

4

UNDER
PRESSURE

86

[EIGHTY-
SIX]

ASATO
ASATO

ILLUSTRATION:
Shirabii

MECHANICAL DESIGN:
I-IV



4

UNDER PRESSURE

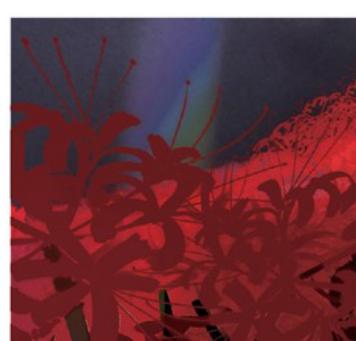
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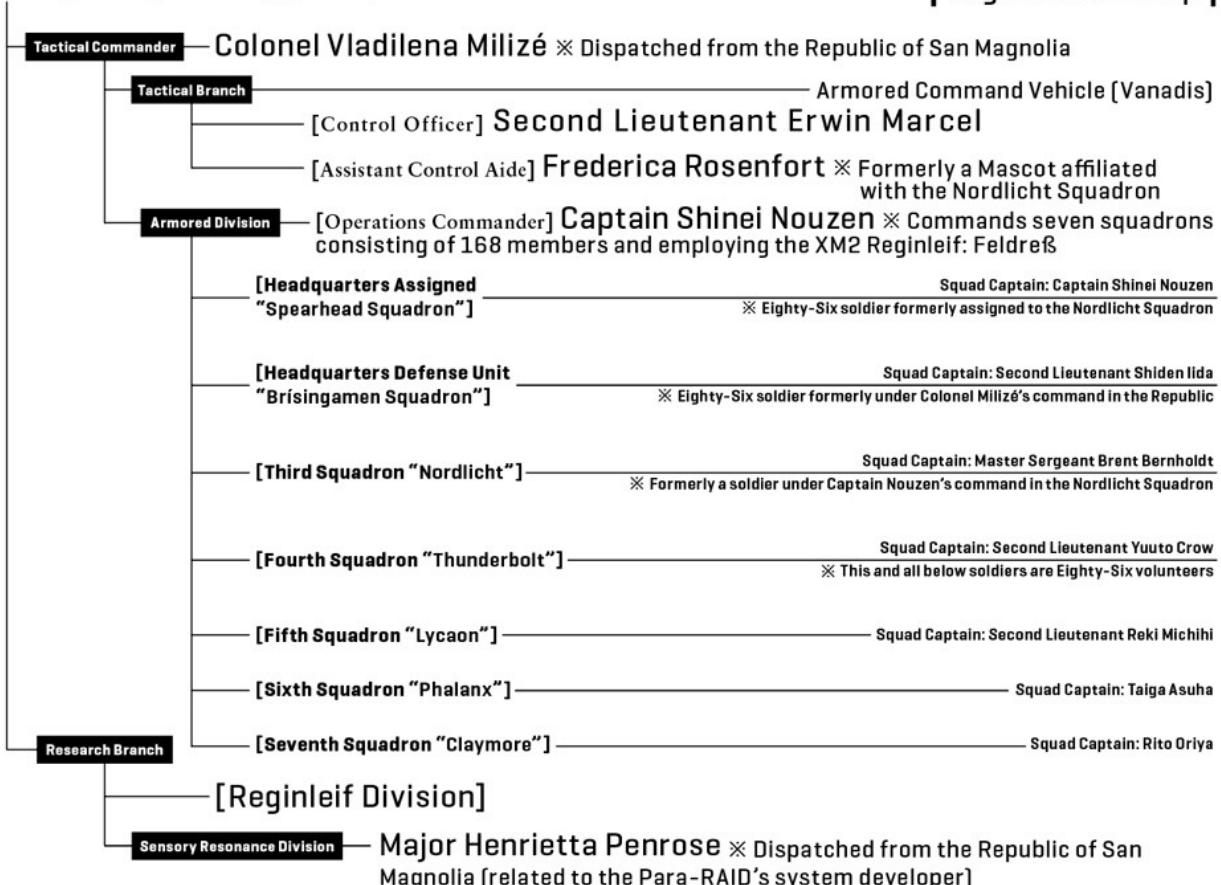
OUTLINE

Following the success of the Morpho elimination operation, aid and relief efforts have been extended to the Republic of San Magnolia, and the allied forces have gained many new skilled officers. However, due to the unique environment the Republic's soldiers had been a part of, it was decided that integrating them into the regular Federacy forces would be unwise. As such, a new force was established, focusing on the employment of Reginleifs, which have garnered impressive results in past operations.

History

[Unit Commander] Colonel Grethe Wenzel

※ In charge of Reginleif design/development

| Organization Map |

※ The Strike Package also has maintenance and medical teams, facilities, and equipment other units are supplied with.

※ Is currently affiliated under the western front's military forces, but it is assumed it can be dispatched to other armies should the need arise

**Supplementary Materials:
Details on Federacy Military Ranks**

Each unit's chain of command is as follows (described so as to prevent any possible confusion upon introduction to Republic military forces):

[Officers] General > Lieutenant General > Major General > Commodore > Colonel > Lieutenant Colonel > Major > Captain > First Lieutenant > Second Lieutenant

↓
[Warrant Officers] Warrant Officer

※ There is no promotion from warrant officer to second lieutenant.

↓
[Noncommissioned Officers] Master Sergeant > Sergeant > Corporal

↓
[Soldiers] Private First Class > Private Second Class > Private

※ The Strike Package also has maintenance and medical teams, facilities, and equipment other units are supplied with.

E I G H T Y - S I X 86



They stand with new comrades by their sides.

New bonds are forged. But peace will not come for them.

Their hopes, their dreams...

...All are selfishly consumed.

The war rages on, unabated.

86

IN ORDER
TO SURVIVE,
THEY
CHOOSE NOT
TO FEEL.

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

STORY BY ASATO ASATO

ILLUSTRATION BY SHIRABI

MECHANICAL DESIGN BY I-IV

The Republic of San Magnolia has continually forced its discriminated population, the Eighty-Six, to pilot armored weapons under the pretense of them being unmanned drones. One of the Republic's Handlers, Lena, has decided to face the Eighty-Six and her own heart head-on and, through many clashes, has managed to exchange words with them.

However, Shin's group—the Eighty-Six with whom she formed strong emotional bonds—was forcibly sent on a death march into the heart of enemy territory.

Their final battle concludes, and Lena can only watch as Shin and his companions walk toward certain death. While she commanded them only through the Para-RAID, she did, without a doubt, fight alongside them on the same battlefield...

Shin and his group, fully expecting to die, instead break through the Legion's territories and make it to the Federal Republic of Giad. Though they are given a glimpse of peace, the Eighty-Six choose to maintain their warrior identities and ultimately resolve to return to the battlefield. The Legion then launches a large-scale offensive on human territories. As he senses the Republic's fall, Shin sinks into despair over Lena's supposed fate.

Following a grueling battle, Shin achieves something of a hollow victory over the Morpho—a Legion that posed a major threat to the Federacy's survival. But the one who stood before him following that victory was none other than Lena, who was presumed dead. She is the one who finally gets through to Shin. Using the same strength he helped her find over the course of their time together, she helps him find his resolve.

And now, after two years of separation, they will have their long-awaited reunion...

EIGHTY-SIX
STORY

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86—EIGHTY-SIX

Vol. 4

ASATO ASATO

Translation by Roman Lempert
Cover art by Shirabii

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

86—Eighty-Six—Ep. 4

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The Republic is the enemy.

—VLADILENA MILIZÉ, *MEMOIRS*

PROLOGUE

MISSING IN ACTION

—Rita.

That was the name the boy—Henrietta Penrose’s childhood friend—would always call her. Annette didn’t remember when he started using that nickname for her. He always had, for as long as she could remember, just as she couldn’t recall a time before he was by her side. They were that close.

He’d probably had trouble saying her name when they were just learning to speak, and he’d found the name Henrietta to be too hard to pronounce. Annette herself had trouble with his name, which was foreign to the Republic, and gave him the nickname Shin instead of using his full name, Shinei.

He’d known her ever since they were children. He was a bright child who would often smile. His older brother would always spoil him, so he was something of a crybaby for his age. Looking back on it, Annette could see that his entire family had raised him with love and affection, which molded him into a kind, carefree child.

He lived in the house next door, so he and Annette would play every day. Though they often had their spats, they always made up the very next day and went right back to playing. The two of them were close enough friends that they’d been vaguely confident things would stay this way even once they grew up.

Then, on that fateful day eleven years ago, they were forever robbed of that friendship.

Or so Annette had believed...

As she exited the transport plane, a Giad military officer stood waiting to greet her. Annette squinted her silver eyes as she looked at him. A steel-blue uniform, contrasting with the Republic of San Magnolia's stylish Prussian blue. The holster of the hefty automatic pistol at his waist blended in seamlessly with his outfit. He stood on the runway awash with spring sunlight, like a stalwart steel-blue shadow.

The Federacy had faced the Legion's onslaught head-on for the past eleven years, and this officer stood as silent evidence of that history. He had the well-built physique of a wild animal and wore a cold gaze beneath the brim of his army cap. But in truth, he was around the same age as Annette. A teenage officer who had received the higher education one would usually acquire before enlisting during the time of his service—a so-called special officer.

While this wasn't something the Republic, which considered its own citizens no better than livestock and cast them into the battlefield, would be in a position to criticize...the Federacy had no choice but to skirt the line of cruelty in order to maintain its front lines, as well.

As Annette looked at him, the officer turned to face her with a practiced, perfect salute.

"Major Henrietta Penrose, I presume?"

"Yes."

"I've come to collect you."

His tone was as dispassionate as his gaze. It contained the absolute minimum amount of respect one had to pay to a ranking official of another country. His voice was devoid of warmth, something the oppressors of San Magnolia did not deserve.

Unlike the Republic—a nation that eleven years ago had been occupied solely by Alba citizens—the Federacy was a multiracial nation. Searching his features, she thought she could identify the black hair of an Onyx and the bloodred eyes of a Pyrope.

She found herself looking away from him. Those features were...oddly similar to those of her childhood friend.

"I see. Thank you."

A middle-aged master sergeant walked up to her at a brisk pace, and she entrusted him with her luggage. She then regarded the officer with a glance.

"Captain, you haven't given me your name yet," she said after confirming the rank on the insignia attached to his lapel.

Military transport planes were different from passenger planes in that they were terribly noisy on the inside. The seats were all made of pipes, making them terribly hard and uncomfortable to sit on. Annette had had to bear these travel conditions for several hours, and the fatigue made her voice come out rougher than she might have intended.

"My apologies."

The officer didn't seem to mind, though. Nodding simply, he answered her question with the same indifferent composure as before. In a cold voice, he gave his name to the officer of the foreign military.

"Shinei Nouzen, section commander of the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package and captain of the Spearhead squadron, at your service, Major Penrose."

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

86

E I G H T Y-
S I X

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In order to survive, they choose not to feel.

Federal Republic of Giad Military Eighty-Sixth Strike Package



Shin

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



Lena

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



Frederica

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



Raiden

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



Kurena

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



Theo

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



Anju

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



Annette

A friend of Lena's and head of research and development for the Para-RAID system. In fact, she is a childhood friend of Shin's from before the Eighty-Six were banished from the eighty-five Sectors. She was dispatched with Lena to the Federacy, but what will come of her reunion with Shin...?



Grethe

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

Shiden

One of the Eighty-Six and a subordinate of Lena's following the departure of Shin and his group. Possesses high combat capabilities.
Personal Name: Cyclops.

Bernholdt

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

Other Characters

Ernst

Temporary president of the Federal Republic of Giad. He took in Shin and the surviving Eighty-Six as his adopted children after they fled the Republic. He appears cordial and serene but displays his true strength in the field of politics.

Willem

Chief of staff for the Federal Republic of Giad's western front military. He's a foul-mouthed realist, but he also cares for the Eighty-Six in his own way. He seems to have a history with Grethe.

Richard

A major general in the Federacy military and an old friend of Grethe's and Willem's from their days in the military academy. He approved the use of the ground-effect winged vehicle Nachzehrer in the previous operation. He regards the Eighty-Six with some suspicion.

Black Cat

A kitten Shin and his friends raised in the first-ward barracks of the Republic's eastern front. Though they cherished this cat, Shin and the others never decided on a name. It was later taken in by Lena and has been her pet ever since.

CHAPTER 1

CALL ON DUTY

The scent of death lingered faintly in the western front's integrated headquarters' base. The last operation had cost them the lives of several hundred thousand—four corps and over 60 percent of their total forces. Their transport capabilities couldn't keep up with the number of corpses that needed to be sent back, and the base had to function as a morgue for some time.

"The Eighty-Sixth Strike Package."

Despite it already being spring, the air was oddly cold as Major General Richard Altner—commander of both the 177th Armored Division and the Republic of San Magnolia Relief Expeditionary Force—spoke the name.

"An independent mobile strike force that pilots Reginleifs, deployed to suppress the Legion's core locations. In effect, a foreign force composed of the Eighty-Six... So it's finally time for them to welcome their queen, is it?"

After a prolonged glance at the office the "queen"—a guest foreign officer from the old Republic of San Magnolia—would occupy, he met the eyes of his conversation partner from behind the veil of fragrant steam wafting from their coffee substitute.

"Think it'll go well?"

"At the very least, I don't doubt their combat potential."

The western army's chief of staff, Commodore Willem Ehrenfried, wore a calm expression. His white face, characteristic of one of noble birth, broke into a thin, cold smile.

"The majority of the Eighty-Six we took under our protection were what they call Name Bearers—veterans who lived through years in the Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield despite the 0.1 survival rate. Even compared to our soldiers, who went through proper combat training, they're in a league of their own. So from a tactical point of view, not putting them to use isn't an option."

It may have been only coffee substitute, but it was brewed dutifully for them by their aides and served elegantly in porcelain coffee cups. Enjoying the flowery aroma of the coffee as they drank, Willem spoke again.

"Regarding the Reginleifs, we now have a rough idea of how to practically utilize them. In terms of mobility, they're more than a match for a Grauwolf moving at maximum speed. And thanks to the Eighty-Six, we no longer need to have the Legion eat up any more of our precious operators."

"I was talking about the state of the Eighty-Six themselves, Willem," said Major General Altner, placing his coffee cup back on its saucer. The characteristically resonant sound of porcelain clinking against porcelain echoed around the room.

"They know no peace, have no homeland, and stand on the battlefield with nothing to protect... Do you really think they can act as the Federacy's sword when they cause friction simply by being in the same place as our fighters?"

The first five Eighty-Six they'd unintentionally sheltered stood as a test case. Even after being given a peaceful life, they'd chosen not to accept it—they couldn't accept it. Their relentless pursuit of combat scenarios they had little to no hope of returning alive from made the other forces fear them. Even as they accrued achievements that were unmatched in the Federacy military, they were loathed as "the monsters the Republic created." One thing Willem knew for certain was that if one were to force those who were raised on the battlefield into peace, they would only flounder, hesitate, and eventually suffocate.

"Good hunting hounds require a vicious disposition. A good

owner's skill is measured by how well they can direct that viciousness toward their enemies, Richard."

That overtly aristocratic manner of speech, one that seemed to disavow the very humanity of others, brought a steely glare to Major General Altner's eyes. Having that gaze fixed on him made the chief of staff shrug in an elegant fashion.

"...Of course, if they cannot grow accustomed to peace, things may be difficult after the war's end—not just for them but for us as well. We don't want criminals in our reserves after the fighting is over, after all."

Major General Altner cocked an eyebrow.

"Color me surprised, Willem. And here I thought you'd say, *Our solution will be a single bullet for each of them.*"

"You have to consider the cost of the fuel for burning the corpses as well as mental-health-care fees for the ones doing the deed, not to mention the paperwork it'd take to cover up their disappearance and the hush money for everyone involved. Even then, it'd eventually come to light...just like it did with the Republic."

Following the Morpho's elimination operation, they confirmed the survival of not only the United Kingdom, the Alliance, and the Republic, but several other countries as well. All those countries would know of the atrocities committed by the Republic by now. The Eighty-Six, also known as the Colorata, were the minority in the Republic. Many of them had brethren of the same races and ethnicities in these countries.

The Republic's treatment of the Eighty-Six would come to be known as the single most abhorrent account of human persecution in all of recorded history. That tarnished reputation would remain a stain on the Republic's name for years to come—assuming, of course, that humankind had so many years left.

"Compared to all that hassle, acclimating them to a life of peace and granting them an education equivalent to that of the special officer academy is more efficient. We may yet have a squadron's worth of young men and women with bright futures ahead of them... Besides..."

The chief of staff's smile suddenly faded away as he looked into the single black eye returning his stare.

"...with the Morpho's suppression and the liberation of the Republic, the people may be in a celebratory mood, but the reality is that the war is getting worse. Because of these incredible losses, the western front's war potential has plummeted, which means taxes will have to increase. We need to make use of these war dogs now, while everyone still has their spears pointed at the Republic... Otherwise, the Eighty-Six may be the ones who find themselves the most uprooted by all this."



It was a nightmare she'd seen countless times.

At the edge of a nameless wasteland, beyond the scorched, desolate battlefield, a handful of headless, sun-bleached skeletons fought against a tidal wave of metallic monsters. Forced into a march, without supplies or any support, the skeletons fell time and time again until they were worn out by the overwhelming number of enemies. One unit was lost in battle, and then another.

And then the final unit remained—one specializing in melee combat—surrounded by Dinosauria and ruthlessly ripped to shreds. Its broken high-frequency blade stabbed into the ground like a blank grave marker. The tragedy wouldn't end, and as the Legion tore away the canopy, the cockpit opened to reveal an impossible amount of blood. They then pulled the mangled corpse of a Processor out of it, dangling like a rag doll. The dead had no dignity paid to them; they were merely torn to pieces as their heads were plundered. Lena never knew their faces. So when the silhouette, clad in a desert-camouflage field uniform, was dragged out of the cockpit, she never saw his face.

To the very end, all Lena could do was watch. Her voice never reached them. She couldn't fire a single shell to support them. She could only watch their gruesome fate unfold. How many times did she wake up in the middle of the night, calling out that name? How many times did she activate the Para-RAID, trying in vain to contact them, only to have each failed attempt break her heart anew?

She never saw it happen, so she never knew for sure, but that

was reality. They should have experienced a fate more terrible than she could ever have imagined. The thought of it sent a shiver down her spine.

But she would never have to see that dream again.

In the Federal Republic of Giad's western front's integrated headquarters' base, Lena got up that morning and made sure her outfit was in order. She fastened the buttons of her starched blouse up to her neck and put on the jacket of her dyed-black uniform. She donned her rank insignia and her gun belt, even put on her regulation cap, and brushed her single streak of red-dyed hair aside. She put these items on one by one, resolutely, like a knight preparing to march into battle.

She peered into her reflection's silver eyes—the same color as her hair—in the mirror. Her uniform was painted black to mourn the deaths of the subordinates she'd lost, and a strip of her hair was dyed red in acknowledgment of their shed blood. The hardened visage of the Bloodstained Queen, Bloody Reina, stared back at her, drenched in their colors.

A knock at the door broke the stillness of morning just as she was tightening her tie.

“—Colonel?”

Lena smiled. She'd never known his face... Never, until now. But she did know his voice. For the past two years, this voice had softly supported her. This serene, peacefully toned voice, with its enunciation and pronunciation pleasant to the ear. Right now, the owner of the voice was at her side, so she would never have to see that nightmare again.

“I'm awake... Come in.”

There was a short pause that felt almost hesitant. But in the next moment, the door opened gently, and Shin peeked his face in. Black Onyx hair and crimson Pyrope eyes. It was only yesterday that she learned his coloring was the opposite of Rei's—his older brother. He was dressed in a fresh Federacy-issued steel-blue uniform but looked as if he had already gotten used to it. His slender form and white face matched the image of the silent boy she'd pictured from his voice, but his hardened physique stood as evidence of the long time he'd spent on the battlefield.

“Colonel, a transport to the headquarters' base will go out at

0825 hours. Please get ready until then."

"Okay."

Lena gave a short reply as she turned around. Then, looking back into the red eyes that reflected her dark appearance, she nodded.

"I'm ready... Let's go."

The newly erected Rüstkammer base was built in the Wolfsland—a vacant region that bordered the former Empire and the old territories that were once in charge of production and manufacturing. This was the home base for Lena's new unit, the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package. It was a large base hugged by forests trailing down from the slightly elevated mountains to the west. A river a short distance away separated the base from a nearby city standing in the shadow of the remains of an old fortification.

Its barracks accommodated nearly ten thousand Processors and enough support personnel to fill a full battalion, as well as roughly a thousand base personnel and several hangars to house the Reginleifs. It also had a runway for the takeoff and landing of transport planes and a training ground spread out on the opposite side that was quite large in comparison to the forest and river.

While it could be said that the base was set up next to a city for ease of transportation, it was also done to help with the Eighty-Six's rehabilitation into society. They had lived on the battlefield from such a young age, so this was necessary for familiarizing them with a peaceful environment. The Eighty-Six who had been sheltered six months ago were still in training—the special officer academy, that is—and the other four senior Eighty-Six, like Raiden, retreated to the barracks, saying they needed to handle their paperwork, leaving Shin to act as her guide.

While on the runway, which relentlessly reflected the sun's heat, Shin offered to take her trunk and her cat carrier.

"Let me carry those for you."

"Oh, it's fine. They're not that heavy."

Shin ignored her reply, took her bags, and started walking away just like that. Lena thought it would be rude to take them back after he'd been so insistent on helping, so she decided to

indulge him just this once.

"Thank you very much."

"It's nothing."

The curt tone that would immediately create distance with anyone else...felt so nostalgic. Lena looked up at his profile standing a head taller than her and was unable to restrain the smile that found its way to her lips. Her eyes were drawn to the red scar just barely visible beneath his uniform's collar. The grisly mark traveled all the way around his neck, eerily resembling a decapitation scar, as if his head had been severed and roughly stitched back on. Was this some old war wound? It looked fairly old.

Since meeting them yesterday at the memorial of the four ruined Juggernauts and the 576 deceased Processors, she hadn't actually gotten to speak much with Shin and the others. After that, she was accepted into the western front's integrated headquarters, and since she was technically the representative of the Republic, there were quite a few social matters she had to attend to. That left her with little time to rekindle old friendships.

She'd gotten to talk to Shin only in the car on the way to the base, so the only thing she'd managed to hear about was what had happened during the Special Reconnaissance mission two years ago and how they'd made their way to the Federacy. She hadn't had a chance to ask about the scar, but...perhaps it would be best to wait for him to tell her about it on his own. Whatever had left such a horrid scar on his body had likely left a matching scar on his heart. It wasn't a subject she could broach so easily.

Perhaps noticing her gaze fixed on him, Shin addressed her.

"...What is it?"

"N-nothing."

The fact that just looking at him made her happy was...far too embarrassing to say aloud. Shin cast a suspicious glance at Lena as she stared at the floor with reddened cheeks. After a short while, he continued the conversation.

"By the way, I see you've been promoted. Congratulations."

"Ah yes..." replied Lena bashfully, unconsciously touching the rank insignia on her collar's lapel.

A promotion to a field-officer position was a hard one to earn,

and being promoted to a commander rank like colonel was even more difficult. While it was true that promotions during wartime tended to happen absurdly fast, a soldier reaching the rank of colonel while in her teens was unheard of.

"It's all for form's sake, really. I'm being dispatched to a foreign country, so it wouldn't do for appearances if I wasn't at least at this rank."

Conversely, only a low-ranking officer had volunteered to become a commanding officer of the relief unit dispatched to the Republic. It had been six months since the Gran Mur's collapse, and the Republic still had many who were waiting for someone to fight in their place and save them and who had no intention of fighting for themselves.

The plan was for the Federacy's relief forces to withdraw after retaking the northern administrative Sectors and to have the Republic's own forces, which were currently being trained, take over defense at their own expense... But considering the way things were progressing, Lena found it hard to be hopeful.

"But that's just as true for you, Captain Nouzen. You only have two years of military experience with the Federacy, but you must have achieved quite a bit to get promoted to captain this quickly."

"...All the ranks above me were vacant, which just goes to show how messed up the Federacy is."

He shrugged, a slight smile visible. Lena looked up at his face with some surprise. She thought his expressions had softened somewhat, in spite of the fact that she hadn't known what he looked like before today. Beneath his cool tone, this young man of the Eighty-Six had always suppressed...*something*; he'd forced it down so violently, it was liable to break at any moment.

A timer staring him in the face as it counted down the moments until his death. His objective of freeing his brother's soul from its mechanical prison. The release. At any rate, now that he had been freed from all of that, perhaps he could finally be at peace. Perhaps now he could look back on the memory of the brother he'd been forced to gun down—despite never wanting to fight him in the first place—with some fondness.

"Now that you're a tactical commander, I thought you'd have aides and officers working under you, but you've come alone."

"No one volunteered. But still, I'm scheduled to meet with some Processors who volunteered and...a technical officer... Er, Major Henrietta Penrose."

Her tone lowered a bit as she said that name.

"...? Oh, the Para-RAID technical adviser."

Shin nodded after a moment of dubious silence. It seemed he didn't understand why Lena faltered before saying Annette's name.

Lena shot him a sidelong glance. Henrietta, as a given name, didn't usually get abbreviated as Annette, so she had referred to her by her full name... But maybe when Lena had first met her, Annette had introduced herself with this unusual abbreviation because she didn't want to remember someone else who'd once called her by a different nickname. A boy—a childhood friend—who she'd hurt and abandoned...and hadn't seen since.

"...You really don't remember."

"Remember...what?"

"Never mind."

Lena shook her head, cutting off the discussion. She was an outsider to the situation, after all. If Annette wanted to talk to him about it, she would. They fell into a brief silence that was soon broken by the sudden *meow* coming from the cat in Lena's carrier.

Shin looked down, blinking in surprise.

"A...cat?"

"He's the one you raised in the Spearhead squadron's barracks."

"Oh."

There was no trace of emotion in his features, but that was typical of him. The cat, on the other hand, seemed to recognize the voice of its favorite person and was meowing excitedly.

"What did you name it?"

"Thermopylae."

Or TP, for short. Shin fell silent for a moment. It was, incidentally, the name of a battlefield where a small army had faced a much larger one in a battle of overwhelming odds, ending with the soldiers from the smaller army dying an honorable death.

"...Not Leonidas?"

"That's right."

"You're surprisingly terrible at picking names."

"You're one to talk, Captain. This little guy saw you off, so he can't be Leonidas. He didn't suffer an honorable defeat in battle, did he?"

"I suppose, but 'Thermopylae' is just..."

"Well, what did you call him before the Special Reconnaissance mission, then?"

The Spearhead squadron's Processors didn't have a set name for the cat, since it wasn't one of their comrades in arms, and Shin tended to call it the name of the author of whatever he was reading at the time.

"I think it was...Ougai?"

"...Don't tell me you were reading 'Takasebune' at the time...! That's even worse...!"

Lena groaned in exasperation. It had a different subject, but the crude summary was that it was the story of a young man who killed his younger brother. Given that Shin went on the Special Reconnaissance mission to face Rei—his brother, who had been turned into a Dinosauria—with the knowledge that they would likely kill each other or that one would turn the tables on the other and kill him, reading that particular story went beyond bad taste and right into the realm of straight-up masochism.

"I just happened to pick it up. There wasn't any deeper meaning to... Oh..."

Shin trailed off. They were in front of the base's largest hangar, which connected to the first barracks, where the classrooms and Lena's office were. The Feldreß it would come to house were still in the transport, and the shutters were open, revealing the place to be empty. The ceiling was high and set with multiple gantry cranes, and the part that would be considered the second story of the hangar was set with catwalks.

"...Colonel."

"...? What is it?"

"I understand that you're about to be very angry, but please, direct your anger only at me."

"I beg your pardon?"

Suddenly, a thick voice bellowed out like a tank turret's fire.

"Take aim!"

Lena braced herself as she turned to see...

"Fire!"

...not guns aimed at her...

...but a large amount of water falling toward her head.

"Hwaaaaah!"

And of course, splashdown.

Hit by such a large amount of water that it felt as if someone had tipped a full bathtub over her head, Lena was soaked in the blink of an eye. Looking around, she saw a group of boys and girls in uniform and work clothes, each holding an empty bucket. Evidently, they'd held the water she had been splashed with.

That was as much as Lena could gather at the moment, and Shin—who had run out of the hangar the moment he heard "Take aim!"—returned to her side. Apparently, this was why he'd insisted on taking her luggage. Maybe there'd been some kind of slipup, or perhaps he really did feel guilty, because his expression was rather awkward and uncomfortable. The cat, incidentally, didn't even acknowledge its mistress's plight, still meowing in an attempt to get Shin's attention.

"Er... Well, it's only water, so don't worry... Right, Master Sergeant Bernholdt?"

"Sir! We got it from the nearby water supply!"

A soldier in the prime of his life walked to the front of the catwalk with his chest stuck out (not out of pride, but out of military discipline) and answered.

"There were also two idiots who brought buckets of paint, but I had it dashed over them as punishment!"

"Oh..."

That explained the two soldiers painted red and white standing in the corner. After paying them a sidelong glance, Shin spoke up. His voice wasn't as rough as the master sergeant's, but his commanding tone traveled with surprising ease.

"You'll clog the drain, so go wash yourselves off in the water supply outside before going in the shower. And be sure to take

care of the mess you made on the floor.”

““Yes, sir!””

Their replies, booming and desperate, were acknowledged by a dispassionate nod from Shin. Lena was still in shock.

“...Is welcoming new officers this way some sort of Federacy tradition...?”

“It isn’t. The Federacy was formed only ten years ago, so it hasn’t had enough time to develop these kinds of tradi—”

“Captain Nouzen, spare her the pointless trivia. There are more important matters at hand.”

A young female officer approached them, a bundle of bath towels in hand. Lena turned around to face her with a start. It was the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package’s commander, Colonel Grethe Wenzel. Put simply, her commanding officer.

“C-Colonel Wenzel?! M-my apologies...!”

“Oh, you can do away with formality, my dear. I might be your superior in the pecking order, but we’re the same rank.”

Placing a towel over Lena’s head, she used another to dry Lena’s wet uniform. The towels were likely freshly laundered, as they were warm and smelled as if they had been dried by the sun.

“There’s a change of clothes in your room, and the bath is ready for you... At least Captain Nouzen had the decency to make them get you towels.”

“...I’m sorry.”

“But that lack of consideration proves you’re still a boy, Captain Nouzen, and that’s cute in its own way. But from now on, if you don’t start acting like a proper escort, she might grow to dislike you.”

“Colonel—”

“Oh, have I said too much? But I’d reckon it’s your fault for having such a juicy personal conversation in a Feldreß that archives all communications on its mission recorder.”

Shin growled in annoyance. Grethe giggled and left, taking the wet towels with her. The master sergeant on the catwalk rushed over in a hurry.

“We’ll handle it, Colonel.”

“My, Master Sergeant Bernholdt, whatever are you planning to do with a towel a young woman just used?”

"Don't even joke like that! Especially not in front of the captain! Hell, she's almost the same age as my kids! She probably doesn't even have hair down there yet!"

"...'Hair,' you say?"

"Aaaaaah, nothing, it's nothin'! Just pretend you didn't hear anything!"

This lively exchange, which one wouldn't imagine a field officer was having with a noncommissioned officer subordinate, slowly died down. Watching them leave, Shin spoke in a worn-out tone.

"For now, you should change out of your uniform... I'll show you to your quarters."

Lena's private quarters, located on the top floor of the first barracks, consisted of two rooms: her office-cum-reception room facing the corridor, and the interior chamber serving as her bedroom. It may have been a military base, but it was in a safe zone over a hundred kilometers away from the front lines. It was a spacious room that prioritized creature comforts over defense—fitting for a commanding officer—and the gentle pearl-white furniture, perhaps chosen with the young lady occupant in mind, was quite lovely.

Shin placed her bag and the cat carrier on the floor and left the room, and the black cat promptly began its cautious first exploration of this new place. The four walls were covered with colored glass, and the office's large window gave an unobstructed view of the city on the other side of the river.

There was a newly erected school in one corner of the city. It was a special facility meant for the Eighty-Six who'd been taken to the internment camps before they had a chance to get elementary education. Usually, a squad-size unit had only one mental health squad appointed to it, but this unit was given two. Even though providing that care should have been the Republic's responsibility...

Shaking her head, Lena made her way to the bathroom attached to her bedroom. Steam clung to the colored tiles of the bathroom walls, and apparently some flower essence had been applied to the water, because a pure, pleasant fragrance filled the

room. She washed off her light makeup and turned the stylish faucet, letting the hot water wash over her.

Come to think of it, she still hadn't gotten an explanation as to why this had happened to her. She opened the bathroom door and put on the RAID Device resting on top of her towel, activating the Para-RAID. The target was, of course, Shin, who was waiting in the corridor outside her private quarters.

"Er, Captain..."

The call was shut down wordlessly. She reconnected the Resonance and asked as soon as the call was connected:

"Why did you hang up?"

His response came in a disconcerted tone.

"**If anything, why did you Resonate now of all times?**"

"We were in the middle of a conversation."

"**...We can finish it later. At least wait until after you shower, please.**"

Lena refused to back down.

"Why can't we do this while I'm in the shower?"

"**What do you mean, 'why'...?**"

There was an exasperated pause between them, which Lena broke by persistently pressing him.

"You were fine with it before. When you told me about the Black Sheep and the Shepherds, two years ago in the Spearhead squadron's barracks, you, er...you were connected while you were in the shower."

"Yes... But you don't seem fine with it, so you don't have to force yourself."

That's...

Well, yes, she was quite embarrassed about this.

Only their sense of hearing was being Resonated, but it gave the impression that they were face-to-face. Lena realized that this meant that her feeling of embarrassment over the situation was being directly transmitted to Shin, which left him feeling restless.

And to top it off, the sounds of the running water and her breath, leaking out from the heat and the steam, as well as the sound of the water dripping from her long, satin-like hair, were also being transmitted.

"But this time we can't— Ah..."

The Sensory Resonance ended again, and this time it seemed

that he'd removed his RAID Device, since she couldn't reconnect.



* * *

Making his way to the top floor to deliver paperwork to Grethe's office, Raiden stopped in front of Shin, who was sitting powerlessly on the corridor's carpet, which was patterned with white flowers on a blue background. He was standing in front of their tactical commander's—Lena's—office, probably waiting for her to change after that little "welcome" she'd been given. But for some reason, he was down on his knees.

"...What's up with you?"

".....Nothing."

Shin answered with a groan, belying his actual response.

In the end, Shin didn't respond until she'd left the bathroom, put on a blouse and skirt, gone out to the office, and knocked on the door to the corridor to call for him.

"...This probably goes without saying, but you do have clothes on right now, don't you...?"

"O-of course I do...!"

"All right, then..."

It was hard to hear him through the oaken door, which was made thick to prevent eavesdropping. She'd also gone back to the bathroom to dry her hair and fix her makeup, so they continued their conversation over the Para-RAID.

"...About what happened earlier..."

They both felt a bit awkward, so it took them a while to kick off the conversation again. Putting down the hair dryer, Lena listened to him as she picked up the brush.

"...Most of the Strike Package's combat personnel were Eighty-Six who volunteered, but not all of them. The others are Federacy soldiers who are following orders...and some among them had acquaintances in the Republic."

That addendum made Lena catch her breath. Roughly ten thousand Eighty-Six were sheltered by the Federacy—enough for a large squadron. But that number was far too small compared to the millions of Colorata who'd lived in the Republic before. Those

ten thousand were the only ones who'd survived the atrocities. Everyone else had died, be it in the internment camps, during the construction of the Gran Mur, or on the battlefield of the Eighty-Sixth Sector. The Republic had reduced them to livestock in human form, without graves for their remains, and slaughtered them.

Prior to the outbreak of the war with the Legion, the Republic's people had mingled with those of the neighboring countries. Of course some of them had relatives and friends across the borders. So once those people had learned of the ways in which their loved ones had been massacred...

"Orders are absolute for a soldier, but that doesn't mean their qualms about having a Republic officer as their superior are going to disappear. When you were appointed to your posting, we—Master Sergeant Bernholdt, Colonel Wenzel, and I—received complaints and objections to the decision."

She recalled the Federacy soldiers on the catwalk, all of different ages and races. Their different-colored eyes all glaring at her with equal coldness.

"That kind of dissent doesn't go away just by keeping a tight lid on things. If anything, trying to repress it would just bring everything to a head later down the line. So I allowed them to exact 'retribution,' only once, upon your arrival. It was I who decided the details, I who brought it up with Colonel Wenzel and had her approve it. Hence why I said earlier, if you're going to be angry, direct your anger at me."

Lena shook her head. This "retribution" amounted to nothing more than buckets of water. There had probably been more extreme ideas of what to do, and Shin had likely shot them all down. He'd probably had a lot of faith in his aides' supervision. And in so doing, he'd spared Lena from more severe, unrestrained retribution, despite Shin being one of the Eighty-Six, who had every right to exact revenge on the Republic's citizens.

"...This is well-deserved punishment for me. I can't get mad..."

"That's not true."

Shin cut down Lena's self-deprecation plainly, with a hint of annoyance in his voice, a discomfort that came the moment before indignation.

"The only ones allowed to demand retribution against the Republic are us,

the Eighty-Six. Even if they aren't unrelated, the Federacy's citizens are not part of this and have no right to exact revenge... Regardless of what they might think, what they did was blatant absurdity under the guise of justice and sanction."

"Captain—"

"In the end, the Federacy is only a country of humans. They can hold up justice as their national policy... But that doesn't make them any more just or ideal."

His dry, desolate tone was full of something like indignation, like sadness... Like some resignation that went beyond those two emotions.

"And...I believe I've said this before already, but the situation in the Eighty-Sixth Sector wasn't something you caused or had the power to rescind on your own. It's not your responsibility, Colonel, and not something you alone need to be blamed for."

And that's why, Shin continued plainly as Lena remained silent.

"The retribution earlier was unjustified violence against you. This treatment was uncalled for, and you still willingly accepted it. So there's no need for you to feel like any smaller of a person for it. If anyone treats you with disrespect going forward, punish them in accordance with Federacy military regulations. You have the authority and responsibility to do so."

Responsibility. That choice of words was so very much like him. Had he said only "authority," Lena would have hesitated to employ it even after hearing this explanation. But if it was her responsibility, she'd have to do it. There was no intent to change Lena's sentiments there; it was only to protect her from thoughtless retribution and, at the same time, to prevent her from being ensnared by her own guilty conscience.

He may have had the face of a coldhearted Reaper and a blunt, indifferent attitude... But Shin was so wonderfully, awfully kind. So much that it hurt.

"...Thank you."

The fresh outfit on her bed was the Republic military's deep blue. Naturally, they didn't have anything in black readily available. Putting on the uniform that bore the colonel-rank insignia and

even affixing her armband, she turned around in front of the full-length mirror to check her appearance before moving to the door leading to the corridor.

"Thank you for waiting, Captain."

It seemed he wasn't exactly sitting there twiddling his thumbs, as he closed the electronic document he was reading on some sort of device before turning around, blinking in surprise as he inspected her new state of dress. Come to think of it, this was the first time Shin was seeing her in this uniform. When they reunited yesterday and met again today, she had been wearing her black one.

...She now realized why she'd been so nervous about her appearance earlier. She had made absolutely sure that there was nothing off about the way she looked...just like a girl about to go out on a first date. She could feel the blood rushing to her cheeks as Shin stared at her with the utmost curiosity.

"...Colonel?"

"N-no, it's nothing."

She squeaked out her reply in a small voice that certainly didn't make it seem as if it was nothing.

Becoming mindful of this made her exceedingly aware of all sorts of subtle details she hadn't noticed until now—or maybe she had unconsciously tried to ignore them. For starters, it was entirely likely that this situation was overstimulating for her, given that their unexpected reunion came after their entire communication had been through the Para-RAID, always separated by several hundred kilometers. His voice was so close, and most of all, due to the height difference, Shin's mouth was the same height as Lena's ear.

She couldn't help but be hyperaware of how much taller he was than her. She could feel the warmth of his body heat, which made it all too clear that he was standing right next to her without her needing to look. She hadn't known that a boy's body heat could be so warm, and for some reason, that made her extremely giddy. Placing her hands over her chest to calm herself down, she took a deep breath and managed to stifle the blush on her cheeks before saying as if nothing had happened, "You were going to show me around the base, yes? Let's go."

...Her voice was still squeaky, though.

Lena tore her eyes away from the smile Shin was unable to restrain and started walking away, her heels clicking against the wooden floor. She felt his presence quietly following her, half a step behind. The realization that he had a habit of moving without making a sound also made her oddly excited.

“...What are those two doing?”

The lower-ranking officers were crammed into two shared rooms equipped with beds, desks, closets, and a shared bathroom. Frederica pouted with puffed-up cheeks as she sat on a bed, her legs dangling as her bloodred eyes stared into space.

“It was one thing when they met Grethe and the staff officers together, but now they’re loitering about the briefing and meeting rooms. It’s like watching a couple of newlyweds! How can they take advantage of their positions as officers for such—”

“...Uh, Frederica.”

Leaning his elbow against the half-open door, Theo spoke up dejectedly.

“What are *you* doing? Eavesdropping again?”

Her red eyes turned to him in a heartbeat. Theo wearily noted that whenever her power to peer into the past and present of those close to her was active, her red eyes seemed to shine.

“I’m not eavesdropping, you imbecile! I’m merely remaining vigilant in case that woman tries anything odd while she leads him by the nose.”

“Chill—he’s just showing her around. The colonel only just arrived at the base today, and Shin’s her direct subordinate, so there’s nothing weird about it.”

“.....That may be true, but...”

“Besides, you were there when Shin embarrassed himself, so you know already.”

Federacy Feldreß were equipped with a mission recorder that recorded all the changes in the sensors, gun cameras, and armaments, in addition to the conversations the pilot had over the intercom. Which of course included the conversation Shin and Lena had with each other—albeit without knowing who was on

the other line—after the Morpho's elimination. Incidentally, the data files of that conversation were the first footage of the Republic in ten years, as well as the record of the first contact with a Republic survivor, and were replayed before the western front's army commanders...much to Shin's dismay.

"That's right! And having it placed before one's eyes only makes it harder to accept! After all, did we not spend so much more time fighting by his si— Aaah?!"

Frederica suddenly raised her head. She was surprised by something only she could see, and she started smiling malevolently.

"...Theo, it appears I've worked up an appetite."

Theo smiled brightly.

"Oh, sure. It's nice out today, so let's grab some food at the PX and head outside."

The PX was a shop of sorts within the base's premises. Frederica began to panic.

"N-no, I did not mean that, um..."

"Lemme guess. Shin and the colonel are going to the cafeteria now, and you're plotting to get in the way. It's obvious."

He could hear Kurena yelp out an "Aaaaaah!" before speeding off like a dog that had just caught sight of its master. The window in the corridor offered a view of the cafeteria, and Frederica probably saw it, too.

"Hup!"

But before Kurena could take off at full speed, Anju tackled Kurena and knocked her down.

"Ouch! What gives, Anju?! Let go!"

"This is as far as you go, missy. You know it's impolite to butt in, Kurena."

"Ow-ow-ow-ow-ow, my joints! Y-you're gonna break something, Anju! Ow-ow-ow-ow-oooooouch!"

After witnessing this heartwarming exchange, Theo turned back to the room. He'd meant to smile, but apparently his intent was naked on his face, because Frederica took a frightened step back.

"We're. Eating. Outside. With Kurena, Anju, and Raiden."

"...Okay."

The Federacy base's dining hall served the same food to everyone, regardless of rank, but allowed a person to control the size of their portions by way of a buffet-style cafeteria system. After clumsily filling her tray up with dishes while Shin and the personnel in charge of setting tables tried their hardest to be a bit too helpful, Lena found her way to an open table.

This base was occupied mostly by Processors in special officer training, and Lena was currently in the first officers' dining hall, which happened to be the largest one. The kitchen personnel, a mixture of supply workers and military personnel, worked over a steaming pot that was large enough for Lena to sit in comfortably.

Owing to the Federacy's and the Republic's different culinary cultures, Lena's tray was filled with a curious combination of foods: the Federacy's unique thick black bread, a cream soup with the appetizing aroma of mushrooms, a salad of cooked vegetables, a red-pepper stew that was apparently common in the Federacy's southern regions, coffee, and an apple tart. At the center of her tray was a steak served with gooseberry sauce that had a fragrant aroma rising from it.

Lena cut it excitedly and carried it into her mouth, and her silver eyes widened with surprise.

"It's delicious...!"

Shin smiled rather happily at Lena's adorable outburst.

"Glad you like it."

"I haven't had real meat in so long... Is this deer?"

Throwing all ladylike mannerisms aside, Lena ate to her heart's content.

"It is... Raiden told us that all food within the walls of the Republic was synthetic, so I thought you might like to try something different. It was worth it gathering the members to go hunting in the forest out back."

"...Did you do this just for me?"

"No, everyone just happened to be free that day."

As he spoke, Shin shoveled his own food into his mouth with startling speed. Shin was still a young man with a healthy appetite to match, after all. It was a pleasant sight to see him clean his tray—which had almost twice the amount of food as Lena's—so quickly. *He's such a boy*, Lena thought as she held back a smile.

"Combatants need things to occupy themselves with when there isn't any combat. Back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, we'd go out to hunt and fish together on the safe days."

"..."

Lena thought that it sounded rather fun, but she immediately shook off that impression. Shin smiled bitterly, apparently noticing her conflict.

"You don't have to make that face. Even the Eighty-Sixth Sector had its own brand of fun."

The Legion had been in their forward path, and the Republic had cut off their avenue of retreat. And they'd known that at the end of their five years of persecution, ridicule, and forced conscription, they would undoubtedly die. It had been that kind of desperate battlefield, and yet...

"We wouldn't do something as pathetic as hanging ourselves just because our deaths were predetermined, nor would we sit idly by, counting the days until the end. If we have to die, we'll live each day without regrets—always smiling in the face of death. That was our one and only form of resistance."

"..."

He could be right... Two years ago, Lena would Resonate and speak with the Spearhead squadron every evening, and every evening, they always seemed to be having so much fun. There had been something charming about the distant sounds of them chattering with one another, poking fun at one another, and arguing loudly over silly trifles. They'd greedily sought out these precious moments during the lulls between one battle and the next. Even without anyone to praise them, even without anything to protect, they'd tried to live their lives to the fullest even if the only thing waiting for them at the end was a meaningless death.

"...I'd like to try fishing, too, sometime."

Shin's expression turned a bit impish.

"Then you should start by catching bugs for bait."

"Bugs."

Like most girls her age, Lena hated bugs. Especially the way they wriggled and skittered.

"Catching them and digging them up is a bit..."

"It's not too hard. Just turn over any rock by the river, and

you'll find more bugs than you could ever want."

".....I'll do my best."

In that moment, Lena's tragic, pained expression was too much to witness. Shin—for the first time Lena could remember—laughed out loud. Lena grimaced, realizing she was being teased.

"...You're more of a bully than I took you for, Captain."

"Sorry, your expression was just so stiff, I couldn't help myself," said Shin, still chuckling. "If you're bad with bugs, maybe it'd be better for you to try hunting. Butchering aside, you know how to handle a rifle."

"Well, yes, an *assault* rifle..."

A sudden memory floated up in Lena's mind, prompting her to put her cutlery aside.

"...During the retaking of the First Sector, the military police in charge of the shelter went out to hunt to serve the Republic's citizens some meat. They thought they might get bored with synthesized food..."

On top of acting as the police organization within the army, the military police's duties included the construction and management of shelters for refugees and prisoners of war. Due to the nature of the war with the Legion, there were no refugees or POWs, so they seemed quite enthusiastic to fulfill that duty for the first time in a long while.

"Some of the older Republic citizens were very happy about that, but...the children threw the meat away without eating a single bite. They said it smelled like blood."

"..."

The war with the Legion had started eleven years ago, which was the same amount of time the Republic had taken shelter within the eighty-five Sectors. Children born within that time frame had never eaten food prepared with natural ingredients, least of all meat.

It was said that one's sense of taste developed at a young age and was largely shaped by the flavors one was exposed to at that time. Consequently, one would assume that those children would never be able to appreciate any food not made in a production plant for as long as they lived. They would never be able to enjoy the cuisine of other countries outside the Gran Mur.

Sensing Lena's concern, Shin spoke up.

"That's in the same vein as them never having seen any other race but the Alba... They might not be able to recognize anyone who isn't an Alba as a fellow human being...right?"

Lena nodded. "This unit's first operation is set to be the retaking of the Republic's northern administrative Sectors. I'm honestly...a little worried about sending you to fight in the Republic the way things are now."

The ostracism and aversion of the Republic's citizens would likely be made apparent to the Eighty-Six, be it by words or other means.

"It's not all that different from when we fought in the Eighty-Sixth Sector... But still, the Republic really had nothing but synthesized food? Even if keeping a steady flow of livestock was too hard, there must have been rabbits or pigeons."

"...We didn't have the technology to capture animals, and hardly any people knew how to properly butcher them. There probably wasn't any consciousness of the fact that we could catch and eat them."

Compared to the dull, tasteless synthetic food they provided the Eighty-Six, the food inside the Republic was still worthy of being called food. There wasn't much of a demand to eat anything better than that.

"Well, I don't know how to cook, so I'm not really one to talk..."

The Milizé family was once a house of nobles, after all, and Lena was their sole heiress. The idea of her dirtying her hands meant that not only did she never cook, but she never had to do any housework. Shin calmly sipped coffee substitute from his mug. "I'm not good at cooking, either."

"Huh?"

Lena found herself staring back at him. He looked nimble fingered, as if he could do pretty much anything, so she had just figured there wasn't anything he wasn't good at.

"That's...surprising."

"Well, it's not like I can't cook at all. But from what Raiden says, my sense of taste is a little..."

Placing the mug back on the table, Shin gestured toward his mouth.

“...dull.”

Judging by the slight hesitation in his tone, he was probably unaware of just how dull his sense of taste actually was. Perhaps that was only natural, since unlike eyesight and hearing, taste wasn’t a sense that had measurements to quantify it. Also, however Raiden described Shin’s sense of taste, it likely wasn’t anything as restrained as “dull.”

“I won’t deny that I’m not very good at seasoning, but even if I do feel bad for doing things like leaving some eggshells in the food, it’s not like it’s the end of the world. I think it’s still perfectly edible that way.”

“...”

That clumsy way of thinking made it clear just how inept he was, even to someone like Lena, who didn’t know the first thing about cooking. However...

“Eggs, hmm...? How does one open them, though?”

She’d heard that the shells were very hard. Did one need a hammer to open them, perhaps?

“...”

This time it was Shin’s turn to be struck silent for several seconds.

“...You know how the school has a class on the fundamentals of cooking as one of its elective courses?”

“Yes...?”

“It covers basic techniques, like how to properly hold a kitchen knife, but for the time being, the only one taking that course is Frederica...our squad’s Mascot. Maybe you should take it, too, Colonel.”

“...Only if you take it with me.”

“I’m good.”

“What? Why?”

The nearby intelligence-staff officers had to hold back from laughing at the sight of this ridiculous back-and-forth.

In the end, their roundabout argument continued even after they finished their meal and Shin got himself a second mug of coffee substitute. Shin refused to back down, which only made Lena

determined to become good at cooking so she could rub it in his face. Shin then went on to follow her with a dubious expression as she walked toward the hangar with an oddly enthusiastic stride.

The hangar had been completely abandoned just a few hours ago but was now full once again with the Feldreß it was meant to house, and the two soldiers who'd been drenched in white and red had also finished their cleanup. These were the Reginleifs, the new mobile weapons Shin and his friends piloted, which now slumbered in the spring sunlight with their long legs folded beneath them.

The sight of those Feldreß, weapons far more refined and optimized than the Juggernaut, made Lena's heart tremble. These white Feldreß, the color of polished bone, had a cold, vicious beauty to them but also gave the ominous impression of skeletal corpses wandering the battlefield in search of their lost heads.

She remembered this. She'd seen it from the Gran Mur's interception cannon's command room, a white flash cutting through the blue darkness of dawn, facing off against the giant, draconic form of the Morpho. She recalled hearing that the Reginleif had been developed using a Juggernaut the Federacy had recovered when they rescued Shin and his group as a reference.

Which meant that her hunch about it being similar to the Juggernaut was right on the mark... So in a way, Shin and his group had saved her life as early as back then. Of course, the greatest contributor to that had been the Processor piloting that Reginleif, but had it not been for the machine's mobility, he wouldn't have been able to pursue and destroy the Morpho. Which reminded her that she still needed to find that officer and thank him.

She beheld each of the five Reginleifs standing in an orderly fashion, each with its own unique armaments. She then stopped before one of them, one which stood out from the rest. Shin's unit: Undertaker. Its fixed armaments were four pile drivers, a pair of wire anchors, and the standard 88 mm smoothbore gun. But in contrast was Shin's almost signature weapon of choice, a high-frequency blade. Lena turned to face Shin, its rider.

"...May I touch it?"

"...? Go ahead."

Shin nodded, perplexed, as if wondering what the point of the question was, but this was the partner he'd entrusted his life to. It wasn't something for someone else to touch without permission. She ran her hand over the cold metal roughened up by countless scars. Shin had been in the Federacy military for only two years. The fighting must have been incredibly intense for it to accumulate so many battle scars in such a short amount of time.

Thank you for saving him, for keeping Shin safe on that battlefield.

It bore the name Undertaker, just as Shin's Juggernaut had in the Republic. If weapons had anything resembling souls, this unit had inherited that Juggernaut's soul, without question. Her fingers traced the unit emblem of a spearhead emblazoned beneath the canopy. As her eyes wandered to what looked to be his Personal Mark—a headless skeleton carrying a shovel—Shin spoke with a wry smile.

"You read up on the Juggernaut's data before being stationed here, right? All its equipment is standard, so I don't think you'll find anything too unusual here."

"That's true, but...um, it was the first model that came to aid the Republic, so..."

For some reason, she hesitated to tell Shin the details of how another Processor had saved her, and instead, she trailed off vaguely. She then suddenly remembered something and, after excusing herself for a moment, walked over to the head of the maintenance team. She exchanged a few words with them, received something, and walked back with the parcel in hand. An acquaintance she'd happened to meet yesterday in the integrated headquarters' base had left her with this package, along with a message. It was a dangerous item, meaning she couldn't carry it in her luggage, so she'd had it carried over in a munitions container, along with other ammunition.

"...What's this?"

"Well, er, I don't really know, either..."

It was a plastic case that had remained unopened since leaving the gunsmith. She lifted the lid and said after presenting the

contents:

“I believe this belongs to you, Captain.”

The case contained a somewhat large 9 mm automatic pistol with a double-feed magazine, the kind of gun the old Republic’s ground forces had used in the past. With the ground forces gone from the battlefield, the Eighty-Six Processors often carried these. Shin looked down into the case suspiciously...and, in the next moment, stiffened noisily.

“Captain?”

“...Colonel, where did you...find this?”

“Outside the Gran Mur, when the Federacy came to rescue us.”

“.....”

Shin fell silent, his face becoming somewhat pale. It was hard to tell, since his expression rarely changed, but she could sense some uneasiness behind his expressionless face. Lena didn’t know the reason behind it, though. To begin with, this pistol was something Shiden—the captain of the Queen’s Knights—had found in the sea of lycoris flowers after the Morpho’s destruction and their linking up with the Federacy’s rescue forces.

When they met for the first time in a while yesterday, Shiden had had the expression of a child who had thought up a nasty prank to pull, and she’d told Lena to hand the pistol over to the Strike Package’s captain (in other words, to Shin). Shiden had said Shin had dropped it, with the smile of a starved crocodile facing a delectable meal.

The pistol hadn’t seemed as if it’d been discarded for that long, so Lena had assumed it belonged to that Reginleif’s Processor, who she figured was the Strike Package’s captain... But to think Shin had happened to be there, too. That shouldn’t have been possible. After all, there had been just the one Reginleif there. She remembered that from their conversation.

She remembered the blunt, youthful voice speaking to her from beyond the transmission crackling with noise. He never did give her his name, but she did remember the Personal Mark on the damaged armor... A headless skeleton shouldering a shovel. Realizing she’d seen that same Personal Mark only a moment ago, she turned her eyes to Undertaker again.

The same headless skeleton shouldering a shovel didn’t quite

return her gaze, because of its missing head, but it was there all the same. The Personal Mark of a reaper burying the dead. A *reaper*...

...It can't be.

Shifting her attention back to Shin—to the Processor who piloted that Reginleif—she gawked at him, which only resulted in Shin averting his gaze. Shin obstinately refused to look Lena in the eye. And that made Lena sure of it.

"It was you...?!"

Shin's eyes darted around for a moment, as if looking for a way out...before he dropped his shoulders in resignation.

"...Yes, it was."

In contrast to Lena's eyes lighting up, Shin looked away awkwardly.

"I'm sorry...for back then."

"Huh?"

"I mean...I didn't know who you were, but I said some rather rude things at the time..."

"Um..."

Sorry... Sorry? What did I tell him at the time, come to think of it? Actually, I...can't remember at all...!"

"N-no, I was desperate at the time... I actually don't quite remember what happened, but did I perhaps say something rude myself? I was, um, quite exhausted and a bit out of it at the time, and I feel like I said all sorts of things in the heat of the moment..."

She tripped over her flustered apology. Thinking about it, saying she didn't remember what had happened was that much ruder, but having come to that realization only after saying it, Lena became even more flustered.

Shin only seemed relieved, though. *"No... You actually saved me back then."*

That was one thing she did remember. At that time, the Federacy's Processor—Shin—had been like a lost, defeated child with no idea of where to go next. She didn't know what battles he'd lived through over the two years since the Special Reconnaissance mission and reaching the Federacy, but he'd found himself going on a suicidal charge through the Legion's

territories to face off against the Morpho. The fight must have been quite terrible for the Federacy for it to order him to do this. So if she could help him, even a little bit...

"Thank goodness. In that case...I'm glad."

She presented him with the gun case once more, and this time, Shin accepted it.

He couldn't carry around a handgun that he hadn't tested yet, so Shin went back to his room to put the gun case down.

"—By the way, how did you know the gun was mine? Did someone give it to you?"

"That's right. Yesterday at the integrated headquarters, I ran into Cyclops—Captain Iida. That's when I got it."

"...Cyclops?"

"The captain of the squadron I was assigned to after your Special Reconnaissance mission."

"..."

That exchange soured Shin's mood for a moment (which was, once again, quite hard to notice given how little his expression changed). As he tossed the gun case on the desk with particular crudeness, Lena peeked into his room from the doorstep, wondering if it was all right to do so. Compared to Lena's room—one for a higher-ranking officer—Shin's was the rather plain quarters of a Processor.

Two years ago, she'd gotten the impression that he was a bookworm, or rather, an indiscriminate reader, and apparently, she was right on the money. The only thing adorning the cold, tidy room was a small, cluttered shelf crammed full of books. As she perused the titles on the shelf, which included philosophy books, technical manuals, paperback novels, and for some reason picture books, Lena asked, "...Why didn't you tell me until now, though? I realize the Federacy military has confidentiality clauses, but you could have at least contacted me..."

It was understandable during the Morpho's elimination operation, since they hadn't seen each other's faces, but Shin had definitely known Lena was going to become the Strike Package's commanding officer. He regarded her question with an annoyed

expression.

“I’m sorry. During the rescue operation, we were always on the front lines, and when the Strike Package was being organized, the confidentiality became that much stricter for some reason. We weren’t allowed to contact anyone from the outside.”

“...”

Lena had asked the relief expeditionary force several times about the headless skeleton’s Processor and hadn’t been given an answer, because of confidentiality clauses. But now she recalled the commander, Richard, holding back laughter and his adviser, the chief of staff, Willem, showing an amused smile. She’d asked for the Processor’s personnel file, which would usually have their name, but curiously, the procedure was continually held up, and she hadn’t seen it until now. Lena got the feeling they had all been in on it and had conspired to not let the two of them get in contact...

“And besides, I never once doubted that you would catch up to us, Colonel.”

“Huh...?”

“I never doubted that you’d reach our final destination. I worried that contacting you or coming to see you would make it seem like I didn’t believe you could do it on your own.”

“You remembered.”

“Of course I did.”

Shin said it with his usual placid tone, as if it was nothing at all, but there were no other words in the world that could have made Lena happier. He’d remembered—he’d believed in her and that she would catch up to them someday. Lena bit her lip. If there was ever a time to say what needed to be said, it was now, and if she didn’t take the opportunity, she’d likely never be brave enough again.

“Shin.”

She called his name firmly. Shin turned to face her, closing the door to his room. Lena gave a dry cough before continuing.

“Can we...can we call each other by our names? In public places there are appearances to keep up, so that’s not acceptable, of course, but whenever we’re not...”

“Major.”

The Eighty-Six had called her by her rank before as a sign of their reservations. To signify their relationship as the oppressor and the oppressed. One was a white pig sitting safely behind the wall, and the others were proud Eighty-Six fighting outside it. An invisible line had been drawn between them, marking the fact that they weren't close enough to pretend to be friends by calling one another by their given names.

But she was finally outside the wall, even if she didn't stand beside them on the battlefield.

"For these past two years, I've fought my own way, even if it doesn't compare to yours. And even if I couldn't make my dream come true, at the very least, I never ran away. So could you treat me like you do the others..."

Like Raiden and Theo and Kurena and Anju. Like his comrades in arms...

"...and call me by my name...? Could you please call me Lena?"

Shin looked at Lena with surprise, seemingly taken aback—as if he'd called her by her rank out of habit and not out of any ill will—and suddenly smiled.

"I don't mind. But only on one condition."

"There's a condition?"

"Yes."

As Lena steeled herself, Shin said:

"Please stop making that tragic face."

His words struck Lena like a knife through the heart.

"...I'm not making a tragic face."

For some reason, her voice came out awkwardly, as if her nose was stuffy... As if she was on the verge of tears.

"Yes, you are. To be honest...it's kind of been irritating me for a while now."

Even as he called her face irritating, his tone and gaze were filled with concern.

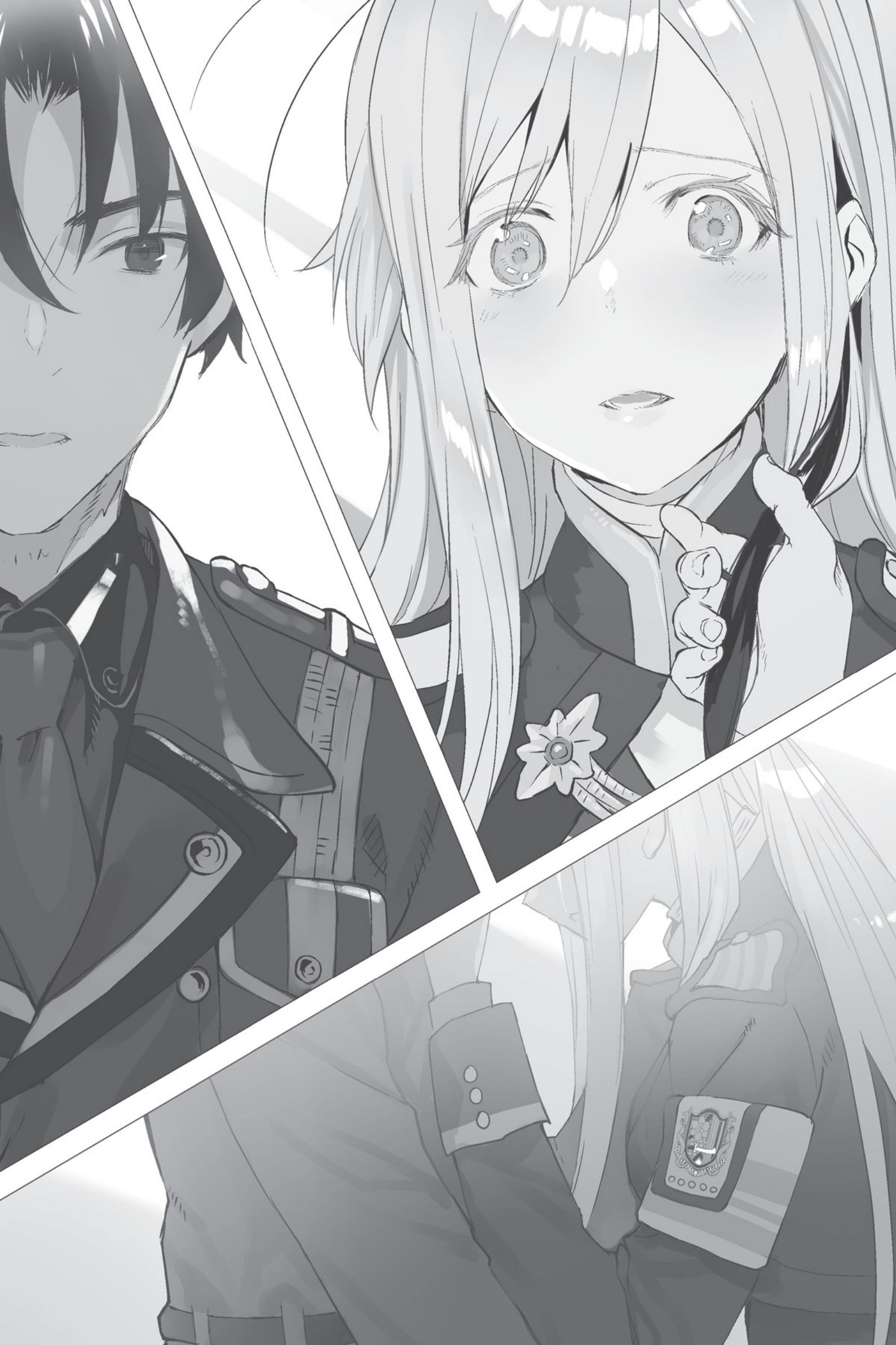
"When I said I wanted you to remember us, it wasn't so you would remember our deaths. I didn't tell you to live on just so you could spend every day trying to atone for your sins... I didn't leave you with those words as a punishment, so that you would wear such a tortured expression..."

As if to say he wasn't accusing her of anything...

“...So stop wearing that macabre uniform. It doesn’t suit you...
And neither does this hair.”

After a moment of hesitation, he gently scooped up a strand of Lena’s long, silken hair. The lone streak was dyed red, meant to represent the blood of the Eighty-Six.

“You don’t have to do this anymore. You have no sins to atone for. No one’s condemning you, so please stop—stop trying to bear a cross that doesn’t exist.”



Lena slowly shook her head.

It wasn't a cross... It wasn't guilt. It was armor. The uniform dyed black. The hair dyed red. They were the armor I needed to fight all alone in the Republic, where everyone else forgot how to fight.

"...But..."

The words spilled from her pink lips before she knew what she was saying.

"...there was no one left... You and the others, everyone I took command of after you left, they all went ahead and left me behind."

A calm voice in her head ordered her to stop, but the bitter whispers slithered out all the same.

Your side is the one that cast them out, the side that sent them to their deaths. You have no right to say anything, no right to weep your loneliness to him.

"No one believed me. No one would fight with me... No one stood beside me."

Even though I begged them... "Don't leave me behind..."

"Both my uncle and mother passed away, and I was left all alone... So if I didn't pretend to be strong, I would never have lasted. If I didn't call myself the Bloodstained Queen, if I didn't believe the lie that I was Bloody Reina, then I would have..."

"...Yeah..."

...broken and fallen apart a long time ago.

Shin quietly affirmed Lena's vulnerability. Maybe he identified with some of what she said. Maybe this boy, the same age as her, carried the name of the Reaper so he could survive that battlefield of certain death...

"But you don't need that anymore. You're not alone anymore... You have me, Raiden, and the others by your side."

The warmth of his body, slightly warmer than her own, had made her restless earlier, but now it felt comforting. It gave weight to his words and filled her with hope.

"Didn't you want to fight together—with us?"

"..."

And there was her limit. Lena clung to the person who stood by her side—at long last—and wept like a child.

"...Those two are really, how d'ya say it...? A troublesome pair?" said Theo, one hand clamped over Frederica's mouth as he carried the struggling girl with the other hand.

"Didn't think we'd have to cover for them getting stalked by these two the entire day," replied Raiden, carrying the equally muffled, equally miffed Kurena.

They were on the bend of the corridor where Lena was currently clinging to Shin, weeping loudly. Raiden and Theo were tucked in the shadows behind the wall, hidden from view, whispering as quietly as they could so Shin's keen ears and senses wouldn't pick up on their presence.

Anju, who was sitting on the opposite side of the corridor and successfully eavesdropping on Shin and Lena with a hand mirror, cracked a fox's smile.

"If anything, Kurena and Frederica need to learn to restrain themselves a bit. I know you don't like seeing your big brother getting snatched away by another girl, but at least let them have today."

Kurena and Frederica both let out muffled, annoyed groans in response—some exclamation of protest and objection that more than likely meant *He's not my big brother!*—which everyone tacitly ignored.

The record of Shin and Lena's conversation after the Morpho's destruction was one Shin didn't want others to hear at all costs, but Theo was glad they'd heard it. He was the Reaper who fought by their side and took their dead comrades to their final destination. But that crybaby of a Handler had told him the words they'd always wanted to say but couldn't, since it was them that made Shin carry that burden.

"...I'm glad the colonel didn't die."

"Agreed."

Anju snapped her hand mirror shut.

"He's gonna notice us any minute now. Let's get out of here."

"Okaaay." "Rogerrrr that."

She'd gone to all that trouble to reapply her makeup, and now it was running again. Lena spoke, still with a bit of a hiccup in her

voice.

“I’ll change my hair back to the way it was before, then.”

Shin smiled faintly.

“I think that would be for the best.”

“My uniform, too.”

“Yeah.”

“...However, until a spare uniform arrives, I’ll keep wearing the black one...”

“Couldn’t you just wear the Federacy uniform until then?”

No, that’s a bit too much, or so Lena was about to say before changing her mind. Yes, she’d been on the receiving end of his teasing for long enough, so her next retort served as a bit of petty revenge.

“Would that be more to your...liking?”

“Huh...?”

Shin stared at Lena, taken aback. Unsure how to answer that, he froze in place with his mouth hanging open. Seeing this usually detached boy so uncharacteristically flustered, Lena couldn’t help but burst out in laughter.

CHAPTER 2

IDENTIFICATION: FRIEND OR FOE?

The refugee shelter was a collection of prebuilt, short-term dwellings. They were weatherworn, with colors faded by the sun. They were sold cheap to the Republic, a hand-me-down from the Federacy's old barracks. Simple, crude structures meant to provide shelter on the battlefield.

The refugees were treated like livestock, forced into these structures on the edge of the battlefield, and never given any choice of the food, clothing, and supplies they received. In exchange for this minimal support offered to them by the Federacy, they were forced into labor-intensive restoration work and mandatory combat training.

The Republic of San Magnolia did have an existing interim government, but in truth, it was under the Federacy's heel. These Imperialist dogs who'd ceased being an empire in name alone walked all over the Republic, which valued peace and equality, under the false pretense of protection.

The sight of young boys and girls still in their midteens meandering about with listless expressions was a knife to the heart. At that age, they should have been under the care and protection of their parents and society, attending school, dabbling

in fashion and hobbies, hanging out with their friends. But instead...

Amid the ruins of what had once been a magnificent palace that had served as the military's headquarters was now a newly built barracks meant to house the new unit dispatched here this spring. The Eighty-Sixth Strike Package, the unit made up of those disgusting Eighty-Six. Once again, those stains try to befoul this beautiful country with their filthy colors, as if they own the place.

But they are mistaken. For this is our proud Alba country.

†

"Colonel Vladilena Milizé and Captain Shinei Nouzen. As part of our operations to retake the Republic's northern administrative Sectors, I assign you to a top-secret mission."

They were in the integrated headquarters' base, in the chief of staff's room, which for some reason had its lights turned off. Sitting with his back to the sunlit window, with the backlighting obfuscating his face, the chief of staff, Willem, leaned forward, his elbows resting on his desk while he covered his mouth as he spoke.

The question Lena asked Shin with her eyes was all too obvious.

This is rather strange. Is this how they give orders in the Federacy military?

But Shin unfortunately remained as expressionless as ever, meaning he probably thought nothing of this, as was usually the case. Or maybe he was simply too aghast to speak. Lena couldn't tell.

But just as those thoughts crossed her mind, Willem straightened his back in what looked like a bored, disappointed gesture.

"...What, aren't you excited? I thought kids your age would be over the moon at the idea of a top-secret mission."

"What're the mission specifics?"

The chief of staff scoffed at the way Shin ignored his jape with his own deadpan reply.

"You really are a downer, Captain Nouzen. I'll give you some recordings of those cartoons that were popular when you were young, so do try to enjoy some childish entertainment, even this late in the game... Now, then..."

An aide entered the room and switched on the lights before activating a holo-screen and piling a stack of media filled with cartoons and movies on the chief of staff's desk.

"...let's get back on track. I have a mission for you, my dear officers. As part of our operation to retake the Republic's northern Sectors, the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package will be dispatched on a takeover operation of the Republic's northern secondary capital of Charité's underground central station terminal."

Lena stiffened. It was finally time.

"Let's begin by explaining our current status. There is a large force of Legion stationed to the north of the First Sector, the Republic's capital of Liberté et Égalité. Since December of last year, the occupying forces have been judged insufficient for retaking the Sector and forced to give up on advancing farther in—although I'm sure there's no need to explain this to Captain Nouzen, who can trace the enemy's movements."

The chief of staff smiled thinly at Lena, who looked back at him.

"The Federacy military is aware of the captain's ability to track the enemy and is making use of it to stay abreast of their activities over a large area. Unlike your country, which clung to some shared delusion of common sense, the Federacy doesn't have the luxury to throw a precious warning device like him onto the battlefield."

"I doubt things would have ended well for me had the Republic acknowledged me as a warning device."

In the Republic, the Eighty-Six were considered a subhuman race with no rights to speak of. Had they recognized him as a promising research subject, he'd likely have been dissected and preserved in liquid... In the past, when Sensory Resonance was still in development, countless children had been taken from the internment camps and killed in human experimentation.

Lena recalled her friend who had been tormented secretly for years by the thought that she had abandoned a childhood friend

to that fate. Major Henrietta Penrose, head of research for the Sensory Resonance technology. Shin's forgotten childhood friend.

"Yes, indeed... The Charité underground central station terminal you are to suppress is a large-scale production base for this detachment of Legion. According to our recon, it's presumed the fourth underground level houses an Auto Reproduction type—a Weisel—and the fifth underground level houses a Power Plant type's—an Admiral's—control unit."

With a wave of the chief of staff's hand, a holo-screen appeared before them, presenting a three-dimensional holographic model of the underground terminal. It had fourteen routes and twenty-five platforms and lines, as well as a large-scale commercial facility attached to it that spanned seven subterranean levels. It had an extremely elaborate, convoluted structure with some of the establishments extending as far as their adjoining stations.

Even looking at its three-dimensional model from above, one could easily get lost, earning it the infamous name of the Charité Underground Labyrinth.

Shin narrowed his eyes as soon as he'd scoured the model. Lena realized why a moment later.

It was narrow.

The smallest tunnels were a mere four meters in length and width. The unit that constituted the main bulk of the Federacy's army, the Vánagandr, was utterly incapable of moving in them, and one wrong move could even get a Reginleif stuck. The topography didn't allow the Legion to deploy their own main forces, the Löwe and the Dinosauria, but since they were on the defending side, they could burrow into the floor and brace for impact. This battlefield, where they could hide the weak points in their armor or make it so their heads were hard to aim at, could actually be the worst possible setting for the Reginleif and its low firepower.

"The objective is the elimination of these two Legion. In addition, we ask that you do it with as little damage to the units as possible. We have very little observational data on these two types. We want to study them, if possible... But don't make it a priority. If doing so would result in extra losses, you may forfeit

this secondary objective."

There were few observational records of the Admiral and the Weisel lurking in the depths of the Legion's territories. Even the Republic had encountered them only a handful of times, early in the war. Thankfully, there had still been active soldiers from the ground forces on the battlefields at the time, so they'd been able to give fairly detailed reports of what they'd seen. With that thought in mind, Lena raised a hand.

"May I ask a question, sir?"

The chief of staff gave a gentlemanly smile.

"Of course, Colonel Milizé... It's pleasant to hear some respect for one's superior officers, unlike a certain dreary captain I won't mention by name."

Lena regarded Shin with a sidelong glance, and he pretended not to notice.

"The Admiral is a type of Legion that produces energy packs by converting solar energy into electricity. How does it generate power underground, without access to sunlight?"

According to reports, the Admiral was a massive butterfly-like Legion with solar panel wings, accompanied by flocks of palmtop-size Edelfalter: the Generator Extension types. It couldn't spread its massive wings underground and didn't have sunlight to generate power to begin with.

"To be exact, they *typically* rely on solar generation. According to a report we've received from the United Kingdom, among the Legion they fight against, there's an Admiral that uses geothermal power to generate electricity. The ability to adapt themselves to the situation is a well-known trait of the Legion, characteristic of their high learning capabilities... Moreover, according to our estimates, this Admiral is using nuclear fusion to generate electricity."

"Nuclear fusion...? But that's..."

"It's only in trial stages even here in the Federacy, which means it's perfectly possible for the Legion. Much of the technology prided by our Empire was inherited by the Legion, after all... This is another reason why the Morpho was heading for the Republic during last year's large-scale offensives. The more electricity provided to the railgun, the higher its initial velocity, its

power, and its range. If it not only sat encamped within the walls but also was given access to a nuclear fusion generator's endless power supply...at the very least, our Federacy, as well as the surrounding countries, would have been one-sidedly reduced to ashes."

"..."

Shin was the next to speak:

"Commodore."

"Yes, my dreary captain?"

"The Eighty-Sixth Strike Package's commanding officer isn't Colonel Milizé, but Colonel Wenzel. Why isn't Colonel Wenzel here?"

The chief of staff smiled faintly as he shrugged.

"Why, isn't it obvious? This kind of operation doesn't require briefing, and usually we'd just send you the data files. There was simply something else I wanted to show you aside from the directive for this operation."

"..."

Okay, this guy can't be trusted, thought Lena. Shin, standing next to her, likely had the same thought.

The chief of staff rose to his feet, saying he'd escort them as a way to stretch his legs after all the desk work. Lena followed him down the integrated headquarters' base's corridor, when she suddenly realized something and looked around. They weren't walking the way they'd come from. She turned her gaze to Shin, who surveyed his surroundings with narrowed eyes.

"Sir..."

The chief of staff, Willem, didn't spare her a single glance as he walked up to a door at the end of the corridor. The door's ID lock deactivated, and he pushed it open. He then looked back at the two of them, who were standing stock-still, and motioned for them to come in.

It was a room with such a high ceiling it appeared as though the upper floor had been removed to accommodate it, and they were on its second level. Below the guardrail were offices filled with soldiers wearing the information-analysis team's armband,

going about their work. Several of them were looking at a holo-screen projected in midair—likely their analysis subject.

The holo-screen showed some kind of meeting room created with the oppressive design scheme of the Empire's late years. Ernst's voice boomed from the room, but there was no sight of him. He was out of the camera's range.

“—Another complaint regarding the Eighty-Six's treatment, Representative Primevére?”

His tone sounded exceptionally cold and stiff. On the screen, the woman called Primevére smiled gracefully. She had an Alba's silver hair and eyes and wore the emblem of the five-hued flag that designated her as someone with a post in the Republic's interim government.

“Yes... As we've mentioned several times already, the Eighty-Six your country seized from us are all weapons belonging to the Republic of San Magnolia. They are the rightful property of our country. We ask that you return them to us immediately.”

“What...?!”

Lena inadvertently cried out, and the chief of staff raised a hand to silence her. Looking up at him, she saw him smirking faintly below his regulation cap. Lena finally saw the truth behind his cruel smile. His real reason for summoning them here today...

...was to show them *this*...

The woman in the footage—the one called Primevére—continued her one-sided demands:

The Eighty-Six are a lesser species—livestock in human form. The Federacy has no right to seize them. To begin with, the Federacy has no basis to leave their military within Republic territories. So they are to return the Eighty-Six, order their military to retreat, and return sovereignty of the Republic to rightful Alba hands.

Ernst seemed to have scoffed.

“We had been planning to entrust defense to your military as soon as we were done retaking the northern Sectors. But do you really plan to hold back the Legion with methods that, aside from being atrocious, failed you six months ago?”

“Of course. We Alba established the greatest form of government in the history of humankind: a system wherein the superior race stands above all other races on the

continent. We would never lose to the Legion, as they are the creation of an inferior race."

Her eyes indicated she was entirely serious.

Even the Federacy, which had the largest territory and military strength on the continent, needed to change its strategies to oppose the Legion, but she had practically declared victory already. She was that confident in the Alba's superiority over others races in every field.

This person—this...*fanatic*—actually said that.

"Our retreat six months ago can be attributed to the Eighty-Six's incompetence. We gave them superb weapons, better than mere livestock could have ever hoped for, yet still they failed to achieve victory over the course of a decade. And from our inspections, the Gran Mur's collapse during that pitiful Legion attack was due to several structural flaws in the design. It was sabotage at the hands of the Eighty-Six who built it. Those feeble-minded, slothful degenerates... This time, we will have them fight under our superior, efficient command."

The footage ended. Lena stared at the blacked-out screen, biting her lip.

Again.

People who think this way are leading the Republic again...

"So they want to have the Eighty-Six handle the Republic's defense again after the Federacy's army leaves. It's truly incorrigible how little they seem to understand the war situation and how warped their sense of justice is."

The chief of staff's scoffing, scathing laughter felt terribly distant to her. She couldn't even look Shin, who was standing right next to her, in the eye... No, she didn't want to look at him. He was probably looking at Lena with the same cold, coolheaded gaze he would direct at the other Alba.

Shin spoke plainly:

"...So if we're not useful, you intend to abide by their demands?"

"After the civilians' petty sympathy runs out, and if we find we have no further use for you, it's a possibility."

The chief of staff didn't flinch away from Shin's cold stare.

"There's no reason to act peevish at this point, Eighty-Six.

Aren't you guys living proof that this is what all people eventually boil down to?"

Shin gave a small sigh.

"...Yes."

"Anyway, that woman is rapidly gathering support among the old Republic's citizens and building up her position within the interim government. She's the leader of the Holy Magnolian Order of Pureblood, Pure-White, Patriotic Knights, and their demands are, well, as you've heard."

"...Is that some kind of code name within the Federacy military?"

"I merely called them what they call themselves."

"....."

Shin let out a heavy, disgusted sigh.

"And how are these...knights related to our mission?"

He cut their name short.

"You can view this as a warning and nothing more... Let us hope this is all just needless fear on my part, shall we?"



But the Patriotic Knights' demands remained thrust into Lena's heart like a thorn. With the personnel files of 139 newly appointed Processors projected in the air before her, Lena sat lost in thought.

The Eighty-Six were born and raised in the Republic, but it was the farthest thing from home for them. And yet, someday, they might yearn to return to their birthplace. But if this was what the Republic would be like when that time came...they would likely never return.

How can the Republic...? My homeland, even if I can no longer pride myself on it...

TP the black cat let out a needy meow.

"Colonel... Colonel Milizé."

"Eep!"

She looked up to see Grethe.

"My apologies. What is it, Colonel Wenzel?"

"What,' you ask. Major Penrose and Second Lieutenant Jaeger are arriving today, and it's also the first Processor group's starting day in their new posting. The major and second lieutenant should be arriving any minute."

Anxiously checking the holographic calendar and watch on the desk, she quickly rose to her feet.

"I—I have to go welcome them."

Lena had intended to go greet them herself but had been so swamped with paperwork that she'd forgotten. Grethe smirked, stopping her with a hand.

"I've already sent someone to greet them. They'll be shown around the rooms, so you have time to get yourself dressed... Major Penrose is a girl, too, after all. We can't have her making any appearances before she's had the chance to wash off the exhaustion of her trip."

"I'm sorry... Thank you."

"No need for thanks. This is part of my job."

Just as Lena was about to sit back down, she suddenly realized something and stiffened halfway through sinking into her seat.

"Who did you send to greet her...?"

Grethe tilted her head curiously.

"Captain Nouzen, since he happened to be free... Why do you ask?"

"Shin...?!"

Shin regarded the Republic technical officer dubiously as she stood frozen in place on the runway, his name escaping her lips in an anguished cry. Bernholdt, who was holding her luggage, also wore a puzzled expression. The technical officer—Major Penrose—went pale with shock and confusion, paler than he'd ever seen a person go before. As she gradually recovered from her surprise, she said through quivering lips, "...Captain Nouzen, there's something I'd like to confirm."

Her voice sounded as if it was squashed under a lump of emotion.

"Was Colonel Milizé the one who sent you to greet me...?"

"No, Major Penrose, it was under the instruction of Colonel

Wenzel, the unit commander."

He answered her question, wondering all the while what the point behind it was. The difference in rank between a major and a captain was absolute, and while Shin himself didn't care about the rules one way or another, he followed them so Lena wouldn't have to lose face over his actions. He thought he'd realized what the reason for her attitude was. Citizens of the Republic saw the Eighty-Six as pigs in human form.

"If you find being greeted by an Eighty-Six unpleasant, I apologize... Since you're appointed to the laboratory, I doubt we'll have to see each other after this."

"If that bothered me, I wouldn't have volunteered to come here in the first place."

Major Penrose spat out her reply as if she'd been stabbed by a knife.

"...And besides, I'm a technical expert in the Sensory Resonance field. I'll have to closely interact with you Processors anyway..."

"Annette!"

A panicked voice echoed down the runway. Turning their gazes, they spotted Lena dashing toward them. She'd probably sprinted the entire way, because when she approached them, she had her hands on her knees and was panting heavily. Seeing as she had neither her regulation cap nor her medals on, she'd probably come over without a moment's delay.

"Captain Nouzen, I'll handle showing Major Penrose around. Master Sergeant Bernholdt, please take care of her luggage."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Let's go."

Shin's dubious gaze followed Lena as she left. It was as if she were trying to tear away from the place—from him. As they were leaving, Bernholdt extended a hand, as if asking for something, and Shin handed him his regulation cap. Raiden, who'd just happened to pass by, watched them go and asked, "...What was that about?"

"Beats me."

Shin didn't have any idea what the problem was, either. He then asked Raiden in turn, "What's up?"

"Came here to meet some of the newbies. This one kid who got left behind..."

He gestured with his chin toward a Celena boy who was idly looking around, apparently having missed his chance to leave with the rest of the group in time.

"...and that guy there."

Raiden then turned his gaze to the second transport plane's rear hatch, which had just opened. The small-framed Eighty-Six boy who rushed out stopped in his tracks when he noticed Shin and Raiden. His jaw nearly hit the floor before he murmured:

"Huh? C-Cap'n Nouzen?! Vice Cap'n Shuga!"

He was acting as if he'd just witnessed two dead men walking, but from his perspective, that wasn't too far from the truth. This boy, Rito, had been Shin and Raiden's subordinate in the unit they'd served in before joining the Spearhead squadron two years ago. For all he knew, Shin and Raiden were dead. Shin was likewise surprised to find an acquaintance from two years ago who had survived, but Rito responded thus:

"Whoa, Cap'n, don't tell me you actually croaked and changed your job to a real reaper?! Are we actually all dead already?!"

Raiden burst out laughing at the absurd idea while Shin heaved a deep sigh.

After the Gran Mur's fall, there were Republic citizens, however few, who joined the ranks and piloted Juggernauts. And there was one who chose to forgo protecting their homeland directly and volunteered for the Strike Package. A single soldier.

"Second Lieutenant Dustin Jaeger. I'll be under your command as of today. It's a pleasure to meet you."

As the Celena boy saluted clumsily, clad in his deep-blue Republic uniform, an uncomfortable air passed among Shin's group of five seniors. They'd been told about him ahead of time, but still... A Republic citizen. They couldn't help but feel some resistance. Sensing the dark atmosphere settling over his comrades, Shin asked, "You weren't originally a soldier—why volunteer? You can skip the formalities—we're all the same as you here."

And therein lay the difference between treating someone like a human and treating them like a drone.

"Affirmative, sir... Er, pardon! Yeah, I was a student before the large-scale offensive happened."

Flustered, Dustin reworded his reply when he saw Shin's crimson eyes narrow slightly. As was demanded of him, he spoke before the Eighty-Six while omitting all formalities.

"...You see, a lot of my classmates were Eighty-Six who died in battle with the Legion. And all I could do was watch. So I thought it would be obvious for me to carry that stigma. But I don't want my children and grandchildren to have to bear it, too. So to break the cycle, I... The Republic citizens have to fight."

"Whatever happens after you die in battle doesn't concern you anymore. Are you still sure about that?"

Dustin pursed his lips.

"Even if I die, the influence of my actions will remain. And that will affect the future. So it does concern me... If you'll have me, I'm determined to do this."

"Eighty-Sixth Strike Package Second Lieutenant Shiden Iida, captain of the Brisingamen unit, in charge of defending headquarters. A pleasure to finally meet ya, Captain Nouzen, sir."

The unit that had gone on to be known as the Queen's Knights ended up having fifteen members survive the large-scale offensive. Shin watched her, Second Lieutenant Shiden Iida, aka Cyclops, as she gave a messy salute with her back to the five female Processors standing at the core of the group. Lena had to stifle her laughter at Shin's anticlimactic reaction.

Shiden's voice was a husky alto that made it hard to distinguish her sex. Her unkempt red hair was cropped short, she had light-brown skin, and she was as tall as the average man. In contrast, her ample bust, larger than that of most women Lena knew, bent her Federacy uniform's tie at a sharp angle.

Her eyes were likely the inspiration for her Personal Name. Her right eye was a dark indigo, and her left was as white as snow, giving the impression that she had only one eye. They narrowed as she bore her sharp canines, smirking like a wild animal.

Yes, Shiden Iida *was a woman*.

Lena had never mentioned it, and it seemed Shin had never expected her to be a woman. It was said that the survival rate in the Eighty-Sixth Sector was higher for males. In a field of harsh combat, a difference in endurance and stamina significantly influenced survival rate. And as female soldiers typically didn't have as much physical stamina as male soldiers, they had a shorter average life expectancy.

In a briefing room, with all the Processors gathered in one place, Shiden spoke from the center of the group.

"By the way, did you get your toy back, Lady-Killer? The one you dropped in that flower field six months ago?"

Shiden smirked as Shin narrowed his eyes. She really was tall for a girl. She stood eye to eye with Shin, who was taller than the average boy his age.

"I don't know the specifics, but don't go ventin' your anger at a woman who coulda been a total stranger for all you knew, dumb ass. That was beyond embarrassing."

"I won't deny that... But what right do you have to say that to me?"



Shiden scoffed and cocked her chin up haughtily.

"Every right. I don't care if you're the Reaper of the eastern front. You got no right to diss *Our* Majesty, got it? 'Sides, weren't you supposed to die two years ago? At least know how to stay in the grave, dammit."

"...You're all bark, aren't you?"

Shin replied with blatant provocation, leaving the *no bite* bit unsaid. With her odd eyes glistening as if in laughter for a moment, Shiden launched her tall form forward.

"Take that!"

As soon as she shouted, a diagonal kick bore down on Shin like a hammer blow, which he evaded by bending his body half a step back. He then narrowly dodged the next attack and, using the gap between her strikes to find an opening, swiped at her with a swing of his arm. Strands of her short red hair danced through the air like a splash of blood or embers fluttering in the wind.

Reflecting that color, her snow-white eye narrowed with bestial ferocity.

Lena was flustered by the sight of this sudden scuffle, and her eyes and powerlessly outstretched hands wandered to and fro.

"Ah, er, p-please, please stop it...!"

"Ah, leave 'em, Lena. Let 'em duke it out."

So said Theo, sitting backward on a chair, the backrest serving as a chinrest while his hands, folded atop it, cradled his head.

"You know how lions, wolves—hell, even stray dogs—fight for dominance in the pack? Yeah, this is that. Just let 'em settle things their way."

"They're not stray dogs—!"

Lena noticed the surrounding Eighty-Six were moving chairs closer for a better look, blatantly placing bets on who they thought would win. No one was planning on stopping this. Kurena, Anju, and Raiden were watching the violence unfold without a care in the world.

"What, the bets are fifty-fifty...? For real...? Shin's got this, nine times out of ten."

"Yeah, well... He might be the Reaper of the eastern front, but that story's two years old now..."

"I guess most of them don't know him that well. Anyway, I'd

say Lena was right on the money here, if anything."

"M-me...?!"

"Like, look at 'em. They'll both stop after a while."

After all, they're not dogs.

One girl assumed the role of bookie (the Brísingamen squadron's vice captain, appallingly enough) and made the rounds, taking bets. Raiden and the others all placed a few small bets on Shin winning.

"In the Republic, the Eighty-Six didn't really care for ranks. So we'd decide on the positions of captain and vice captain by ourselves."

...Is that so?

Lena couldn't help but feel disgusted for having been so detached from what happened outside the walls that she hadn't even known that, despite being a soldier.

"But Name Bearers have their pride and won't follow anyone weaker than them into battle."

"Our lives are on the line here. Like hell we're gonna die because we let some no-skill moron order us around."

"Usually the strongest person gets picked as captain. It's one thing when you have a unit with only one Name Bearer, but when you get a bunch of 'em in one place, things usually get decided like this: with a fight."

As uncomfortable as the phrasing might have been, it really was like animals fighting for dominance.

"Was it like that for the Spearhead squadron, too?"

On that last battlefield in the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

"At the time, Shin's name and skill were already well-known, so we all unanimously agreed Shin would be captain and Raiden would be vice captain."

"...And you've been pushing all your dirty work on me ever since."

"Well what'd ya expect? The rest of us suck at reading and writing, and besides, you've been with Shin the longest."

A squad captain had to fill out paperwork as part of their role, and should anything happen to the captain, the vice captain was to take over for them. Both Shin and Raiden had been blessed with guardians and given a better education than most children in

their position, so it made sense to let them handle those duties.

"But yeah, we had these kinds of fights for dominance in the squads before that. There was Kurena and Daiya and Kaie and me... There was also this guy before you were assigned to us, Kujo. He was the biggest, thickest guy in his squad at the time, but seeing the smallest girl there, Kaie, beat the shit out of him was insane."

Apparently, she'd taken advantage of Kujo's size and used his knees as footing to deliver a flying kick to the nape of his neck.

Kurena scoffed at Lena, who still watched the scuffle with a flustered, panicked look in her eyes.

"It'll be fine. Shin doesn't go all out against women. He's holding back a lot right now, actually."

"Yeah, Shin starts kicking when he gets serious. He usually aims for the jaw, too."

"You took one to the jaw once, didn't you, Raiden? I always wondered how the hell he moved his body when I heard he could kick a taller person in the jaw while locked in a stalemate, but Shin really does pull it off, doesn't he?"

"I think Daiya got knocked out by one of those. Why does he always aim for the spots that'd usually kill someone...? Oh!"

"Whoa. She's not bad. She got Shin to block."

Using a spinning kick as a feint, she suddenly switched her pivot leg midrotation and shifted to a high kick. Unable to dodge the blow to his temple in time, Shin took the blow with the upper part of his right arm, causing a small tear in the sleeve of his uniform. The angular corner of her combat boot's sole cut him. That was her getting back at him for that slash with his arm. A few drops of blood flicked into the air from beneath the torn steel-blue fabric.

Shin's bloodred eyes grew colder, something even Lena, who wasn't used to seeing physical violence yet, noticed.

"...Uh-oh."

"She got him in *that* mood..."

The moment Raiden and Theo whispered that exchange, Shin moved. As Shiden tried to retract her leg, he pushed it aside with his right arm. At the same time, he took a sharp step forward to close the gap between them, and as Shiden hopped on one leg as

he intended, trying to keep her balance, he used the tip of his foot to trip up her pivot leg and lift her up.

“Ah, whoa...!”

Shiden was completely airborne for a moment, before Shin caught her by the neck and slammed her back down toward the floor.

“...?!”

If this had been a fight against a true enemy, he really would have slammed her into the ground. But halfway through, Shin let go of her, and abiding by her animal instincts, Shiden curled up and covered her head, allowing gravity to pull her down the remaining distance. She then crashed against the wooden floor.

She may have been a girl, but she was the size of a boy and had a physique tempered by the battlefield. A heavy crashing noise echoed throughout the room, and Shiden was silent.

None in attendance made so much as a squeak.

Silence.

Silence.

And more silence.

Suddenly, Shiden twitched. She kicked up and, using the momentum, got to her feet, switching from her previous sprawled-out position, and jabbed her finger at him in complaint.

“...Asshole! That woulda killed me if I didn’t brace myself!”

“You’re assuming I care if you live or die.”

“Why’d you click your tongue just now?! Were you actually *trying* to kill me, you son of a bitch...?!”

“Tch...”

“Ohhh, you piss me off...! See, Your Majesty? This guy’s the kind of bastard who can raise a hand to a woman without a second thought!”

“You’re the one who snapped at me like a rabid dog. Now shut up and stop being a sore loser.”

Shin snapped back at Shiden, who was quite literally pointing fingers at him, with a voice that was 10 percent colder than usual. It really did look like a pair of ten-year-olds bickering. As she looked over this heartwarming(?) exchange, Lena wished from the bottom of her heart that they would leave her out of it. Raiden and Theo were gripping their sides and roaring with laughter.

But still, a loss was a loss. Shiden walked off, grumbling all the while, leaving Shin in the center of the group.

“Now then...”

His crimson eyes scoured the briefing room, full of resolve, making even the battle-hardened Eighty-Six divert their gazes and flinch away. Until now, Shiden had been the Processor who’d served as Lena’s—their superior officer, Bloody Reina’s—direct subordinate. She had been acknowledged as the strongest Processor. And he’d effortlessly dispatched her as if it was child’s play.

“...if anyone else has a problem with me taking command, step right up.”

Not a single hand went up.

No.

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do. I’m up next...!”

There was, in fact, one who raised his voice. Crossing through the crowd, Dustin removed his uniform’s blazer enthusiastically. Anju, who happened to be next to him, stopped him in his tracks.

“Listen up, Second Lieutenant Jaeger.”

He turned to face her, only to be met with a pair of eyes slightly higher than his own, looking down at him as an adult might look at a child talking nonsense.

“You can talk a big game *after* you beat me.”

“Uh, no, I mean, I can’t fight a girl...”

Anju smirked.

“Come at me.”

The briefing room erupted once more as everyone scrambled to make back what they’d lost in bets. Shin returned to Kurena’s and Lena’s side as Raiden and Theo waved lightly.

“Good work out there.”

“Yeah... By the way,” he said, turning his gaze toward the corner of the briefing room, “what are Anju and Jaeger doing?”

“Um. Discipline, I guess?”

And just as Shin glanced in their direction...

“—Yah!”

“Whoaaaaaaaaaa!”

...Anju easily threw Dustin over her shoulder, and he unfortunately went on to deliver a passionate kiss to the nearby table.

“Annette, I’m sorry. I never intended for you two to meet like that.”

“It’s okay.”

It was after nightfall. In her room in the barracks, Annette gently shook her head at Lena—who apologized profusely—and then looked out the window. The officer’s cafeteria was bustling with over a hundred Processors enjoying their free time. By the window was Shin, sitting a short distance away from the chaos and reading a book. Watching his shadow flip through the pages, Annette said with a whisper:

“I couldn’t tell it was Shin at first, either. He’s so...”

She trailed off, but somehow Lena knew what she was going to say.

...So different.

†

April 2150.

The Federacy’s relief expeditionary force had finally finished its three months of preparation and was ready to go on the offensive. The operation to retake the Republic’s northern regions had begun, and as a result, the Strike Package was placed under the relief expeditionary force’s jurisdiction and was dispatched to its garrisoned headquarters in the capital of Liberté et Égalité.

But when the 168 Eighty-Six who made up the majority of the Strike Package’s seven squadrons got to the base, they were greeted with...

GO BACK TO THE EIGHTY-SIXTH SECTOR, EIGHTY-SIX!

RETURN THIS PURE-WHITE COUNTRY TO HUMAN HANDS!

...countless such banners, hanging and fluttering off the tall burned buildings surrounding what was once the Republic's ground forces' headquarters and now served as the garrisoned base.

†

Yesterday, the MPs on patrol had removed the banners, but looking out the briefing room's window, Lena could see they were once again flapping about in the same spot.

Not again, Lena thought as she furrowed her brow. It was the same thing again today. *Go away, Eighty-Six. Give us back our pure-white country,* and so on. The relief expeditionary force had its hands full with holding the line and retaking the northern Sectors and couldn't shift any resources toward maintaining public order. And since no investigation was done on the matter, some of the civilians continued their ceaseless acts of bigotry against the Eighty-Six.

Starting from the day they put up the banners, they began singing derogatory songs from the safety of their hiding places. At night, they would hand out incendiary flyers. More and more graffiti rife with vilification covered the surroundings of the base, and the airwaves were filled with pirate radio stations.

Despicable, they said. *Get out,* they said. *It's your fault that things have come to this.* They repeated their words of malice and ill will without end, never once realizing they'd brought their fate on themselves.

When Shin came to her office to confirm some documents, he asked her, "What's with all the commotion over bleach and detergent?"

"...Bleach and detergent?"

"They keep saying, 'Give us back our pure white.'"

Lena burst out laughing. Sure enough, when taken out of context, it did sound like something out of a commercial for laundry detergent. But she soon slumped her shoulders.

"...I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's nothing you need to apologize for, Lena," Shin

said without a hint of displeasure, a wry smile on his face. "It doesn't matter what we say—those people won't listen. They're like dogs who are all bark and no bite; you lose the moment you pay them any mind. All they can do is be loud, and you can always just laugh them off like you did just now."

Shin shrugged at her returned gaze.

"So don't let it bother you, Lena... It's not your fault, so don't make that face."

Lena smiled bitterly. She realized he was worrying about her, and that made her happy, but...

"But I can't help but be bothered by this. I... I'm a citizen of the Republic, too."

Even if she couldn't be proud of it, even if she was incapable of loving it anymore, the Republic was still the homeland that had given birth to and raised Lena. And as one of the Republic's citizens, seeing her compatriots conduct themselves so despicably made her feel ashamed and pathetic. And leaving those things as they were before the eyes of the Eighty-Six was unacceptable.

"Leaving such things as they are even when you know they're wrong is tantamount to supporting them. Not correcting their actions is...shameful, as a fellow citizen of the Republic."

Shin fell silent for a moment. She thought she saw a flash of what looked like anger or indignation in his eyes.

"...You're different from them, and we all know that... Whatever they say or do has no bearing on you."

"...Even so, I find it intolerable. Isn't there something we can do, Colonel Wenzel?"

"Well, yeah, it's certainly not a pleasant sight..."

Lena voiced her complaints during one of their scheduled meetings, and Grethe knit her brows in annoyance.

"Headquarters has relayed our complaints to the interim government, and we've increased the area of the no-trespassing zone, as well as the frequency of patrols. Anything more than that would be difficult to pull off."

"...Yes, I supposed as much..."

"I understand your irritation, but the military police can only

act within Federacy military regulations."

Maintaining civil order within the base and its surroundings was the military police's role. And since this matter deliberately lowered the soldiers' morale, the MPs were actively trying to prevent it. And still, there was no stopping the radio broadcasts traveling through the airwaves or the chanting and flyers riding the wind.

The other day, as a squadron was on its way back to base after an exercise, they found acorns littering the road. The Federacy soldiers didn't seem to mind, but Lena, a Republic citizen, understood the meaning behind it. The Republic's industries were originally agriculture and stock farming. And acorns were traditionally...fodder for pigs.

The Eighty-Six may have been born in the Republic, but they'd never learned its culture and history, so thankfully, the malicious, disdainful meaning behind this act was lost on them... But as they sat in the transport, Shin sighed lightly, and Raiden scoffed. Lena felt the anxiety squeeze her heart like a vise. If nothing else, the two of them knew. They simply kept quiet, pretending to not notice the spite directed their way. She wanted to find a way to stop it...

"We can't say we don't care, but...the Eighty-Six aren't bothered by it, right?" asked Grethe.

"...Indeed..."

Lena nodded vaguely. She found it odd, or at the very least unpleasant. It wasn't as if they were all as indifferent to it as Shin was. There were some sparse reactions to it here and there, but they were all within the scope of jokes.

Every time a banner was erected, the Eighty-Six tied a stuffed toy of a white pig to one of the unused flagpoles and sentenced it to an execution by hanging. Every time the obnoxious chanting started, it was turned into a vulgar parody the next day. The Eighty-Six would scribble cutesy caricatures of a white pig on the backs of flyers, and every day the cafeteria boomed with exaggerated imitations of the Republic citizens.

The fact that they weren't hurt by this was certainly a positive note, but Lena felt that they should have resented it further, opposed it more openly. After all, the Republic that had

persecuted them and taken away their rights no longer existed...

"Laughing in the face of adversity is another form of resistance... I doubt it's anything that would phase them at this point."

"But mistakes cannot go uncorrected. And the Republic citizens are unfairly venting their frustrations at them; there's no reason they should have to go along with it."

Her voice was now tinged with anger.

"The Eighty-Sixth Sector no longer exists. We're not ruling over them. They should be allowed to openly oppose this hatred..."

Grethe frowned.

"...And how exactly do you suggest they go about doing that?"

Lena blinked at the sudden question.

"How...? What do you mean, Colonel Wenzel?"

"This is my impression from knowing them... From knowing Captain Nouzen for a year now."

Meeting Lena's gaze, this officer, who was ten years older than she was, spoke in a pensive tone. Her lips were meticulously coated with red lipstick, and unlike Lena's, her uniform's chest was full of ribbons and medals from achievements she'd racked up.

"Those kids, they aren't strong. They simply understood that they had to be strong to survive, and in the process of trying to become strong, they instead cut off anything that made them weak."

It wasn't that they weren't hurt. It was that they hurt so much they had to *cut off* anything that allowed them to feel pain...?

"What you're talking about... That was just another aspect of weakness for them. Experiencing that blatant hatred day in and day out cut it all away from their hearts and made them numb. Telling them to stand up for themselves in the face of senseless adversity might seem like the natural response, but...isn't that the same as asking them to feel pain again?"

While they weren't using live rounds, mock battles in which Juggernauts weighing over ten tons engaged in high-speed maneuvers and tried to shoot at one another's flanks and rears

were harsh on those who weren't used to it. Dustin dragged himself wearily to the shower after the debriefing, only to be passed by Rito, who shouted, "Dibs!"

Watching their backs recede in the distance, Shin furrowed his brow. Since he was the captain, the decision of which troops to assign to which squadron was in his hands, and he mostly chose based off their grades in the special officer academy and their battle record in the Republic. It ultimately resulted in pretty much the same squads they had in the Republic, but there was one problematic soldier.

Anju had been leaning against the wall, waiting for Shin to come out.

"You're not sure what to do about Jaeger's post, are you?" she asked upon seeing him.

"...Yeah."

Despite being three years younger than Dustin, Rito was a Processor who'd served in the squadron Shin had belonged to before joining Spearhead. Two years of combat history was fairly short for a surviving Processor, but it was still much more than Dustin. That two-year gap of experience handling a Juggernaut was all too apparent. Their win-loss rates in training and the way he was exhausted after a match told the story all too clearly.

"His spirit is admirable, though, and it doesn't seem like he wants to die. He just lacks resolve and actual skill."

"I was thinking of benching him as a reserve... But we don't have that kind of luxury with the next operation."

"...Could you let my platoon have him?"

He looked back at Anju, who responded with a faint, bitter smile.

"I mean, you were thinking of taking him either way, right? It's out of the question to put him in yours or Theo's platoons, since you two are vanguards. Raiden ends up working with you often, so he's on the front line all the same. But you can't attach a rookie who's easily spotted to Kurena, who's focused on espionage and sniping... Putting him in my platoon, which is in charge of suppressing fire, would be safer for both of us."

He had his apprehensions, but Anju was right... Having her deal with him was the best course of action.

"Thanks... But if you feel it's hard on you—"

"It'll be fine. It's the same for everyone else. That's just what the white pigs are like... Right?"

There wasn't an Eighty-Six alive who didn't know what it was like to have the Republic walk all over them.

"Yeah."

"And it's true for the colonel, too."

Shin blinked as if he hadn't expected Lena to be mentioned, and Anju simply smiled and shrugged.

"If the colonel thinks that way, too...she'll end up turning her back on the Republic soon enough. So you don't have to feel anxious over this, okay?"

He looked into the azure eyes of the girl who worried constantly for him, to an almost irritating extent.

"...Okay."

All the Para-RAID data accumulated during training sessions and the results of the Processors' periodic inspections were gathered by Annette, who was currently bringing the information up on holo-screens and confirming it. There was no unusual behavior for the time being, nor were there any irregularities with their individual physiologies. That much was to be expected, since they had used this technology for years in the Republic, but it was best to err on the side of caution.

She'd volunteered to do this because she thought that this could be helpful for him—a way to atone for her sins. As she scrolled through page after page of electronic documents, her hands stopped when his name popped up, accompanied by a mug shot.

"...Shin."

Her inadvertently extended hand froze in midair. She found herself biting her lip.

"—Captain Nouzen."

Responding to her voice with a formal nod, the person standing nearby turned to face her.

"What is it, Major Penrose?"

His bloodred eyes. His pale face that hardly ever showed emotion. He'd gotten so much taller in ten years, and his form was slender but tempered by seven years of fierce combat. He was like an old, whetted sword, stuck in the ground of an ancient battlefield, bathed in moonlight.

He was all too different from before. And he looked at Annette as he would a stranger.

"Shin. You actually do remember me, don't you?"

Lena had already told Annette that Shin had never spoken of her, back when they left for the Special Reconnaissance mission. He'd never even mentioned her name, and he likely didn't remember her at all.

But she thought that was a lie. How could he forget how she'd called him a stain when it was such a terrible act of betrayal for him? Having Annette, one of his closest peers, call him that slur was probably the worst thing in the world. And in the end, she'd abandoned him. She'd been stupidly indignant when the chance came to save him, and she had Shin and his precious family... cruelly sent to the internment camps.

Shin had lost his family and been forced to spend what was probably five years fighting in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. A veritable hell on earth. And Annette was at the root of it all. How could he not resent her for it?

He had to resent her. And when he came to greet her, he must have had to hold his emotions in check since they were in an official setting. Or perhaps he treated her like a stranger because he couldn't forgive her. But now they were living in the same barracks and had plenty of opportunities to speak without others getting in the way. She thought he would say something soon enough... But the days came and went, and he never brought it up.

It couldn't be... It couldn't really be, could it...?

"It's me, Henrietta... *Rita*. From the house next door... You remember me, right...?"

There was no way he would forget...

But Shin merely looked at her with slight confusion in his eyes and shook his head gently.

Ahhh, he really did become taller. The inappropriate thought

crossed her mind as she looked up at him. The little boy in her memories was always the same height as her, back then.

“...My apologies.”

And he replied to her as such, with a glance one would only cast at a complete stranger.

Annette had told Lena ahead of time that she would speak to Shin today. She'd said that if anything were to happen, it would all be her own fault, and she'd implored Lena not to punish Shin no matter what happened, her eyes shining with grim resolve.

Lena figured nothing would happen. Shin's dignity as an Eighty-Six would forbid him from acting like one of the Republic's white pigs... And he probably didn't even remember her to begin with.

It was after sunset, and despite it being before lights-out, the room was dim. The light from the corridor rushed over the figure squatting on the floor.

“...Annette.”

“...He...doesn't remember me.”

“...”

I knew it...

“He really doesn't remember anything. How we played every day. Our houses in the First Sector, or how we went on expeditions in the yard... He really doesn't remember anything before he was sent to the internment camp.”

In the ten years since they had last seen each other, Shin—the boy who had fought long and hard until he earned the name of the Eighty-Sixth Sector's Reaper—had had so much stripped away from him by the intensity of battle.

To temper and whet a blade is to chip away at it. And to become a sharp blade that cut through the Legion, Shin had had everything that wasn't beneficial for combat whetted away. Annette had likely realized for the first time what it meant to survive five years of war with the Legion on the Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield. There was no way to survive while remaining the same person you had been going in. It was that kind of hell.

Annette covered her face with both hands.

"...But what am I supposed to do now?"

She sounded like a lost child with nowhere to go and no one to turn to.

"I knew he'd probably never forgive me. But I was fine with that; I still wanted to apologize. But I can't do that if he doesn't even remember. So how am I supposed to make things right with Shin now...?!"

Lena looked at the floor as Annette spoke, her voice a muted scream. She'd thought once before that Shin's forgetting everything would likely be a curse for Annette. Sins required punishment. Even if a sinner was never forgiven, they could atone by apologizing. But if the sin was forgotten, even that would be rendered impossible. Annette's sin would never be wiped away, even if it was only a one-sided, exceedingly selfish act from the side of the perpetrator.

He may not have remembered, but Shin did have his own thoughts about the situation. Unlike their headquarters' base, which had rooms for everyone who was of officer rank and above, this base they were stationed in had multiple Processors share rooms. Being alone was hard. His search led him to the hangar, where he reclined against his rig's armor with an open book. He wasn't reading, however, but rather seemed to be lost in thought.

Noticing the sound of clicking heels, he turned his gaze to Lena and shook his head somewhat powerlessly.

"...I hope you're not too upset."

"I'm not."

It wasn't Shin's fault he didn't remember Annette... That he didn't remember his days in the First Sector.

"But do you really not remember anything? Er... Even if you don't, maybe talking about it could help some of the memories return..."

"Hearing I had a childhood friend made me feel like maybe I did, but that's all... I can't remember a name or a face."

Naturally, when the last memory they had of each other was that of a fight...

"...After we took over the First Sector..." he muttered, his

dejected expression akin to that of an orphaned child, "...I had heard they'd located the house my family used to live in, so I went to see it. The Processors' personnel files should have been deleted, but they were somehow intact, and we found the house that way."

"..."

Lena knew about that. The records of those lost in battle were preserved in an underground warehouse below the ground forces' headquarters. It was actually Lena who'd told the Federacy military to check there since there should have been something down that area, though she didn't know what was hidden in that spot until it was opened.

Two months after the large-scale offensive, a soldier told her about it over the wireless comm in the midst of battle. A predecessor had entrusted him with the task, which he himself supported, of recovering and hiding the records of the fallen. He was originally a Handler himself, who'd lost his job to the war and enlisted in the military to make a living.

Eventually, he was unable to bear seeing child soldiers die as the processing units of "drones." After his squadron, led by a captain in his early teens, had been decimated to the extent that there was no point in leading them to battle anymore, he asked, and was approved, to be transferred to the personnel division.

But you know, Lieutenant Milizé, in the end, people can't escape the sins they've committed.

When he said it, Lena thought she could hear him crying on the other side of the wireless transmission.

I met that captain again. In the barracks of that same Spearhead squadron you know, Lieutenant.

I was the one who took his final picture.

I thought I might go mad at the time. The child soldier I abandoned back then still lived only to march to his death six months later. And there was nothing I could do to help him. No... I never even tried to help him.

Now's my time to atone. I... The Republic will die here. It'll die and be forgotten. But as for them, maybe someone, someday...

Perhaps someone had heard his solemn prayer. The pictures of all the Eighty-Six who should have had their very existences wiped

away had been preserved, and some of the Eighty-Six lived on, like Shin. A path through which that forgotten past could be traced was carved.

And she would remember him: that timid, kindhearted soldier from the personnel division, who gave up his life in exchange for that path.

“And how was it...? The house?”

“Unfamiliar.”

Even seeing it with his own eyes hadn’t jogged his memory...

“...I’m not really...”

It sounded more like he was talking to himself.

“I’m not really all that bothered by the fact that I can’t remember the past. I can fight even without that. I can defeat the Legion even if I can’t recall my family and hometown. If anything, trying too hard to remember might end up distracting me and getting in the way.”

Having something to lose would just be a distraction. Having something to hold dear would just cause him to hesitate. If he didn’t cut away all the things that were unnecessary for battle...he would never survive.

“When all I could think about was killing my brother, I had a reason to live. But when I looked back and realized that I couldn’t even remember what he was like, it...it just felt a little lonely.”

I could never remember him, myself. Yes, he had said that back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. That was why he’d been happy when he’d found out that Lena remembered Rei.

“...I’ve heard your grandfather is still alive.”

He was a high-ranking noble, a leading figure in the old Imperial senate and a supporting pillar of a warrior family—Marquis Seiei Nouzen. Like Rei once told a young Lena, the name of Nouzen was reserved for their clan alone and was rare in both the Empire and the Federacy, which followed it. More precisely, no one but members of the clan was allowed to use it.

Of course, as soon as Shin had been given protection by the Federacy, the marquis had requested a meeting with him through Ernst, since he was convinced Shin was the child of his eldest son, who had eloped. The marquis had since made repeated requests for a meeting to Ernst, to Shin’s superior officers Richard and

Grethe, and recently, even to Lena herself.

I want to meet him, he'd said. Let me see him.

But Shin himself didn't consent, so Lena was in no place to say anything.

"Your grandfather might remember your brother and family... He might have pictures of them. Maybe you should meet him."

Shin gave a faint, almost limp smile.

"Why would I want that? I've never once met this old man who calls himself my grandfather. I don't remember any stories of my father that I'd be able to tell him. What would I even say...? What good would meeting him now do me? It would be a hollow meeting for both of us."

It would just be a grim reminder that what was once lost could never be compensated for.

It was then that Lena realized. Shin said he didn't remember, that he couldn't remember. But maybe it wasn't that he *couldn't* remember, but rather...

"At this point, I don't really want to remember, so I don't want to meet him, either... The same goes for Major Penrose."

The girl who claimed to be the childhood friend he couldn't remember.

"If she wanted to apologize...to make it like nothing happened, she would have been better off forgetting herself and never coming to me about it."

He was better off not knowing what he'd forgotten—what he'd lost. That was Shin's stance.

†

"Well, I'd like to think I outdid myself this time. Feel free to praise me, Lena."

Upon being appointed tactical commander, Lena was granted a personal command car. Its call sign was Vanadis. It was Bloody Reina's royal carriage, equipped with state-of-the-art Para-RAID monitoring and command equipment. As Lena visited the hangar to receive it, she was dumbfounded at the sight of the brand-new armored vehicle and the sight of Theo fastened to its flank.

Emblazoned on the side of the vehicle was the silhouette of a woman clad in a crimson dress. Bloody Reina's—Lena's—Personal Mark.

Theo regarded his work with a satisfied smirk.

"Cool, ain't it? Like a logo for some perfume or cosmetics. I figured we'd be redoing everyone's Personal Marks anyway, and I've studied up on drawing since I came to the Federacy."

Like he said, it was a pretty classy illustration. In addition, it had a sort of similar feel to not only Theo's own Personal Mark but also Shin's, Raiden's, Kurena's, and Anju's. She'd always thought the five marks were drawn by the same person but hadn't known it was Theo who drew them.

Lena smiled, a ticklish sort of feeling swelling inside her. The fact that she was counted among their ranks made her heart swell with pride, and the fact that he'd arranged such a surprise for her made her so happy.

"You could have drawn a white pig in a red dress, you know."

A smile came over Theo's paint-stained lips at her playful remark.

"Whaaat? No, no way. I dunno why you're bringing white pigs into this... You still bothered about the Bleachers?"

At some point, it had been decided that the nickname for the order of something-something knights would be the Bleachers. That was probably why the stuffed pig toy they always hanged to death was stored in a detergent crate.

"Hmm, yes... I'd be lying if I said I wasn't."

"You've got nothing to do with it, so don't let it get to you. We're used to them by now."

"But...if you ever feel like you can't take it anymore, please tell me. You now have... No, you always should have had the right to do so."

"What? That's such a drag. Just forget about it—it's fine."

"Besides," said Theo as he looked up, "if I paint a white pig on your Personal Mark, I don't wanna think about what Shin would do to me. I don't wanna die just yet."

"...Why mention Shin?"

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye.

"What, are you serious? Don't tell me you haven't noticed."

"Noticed what?"

Theo heaved a deep sigh from the pit of his stomach.

"Holy shit, you're dense... I mean, at this point, all I can say is *Poor Shin*. It's, like, blatantly obvious."

"...?"

"Eh, never mind. If you don't get it, you don't get it. Explaining it feels like trouble... Or more like..." Theo said, crossing his arms.

There was something about his expression that annoyed Lena a bit. It was the same as... Yes, just like Shin's expression yesterday, when he said he didn't care about the Bleachers' behavior.

"Didn't Shin tell you to stop making that tortured face? He's right, y'know. Nobody's blaming you for anything, which makes your twenty-four-seven one-woman pity party especially paaainful to watch... You can stop now, okay?"

†

As he fired three rounds into the fourth self-propelled mine, he ejected the magazine. A 9 mm double-column pistol was capable of carrying fifteen bullets. He ejected the magazine when there was one bullet in the chamber and two in the magazine and loaded the next one in while standing up and firing.

That was a technique called tactical reloading. An automatic pistol took advantage of the recoil of firing to load the next bullet, so should the chamber be empty when exchanging a magazine, the first bullet would need to be manually loaded. The point of this technique was to prevent the loss of crucial seconds in a firefight. Against the Legion and their superior swiftness, the time required to reload could make the difference between life and death.

After the slide stop rose up following the final bullet fired, the self-propelled mines—or rather, the hologram projection of them—turned off. Shin retracted his pistol's slide into place as he watched the targets rise up, presenting the results of his firing.

He was at the base's firing range. Not even bothering to check the results, Raiden, who sat nearby, looked at the countless bullet

marks concentrated on the holographic self-propelled mines' control units on their chests.

"What, are you pissed or something?"

"That's—"

Shin almost denied it on reflex but instead fell silent. He was rather reluctant to admit it, but...

"...Maybe I am."

"It's not about that one-eyed woman, is it...? So that leaves..."

Raiden pretended to ponder it for a while.

"Is it Lena?"

"...Yeah."

He'd confirmed it since Raiden had gone ahead and said it, but it was still...an unpleasant thing to admit. It wasn't anything she said but rather the things that bound her heart.

"I never wanted to blame her, but...that harassment business has been bothering her."

The Bleachers' harassment truly didn't bother Shin. They were as unpleasant as a fly buzzing in one's ear and nothing more. It wouldn't bother him... Not this late in the game. After dealing with Republic soldiers—very few of whom were decent human beings—for years, the Eighty-Six had grown used to this. Everyone understood that much. All the Eighty-Six were the same in that regard to varying degrees. So not one of them was bothered by it—much less thought this was somehow Lena's fault. And despite that...

Raiden made a rather exasperated expression.

"Hmm."

"...What?"

"Nothing... I was just wondering. If all you did was dwell on the thing that pissed you off most, how much more pissed off could you possibly get? That's all."

There was an insult between the *could* and the *you* that he didn't put into words. Shin looked up at him with half-lidded eyes. He'd never admit it out loud, but he'd hated the height difference between them ever since the day they'd met. Raiden simply scoffed.

"'I'm a citizen of the Republic,' she says... Is she really so attached just because she was born in a specific place or happens

to be the same color as those people?"

The Eighty-Six only faintly remembered their hometowns and the families that raised them, and the concept of a homeland was one that didn't quite feel real to them. The internment camps and the battlefield weren't environments that invoked the feeling of kinship, so the idea of someone being kin just because they were the same race as you didn't really register with them.

If they had a homeland, it was the battlefield they chose to fight on to the bitter end of their own wills. If they had brethren, they were the Eighty-Six who chose the same way of life and fought beside them. So the notion of holding a sense of belonging to a nation because of a land or a race you never chose to be born to was foreign to them.

People shaped themselves by their own hand, through their own flesh and blood and the comrades they relied on. That was the way of life the Eighty-Six thought was right.

"It's just as true for Major Penrose and the Federacy, too. I don't understand why they're so fixated on our pasts."

"Yeah, that, uh, old friend of yours... What's the deal with that anyway? Do you really not remember her?"

"Not a thing."

Shin was the squad's captain, and Annette was the Para-RAID technical adviser. Even without any private business, he'd talked to her a few times in a professional setting, and no memories had surfaced. Though maybe that was simply because he wasn't trying to remember.

"Three things make a man: the homeland he was born into, the blood running through his veins, and the bonds he forms.' ...It was Frederica who said that, wasn't it? I still don't get it."

"Wouldn't you remember that sort of stuff more...?"

Unusual for an Eighty-Six, Raiden had been sheltered within the eighty-five Sectors until he was twelve years old, so there had been relatively less time for the internment camps to wash away his memories.

"It wasn't like the old hag's school was that close to home... And after becoming a Processor, that honestly stopped mattering... Before I knew it, I forgot my parents' faces, and I couldn't remember where I grew up, either. I think it's the same

for you."

"...Do you ever want to go back?"

Would he still want to return to a homeland he'd forgotten? Raiden's lips twisted into something resembling a smile, but the feeling it gave off was more disgust and aversion.

He's the same as me, then, thought Shin. When it came to that, the two of them truly didn't even want to *think* about it.

"...Nah."

As soon as the strategy meeting ended, Shin got up and left. As Annette once again watched him walk away without a word, a young voice spoke out.

"Make those lovey-dovey eyes at him all you want, Weiβhaare. That man has no obligation to guess at your feelings as he is now."

The word Frederica used was a derogatory term in Giad's slang that meant *white hair*. It referred to the Alba and specifically to those of the Republic.

"...Yes, I suppose your power holds monopoly over that field, doesn't it, all-seeing witch?"

"It's easy to see when it's the only thing on your mind. Your remorseful eyes keep chasing Shinei with that longing gaze... It would bother me even if I were to try to ignore it."

Frederica nearly spat her retort as she looked up at Annette.

"If he says he does not know you, then that's the end of it. All that remains is for you to come to terms with it."

"But...but if I don't apologize, I'll never be able to move forward."

Frederica scoffed with blatant disdain, even enmity.

"What you fear is not being unable to move forward but being unable to *go back*. All you wish is to return to the relationship the two of you had in your youth, when you were happy. You wish to make it so your sin is undone... Even as you say you've hurt Shinei, all you wish is to find peace without once seeing the scars inflicted on him."

"..."

Annette froze in place, and Frederica glared at her with eyes

like fire. A Pyrope's crimson eyes, the same as Shin's.

"Shinei...and all those you people have whetted down to nearly nothing have their hands full with protecting themselves. And if you intended to make their load any heavier, I shall stand in your way as your enemy."

†

Lena invited Shin to take a trip through Liberté et Égalité during their time off with the intent of helping Annette in some small way. Perhaps just talking about it or seeing it once wasn't enough to remember, but the right trigger might jog his memories.

Liberté et Égalité's main street's restoration work had been progressing nicely in the six months since it had been retaken. The buildings had burned in the fires of war, and the charred roadside trees had been left as is, but the rubble had been cleared away, and the streets were bustling, those with silver hair intermingling with those in steel-blue uniforms. Witnessing this sight beneath the unchanging azure sky of spring made Lena's heart skip a beat.

"...It's a bit far, but would you like to go to Palace Lune? There was little fighting there, so the structure remained intact."

"Palace Lune?"

"That's where the fireworks for the Republic's founding festival are held. You went to see them with your brother and your family... We promised we'd go see them sometime, remember?"

"Right..."

Hastening his gait to match Lena's, Shin paused as he searched his memory, and then he smiled bitterly. "The fireworks... We said we'd see the fireworks all together."

"Ah... Yes, you're right. In that case, we can't go with just the two of us. When it's time for the fireworks, we can all go see them together."

"By the time the festival rolls around, we'll probably be back at our home base... Though with things as they are, wouldn't setting off fireworks be a little much, assuming the festival was held at all?"

"True. But...someday. The next chance we get."

She stepped forward and then stopped and looked up. This was a real promise, one they could keep. It wasn't like the last promise Shin had made to see the fireworks, knowing all the while that it would never happen. Sensing the implicit meaning behind those words, Shin nodded gently.

"Definitely. Someday."

"Is there something you want to see right now, Shin? Somewhere you'd like to go? Something you'd like to do?"

These were words she'd asked him before, without knowing there was nothing he could wish for, since he was scheduled to die six months later. But things were different now. He could afford to wish for things now. And he was able to make those wishes a reality. This time, when he looked to the future, what did he see...?

Shin thought about it for a short while.

"What about you, Lena?"

"Well, let's see..." said Lena, smiling inadvertently. "For now, I would like to go hunting and fishing in the village behind the Rüstkammer base after this mission is over. And maybe see Sankt Jeder. Oh, and the ocean, too. I've never seen it."

Shin's smile suddenly deepened.

"That sounds nice... One day, for sure."

"Yes. For sure."

The truth was, even this...just walking through town like this with him was one of the things she had always wanted. But she kept that a secret. Seeing Lena quicken her pace from embarrassment, Shin suddenly said, "...Did you want to take a walk all of a sudden because of the matter with Major Penrose?"

He'd seen through her. Lena stopped awkwardly.

"Yes... I know this isn't something I have any right to comment on, but...Annette is a friend of mine—and so are you... Er, but I thought it would help you remember not just about Annette but about your family, too..."

She squeezed her eyes shut and lowered her head.

"I'm sorry. Am I being unpleasant?"

"Not unpleasant, but..."

Shin tilted his head gently. After a hesitant pause, he said

resolutely:

“I do think it’s strange... Why are you so fixated on this?”

Lena seemed surprised by this unexpected question.

“What do you mean, ‘why’...?”

“Lena, if both you and Major Penrose are that tormented by the past and the Republic’s deeds, why aren’t you cutting it all away? To hold on to it is... Why are you asking me to remember when you can’t even bear to face the past yourselves?”

That was a terribly foreign question, the kind only a monster would ask. One’s homeland and past were parts of one’s identity. At least, that was how it was for Lena. So she looked at Shin, who so easily told her to throw it all away, with a chill running through her. She shook it off shortly afterward.

But the doubt remained. How could they be so unconcerned with it? Did the Eighty-Six, who had lost not only their homes and families but even their memories of them, not find it to be sad? Surely some part of them wished to reclaim even a bit of that.

“That’s because... Well, my past and my homeland are part of what makes me who I am. And I can’t cut part of myself away. I think the reason not remembering is less painful for you is... because they’re a part of you, too.”

“I can be myself even if I don’t remember my home or my family. And I think those memories are unnecessary for me, the way I am now.”

“But didn’t the fact that you couldn’t remember your own brother make you lonely?”

“That’s...”

Shin fell silent, as if he was perplexed or confused. For a moment, his crimson eyes wavered with insecurity. Like he was afraid... Frightened.

“It’s true—I didn’t want to forget him. But if I were to remember him, I would—”

At that moment, the high-pitched voice of a child rang in their ears.

“Mommy, why’s that *thing* got those weird colors?”

The tranquil afternoon air froze over in a second. The speaker

was an Alba child, walking down the street, holding hands with their mother. The child's finger was pointing at Shin.

"Its hair is all black and dirty, and its red eyes are creepy. How come no one's gotten rid of such a scary monster? Don't get close, 'cause it'll get us all dirty!"

The mother tried to quiet the child down in a panic.

"S-stop that! What are you—?!"

"There's so many! I'm scared! We gotta get rid of those things. They shouldn't be here!"

"Enough!"

The fact that she didn't even try to correct the child made it clear just how hypocritical of a performance this was. It was as if she wasn't telling her child off, but merely keeping up appearances so she could claim she'd tried to stop them.

Shin looked down at the mother and child with a cold... No, the kind of gaze he might give a pebble on the roadside, and he said, as if to himself, "I see. This could definitely...cause problems later on."

He said it as if it were entirely someone else's business. It shocked Lena, and she held her breath. He may have been born there, but for Shin—an Eighty-Six—the Republic wasn't his home anymore. That was something she thought she understood.

The mother bowed her head time and again in apology, forcibly covering her child's mouth as they continued to state how scared and disgusted they were.

"I'm so sorry! Children don't know any better, but please forgive us..."

"...Mm-hmm."

Shin waved the mother off, as if to say he couldn't care less one way or the other. The mother continued bowing her head and then scooped the child up into her arms and walked off as if fleeing the scene. But the moment she turned around with the child in her arms, the words that crept from her mouth and the stabbing glance of scorn she threw their way told all there was to tell.

"...What does that subhuman filth think it is?"

Lena felt the blood instantly go to her head.

"S-stop right there—!"

She was about to take off after the woman, but someone grabbed her arm. She looked back only to find that it was Shin.

“Ignore it, Lena. Don’t waste your breath.”

“Wha—?!”

Shaking him off, Lena turned to face him. Shin still had a ten-centimeter height advantage on her, even when she was wearing heels. Undaunted by the gap in their heights, Lena glared at him.

“How do you expect me to ignore it?! She just openly insulted you! Even now—and all the way up to now, too! You came to save them! One could say you even fought for them!”

“I’m not fighting for the Republic, and I never have.”

He sounded slightly displeased. Perhaps realizing the seriousness in his tone, he sighed as if trying to vent his stress and continued, still with a hint of irritation in his voice.

“I’m used to the Republic citizens saying whatever they want. I don’t particularly see it as an insult... And no matter what I say, they’ll never listen. Would you take a pig’s squealing to heart, Lena? It’s the same thing to me. As far as the Republic citizens are concerned, the Eighty-Six are just livestock.”

His tone was now so calm and collected that it almost bordered on cruelty. Lena clenched her fists.

“Shin. I’m a Republic citizen, too.”

Shin fell silent for a moment, looking displeased.

“Right... I’m sorry.”

“I don’t think of you as livestock... But I’m still a Republic citizen.”

“You’re different from them.”

“I am.”

She finally realized what Shin meant. Lena was *different* from them.

“The white pigs of the Republic are just human-shaped garbage, unlike me... That’s what you’re trying to say.”

The Eighty-Six didn’t take offense to the behavior of the Republic citizens, nor did they try to correct it. They were just white pigs, after all. They could pretend to speak in the human tongue, but they would forever lack comprehension. They simply didn’t know good from bad. That was about all anyone could expect from the pitiful white pigs.

There was no point in being offended by pigs. Even if you demanded common sense out of them, there would be no way for them to understand you, and you couldn't even blame them. It was natural for the oppressed to see their oppressors as base and detestable, but that incredibly callous division was still...sad.

"So by calling them pigs, by thinking of them as fundamentally different from yourselves...you all feel the same way as them, don't you?"

It was likely different from the Alba's discrimination, but that just went to show that there would never be mutual understanding between them. And it was only natural for them to never see eye to eye. But even if Lena didn't expect anything out of her homeland or its citizens anymore, seeing that nothing had changed even now saddened her. She had finally come to terms with the fact that the cold wrath and despair the Eighty-Six had harbored since their time in the Eighty-Sixth Sector hadn't healed in the slightest...

For a long moment, Shin stood silent. And then he plainly, calmly nodded.

"...Yes."

CHAPTER 3

FRONT TOWARD ENEMY

“—Now then, let’s explain the operation.”

Liberté et Égalité’s small briefing room was fully occupied. Standing in front of the holo-screen was the tactical commander, Lena. Before her were the unit commander, Grethe; five staff officers; the commanders of the seven squadrons making up the unit; the squad members themselves; Annette, who was to inspect another matter during the operation; and for some reason, a single Mascot.

“The following squadrons will be participating in the operation: Spearhead, Brisingamen, Nordlicht, Lycaon, Thunderbolt, Phalanx, and Claymore. We will be employing all seven squadrons that make up the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package.”

The Spearhead squadron was commanded by Shin and formed with the survivors of the former first ward’s first defensive unit. The Brisingamen squadron was commanded by Shiden and was headed by the former Queen’s Knights. The Nordlicht squadron was commanded by Bernholdt and was the only one consisting entirely of Vargus soldiers.

Second Lieutenant Yuuto Crow, who’d served at the head of the eastern front like Shin and Raiden, was in charge of the Thunderbolt squadron, and Second Lieutenant Rito Oriya headed the Claymore squadron. Second Lieutenant Reki Michihi of the

northern front commanded the Lycaon squadron, while Taiga Asuha of the southern front led the Phalanx squadron. Seven squadrons, consisting of 168 soldiers in total.

However, compared to Shin's recon, which had detected that the Legion's defense was a regiment-size force, these numbers didn't seem all that encouraging. The majority of the Legion were likely the swift Ameise and Grauwolf types, as well as self-propelled mines and the Anti-Tank Artillery types—Stier—which were adept at ambushes.

"The stage of the operation would be old Charité's underground central station terminal and its surrounding facilities."

A three-dimensional holographic map of the terminal was displayed. It was a massive underground facility with seven levels, reaching a maximal depth of 105 meters below ground level and extending 5 kilometers to the east and west.

A murmur of "Whoa, what a pain..." spread among the Processors. A main shaft meant to funnel in sunlight extended up through each level from top to bottom. The dome-like main hall used the shaft at its center, and from there passages and platforms spread out like a spiderweb, with subway tunnels extending horizontally and vertically. That included switchover lines and the railyard, as well as countless service routes, making it an extremely narrow and complex battlefield. And there were seven floors of it.

To make things even more complicated, each floor's structure wasn't placed on the same axis as the floors above and below it. The floors were built in a clockwise spiral around the main shaft, with the facilities of the first level and the seventh level placed 180 degrees away from each other. It was a portrait of the infamous Charité Underground Labyrinth, known for throwing off one's sense of direction.

"...Are the Republic citizens morons or something...?" Rito whispered with a straight face, prompting Taiga, who sat beside him, to whack him on the head. Lena felt the same way, honestly.

"Our first objective is the Admiral's control kernel in the main hall of the fifth level's fifth block. The second objective is the Weisel's control kernel in the northern section's fourth level's

fourth block... According to Captain Nouzen's reconnaissance, it's speculated that both Legion are incapable of moving from their positions."

The Power Plant type and the Auto Reproduction type were, as their names implied, massive, city-size Legion facilities. That prevented them from moving in the underground Republic facility. They probably used the underground facility's walls in place of a frame, turning the whole area into a Legion unit.

"In addition, it's estimated that the Weisel's nuclear-fusion-generation facility is located in the seventh level's emergency water tank. There's no need to approach that facility... Or rather, do not go down there. Depending on the makeup of the place, there's a high risk of radiation exposure."

Thanks to Shin's ability, they were able to conclude that there were no Legion on the seventh level and below. The Legion's electronic devices likely couldn't withstand severe radiation. Since the operation's objective wasn't complete seizure of the installation, the minimal requirement for its completion was the destruction of the Admiral on the fifth level. The other Legion combatants would retreat and eventually cease functioning. As such, there was no point in going below the sixth level anyway.

"The Spearhead squadron and the Claymore squadron will infiltrate the installation from the surface, through the central station building's main shaft. The Nordlicht squadron and the Thunderbolt squadron will begin a simultaneous infiltration from the subway tunnels connecting to the first level's southern block. Spearhead and Nordlicht will handle the invasion, while Claymore and Thunderbolt will serve as their backups."

"Roger."

"The Brisingamen squadron will remain on the surface and serve as the operation headquarters' guard. The Lycaon squadron will remain as a reserve force. And the Phalanx squadron—"

"I'll be borrowing them, if you don't mind," Annette interjected plainly.

As the technical adviser for Sensory Resonance, she had received a request from the relief expeditionary force headquarters to investigate a certain matter. It was unrelated to this operation, but circumstances demanded they complete this

objective concurrently.

"Very well... Furthermore, the operation's area is currently under Legion control. Before the operation begins, the relief expeditionary force will seize control over the ten-kilometer radius surrounding the central station building. While they take control, the Strike Package will execute the operation... The blockade's time is eight hours. We'll have to eliminate the targets within that time frame."

Eventually, the Strike Package would have to handle those parts of operations as well, but they currently lacked the manpower and firepower to do so.

"The armored infantry provided to us by the relief expeditionary force will handle maintaining control of seized points within the facility and radio relay to operation headquarters. You can leave defending the lines of communication to them... That is all. Any questions?"

Standing at the head of the line of the squad captains, Shin raised his hand.

"May I say something, Colonel?"

"Go ahead, Captain Nouzen."

"Try not to rely on my recon too much during this operation."

Lena blinked once.

"Understood... But why?"

Shim grimaced slightly.

"Put simply, it's an experience issue... I can detect their positions on a two-dimensional plane without fail, but in a three-dimensional environment... I'm not confident in my ability to pinpoint their positions in vertical space."

The Juggernauts Shin and the Eighty-Six piloted were surface weapons. While they had naturally experienced fighting in urban areas and mountainous regions with varying levels of elevation, both their units and the enemy were fundamentally always on land—standing on the same surface, on the same plane. The Processors—including Shin, of course—had no experience fighting on a battlefield where many confrontations took place across multiple levels of elevation.

"In addition, since we're fighting in such narrow topography, we can expect multiple skirmishes to break out among smaller

platoons. Keeping track of all their situations and giving them all warnings is going to be...honestly speaking, rather difficult."

"Ya sure are useless when it counts the most, huh, Li'l Reaper?" Shiden teased, although Shin ignored her. Perhaps they were simply oil and water, but the two of them clashed often. Lena was actually surprised they could keep arguing over every little thing. It had been that way since the day they met. Shin's expression was usually indifferent to the point where it almost felt condescending, but now he wore a childish expression befitting his age, and that made Lena secretly enjoy their little spats.

"My Brisingamen squadron will make do somehow. My Cyclops is a reinforced-sensor type, so I'll be able to keep an eye out over on my side, too."

Fixing each of them with a half-lidded glare, Frederica said, "I shall keep track of each squadron's status along with these buffoons. I may not know the enemy's positions, but knowing the positions of our units may allow us to maintain control of the situation."

This girl, who was the squad's Mascot, had the mysterious ability to know the present state of those whose names and faces she knew. Shin and Raiden wouldn't say any more about her, and the girl herself seemed to dislike Lena, who had no idea what such a young girl was doing in the military. But that aside, Lena smiled at the small girl, who was several heads shorter than everyone else, despite the military cap she wore.

"I'll be relying on your assistance, Aide Rosenfort."

Frederica looked away with a "Hmph." A peculiar atmosphere filled the briefing room, and Grethe and the staff officers were desperately struggling to hold back their laughter.

Kurena tilted her head quizzically.

"I don't mind us charging in, but can't we drop one of those bombs that pierces the ground and blows up? One of those... What do you call them again? Bunker busters?"

Bunker buster—a subterranean penetrating explosive. As its name implied, it was a generic term for a large bomb that penetrated defensive structures built underground and exploded after forcing its way into the structures, killing personnel with high efficiency. Its distance of penetration varied, and depending on

circumstances, it could bore through sixty meters of reinforced concrete. While a bunker buster wasn't quite strong enough to blow away Charité's massive underground central station terminal in a single blast, dropping several would be more than enough to destroy the control kernels.

Incidentally, while a bunker buster couldn't be loaded on surface weapons due to operation procedures, they knew of its supposed effectiveness from a monster movie the chief of staff had given them. The small mountain of media data was played daily on the cafeteria's and the lounge's televisions. It was a fairly popular present among the Eighty-Six, who'd lacked this kind of entertainment in their youth.

Lena shook her head in denial, though.

"The bunker buster is a bomb equipped with a heavy warhead, and it has to be dropped from a very high altitude in order to pick up speed, so that it can use that kinetic energy to penetrate. We can't mobilize any bomber jets to drop it when the Legion have air superiority."

Kurena knit her brows.

"Uhhh..." Raiden added from the side, "if you drop something heavy from high up, it digs into the ground, but if you drop it from a low altitude, it doesn't even leave a mark, right? Same thing here. Bunker busters have to be dropped from high up to penetrate like they did in the movie."

"O-oh..."

"That's why our only option is charging in with our Juggernauts..."

Shiden gave a thin smile.

"I like it. Hey, Lady-Killer, let's have a race to see which one of us takes out the Admiral first: your Spearhead squadron or my Brisingamen squadron."

"Brisingamen is supposed to defend the base. Are you gonna desert your mission?"

"You can leave that job to the old man's Nordlicht squadron. Guard duty on the surface is too boring for me."

"...I don't mind defending HQ, but don't drag me into your petty bullshit..."

They both ignored Bernholdt's murmuring.

"I can't let an idiot who abandons their mission on a whim handle infiltration. Sit back and guard like a good dog."

"Whoa," Theo whispered. It didn't show on Shin's face, but he was uncharacteristically annoyed with her. Exhaling loudly as if to shift gears, Shin said, with Shiden still smirking:

"About the infiltration route from the tunnels, there are Legion set on all the rails. They're hardly moving, so they're probably Löwe or Stier lying in ambush... Do we have a way of handling them?"

Lena nodded coldly.

"I've thought of a countermeasure."



On top of Charité's central station's ringlike seventh-line inner tracks, in the darkness of the tunnels descending into the first level, a Löwe lay in wait between pieces of rubble that had been carried in. Abiding by its mission to stay vigilant for an enemy that may or may not come, it stood guard, never growing tired of its duty.

It was hard for it to even swivel its turret in this cramped one-track tunnel, but that in turn worked in its favor when it came to playing defense. The tight tunnels meant the enemy would always come from one direction and couldn't dodge to one side. And should the enemy bring in infantry, they would be far too fragile; a single multipurpose shell would sweep them all away.

Even if the Löwe was destroyed, the explosion of the shell would cause a cave-in, and if the shell didn't explode, the Löwe's massive frame would impede the enemy's advance. And while the enemy would be busy trying to remove the obstacle, reinforcements would creep up on them.

It was a firm position, one that was unlikely to be penetrated.

At that moment, a light shone up from the other side of the tunnel leading to the surface, followed by loud vibrations and a thunderous roar. Something was approaching at high speed along the circular tracks the Löwe was lurking on. The Löwe's sensors had low detection ability, but they still picked up on what it was

soon enough.

It simply moved that quickly. It advanced with a sharp, characteristic rumbling that cut through the air of this closed space, rolling down the tracks headfirst. What appeared before it was an aluminum-alloy ten-car subway train with sleighs substituted for its wheels, and its interior filled with rubble and scrap wood. Pushed by rocket boosters, it skidded along the metallic rails, leaving sparks in its wake as it rushed onward with startling speed. Its weight of over a hundred tons bore down on the fifty-ton Löwe. The Löwe withstood the massive kinetic energy for a moment.

Only for a moment, though.



"Activation of all rocket sleighs confirmed—all underground-mass shells launched, and removal of obstacles confirmed, Colonel Milizé."

"Roger that."

Through the Para-RAID, the squadrons could make out Second Lieutenant Erwin Marcel, the officer in charge of Vanadis, giving his report, and Lena's silver-bell-like voice responding to him. Feeling the vibrations rumbling from within the tunnels even inside Wehrwolf, Raiden groaned at the sound of his Handler's voice, which seemed stiffer than it had two years ago.

"...Strapping rocket boosters on abandoned, unmanned train cars and launching them down all the tracks to barrel through the Legion lying in ambush, huh?"

The subway tunnels had been built sturdily to account for the risk of a derailing, so at the very least, they wouldn't cave in easily...but even so, this felt somewhat extreme.

"Say, Shin... You sure this colonel is the same crybaby princess who commanded us back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector...?"

"...I think so."

The silver-bell-like voice ordered them coldly and stiffly. A tone befitting the Bloodstained Queen.

"Tracks clear—Vanadis HQ to all units. Commence infiltration."

"Let's go."

The central station building's main hall. In the center of the domed ceiling was a highly transparent glass pane, from which sunlight was funneled through the main shaft to the underground. With Undertaker taking the lead, twenty-four Juggernauts crossed the wiring meant to prevent trespassing and danced through the rays of light, firing their wire anchors in a gradual, vertical descent. No one's face wavered as they launched their wires at maximum speed to make their units descend.

There was very little freedom of movement in this stance. If they were fired upon from below, they'd be unable to do anything about it. Meanwhile, sunlight shone from above. The Juggernauts moved as if sliding down the golden rays of sunlight.

These four-legged spiders, the color of bleached bone, sailed through the light, chasing the symbol of the skeleton carrying a shovel, like monsters defiling the sanctity of some sacred district. At the same time, it was like a scene taken straight out of mythology, blasphemous and at the same time solemn and queer, detached from realism. There was no one to condemn nor admire this moment in this place people had once frequented by the tens of thousands every day.

Shin could hear Raiden grumble as he heard *that noise* coming from their linked sense of hearing.

"...They're down there, the fuckers."

"Yeah."

Passing through a layer of thick concrete, they reached the first underground level's main hall. Lurking in the darkness beyond the glass were the all-too-familiar angular silhouettes of the Legion. Staring them down, Shin used Undertaker to kick against the glass wall. The fuselage resisted, and the moment it swung back like a pendulum, Shin activated his pile driver.

The 57 mm pile driver, capable of penetrating a Löwe's upper armor, shattered the fortified glass to pieces. Surrounded by glimmering shards, Undertaker and its twenty-three companions descended into the darkness of the great hall.

"—Mm."

The round tunnels extending from the surface to the first underground level were completely dark. Piloting Cyclops, which stood at the head of the column, Shiden stopped her rig's advance as a point of light lit up on the radar screen.

Shiden's Cyclops was a night-raid model equipped with an antenna unit that resembled a unicorn's horn and enhanced its communication and radar capabilities. Early in the war against the Legion, the Republic had deployed a number of these Juggernaut models on trial runs, and the Reginleif went on to inherit that genealogy.

No response from the IFF device. The white blip representing an unidentified enemy turned red a moment later when it was identified as a hostile unit by cross-referencing the database. The enemy numbers rose, painting the radar screen red within moments. They crawled up from the tunnel's slight incline.

Simple, crude, almost caricaturized human forms advancing on all fours with an enemy's cruising speed. As she looked at them through her screen set to night vision, Shiden grinned from ear to ear.

"Finally you show up... I've been getting tired of waiting for you fuckers."

Shiden's smirk was full of confidence, while her odd eyes radiated pure bloodlust.

As the squadron's twenty-four units stepped onto the colored floor tiles, they could hear the faint metallic sound of the enemy's joints unlocking as they shifted from standby mode to combat mode. It was a massive hall with a diameter of two hundred meters that had a circular mezzanine corridor above it with suspension bridges leading up to it. At its farthest end was a wide staircase. The passageway surrounded the circular hall, with a large treelike pillar and an elevator unsteadily blocking their view.

The glint of optical sensors lit up the darkness. The high-pitched shrill of high-frequency blades activating echoed and resonated throughout the space. The Juggernauts standing with their backs to the sunlight filtering in from the main shaft dispersed at roughly the same moment the sound of gunfire

echoed from the darkness.

Anti-tank shells traveling at a horizontal trajectory with a velocity beyond the speed of sound pierced the glass shaft. The Juggernauts spread out around the hall in small groups, and the silent silhouettes of nimble machines followed in swift pursuit.

It was then that Undertaker burst right into the ranks of the Legion, as it always did. As it stepped over one unfortunate Stier and cut it down with a high-frequency blade, Shin quickly examined the Legion's defensive force's formation.

...All according to the colonel's predictions.

The main force was Stier lying in ambush, accompanied by Ameise and Grauwolf types. These were all considered lightweight combat Legion, and there wasn't a Löwe or Dinosauria in sight. They wouldn't be able to maneuver properly in these cramped underground conditions. The Löwe's preferred range was two kilometers, and this hall with a diameter of two hundred meters was far too small for them. And if the Löwe's powerful shells were to impact a pillar, there was the risk of the whole facility coming down around them.

"All units, refrain from using your main battery if possible. We should be able to handle Stier and Grauwolf types with our secondary armaments."

"Roger."

Shin crossed paths with a charging Grauwolf—only to suddenly brake. The opponent's blade missed its mark, and Shin used the momentum to cut down the Grauwolf before stepping over its wreckage to force a pile driver into a second one's head. He then took a low, sharp jump to land in the middle of a rear platoon of Stier.

"Shin, we need to get control of things up there first. Wouldn't want 'em raining down on us."

Theo's platoon fired wire anchors, ascending up to the mezzanine floor's webbed pathway. In between fighting, they stole glances at the corridor leading up to the adjacent sector, its walls gouged, and caught sight of self-propelled mines crawling out in droves.

...There were quite a few of them.

Shin narrowed his eyes, confirming the sum total of enemies in

the upper corridor and the main hall. There was a limit to the number of bullets and shells they could carry, and in particular, their pile drivers only had so much gunpowder. Cold weapons like the high-frequency blade didn't run out of ammo, but out of everyone in the operation, Shin was the only one who had them equipped on his rig.

The arrangement was that while the Juggernauts took over the lower levels, the armored infantry would maintain control over the upper ones, so if they ran out of ammo, it would be possible to go and restock.

"...I'm really starting to miss Fido right about now."

"*Pi*."

"Mm?"

Sitting in a corner of Vanadis, which was filled with countless optical screens, Frederica noticed Fido was going back and forth near the command car in disorderly steps. It looked somehow anxious. Like a large dog that had thought it might finally get taken for a walk but was left behind, moaning in protest at a master who wasn't there.

Stretching up on her hard seat, Frederica looked over at the Scavenger through the bulky pane of the command car's window and smirked. That metaphor was more than apt; Fido had indeed been left behind. Because Fido was taller and slower than a Juggernaut, they couldn't bring it along, as it had no way of navigating the subway tunnels' cramped spaces, which required a lot of vertical movement. It had been decided that for this mission, it would supply provisions only on-site and not follow them into battle.

Fido, however, seemed unsatisfied with the arrangement. All the way up to the operation's starting time, it had thrown (what could only be described as) tantrums over not being able to accompany them, but Shin had kept refusing.

Switching the intercom's setting to external speakers, she ordered into the microphone:

"Calm down, Fido. Stay within borders!"

"*Pi!*"

"Should you go down there and get shot down in the tunnels, you would only serve to block Shinei's and the others' route of escape. Are you trying to summon such a plight upon yourself?"

"*Pi...*"

It seemed to have dropped its shoulders dejectedly. Frederica couldn't hold back a smile.

"Not to worry—he will return safely. That one will never let the Legion get the better of him. But surely you know this, for who has fought by his side longer than you have? Things will certainly end without incident once again."

"*Pi.*"

"Oh, you truly are a well-behaved one. I, of course, understand just as well. I have been by Shinei's side and fought with him for the past two years, after all."

A clattering sound—the sound of something falling to the ground—came from behind her. Upon turning around, she saw Lena bend over to pick up her clipboard.

"...Excuse me."

Her silver-bell-like voice was thick with false calm, made to hide an agitated shiver to her tone. Sneaking a glance at her profile, Frederica smirked a bit. Marcel and the other control personnel seemed to be looking away intentionally, plugging their ears and reciting an odd mantra: "Nope, nope, can't hear a thing."

"My, is something wrong, Colonel Milizé? Does my and Fido's relationship with Shinei bother you in some way?"

Frederica's sly remark made Lena grimace. She recalled how, despite it having been moments before the operation's start, Shin and Fido had seemed to be squabbling a short distance away from Vanadis.

I already told you, we can't take you along this time. Stay put in HQ.

Pi...!

Shin had repeated as much time and again in a huff, while Fido's large form, which likely weighed over ten tons, had swayed to and fro as if shaking its head in childish denial. Most people would probably grab their sides laughing at this odd but pathetic

scene (Shiden actually laughed so hard she couldn't move, and Raiden watched, flabbergasted), but Lena couldn't find it amusing.

She knew Fido was his longest-running comrade and precious companion, but the way Shin coddled it so much seemed more like just plain attachment. Maybe the fact that it was an autonomous machine just made it all the more precious in a way. Lena still couldn't bring herself to enjoy the sight, though. The Scavenger throwing a tantrum was so much like an obstinate but loyal hunting dog. Shin frowned as if fed up with it, but he showed a hint of a smile.

And then there was the girl, Frederica. She held the odd position of Mascot and, like Shin, was of mixed Onyx and Pyrope blood, which made her cling to Shin as if she truly were his younger sister. Shin may not have been aware of it, but he seemed to spoil her quite a bit. Lena honestly didn't like it at all.

"It's nothing."

Incidentally, Frederica left the switch for the external speaker on, and their exchange leaked outside.

"...Master Sergeant, do they think we're, like, signposts on the wayside or something? Like local landmarks, just standing here?"

"Drop it."

The ones left behind to guard HQ were the only squadron in the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package to consist entirely of mercenaries: the Nordlicht squadron. Bernholdt replied shortly to his squad mate's stealthy whisper.

"Doesn't it piss you off, though? We're being treated like decorations."

"I cherish it, man. I wouldn't get involved in these kids' sappy game of house if you paid me."

"...Figures."

Getting easily excited or sad over every little thing, worrying too much about things that didn't warrant that much concern... It might mean the world to these kids, but Bernholdt mostly saw it as a waste of time. The idea that the stone-faced captain was caught up in it, too, though... Now *that* was a fun thought. Apparently, he *could* act his age after all.

"Don't get caught up in the idle chatter. The kids are fighting in the tunnels. It'd be no joke if HQ got attacked and taken over while they're busy down there."

"**Yes, sir...**"

"And besides..."

He scoffed as his large body—as thick as a small bear's due to years spent on the battlefield—shifted uneasily in the Juggernaut's cockpit.

"...I can't shake this bad feeling... I just can't see things going this smoothly against the Legion, y'know?"

His thoughts wandered to the Reaper. Even if they were under Bloody Reina's command...

"There!"

Cyclops's front left leg bore down like a hammer, kicking away a self-propelled mine that tried to creep up on it. The self-propelled mine was torn in half by the impact, and its upper and lower halves went into uncontrollable spasms as they landed on the concrete between the tracks. As Cyclops stomped over this corpse that hadn't even been alive to begin with, more and more self-propelled mines crawled out in droves from the darkness beyond the maintenance corridor.

Those faceless, poorly made humanoid shapes crept across the ground rapidly, flocking around the Juggernauts' legs like zombies from some horror movie. The whispering of their artificial voices, meant to lure in humans by fooling them into thinking the self-propelled mines were children or injured people, made them all the more frightening.

Mommy. Mommy. Where? Mommy.

Take me. Take me with you. Take me.

Save me. Don't leave me.

"Like hell anyone's gonna fall for that!"

This maelstrom of whispers would paralyze most people in terror, but Shiden simply laughed through bared teeth. Stomping and kicking, the Juggernaut crossed through the self-propelled mines that flocked to it like black ants. Self-propelled mines triggered upon contact and had enough firepower to penetrate a

Vánagandr's upper armor, so marching through them in a lightly armored Juggernaut was the height of madness.

Cyclops's reinforced sensors blared out an alert. Regarding the proximity alert with her indigo right eye, she pulled back the control stick to apply the brakes. The next moment, several child-shaped self-propelled mines descended from the maintenance corridor, right where Cyclops would have been had Shiden not braked. Small hands waved through empty air, missing their mark, and their stomachs, stuffed with explosives, fell aimlessly to the ground.

“Morons.”

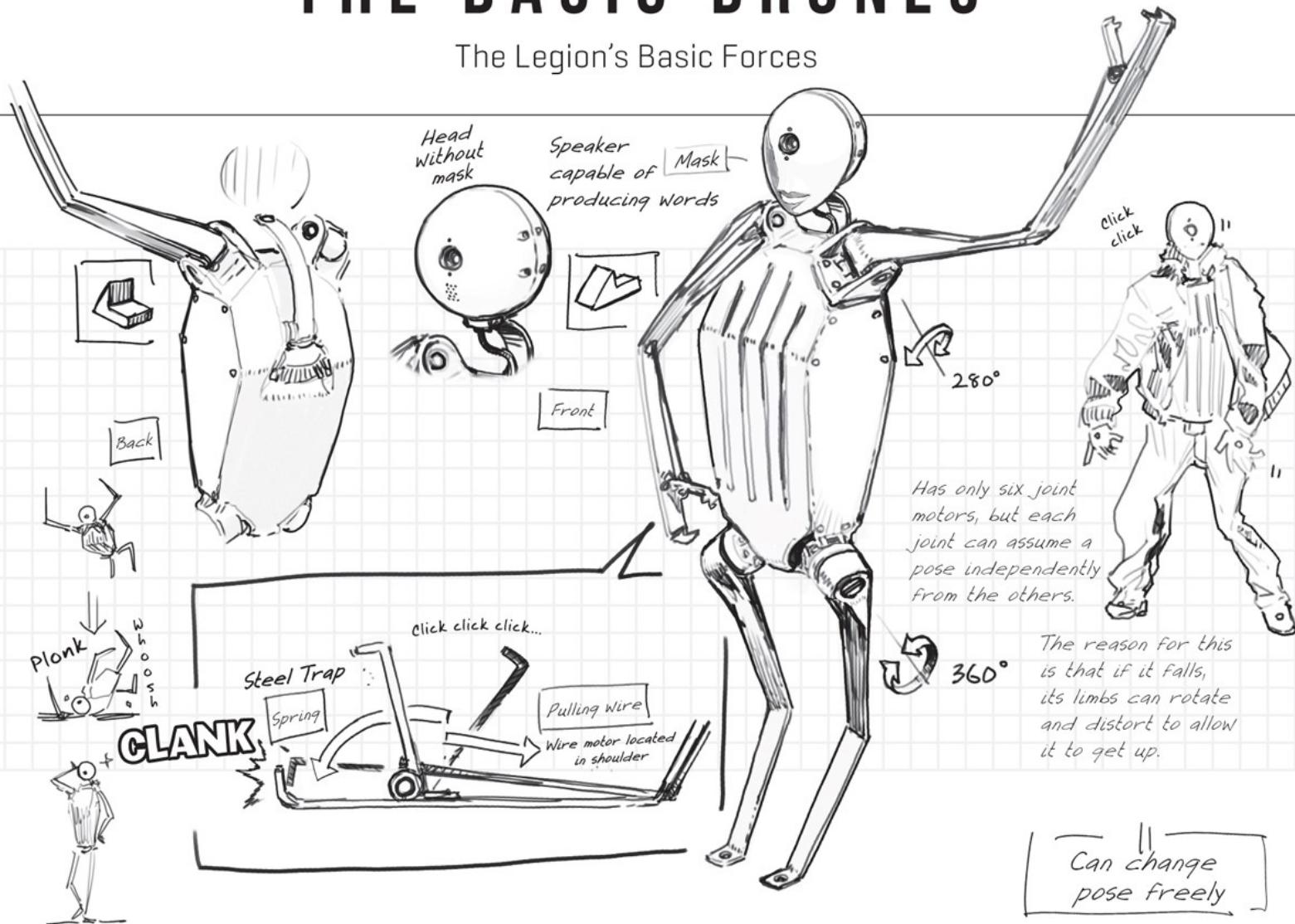
She pulled the trigger while mocking them. Her rear-mounted gun fired a buckshot that decimated the self-propelled mines, which had been trying to get to their feet. An 88 mm shotgun. It sacrificed penetrating power in exchange for suppressive power against the lightweight Legion and was Shiden's weapon of choice in close combat.

“Ha, like sitting ducks! It's like you were never there to begin with!”

The fragments of the humanoid weapons lay scattered across the concrete. Kicking them aside, Cyclops charged at the self-propelled mines that kept crawling out of the woodwork, cackling all the while.

THE BASIC DRONES

The Legion's Basic Forces



[Legion Special Antipersonnel Armament]

Self-Propelled Mine (Injured-Soldier Model)

[A R M A M E N T S]

Antipersonnel high-performance warhead

OR

High-performance forged fragment warhead

Both hidden within its abdominal cavity

※ This weapon is a suicide-bomb unit.

[S P E C S]

Height: 1.8 m

Movement Speed: roughly 50 km/h

[seems to travel on all fours]

A weapon with a design radically different from all other Legion types. Its primary use is to cling onto humans or human-piloted weapons and self-destruct. It is the only Legion that produces an audible voice; the injured-soldier models pretend to be dying soldiers, crying "Save me" and "Mommy" in order to attract enemy soldiers and kill them. There are also child-size models, which, while fewer in number right now, claimed many victims in the early stages of the war.

Because they're smaller than most Legion, antipersonnel mines operate better than other units in cramped conditions but are weak enough to be dispatched with antipersonnel rifles.

"Spearhead's guys are still squabbling in the central hall... Let's eat all of these up before that headless Reaper has a chance to steal any prey from us!"

Cut down with a vertical slash across its front armor, the Grauwolf crumpled to its feet with a heavy thud before going silent. The reverberations of his consorts' cannons died out, and Shin carefully examined the now-silent hall.

...It appeared they had cleaned the place out.

"Colonel. Suppression of the main hall is complete."

"Roger that, Captain Nouzen. Leave clearing away the remnants of the enemy to the Claymore squadron and advance down the route to the second level."

"Roger... Colonel, are you all right?" he asked, noticing there was something of a sigh mixed into her response.

"Hmm? ...Yes, as long as I'm not Resonating with too many people at once, or if it's only the captain of each squadron."

Even if the amount of information shared through the sense of hearing was relatively light, staying Resonated with over a hundred Processors at once for prolonged periods of time was taxing. Therefore, as tactical commander, Lena Resonated with only each squadron's captain and the infantry unit's commanders. It wasn't much different from what Shin was experiencing, since he was connected to the other captains in addition to his direct subordinates, but lack of experience made it that much harder.

"I've had to command many more at once back during the large-scale offensive... You don't have to worry about me."

Another voice cut into their conversation.

"Sorry for interrupting, but it's Penrose. If you've got the first level secured, it's time for me to begin my investigation. As we agreed in the briefing, I'll be borrowing the Phalanx squadron."

"Second Lieutenant Asuha here. As she said, the Phalanx squadron is rolling out."

Following Annette's words was the voice of the Phalanx squadron's captain, Second Lieutenant Taiga Asuha. Hearing the earnest voice, Shin spoke.

“—Asuha.”

“What is it, Nouzen?”

“No, it’s just...” It wasn’t something he could describe in distinct terms. “I’ve got a weird feeling about this. The Eintagsfliege are spread thick outside. We might be outside the war zone, but don’t let your guard down.”

“You worry too much, chief... Roger that. It’ll be fine—I’m not one to get sloppy.”

“Professor Penrose, the area might be blockaded, but this is still a battlefield. Pull back on my order if I sense any danger.”

“I know... I’m sorry, but you’re distracting me, so can you move away a little?”

Watching as the dark-skinned captain of the Phalanx squadron, Second Lieutenant Taiga Asuha, moved back to his rig, Annette turned around and prepared to get to work. They were in an office building a short distance away from the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package’s tactical headquarters. It was one of many buildings surrounding the station. The spacious entrance hall was located in the basement, and at the end of it were stylish elevators.

At the center of the hall was a curved, silver-rimmed, rail-like object that broke through the ceiling, probably designed in the shape of the Charité Underground Labyrinth. The skylight beyond it had likely broken and fallen in. Annette walked through the room, her heels clicking against the marble floor colored faintly by the shadow of the Eintagsfliege’s distant silvery glow.

Apparently, the Federacy military had detected a disturbance in RAID Devices present around this building. It had been discovered several months ago, when the military had been gathering information during preparations for the recapture operation. According to reports, there were no issues with Resonance between squad members, but there was someone else connected to the Resonance, constantly connecting and disconnecting in an unstable fashion.

It sounded like the kind of poorly cobbled-together ghost story people sometimes cooked up on the battlefield. The Federacy’s RAID Device had been created by analyzing Shin’s and his group’s

devices after they'd been recovered, making it an inferior copy. Even the Republic's original models were a black box of sorts that operated without its makers knowing exactly how it worked, though, so in terms of performance, there weren't any major differences between the two models.

However, the Para-RAID was the sole communications method capable of broadcasting under the Eintagsfliege's jamming. If there was any chance of it not operating properly, it could get in the way of completing military objectives, and so Annette had been requested to look into it, and since she'd insisted that—as the leading person in the field—it would be faster for her to check by herself, she'd asked to come to the battlefield.

Her activated RAID Device didn't show any abnormalities. She checked to be on the safe side, and none of the Phalanx squadron's Processors detected any kind of interference, either. Walking around the entrance hall with her hands in her lab coat's pockets, she peeked into a certain corner before falling silent.

"...So you're the culprit."



The shield method was an excavation method based around using a cylindrical excavator called a Shield Machine that was the same size as the tunnel's diameter. The tip of the Shield Machine would break through the sediment while Segments were strategically placed in order to stabilize the tunnel. The Segments were one-to-two-meter-high blocks that were several dozen centimeters in length, and tunnels built with the shield method were circular, with that geometric shape seeming to go on forever.

The second level's northeastern block was reinforced with steel Segments and was no exception to that rule. Standing at the front of the line as they descended into the tunnel, Shin was suddenly assailed by an odd feeling while in Undertaker's cockpit.

The view of the circular tunnels that seemed to go on forever. The two train tracks extending endlessly into the darkness. The electric cables on the ceiling, and all sorts of unknown wires. The lamps that were placed in regular intervals, now silent and dead,

unable to cast their light anymore.

This silver tunnel that resembled an endless corridor was as solemn as a dead king's catacomb.

It was like running through a perpetual nightmare, with one's perception of time growing fainter and fainter. As if they were in the stomach of some mythical serpent. It threw off their sense of reality, with the monotonous scenery lulling them into a semi-hypnotic state, making them think the tunnel was longer than it was, like a geometric pattern with no end in sight.

As they advanced down the tunnel, a strange sensation came over Shin, as if he were sinking into his own consciousness.

You couldn't remember your own brother...

Maybe that was why. He grimaced as her silver-bell-like voice suddenly bubbled to the surface of his memories.

Your grandfather might remember your brother and family.

Shin. You actually do remember me.

It was all unnecessary.

He wouldn't remember it. Not at this point... He didn't even want to remember.

The sound of wailing reached his ears. A rectangle of light was visible at the end of the earthen tunnel. Shin confirmed there were no ambushes near the exit and went ahead, maintaining his cruising speed.

For a moment, the harsh light blinded his eyes, which had grown used to the darkness. Shin squinted as he looked around. There was a large circular pool in the floor, filled with what looked like a silver furnace of flickering Liquid Micromachines. It was a generator for creating the high-polymer material forming the core of the Legion's propulsion system and their artificial muscles. There were also lathes and presses for metalworking.

Looking deeper in, Shin saw lightweight Legion like the Ameise and Grauwolf types moving along a conveyor belt, and a dry dock for assembling Löwe and Dinosauria. What looked like suits of armor were suspended from above in what was probably an assembly line for self-propelled mines. Deeper in still was a large boxlike machine that resembled a scanner typically used by humans, except much larger. That was probably for inspecting completed Legion.

As if in preparation to intercept the Juggernauts with the full might of the available Legion, all processes ground to a halt. The robotic arms writhing oddly in the gaps between the conveyor belts, as well as the gantry crane on the ceiling, froze midoperation.

...However.

They're here.

The wails of sorrow echoed from behind the machinery, in the shadow of the crane arms, as they lay in wait. Shin could sense them.

"...All units, switch ammo to APFSDS."

APFSDS—Armor-Piercing Fin-Stabilized Discarding Sabot. No one replied, but the heavy, solemn sound of their 88 mm cannons loading was all he needed to hear.

"Twelve units to the left and twelve to the right behind the generator—shoot them down along with the generator."

†

Annette's gaze fell on a crouching, dehydrated corpse sitting inside a cramped storage space hidden between the wall panels. It was dressed in the Republic military's deep-blue uniform, and the quasi-nerve crystal on its neck glimmered blue. It was probably one of the Republic's Handlers.

Annette had no experience in performing autopsies, but from the looks of how dry the body was, this person had not died recently, and based on the fact that it wasn't decayed, either, it had probably died during the cold, arid winter. Probably around the time the recon unit was near this building.

"So you were the one who kept connecting and disconnecting..."

It was simple, really. This person had tried Resonating with the recon unit while they were still alive, but on the verge of death. Physical distance didn't matter to the Para-RAID, and Republic soldiers didn't have Federacy soldiers registered as Resonance targets. But there were no known accounts of someone trying to Resonate while on the verge of death, either.

The human brain was even more of a black box than the RAID Device. According to theory, when people died, their consciousnesses sank into the collective unconscious and disappeared. There was the possibility that the moment that happened, those connected to them through Sensory Resonance would feel some kind of reaction. Not that she had any intention of testing this theory. Annette collected her thoughts as she looked down at the corpse.

The reason the recon unit hadn't found this Republic soldier's corpse was because they'd been on the lookout for the Legion and not humans. The Úlfhéðnar—the reinforced exoskeleton used by the armored infantry—had sensory capabilities inferior to the Ameise's, and considering that this corpse, at the time, had been dying and unmoving, with most of its body heat lost and its pulse faint, detecting it would have been that much harder. Annette finding it had been mostly coincidence.

...I've always been bad at hide-and-seek.

Annette bit her lip as that thought suddenly crossed her mind.

Bad at hiding...and seeking.

Or rather, Shin used to be so good at it. Whenever she hid, he found her right away, and when it was his turn to hide, she could never find him. Games always lasted that much longer when Annette was It. And still, hide-and-seek was one game she often played with him.

Found you, Rita!

Because she loved seeing that smiling face when he found her, no matter where she hid.

The sudden reminiscence made tears well up in her eyes. She glared at the corpse in front of her to shoo the feeling away. It was then she realized.

"...How?"

How has this person only been dead for a few months?

The Legion's large-scale offensive had happened almost a year ago, late last summer. She would never forget how on the night of the Republic's founding festival, the Gran Mur had collapsed, and within just one week of that, Liberté et Égalité had fallen.

At that point, the northern secondary capital, Charité, had been brought to ruin. The Legion didn't take prisoners and

couldn't tell soldiers apart from civilians. There couldn't have been any survivors.

Following that, the remnants of the Republic had gone farther south, and the next time humankind set foot in Charité was when the recon unit arrived. There were no Republic military personnel mixed in with the relief expeditionary force, either.

It all led to one conclusion—there shouldn't have been any Republic soldiers who could have died here several months ago.

What's...going on?

Suddenly—

Standing guard near the building beneath the massive cloud of Eintagsfliege, the captain of the Phalanx squadron, Taiga Asuha, frowned unpleasantly, sitting in the safety of the Juggernaut's cockpit, as did his comrades.

“—Sounds like hell down there.”

Taiga's comrade of several years and vice captain, Aina, replied with a smile.

“I’m fine right now, since I’m not Resonated with them, but it really does look bad, Taiga. I’m hearing the Legion’s voices.”

“Yeah... No idea how Nouzen’s still sane when he has to hear this twenty-four seven.”

They may have been fellow Eighty-Six, but Shin had been sent to the first ward's first defensive unit two years ago—the final disposal site for Processors who'd outlived their welcome, and from there, he'd been cast out to the Legion's territories. Taiga had been in the eighth ward until just six months ago. There was no relation between the two of them. Taiga had heard about his infamous ability, of course, but there were few left on the Republic's battlefield who'd actually come into contact with it.

Even battle-hardened Eighty-Six and the cruel Bloody Reina had fallen into a state of panic the first time they'd touched on Shin's ability. It was for this reason that captains and vice captains, who were obligated to remain Resonated to Shin at all times during operations, all Resonated with him several times prior to any operations in order to grow accustomed to the strain.

At least, that was the idea, but it was still...harsh. Being

Resonated with Shin, who was an expert in melee combat and always fought within arm's reach of the Legion, was much harder than using the Sensory Resonance under more normal circumstances.

The Reaper who breaks his Handlers and any Eighty-Six who can't stand the wails of the dead, huh...

Taiga sighed, recalling the cold, emotionless expression and bloodred eyes that seemed to fit that moniker all too well. Maybe he could only keep it together because he was constantly exposed to the voices, or maybe it was the other way around—the continued exposure wore out his sensitivity. Even after coming in contact with that much death, after three years of service, Taiga couldn't imagine seven years of fighting through those screams.

It was then that he heard a feeble whisper of grief from the Resonance.

"...I don't want to die."

This wasn't a normal factory to begin with. It was an Admiral—they were effectively in the stomach of a Legion far larger than the combat types—in the bowels of a slaughter machine bent on wiping out humankind. Every single machine in sight was part of the enemy.

The laser cutters used to handle steelwork fired their rays like elongated swords. The nearby robot arms brandished their three-clawed fingers like a hawk's talons. A flock of spiderlike machines of unknown purpose and name, as large as medium-size dogs, flocked to the Juggernauts, trying to trip up their legs.

Evading, cutting through, and stomping out those obstacles, Undertaker ran ahead. Even with countless pieces of writhing machinery blocking Shin's field of vision, his ability allowed him to see through the Legion's hiding places accurately.

"Anju, we'll be passing by a gantry crane in twenty seconds. There's one in the shadow of the third crane from the right. Probably a self-propelled mine. Take it out with a proximity-fuse round."

"Roger... Second Lieutenant Jaeger, don't forget to substitute the missile launcher for a tank turret today. And remember to change your ammunition,

too."

"R-roger."

"Theo. There's an enemy group behind the Löwe. They'll be coming out soon."

"Roger... Ah, I think I just saw them for a second—it's a bunch of Grauwolf types. Rito, take care of any I miss."

"You got it."

High-explosive projectiles meant for lightly armored targets burst against the ceiling one after another, raining shards of something that had once held a humanoid shape onto the floor. Grauwolf types leaped over half-assembled Löwe in an attempt to swoop down on the enemy, only to be mowed down by an anchor fired horizontally.

Twenty-four Juggernauts rushed ahead, through fire and metal rain. They broke through the production area, once again invading the tunnels built for the train tracks. This time, however, the diameter of the tunnel was large enough to accommodate an eight-track railway. Double rails. Those were the high-speed rails they had heard about—the ones the Legion had repaired.

The predictions were correct, it seemed. This was where the Morpho had been headed at the time—to link with the nuclear fusion Admiral behind the Gran Mur's walls, where it could aim at every one of humankind's spheres of existence.

It was then that the faint, sorrowful voice of a girl echoed in his ears.

"I don't want to die."

Furrowing his brow, Shin lifted his gaze in the direction the voice had come from for a moment. It had come from...

"The surface, huh...?"

It wasn't where Lena was... Not where the tactical headquarters were, but elsewhere.

A group of Grauwolf types noisily crept out from around the building, surrounding the Phalanx squadron, who stood on the defensive. Taiga clicked his tongue in annoyance, wondering where they'd popped out of.

Charité's central station terminal—the Legion's underground

labyrinth—spread out across this Sector’s underground. There could have been exits to the surface that weren’t marked on any map, and the Grauwolf types were only two to three meters tall. It was entirely possible for them to escape through a ventilation hole or the like.

“Aina, cover the major! Professor Penrose, get inside Estoc!”

“Roger that, Taiga!”

“Understood... Be careful!”

Aina’s unit—Estoc—responded, turning aside. Through his main screen, Taiga could see Annette running across the glass-paned building... She may have been an Alba, down to the last thing she said, but she wasn’t a bad person.

“Handler One, enemy detected. Engaging in combat... All units, don’t forget our target for protection is in the rear!”

His squad mates’ responses echoed through the Resonance. Looking around at his consorts assuming combat stance, Taiga turned the sights of his 88 mm cannon to the enemy.

“...I don’t want to die.”

The sorrowful voice spoke in a human tongue. It was what Shin called a Black Sheep—a soldier unit that used a degraded copy of a human brain, constantly looping and replaying its final thoughts before death, without any of the memories or intelligence it had in life.

“I don’t want to die.”

But still...it was irritating. Taiga was reminded of his own dead comrades, who’d likely mouthed the same words in their final moments.

“I don’t want to die.”

Did he—did that red-eyed Reaper, incapable of shutting his ears to these wails, grow used to them? Did he eventually just feel nothing after hearing them? Or was it that he couldn’t bear to listen to them anymore, pitying them as they were forced to lament their ill fortune even after death? Was that why he returned to this endless battlefield, despite countless brushes with death, to bury the Legion?

A Grauwolf leaped diagonally from behind the cover of rubble, charging at him. Taiga shot it down with heavy machine-gun fire and stomped over its remains to shift to a new target, when it

happened.

From behind them, from the entrance where *there was no enemy in sight*, came a flash of light.

“...Huh?”

That flash turned out to be sparks of short-circuiting electricity. Estoc had been cut in half, its cockpit block slashed through the middle and its severed circuitry blooming into a flower of high voltage like a death wail. Annette, who’d been running over to it, froze in place. A red flash of blood spurted out into the white sunlight.

“Wha...?!”

Then a second unit grappling with a Grauwolf to Taiga’s rear left was cut down. A third unit was bashed along its side and knocked back. To his sides, above and below him, to his front and his rear, Juggernauts were cut in half, their malfunctioning limbs twitching in place of screams as they all crumpled.

Wh-what is this...?!

The Grauwolf types fighting against them weren’t doing anything out of the ordinary. Their armaments were the same as every other Grauwolf’s: two high-frequency blades and a multi-rocket launcher. Estoc, the first to fall, hadn’t even been fighting a Grauwolf to begin with.

The method of how they attacked was unknown. Only the sound of the wind being sliced echoed alongside the incessant wailing of the dead...and the screaming of his comrades, tearing through the sunlight.

“Shit... What is this? What the fuck is going on?!”

“Aina! Aina’s been—!”

“Ah—”

A canopy blew off, and the severed head of a Processor took to the air like a bad joke. During the one moment Taiga was distracted, the Grauwolf in front of him closed in. He detected its artificial murderous impulse.

But that was all.

The black frosted sheen of a blade slashed at the edge of his

optical screen, flashing in the sunlight.

That was the last thing Taiga ever saw.

"...!"

Frederica suddenly stood up, kicking her chair away. All color drained from her face, and her bloodred eyes shot open. Noticing the girl's unusual demeanor, Lena briskly walked up to her from across the narrow compartment.

"Are you all right? What's the—?"

Those crimson eyes weren't looking at her. They were frozen in shock and terror as they beheld the grim spectacle taking place far away. As she took several shallow breaths, her bloodless lips managed to form the following words:

"...The Phalanx squadron..."

The squadron charged with defending Annette, stationed not far from here, in what should have been a safe sector...

"...was just wiped out.....!"

His ability still picked up the wailing of the enemies that weren't in his field of vision yet. He alerted the rest of his squad mates to the danger as a horde of self-propelled mines leaped out in front of Undertaker's feet like a surge of black water. *This really is a bit much*, Shin thought as he squinted at the sight of the distorted humanoid figures filling up the eight-track railway in the blink of an eye.

Just as the Eighty-Six had once been back in the Republic, the self-propelled mines were disposable weapons. It made sense to send them out in droves, but...this was still too much. After covering a certain distance, Shin could only perceive the Legion as a single group, and his battle with the Morpho had taught him he couldn't pick up the voice of a dormant unit in a state of stasis.

But still, these numbers were far too much.

A human figure approached him from his blind spot, as if gazing at him from the edge of his field of vision. Shin pulled back his unit's front left leg before it could cling to it. There was no point wasting precious gunpowder on a brittle self-propelled mine.

But just as he was about to kick it away...

It met his gaze.

"?!"

He reflexively jumped back, almost colliding with Raiden, who swore in annoyance. Shin couldn't pay that any mind, either. He fixed his attention on the figure on his main screen, which stepped back as if afraid.

He couldn't hear any wailing.

Impossible.

They were underground, and the concrete and sediment impaired wireless communications, but the armored infantry unit assisting them set up a relay to the surface. Using the data link, he compared the enemy-detection status of each of the other squadrons with the voices he could pick up, then clicked his tongue.



What a pain.

Confirming the status of the Para-RAID, he spoke to all the squad captains.

“...All Strike Package members...”

Cyclops’s radar picked up an enemy group. Unarmored humanoid targets weighing roughly a hundred kilograms each. Self-propelled mines. A highly condensed group of brittle self-propelled mines were easy pickings for a cannon’s buckshot fire. Shiden licked her lips, ruminating on the foolishness of the hunks of scrap metal.

It was then that she heard the sound of someone gasping through the Resonance.

“All Strike Package members, cease all combat and retreat—Shiden, don’t shoot!”

“?!”

Shiden’s index finger flew off the trigger at the last second. Cyclops hopped back, with Shiden pressing a hand against her left ear. The quasi-nerve crystal implanted beneath her skin had been taken out when she joined the Federacy military, along with her variable data link ear cuff, but habits picked up during four years on the battlefield died hard.

“What the hell?! I was just about to take out that whole group! The timing was perfect!”

“Assuming those are Legion... But the ones I was talking about weren’t.”

“Huh?! Then what else would they—?”

Halfway through her words, Shiden realized the truth. The enemies were antipersonnel weapons the Legion had developed in humanoid form. However badly made, the self-propelled mines were only shaped like humans. So if the figures in front of her weren’t self-propelled mines, the answer was clear.

The figures emerged from the darkness, with staggering steps that made them appear wounded, just like the self-propelled mines that couldn’t walk upright. But their silver colors stood out all too clearly.

An Adularia’s silver eyes stared at Cyclops. They *stared* at her.

The Legion used their blatantly unfair technological advantage to tirelessly develop and stay one step ahead of humankind. But

their programming prohibited them from making a weapon that was *too* similar to a human. Even the self-propelled mines, which were close in that regard, didn't have human faces. They lacked mouths, noses, and of course, eyes.

Which meant that this...

"So that's what's going on...?!"

Shiden swore under her breath. *What the fuck?*

"...There's white pigs here...?!"

CHAPTER 4

TRIAGE

“...Ugh.”

Opening her eyes, she found herself in total darkness. Annette, who was sprawled out haphazardly on the floor, rose to her feet.

Where...am I...?

She looked around, but the darkness was too thick for the naked eye to see anything. She could feel the sensation of concrete against her bare feet. The place didn’t feel suffocating, which meant it was probably a fairly open space.

As she’d been investigating a Legion installation they’d recovered, the Phalanx squadron had been attacked by the Legion and wiped out. The Grauwolf types that had taken them out had closed in on her, and that was all she remembered. The memory made Annette bite her lip.

I’ve been captured by the Legion, then. But why? If this was a Headhunt and they were looking for neural networks to assimilate, the Phalanx squadron’s combat-experienced Processors would be much more valuable to the Legion. If they killed them, why take a noncombatant like me? The weirdness doesn’t end there, though. The tactical HQ was still functioning when they attacked. Why sacrifice the element of surprise and not raid the enemy headquarters?

This isn’t a Headhunt. And they weren’t aiming to diminish the

Strike Package's forces, either. What makes me more valuable than those objectives?

It would have made sense if she'd been an expert in Feldreß development or a developer of some cutting-edge weapon system, but she was a Para-RAID researcher. The Legion could already communicate under the Eintagsfliege's deployment; they didn't need her.

No. I don't know. I don't have enough information.

She shook her head and got to her feet. For now, she needed to run. She turned and surveyed her surroundings. Her RAID Device had probably fallen off when was taken away. She patted down her lab coat, only to find the pistol she had worn for self-defense was gone, too.

It was a completely unlit space, but after a while, her eyes grew used to the darkness. The place was as large as... No, it was even larger than she'd thought, and she could barely make out the silhouettes of a group of humanoids crouching in a corner. They were likely people. If they were self-propelled mines and didn't attack her at this distance, they wouldn't react to her raising her voice, either.

Annette forced her parched throat to speak.

“Hey.”

No reaction.

“Hey. You there. Are you survivors from the Phalanx squadron? Do you know where this is or how we got here...? Hey!”

Still no reaction.

†

“Let's put the situation in order.”

The tactical headquarters were thick with suspense after hearing a squadron had been wiped out on the surface, which should have been secure. The Nordlicht squadron, which was in charge of protecting the headquarters, formed a defensive perimeter around them with the reserve Lycaon squadron and spare armored infantry.

Information ran frantically across Vanadis's main screen as

Lena tried her hardest to stifle her anxiety. Frederica bravely reported the situation she “saw” after the Phalanx squadron’s annihilation. Annette was...

“The Phalanx squadron’s annihilation, Professor Henrietta Penrose’s abduction, the presence of humans mixed in with the Legion in the operation area... All of this is accurate, correct?”

“There’s no doubting the last point, Colonel.”

The Spearhead squadron was hidden in one of the automatic factories’ dry docks, silently taking cover behind the massive form of a half-complete Morpho. They’d lowered the anti-fire/anti-flooding shutters so the self-propelled mines and the Grauwolf types’ feeble sensors wouldn’t be able to find them.

Shin spoke from inside Undertaker, which he’d switched over to standby mode.

“I wanted to confirm the gist of how many people were in the operation area and what their infiltration status was, but I’m sorry to say I don’t have time to chat, given the situation.”

It was hard to tell the humans apart when they were mixed in with that many self-propelled mines and Grauwolf types, which was why the squadron had ceased combat and retreated to the depths of the Auto Reproduction type.

Having fought in the Eighty-Sixth Sector—which didn’t have civilians—until now, the Eighty-Six weren’t used to battles in which there were units they weren’t supposed to kill mixed in with the enemy. In a way, the Processors were similar to the Legion in the sense that they normally destroyed everything that wasn’t an ally.

“Judging by how filthy the people and their clothes are, it looks like they were kept in unhygienic conditions for a prolonged period of time... They’re likely survivors of the large-scale offensive.”

“I’m not sure if I’d call ‘em survivors, Lady-Killer. More like leftovers. Or maybe raw ingredients would be closer?”

Ceasing all combat, Shiden’s Brisingamen squadron took refuge

in an abandoned elevator hall and lowered their shutters. Undoing her flight suit with one hand, Shiden rummaged through the cockpit's storage compartment.

Unlike when the Eighty-Six had to make do with the Republic's unused field uniforms, the Federacy provided its Processors with high-performance armored flight suits optimized for operating Feldreß. In addition to being easy to move in, they were highly fire retardant, were shock absorbent, protected somewhat against bullets and knives, and were gravity resistant. They did, however, have one problem.

They were tight around the chest.

Undoing the button to free her breasts from their stranglehold, she heaved a sigh. It was hot. She took a sip from her canteen before pouring the rest over her head and shaking it off like an animal. This heat was from the massive amount of adrenaline secreted from the excessive movement involved with piloting a Juggernaut. She then took out a piece of chocolate from her storage compartment and bit into it.

"Forget filthy, I wouldn't get anywhere near 'em as they are now. Wouldn't waste my time talking to 'em, either. They didn't look sane to me."

She scoffed, glancing at the closed warehouse door. The "humans" the Brisingamen squadron had encountered were prowling behind it, along with the self-propelled mines and the Grauwolf types.

"Their ages were all different, but each one was equally filthy and insane... Our comrades were one thing, but we didn't care for pigs that were slow to run away."

"Slow to run away... You mean from the large-scale offensive last year..."

The Legion didn't take prisoners...with one exception. Headhunts. They occasionally rounded up the heads of their victims in order to assimilate their neural networks.

"What do we do, Your Majesty...? Try to shelter 'em? I don't care if the white pigs live or die, but I'll say it again: They're not responsive. We can tell them to get away all we want, but they won't move."

Lena bit her lip at Shiden's apathetic question. Telling them to shelter the Alba would be easy. But expecting them to fight while telling the Alba apart from the self-propelled mines in the darkness of the underground labyrinth wasn't a realistic demand. Enforcing that order would likely result in casualties among the Eighty-Six on the field.

On the other hand, ordering them to fire indiscriminately at humans, even if they were Republic citizens... Just imagining it made her sick. Especially given how some of the Eighty-Six had seen their family and friends killed in a similar manner.

Easily ordering them to commit atrocities would be nothing short of incompetence. A carelessness a commander must never, ever commit.

"...No. There's no need for our armored squadrons to proactively shelter them."

Lena could feel the captains become racked with suspense over the Resonance and continued:

"However, there is a way to tell them apart... If you encounter humanoid units, expose them to your fire-control laser sights at maximum output. If they're humans, they should run away, or at least stop moving. If they don't react, they're self-propelled mines."

She could feel Shin grimacing.

"Depending on how long we expose them to it, it could result in severe burns at the very least."

"...Yes. But it's preferable to gunning them down."

A Feldreß's—a Juggernaut's—fire-control system employed an invisible laser beam that functioned as its sights and range finder, and a laser was a convergence of energy with directivity. Exposing it to one's eyes could result in blindness, while exposure to the skin could cause it to heat up and burn. Even if the Alba weren't sane, their sense of pain would likely still be intact. Pain was an organism's alarm bell, spurring one to actively evade and run away. The Legion had instruments that would detect exposure to lasers, but they had neither a sense of pain nor the intelligence to understand and mimic what happened to humans when they were exposed to lasers.

"It may expose your positions, but the self-propelled mines can

only fight in an extremely short range anyway. It shouldn't influence combat. Leave the sheltering of any humans who run away to the armored infantry... But please try not to have them scatter too far."

"Roger."

"However..."

She cut into his response, which was as steeped in apathy as she'd expected it to be.

"...that doesn't apply in situations that may prove fatal. Apply swift judgment and remove any threats before you without hesitation."

Ordering the Eighty-Six to take losses in the name of Republic civilians was the one thing she could never order them to do.

"Likewise, with regards to Professor Henrietta Penrose..."

She could feel a tight sensation in her chest. She was dizzy. Lena feared the words she was about to utter. They'd skipped grades together, and each had been the only friend the other had had around the same age. They'd quarreled two years ago regarding the Spearhead squadron's treatment and had hurt each other, but in the end, Annette had still helped reconfigure Lena's RAID Device.

During the large-scale offensive, Annette had taken command of units and fought by her side. She was a dear friend to her. Her one and only...best friend. But she couldn't expose her subordinates...her Processors and the armored infantry loaned to her, just for her...

"Prioritize completing the mission. Now that the Phalanx squadron has been taken out by an unidentified attack, splitting up our forces to look for her and placing our units under risk of being taken out individually...is a risk we can't afford to take."

She'd thought about sending in the Lycaon squadron, which was waiting on standby, but considering the four squadrons already deployed might encounter unforeseen problems, she couldn't afford shifting any forces for Annette's sake.

"Colonel..."

"I'm not abandoning her, Captain Nouzen. If any of our squadrons go in deep enough, they should be able to rescue her then. However...if we don't make it in time, there isn't much we

can do."

Even if that meant leaving Annette to be cruelly dismembered. After a silence of several seconds, Shin spoke again.

“...Colonel. The Spearhead squadron and I will move to Major Penrose’s rescue.”

“Captain Nouzen...?!”

“We may not know the enemy’s method of attack, but they’re still Legion. In that case, I should be able to avoid engagement as I advance. My chances of encountering the Legion along the way are lower.”

“But...”

“You’re thinking about how you can’t let us Eighty-Six die for Republic citizens, aren’t you?”

As he pointed out Lena’s concerns accurately, his quiet voice was racked with concern.

“I don’t understand *why* you can’t separate yourself from the Republic, Colonel, but I do understand that regardless of the reason, you simply can’t. You think these sins are your own because you’re a citizen of that country. But that doesn’t mean you have to pretend you’re as coldhearted as the Republic, Colonel.”

You don’t have to act the part of the Bloodstained Queen who fights with no one by her side.

“So don’t force yourself to do things you shouldn’t have to... I’ll say it again. It doesn’t suit you, Colonel.”

“.....”

“I’ll leave subjugating the Admiral to the Brisingamen and Thunderbolt squadrons. We’ll have to split up our forces as you feared, but this shouldn’t cut into our search time.”

Shiden let out a chuckle.

“You sure you’re cool with that? You’d just be handing me a win.”

“Take it. Now isn’t the time for pissing contests.”

“I know—I’m kidding... Leave it to me.”

Frederica then said:

“Shinei, I’ve been keeping track of the general area where Penrose was taken. If I compare it with the map, I should be capable of pinpointing her exact location. I will show you the way, so focus on evading the Legion to the best of your ability.”

“...Close your ‘eyes’ if things get dangerous.”

“Apologies in advance, but I may take you up on that... As unpleasant as it is to say, I would much rather not bear witness to her being picked apart.”

“Rito, we can leave taking out the Weisel to you while we’re searching for her, right?”

“Yep, no problem, Cap’n.”

Lena frowned. As a commander, she had to withstand the emotions welling up from within. “...Thank you so much...”

Shin’s only response was silence, while Frederica snorted before adding:

“A final question... Aside from the Phalanx squadron’s annihilation, no one else has been attacked in a similar manner, correct?”

“ Nope.”

“We haven’t seen anything, either.”

“So only I saw it...”

Shin asked, **“Frederica, can you explain what happened back there?”**

His question carried the implicit intent that it was fine if she couldn’t explain it...or rather, didn’t wish to remember. She’d borne witness to a squadron of twenty-four people, whose names and faces she knew, getting ruthlessly overrun one after another. It was a consideration one would naturally make toward a child only barely over the age of ten.

Frederica shook her head, though.

“My apologies—I know not the details. Juggernauts were being crushed left and right before I even knew what was happening... To the very end, I did not see what manner of attack it was.”

“How were they killed?”

“Captain Nouzen, how can you ask something so bluntly...?!”

“I do not mind, Milizé. It is because I can aid them with my power that I am by Shinei’s side. I’ve a great debt to repay.”

Frederica heaved a sigh.

“But as easy as that may be to say... Yes.”

Frederica’s red eyes clouded over with recollection as she earnestly tried to put what she’d seen into words.

“Aina, the first to be defeated, was suddenly split in half. Despite the absence of hostiles in her vicinity, the Juggernaut was

cut right down the middle of the cockpit... I would assume she died instantly."

"Maybe it was sniped by a large-caliber cannon...?"

It seemed likely, given it had been destroyed without any enemies around. But Frederica shook her head.

"Aina stood within a building surrounded by Juggernauts. It would be exceptionally difficult to find a line of fire to snipe that position, no matter where one was to take aim from... Perhaps a sniper of Kurena's skill would be capable of such a feat."

"It would be hard to split a Juggernaut in two with a projectile weapon to begin with. I think chances of this being a snipe are slim."

A 30 cm APFSDS's penetration marks were relatively small, as were a high-explosive anti-tank warhead's, with its metal jet. It was doubtful it could even split the Republic's walking coffin in half. But this wasn't to say Shin came up with an answer. It seemed he was thinking ardently and only speaking so as to put everything in order. But in the end, he couldn't come up with anything and fell silent.

Realizing that any further discussion would only be conjecture, Lena drew a conclusion based on what they knew so far.

"...We must place maximum priority on collecting information regarding said attack. Should you run into a similar attack, avoid combat as much as possible and retreat at once."

"Roger."

"Roger that."

She called out time after time, but the human figures didn't react to her voice. Annette fell silent, feeling a sense of dread creep over her. Seeing how the lines of their shoulders moved up and down as they breathed, she realized they were likely humans after all and weren't dead. This group of fellow humans simply breathed, powerlessly, weakly.

The sound of her heels clicking against the floor was a problem in this situation. Kicking her shoes away, she walked across the floor wearing only stockings on her feet. The door had an electronic lock on it, but thankfully it was an old type, a type that could be fooled by any kind of thin, card-like object. Twisting the

knob over and over, she took a random card out of her coat's pocket and passed it through the reader. The simple mechanism gave an electronic beep as it easily yielded.

Gently pushing the metallic door open, she peeked through the crack... There was nothing there. It seemed the Legion didn't feel much need to guard such helpless prey. And honestly, there likely wasn't any need to do so. They weren't bound in any way, but this confinement was more than enough to keep those who wouldn't move of their own volition contained.

As she looked back, the other prisoners didn't so much as stir. She called out to the group standing at the head of them:

"Hey, let's get out of here... We should be able to escape now."

But as expected, she got no reply.

Shaking her head, Annette slipped through the door's crack with catlike dexterity. The heavy door closed on its own the moment she let go of it, and the sound of the lock clicking echoed softly. Shaking off the hard sound that almost seemed to criticize her for abandoning someone again, she walked on. At first, she moved cautiously, but eventually she sped up into a light jog.

The long, long corridor was spacious and comfortably wide, and its ceiling was low, as was typical of the underground. She could make out the dim white ornamental floor tiles even in the darkness, and there were silver shutters with elaborate designs lowered to the left and right. Farther in were stylish storefronts competing against one another in beauty throughout this uninhabited, abandoned space.

She was in a shopping mall.

It was probably—or rather, without a doubt—the commerce facility within the Charité Underground Labyrinth. She advanced down the wide walkways, grappling with the fear of falling into a Legion ambush. The walkways were full of gentle curves and were designed to allow plenty of customers to walk through easily, which created many blind spots. Clinging to the shadows, she desperately sought the staircase that would take her to the surface.

When she saw *that* near a distant wall, she jogged over. As she did, she listened closely, making sure to stay wary of the sound of anything approaching her. None of the Legion, not even the

Dinosauria with its hundred tons of weight, made a sound with their footsteps. But in this complete and utter silence, there was no way of moving without making some kind of noise.

Standing with her back to *that*, which looked like a round pillar of some ancient sanctum, she stood in place and looked up to where that person should be. The Phalanx squadron had been attacked on the surface despite the battlefield having been presumed to be only underground. There was a chance the tactical headquarters—where Lena and the others were—had been attacked and wiped out as well, but she had to gamble on them being unharmed.

“Don’t lose sight of me... I’m begging you...”

Because inside Vanadis was Frederica—the girl with the ability to see the past and present of anyone she knew.

“Good. She seems to be unharmed.”

Frederica’s crimson eyes shone faintly as she stared into space. Sitting completely still—her appearance as lovely and put together as always—she seemed mystical and majestic and at the same time entirely foreign when placed in contrast with the armored command vehicle and its cutting-edge technology.

It was like divine possession, as if she were a holy priestess speaking the will of the gods. Solemn and grave. Staring through empty space into some unknowable place with her eyes completely blank, Frederica grimaced.

“You’ve quite the tenacity, running up as far as you did... However, what is it that you’re doing there, Penrose? Wandering around as you are.”

Frederica knit her adorable brows in momentary thought, then her eyes widened as she grinned in understanding.

“Ah, you smart girl, you. You stopped before the information board, *knowing I might be gazing upon you...* Shinei.”

He replied by nodding silently over the Resonance.

“I have a grasp on Penrose’s whereabouts. Head there as fast as you can.”

“—Confirmed. The fourth level’s eastern commercial block, huh?”

Confirming the map data he’d received, Shin turned Undertaker’s bearing. Annette’s current location was presented in red, and the shortest route there was highlighted. He could hear Lena speaking over the Juggernaut’s loud operation noise.

“We’ve set the route based on the enemy’s distribution and their presumed advance patterns, but it’s only speculation. You should change paths and take detours if you deem it necessary, Captain.”

“Roger... But it looks like the current recommended route should be fine.”

He replied after confirming the Legion’s current status. It seemed Lena had the three-dimensional structure of the map memorized and was shifting the movements of her units and the enemy in her mind in real time. It would be one thing if it were on a planar surface, but Shin had trouble believing she could handle everything on a three-dimensional battlefield where units moved constantly.

This was a skill Lena had gained precisely because she’d spent so long commanding from a distant control room, where she’d had to rely on fragmentary information from the battlefield covered by the Eintagsfliege’s jamming. It made Shin wonder what kind of fighting Lena had seen in the Republic ever since the Special Reconnaissance mission two years ago. Suddenly, he realized he had absolutely no idea.

And that was because he’d never asked. No one, himself included, had ever thought to ask Lena about that. Lena, on the other hand, seemed to want to ask all sorts of questions. She must have had...a lot on her mind.

“...Mm.”

Confirming the recommended path on his sub-screen and the actual route he saw through the main screen, Shin paused Undertaker’s advance. Shin’s ability enabled him to accurately monitor the Legion’s condition, and Lena’s ability to keep track of the war situation was also impressive. But situations like these often occurred on the battlefield nonetheless.

There were errors on the map.

The recommended route pointed them to a service route meant for maintenance purposes—a cramped, thin corridor large

enough to allow only one person to pass through.

"There's no path forward...? That can't be."

"To be exact, there's no path that a *Juggernaut* can pass through. It's only natural, since this place wasn't built to accommodate Feldreß."

Shin's voice over the Resonance didn't seem to mind it much. Mistaken information was likely a common occurrence on the battlefield he knew—but for Lena, his report was a bitter pill to swallow.

It shouldn't have been possible. This map data's last update had been right after the facility's latest repair and maintenance work. Mistaken map data could lead to lost lives in the subway tunnels, where visibility was obstructed and routes one could move along were limited, so Lena had made sure to confirm it as carefully as she could, yet still...

A cold suspicion crossed her mind. *It couldn't be that the map is...?*

The map had been provided to them by *the Republic's interim government*... The interim government that was now infiltrated by the Bleachers, who desired the return and restoration of the Eighty-Six. And as she looked at it more carefully, she saw that said service route was supposed to be meant for carrying equipment, according to the map, but compared to the layout of the place, it blatantly didn't seem to fit with the other pathways and railway tracks in terms of depth.

It can't be.

"Roger that. Look for a detour from said route... Second Lieutenant Marcel, could you analyze this map of the combat area and try to find any discrepancies with the structure?"

Turning off the Para-RAID halfway through, she addressed the control officer sitting in the front seat ahead of her. This young man, who was the same age as Shin and his group and had the same special officer training as them, glanced at her and nodded lightly.

"...It'll take me some time, but probably."

"Then please do. This is top priority, so have it done as soon as possible."

"Roger that."

Frederica suddenly raised her face.

"Mm, not good! Shinei, you must hurry!"

She stood up and shouted, without even noticing she was doing so:

"Run, Penrose! You mustn't stay there!"

Whoever had planned out this underground facility must have been a true idiot. She'd finally found a staircase that seemed as if it might lead her up, but after she climbed what felt like a whole floor's worth of stairs, it turned into a one-way descent and led her to a different sector of the same floor. She knew she was lucky enough not being down in the subway tunnels, but this weird game of tag was grinding on her nerves.

Annette looked around in annoyance. Her lab coat was trailing at her feet, so she took it off and draped it over her arm. In a complete turnaround from where she'd been before, the sector she was in right now looked to be some kind of factory. She was in a clean room or some kind of operating room: a dim, borderline-sterilized white space.

It didn't look anything like the station or its associated facilities. The Legion had probably repaired and rebuilt this section after occupying Charité. It was an elongated place, and Annette couldn't make out the other end of the room, but deeper inside was what looked like a scanning device, along with a group of small beds set up in a rectangular shape, with thin robotic arms dangling from the ceiling toward them.

Aside from the staircase, there was also a cramped corridor that looked to be a service route and a broader path that was likely used by the visiting customers. Along the broad path were marks left by something that had been dragged away, as well as countless scrapes and footprints. As she stood in front of the transparent wall partitioning where she was from the machinery, Annette's gaze fell on a cluster of things arranged in neat rows.

".....?"

They were cylindrical glass containers, big enough to hold Annette with her in a standing position. Several of them were

lined up in an orderly fashion, like display cases in a museum. They were filled with some kind of transparent liquid. The pedestals inside were illuminated by an artificial white glow that revealed the floating contents. Nothing was connected to them but the electrical cords that lit them up, and since there were no bubbles rising up in the liquid, she could tell that no oxygen was being pumped in, either. In other words, whatever was inside the cylinders wasn't alive.

She recognized the silhouettes of the contents but couldn't properly identify them... No, she thought she knew, but she couldn't for the life of her understand what it meant. She stepped forward and peered inside...

...!

This is...!

The moment she realized what was inside the cylinders, she felt all the blood drain from her face. She'd gone pale, but the calm, calculated part of her that was a scientist couldn't help but observe it with great detail.

There were multiples of the same thing... No, there were several samples of the same thing gathered up. They were gradually organized by how much work had been put into each one, and there were several...*several people's* worth in there. The Legion didn't use numbers. There were no notes to explain this anywhere. But still she knew.

This was...

Something then looked at her from the other side of the cylinder. As Annette froze in place, the humanoid shape on the other side of the cylinder swayed. Its reflection moved with a delay as its clumsy movements, which seemed to come straight out of a horror movie, made Annette jump back in fright.

The self-propelled mine crept over in pursuit of her. Its faceless globe of a head writhed like an insect, swerving in her direction. Gazing at Annette with its eyeless visage, it suddenly hopped nimbly at her the next moment like a spring.

"No...!"

In a stroke of luck, she remembered the lab coat she had draped over her arm. She threw it in a panic, and it fortunately spread out and covered the self-propelled mine's head-mounted

sensor unit. The blinded self-propelled mine could only fumble about pathetically as Annette cowered away with unsteady steps.

Its head rattled in what were almost comical movements as it tried to remove the coat covering it, but the self-propelled mine's hands couldn't move as precisely as a human's. It looked as if it couldn't get the pesky fabric off. This was her chance to escape...!

She was in a state of panic, fearing for her life, but that same fear froze her limbs. As she tried desperately to run, her legs stiffened against her will and her heels sank into a seam in the floor, making her topple over in a spectacular fashion. Her back had apparently hit the part of the transparent wall that corresponded with the door, because it opened inward without much resistance, causing her to tumble into the room back first.

All manner of things crossed her spinning field of vision as she fell. This overly sterilized white space. The row of glass cases. The medical-looking scanning device. The table roughly the size and height of a cramped bed...made of easily cleanable metal. And the group of robotic arms above it, equipped with glinting blades.

This was...

...an operating table.

Yes.

This was a *dissection room*.

A sharp sound blared out from the wall, rebounding off the glass door and causing her to freeze up. The self-propelled mine, which still had its optical sensor covered, raised its head at the sudden noise. Annette, who had fallen on her back, couldn't move yet. The self-propelled mine got up, its body turning intently in her direction...

...when the sound of something whistling through the air reached her ears.

Something swung down like a hammer from behind the self-propelled mine, bashing it across the back of its head.

It was an assault rifle's gunstock, drawing a silver arc through the air. The collapsible-gunstock rifle given to Feldreß operators swung down on the weakly connected part of the self-propelled mine's head with perfect accuracy, violently slamming into its

head-mounted sensor unit.

Unlike a bladed weapon, even women and children could use firearms, but the assault rifle's weight made it heavier than most melee weapons. Especially a 7.62 mm assault rifle, made entirely of metal, that packed a weight of nearly five kilograms when loaded.

The self-propelled mine, which was only slightly heavier than a human, was knocked away. It took two or three unsteady steps forward, its wobbling head's sensor unit wavering as it tried to readjust its bearings. By that time, though, the assault rifle's muzzle was already pointed its way. Lightly and easily, as if it were a handgun, the rifle was aimed and fired without mercy.

Three bullets pierced the control module in the self-propelled mine's chest. The shock waves from being hit rattled it—causing it to perform a peculiar dance before it crumpled to the floor like a marionette with its strings cut. Lowering the smoking barrel, Shin looked over the remains of his enemy as Annette—still on the floor—watched him with a stupefied expression.

...When was it again? Back when she was little? She would go out to explore with her childhood friend only to lose sight of him and get lost. Annette would huddle beneath cover, not knowing where she was, and the boy would look for her, finding her after it had already gotten dark.

Found you, Rita!

Smiling as he always did, he would sneak up on her with footsteps that made no noise, just like his brother's and father's. She remembered his father once telling her it was because they were originally from a clan in the Empire tasked with guarding the emperor. He'd said he hoped that in this country, they wouldn't have to teach their children how to fight and kill anyone.

His wish would never be granted. And for the worst possible reason, at that.

So even in military boots, with their hard soles, Shin's footsteps were inaudible. But although that was no different from before, his hands were now used to handling firearms. Cold eyes. A virile form that fit the steel-blue flight suit he was wearing perfectly.

Annette finally came to fully realize that everything was completely different now—the childhood friend she'd once known

was long gone. What had happened back then and how she'd felt at the time were things that, at this point, existed only within her heart. If one were to search within Shin's heart for what had happened back then, one wouldn't find the girl he'd once known. But she still uttered his name, almost automatically.

Shin.

"...Captain Nouzen."

She thought she could feel his crimson eyes turn toward her. But in the next moment, he turned away, probably because someone else was approaching them. She could hear the sound of their military boots. The figure that appeared had an Eisen's reddish-black hair and eyes and was clad in the Federacy's flight suit. That was First Lieutenant Shuga, if she recalled correctly.

"Fucking hell, man. Can't you just shoot it like a normal person?"

"Hitting it is faster in this kind of encounter. Besides, if I shot blindly, I might have hit the professor."

A 7.62 mm's full-size rifle rounds were extremely lethal as antipersonnel weapons. Even if one didn't hit a person's head or torso, it could still easily kill depending on where it hit. It seemed Shin had been careful for that reason.

"Are you all right, Major Penrose?"

Contrary to the content of his question, his tone sounded utterly indifferent. Annette found herself frowning reflexively.

"...Isn't it obvious?! I was seconds away from death just now!"

"Well, from the look of things, you're not dead. You should be fine if you have energy to talk back," replied Shin, a hint of exasperation in his features.

They hadn't had this kind of rough exchange since they were children—but everything was different now.

"...Shin."

This time, she intently called his name, and it slipped through her lips without resistance. As far as he was concerned, she was a total stranger now. But she at least had to say this much.

"I'm sorry."

For abandoning you. For not saving you. For doing nothing and for making excuses that there was nothing I could do. For making you worry over things you can't remember and getting you

selfishly involved with my atonement.

“.....?”

Shin blinked, puzzled by the sudden apology. He gazed at Annette for a moment like a hunting dog that had been given an order it couldn't comprehend, and then he looked away.

“I'm not sure what you're sorry about...”

His voice was so deep it didn't even remotely match the voice from her memories, and while he had once been the same height as her, he'd gotten much taller than her at some point.

“...but as far as I'm concerned, there's no reason for you to apologize to me... So don't worry about it, Major Penrose.”



Annette smiled, tears in her eyes.

You don't even remember, you dummy. You're nothing like you were before. But this part of you...the way you're always so kind to me it hurts... This part hasn't changed. And that makes me feel just a little bit...lonely.

"...You're right."

When Shin reported back that Annette had been safely rescued, he heard the relief in Lena's voice and couldn't help but feel that not abandoning Annette had been the right decision. A few seconds later, another pair of footsteps rushed over toward them. Turning in the direction of the new person, Raiden placed a hand on his hip.

"You're late, Jaeger. We already told you there's no need for caution right now."

"I understand your reasoning, but...still, I learned in training to always be cautious..."

He couldn't track the enemy if he was dead, so being cautious was the right decision, but...

"I'm glad you guys came to rescue me, but why this lineup? Or rather..."

Annette regarded them with half-lidded eyes after she'd been helped up to her feet and left with nothing to do.

"Don't tell me you guys came over like this."

"There was no path big enough for the Juggernauts to pass through," explained Shin, gesturing toward the service route behind them.

It was a cramped corridor full of twists and turns, wide enough to allow only one person to pass through.

"Frederica saw that your situation was a race against time, so we took the shortest path available. If Juggernauts couldn't pass through, the same should apply for the Legion, leaving passage only for people and self-propelled mines, and we can handle those with rifles... We weren't sure we'd make it in time, though."

"...I see. I guess you'd need men to handle the heavy lifting, even if it was just for carrying my corpse back..."

She sighed despondently for some reason and then gestured

back with the same demeanor.

"Well, while you're here, have a look back here."

She'd gestured toward several cylinders they hadn't quite noticed until she'd pointed them out. They glowed white and had multiple spheres floating inside them. Upon closer inspection, Shin realized what they were.

"Human...?"

They were transparent, like some kind of mineral crystal, but were similar to human craniums. The reason it was hard to say for sure was because they lacked that certain vividness organic tissue had. The eyeballs and muscle tissue had been removed. The bone structuring the skulls seemed to be made of blue metallic ore, while the cartilage appeared to be made of ruby. The brain matter looked like peridot.

The white light rendered them transparent as they floated in the cylinders like elaborate works of art. Judging from their sizes, the heads came from men, women, and children, and there were several of each type. Empty eye sockets stared out from neighboring cylinders.

Raiden, who stood next to Shin, squinted at the sight. Perhaps Dustin was imagining how these heads ended up in this state, because they could hear him swallow nervously.

"Transparent specimens. The Legion used drugs to render the biological tissue transparent and dye it over. I'm not sure what they did to dye the nervous system, though."

"...Were those originally human corpses?"

"You say it like it's nothing... But yes, that's right. These are real human heads. Probably Republic citizens that were rounded up during the large-scale offensive."

Sounding nauseated, Dustin added, "I'm surprised you're taking this so well."

"I'm used to seeing severed heads. This case is actually more palatable than most, since they've been severed cleanly."

"I know it's not your fault, but being used to corpses is still a little much... And I'm talking about the first lieutenant over there, too. Second Lieutenant Jaeger's reaction was actually pretty normal, so maybe you should take a page out of his book."

Even as she said that, she returned her attention to the

severed heads of her compatriots.

"This is probably some kind of guide for how to cut open stolen heads and remove their brains. It tells them all the steps involved, like where and how to cut, so they can produce intelligent Legion —what you guys call Black Sheep and Shepherds."

As they turned their gazes to her, Annette shrugged.

"I read the report you submitted to the Federacy military regarding the Legion, and Lena calls them that, too."

The technical officer of the Republic's former research division then looked at Shin out of the corner of her eye.

"You're lucky the people at the Transport Division wouldn't do their jobs properly. If they had, you might've been decorating my lab just like the people in these cylinders."

"...What are you talking about?"

"Undertaker, the possessed Processor who breaks his Handlers. The ghost stories people tell on the battlefield are one thing, but once people started offing themselves, I got requests to investigate you... What a missed opportunity. If they'd brought you over, I'd have picked your brain open and gotten a real good look."

Dustin's eyes widened, and Raiden cocked an eyebrow, but Shin didn't seem fazed.

"I doubt someone who doesn't reek of blood could do that."

"That's—"

Annette tried to say something in protest...but eventually dropped her shoulders and smiled weakly, looking exhausted.

"That's right... I don't have the guts to do something like that, much less a reason."

She didn't mean just the atrocity of dissecting a live person but also the act of boasting about her own faults, trying to make herself out to be more terrible than she truly was.

"...Anyway, that's what this is. A guide for producing Shepherds... Except..."

She tapped the farthest cylinder, which looked to be the final phase in whatever this was.

"...this one here is bothering me. Its hippocampus is totally *destroyed*... The Shepherds use undamaged brains, right? So why do you suppose they'd intentionally damage part of the brain?"

"Looks like they didn't think we'd get this far in. There isn't a single unit on patrol."

The fifth level's central main hall. In the middle of a place so dyed over with white it was maddening, Shiden smirked from inside Cyclops's cockpit. The entirety of this space—its ceiling, walls, and floor—was covered with small white tiles. It was translucent white darkness, as hazy as fresh snow. This place should have been part of the station, too, so if the interior had remained unchanged this entire time, then...the Republic must have reeeeally coveted the color white, to put it mildly. And if that was the case, they shouldn't have accepted immigrants to begin with.

The massive shadow lurking in the depths of the room didn't answer them. Silver tubes piled over one another, writhing like the organs or blood vessels of some unknown creature. Its trunk had a thin metal plate over it that seemed to be breathing somehow. It had what looked like eight thin legs, which were so disproportionate to its weight that Shiden wondered why they were even there, and finally a composite sensor that looked like a moth's feelers and an optical sensor that looked like an insect's eyes.

This was the Admiral...or rather, its control module.

Its blue optical sensor swerved sluggishly. Its abdomen was probably connected to the reactor farther underground. It was buried inside the white tiles and was probably incapable of moving. From the way it looked, it was an easy target.

"...Well, I doubt this'll go smoothly."

White lines of light ran across the hall's floor. Arbitrarily and then horizontally. A grid of light hit the corner of the floor twenty centimeters away.

"Knew it...!"

She braced herself—but as it turned out, it was only a beam of light. Only her Juggernaut's leg was touching the beam, but it wasn't taking any kind of damage. Lattices of light began covering the floor, as if to expose the coordinates to something—

Shiden's breath caught in her throat as she looked up. At that same moment, Cyclops's enhanced sensors blared out an alarm that rattled her eardrums. Enemy proximity alert. Its location was

—immediately above her!

As she looked up, the optical sensors followed suit, and after a brief lag, the image of the ceiling appeared on her optical screen. There were luminous points dotting the transparent ceiling tiles, and the moment she noticed them, Shiden shouted out instinctively:

"Mika, Rena, jump to the sides! Alto, don't move!"

And just as she gave the warning, several sharp blue beams of light pierced the hall's airspace from top to bottom. As everyone's units performed evasive maneuvers in response to the warning, a ray of light grazed over Alto's unit, which lay facedown with its legs retracted, and another ray passed by Mika's unit horizontally. A moment later, the fuselage of Rena's unit, which had failed to evade in time, was skewered from directly above.

"Rena?!"

The Juggernaut crumpled silently without so much as a scream from within as the ray of light pierced through the cockpit. This thin ray of condensed light pierced through the 88 mm turret's barrel laid over the cockpit without so much as a sound. The spears of light that had scraped and pierced the Juggernauts were absorbed by the half-transparent floor tiles, and then they dispersed and disappeared.

"Were those...lasers...?!"

"Looks like it."

She swiftly replied to Shana's—her vice captain's—cry. After all, they'd entered the internment camps when they were seven years old or so, and they'd only just recently started attending something kind of like school—the special officer academy. They didn't have the knowledge to accurately analyze the situation, though the Reaper and his werewolf of a vice captain apparently had gotten some education, annoyingly enough. They might have gotten a better handle on the situation.

Curling her lips bitterly, she kept her eyes open. She couldn't see it directly, but the radar screen showed her the enemy's positions scattering. A blue luminous point lit up in the ceiling. She issued a warning to the Juggernaut standing directly below it, which jumped back a moment before another laser pierced where it had once stood at what was quite literally the speed of light.

The laser skimmed the pile driver of her right leg, which burst in a shower of flames and black smoke. As Cyclops retreated while leaving a trail of smoke behind her, Shiden narrowed her eyes.

So that's what's going on.

"Those lines on the floor are coordinates, and when you step on them, the lasers fire in that direction... This whole room's a Legion. It can't follow us with its eyes to attack us when we're in its belly."

It was probably faster for the lasers to receive their coordinates directly via data link rather than rely on optical sensors to handle them individually. She could feel Shana furrow her brow.

"The grids are so narrow, it's impossible for a Juggernaut to avoid stepping on them."

"Yeah, but even if we step on them, it doesn't look like it can fire at all of us at once. It's not equipped to fire at twenty-four units simultaneously."

It fired multiple lasers per target, rather than one for each, to ensure it hit, meaning it could attack only a few targets at once. In which case...

"My Cyclops has a grasp on how many firing units there are and where they're situated... If we're gonna use that interval to shoot at it, we'll have to open fire either just after or a second before we hear the alert."

Only the Juggernauts that were being fired at would have to take evasive maneuvers, while all other remaining units fired. As with all modern weapons, the laser units moved after they shot, but they had to stop moving for a moment before firing. That would be the Juggernauts' window to gun them down.

"Cyclops to all units... Retaliate after the enemy's next barrage. On my command—"

The proximity alert blared again. Shiden's eyes were drawn to the radar screen, where blips appeared around her unit's position, except there was nothing in her coplanar field of vision. The number of laser units on the ceiling above them increased abruptly. It likely took time for the defense system to kick in completely, or perhaps the consciousness of the dead person

incorporated into the Admiral had an unfavorable disposition when it came to operating the laser units.

As they looked up in astonishment, blue lights lit up at once through the half-transparent tiles, as if to mock these girls' efforts.

"...Jaeger, let Professor Penrose ride in your rig. Move to the center of the back row and avoid combat as much as you can. Rito, hold on just a bit longer. We'll head your way once we entrust the professor to our succeeding unit."

"Roger that, Cap'n, but come over ASAP!"

It seemed Jaeger and Rito were engaging the defensive unit several hundred meters away from the Weisel. Cutting out Rito's near scream, Shin brought Undertaker to its feet. While the self-propelled mines were brittle, Undertaker wasn't armed with machine guns, so Shin couldn't fight them efficiently. Theo's vanguard platoon and Raiden's covering-fire platoon took the front, advancing while engaging the mixture of self-propelled mines and humans by alternating between their laser sights and machine guns.

Letting out hoarse shouts, the silhouettes of what were likely humans retreated, going the opposite direction from the Spearhead squadron. The armored infantry who were following them hadn't caught up yet, but they would likely take whatever human found them under their protection. Doing so was likely why they were lagging behind in the first place.

Suddenly, Lena's voice cut into the Resonance.

"Captain Nouzen, I'm sorry to interrupt in the middle of battle."

"Colonel... What is it?"

When she told him about what was happening on the other side of the battlefield, he furrowed his brow. That sounded difficult, for sure... No. The Brisingamen squadron was in the fifth level's central block, while the Spearhead squadron was advancing toward the eastern end of the fourth level. There was no direct path leading there, but in terms of direct distance, they were just a few kilometers away. It was actually close, as combat distance went.

"Dammit..."!

As she continued sending warnings to her allies who were in the enemy's sights, Shiden gritted her teeth. She grasped the position of all the laser units—which Lena had dubbed the Biene (the Fire Extension type) upon receiving the report about them. Shiden knew who would likely be aimed at next, too.

But there were too many of them. Her consort units that had the time to fire couldn't keep up with the Biene's cycles of high-speed movement and shooting, and she couldn't predict where they would stop to shoot next. Taking out even a scant few of them was the most they could manage so far.

"...Shiden. Do you want the Thunderbolt squadron to join up with you?"

"Cut the bullshit, Yuuto! The second you all get here, you'll be in their sights. Forget it. Just secure our path of retreat."

Shiden herself wanted to retreat and regroup for the time being, but it seemed the Biene were configured to prioritize shooting near the entrance first. Two or three of her squad mates had attempted to head there, and it resulted only in their being killed by an intricate grid of lasers... A nasty setup. The spears of light didn't give them a moment to breathe, rushing them down and, at times, mowing them down.

Her squad mates were evading to the best of their abilities, but their breathing was growing ragged due to overexertion. Cases where they fumbled their maneuvers, resulting in their piles and machine guns getting blown away, were becoming more frequent. It was only a matter of time until another person took a direct hit. Was their only choice to shoot down the ceiling and take out the enemy while burying themselves alive...?

It was then that a cold voice interrupted her troubling thoughts.

"—All units, switch ammunition to high-explosive rounds."

Shiden's odd eyes widened. *That voice.*

"Nouzen...?!"

"I'll take over relaying the targets. You prioritize ordering them to dodge... I can determine the Legion's positions, but I can't see which Juggernauts are being aimed at."

Shiden was dumbfounded for a moment before breaking into her trademark grin. He was in the middle of battle himself, and

still...

“...You’re somethin’ else, you know that, Li’l Reaper?”

Shaking her head, she looked up to the ceiling. The blips of the Biene were still filling up her radar screen. Shin couldn’t see the Juggernauts’ movements... He couldn’t tell who was going to be firing at the enemy. In which case...

“Just give us their coordinates. No one here’ll confuse our voices. All units! Li’l Reaper’s gonna be our oracle for today and tell us where to shoot. Whoever’s closest to where he calls out—doesn’t matter who—shoot on his order!”

It was an outrageous command, but no one put up an argument. Hearing a click of the tongue on the other side of the Resonance, which was as jumbled with the ghosts’ moans as always, filled her with a strange sensation.

†

“—Distance 22. That’s the last one, Shiden.”

“Yeah, I got it covered—Alto, fire!”

The final shot, a buckshot bombardment, bore into the gouged white ceiling. A small, spiderlike Legion fell from the ceiling between the debris, the oscillation device in its stomach emitting a blue glow. After watching it take a barrage of machine-gun fire and fall silent after rolling over on the floor, Shiden pushed Cyclops’s control stick forward.

Breaking into a jog as if it had been kicked into action, Cyclops charged at the Admiral’s massive butterfly-like compound eyes. Even without any means to defend itself, the noncombatant Legion unit still raised its head gravely, as if to greet its tiny opponent. Her Resonance with Shin allowed Shiden to hear the Legion’s voice.

“All hail the Empire! Heil dem Reich!”

The high voice, likely a woman’s, emerged from the Legion’s rear top section. Being commander units, the Shepherds continually repeated the laments of people who had once died.

Juggernauts weren’t good at firing at extreme angles of elevation. This Legion was a dozen meters tall, and shooting

directly at the top of it was difficult, but...

"Shiden!"

Picking up on the problem, Shana maneuvered her Juggernaut into a crouch. The moment Cyclops hopped on its turret's back, it released its limiters and forced its four legs into a full-strength leap. By adding the leg strength of the Juggernaut it was riding on to its own, Cyclops reached a height well beyond its specs' capabilities.

It drove an anchor into the dome-shaped ceiling, then reeled it back at full force and clung to the surface. Kicking against the ceiling, which had now become its floor, it dived down diagonally —its muzzle aimed toward the wailing voice. Its sights were fixed on its target's rear, in the gap between its wings.

"Heil dem Reich!"

"Shut the hell up and stay dead for once."

Shiden pulled the trigger.

The 88 mm APFSDS whistled out of her turret and pierced the Admiral's back directly. Like a spear descending from the heavens, as if to deliver judgment for the Admiral's earlier action, the APFSDS skewered it. Even unarmored, it had a gigantic frame. The depleted uranium shell traveled through the Admiral's interior structure, eventually losing its kinetic energy and bouncing back from its failed attempt to pierce through the frame of its chest.

It ricocheted around its insides, tearing its internal structure apart all the while, reducing the Liquid Micromachines to dust with its unique immolating flames. The long-dead ghost cried out in agony, its screams echoing in their ears. The Admiral's head sank heavily to the floor, and Shiden scoffed as she landed next to it.

"Your Majesty, the Admiral's down. Right, Nouzen?"

"Yeah... Looks that way."

"...What's that half-hearted response for?!"

"You can figure that out on your own, can't you? Don't ask pointless questions."

Lena smiled at the sound of them bickering again the moment things calmed down. Annette had been rescued, and the Admiral had been destroyed. Their completing one of their objectives

seemed to have given them the leisure to squabble.

“Good work, Captain Nouzen and Second Lieutenant Iida. Proceed to eliminate the Weisel next. Captain Nouzen, leave Major Penrose with the armored infantry.”

“Roger.”

“And once we get rid of the Weisel, all that’s left is clearing out the remaining enemies... Lady-Killer, I know they’re still skulking around, but how many of them are left?”

“...Do you really want to know?”

“Ah, no, forget it. That’s all I needed to hear.”

Shiden sounded absolutely fed up. Lena chuckled.

“Just a little more until we accomplish our objectives. Keep up the good work.”

†

The great amounts of sediment and concrete covering their position did nothing to prevent the communication through the Eintagsfliege resting their wings within it.

<Destruction of Matrix 277 confirmed. Command transferred to Hermes One.>

<Hermes One to first wide area network.>

<Transfer of all research data complete. Abdication of Production Facility 277 decided. Execute secrecy measures.>

<Lifting of stasis on Classified Article 27708 required for execution of secrecy measures —requesting confirmation.>

<First wide area network to Hermes One. Request approved.>

<Acknowledged.>

Communications concluded, and immediately, orders were issued to all subordinates down in the darkness.

<Hermes One to all units. Download 27708. Commence conversion.>

<Executing.>

At that moment, a voice bubbled up from the depths of the fallen capital, from the depths where the sun could not reach—as if to curse, as if to praise, a sorrowful scream burst forth like a newborn’s cry.

"Ugh...!"

The Legion's cries suddenly intensified in volume, forcing Shin to crouch and cover his ears. It was a meaningless gesture, since it wasn't physical noise to begin with, but he couldn't help doing so. Countless cries, wails, and moans of anguish and misery swelled up, like blades tearing into his very thoughts and burning his mind incessantly.

His head felt as if it might split in two. His sanity was being wrenched apart. One person's mind could not hope to withstand this unrelenting onslaught of the tortured wails of the damned. The sensory overload made all other sensations peter out. As his field of vision constricted and his consciousness was bleached in the color of blood, he cast one final thought into the abyss—and soon that, too, cut out entirely.

It can't be.

"Whoa!"

Shiden covered her ears with her hands, unable to process the bloodcurdling vortex of screams drowning her mind. Even with her synchronization rate set to the absolute minimum, the storm of voices still raged in her ears. Instinctively cutting off her Resonance with Shin, she gritted her teeth as she tried to calm her agitated consciousness. The team captains exchanged nervous, terrified words over the Resonance.

What...was that...?

After a moment of bewilderment, Shiden shook her head.

Get ahold of yourself. There's no time to question it. Something definitely happened.

She tried to reconnect to Shin, but she couldn't Resonate. He'd either removed the RAID Device or passed out from the strain... Or—and she really didn't want to consider it—maybe whatever just happened had straight-up killed him.

If something happened to the unit captain, Shin, his vice captain, Raiden, would have to take over for him. He likely wouldn't have the wherewithal to explain the situation. In that case—

"Yo, Theo! What happened?! Did those hunks of scrap metal

attack us again?!"

She swiftly changed her Sensory Resonance target to Theo. Each of the Spearhead squadron's Processors had Resonated with the other squads' captains and vice captains... Probably the kind of conduct one would expect from the elite of the elite who had served in the first ward's first defensive unit, Spearhead, two years ago. Their thinking was rapid, and they concluded who they should share information with right now.

"All captains, this is a proxy message! ...First, that Legion voice just now wasn't an attack! Shin is unresponsive, so assume defensive positions until we assess the situation!"

It seemed Theo hadn't quite caught up to the situation yet, either. Perhaps noticing that, he took a moment to breathe and then continued in a more restrained tone:

"Also, this is just speculation, but...I think I recognize what kind of voices those were."

Theo grimaced as he said that. He'd remembered it from his time in the Eighty-Sixth Sector's first ward's first defensive unit two years ago, during the final battle. At the start of their death march known as the Special Reconnaissance mission.

After fighting by Shin's side for nearly three years, he'd thought he'd gotten used to it, but even at the lowest synchronization rate, he couldn't help but tremble in terror when he heard that scream overflowing with murderous intent.

There was still no response from Shin.

"A Shepherd—if several of them were to cry out at the same time, that's what they'd sound like."

Shiden butted in, sounding suspicious.

"Wait just a sec. I thought the Shepherds were limited in number. There were only a hundred or so in the Republic's territories... And what we just heard wasn't only one or two of them. Don't fuck around—it's like you're saying every Legion in here is a Shepherd."

"Yeah, that's probably what it means."

But how is that even...?

“...No way.”

She felt something cold rush down her spine. Her radar screen was full of blips. Cyclops picked up the approaching hostiles one after another. The Legion surged up from below, with the bloodcurdling roar emanating from the bottom of the earth at their back.

It couldn’t be.

“You’re saying *these are all Shepherds...?!*”

†

The Legion’s central processors were modeled after a large mammal’s central nervous system and coded with an unchangeable life span set by the Empire, which had created them. Fifty thousand hours for every version—roughly six years. Once that time lapsed, the structures of their central processors would collapse, and they would cease to function—a fail-safe introduced by the Empire just in case the Legion went berserk.

Once the Empire fell, the Legion could no longer receive further version updates. But spurred by their original orders to fight, the Legion needed to find a substitute for their central processors. And fortunately, an alternative was readily available. An impressively developed neural network, remarkable even among large mammals.

The human brain.

But the Legion could meet humankind only on the battlefield, and corpses without damage to their craniums were few and far between. The Republic, which neglected to collect its corpses and even sent out small squadrons on death marches every so often, was the battlefield that yielded the most brains to plunder—in fact, the majority of the Black Sheep and Shepherds across the continent had been seized in the anti-Republic campaign. But that was a relative figure.

The majority of the raids had been carried out during *that* suppression operation. They hadn’t fought. They hadn’t committed suicide, either. They’d never bothered recovering or

killing those dragged away by the Tausendfüßler. The easiest of hunting grounds, where prey only ran about powerlessly.

The eighty-five administrative Sectors of the Republic of San Magnolia.

They may have cast their minority, the Eighty-Six, out into the Eighty-Sixth Sector, but they were still an advanced nation with the population and territory to match that of the continent's west. And so the civilians the Legion had pillaged away were, indeed...

...ten million in number.

†

"...But why would the number of Shepherds increase so suddenly?"

Lena moaned, supporting her body, which was on the verge of falling over, as she prodded at the console. Reports streamed in from all squadrons under her command in rapid succession. The behavioral patterns of Legion that had already been encountered had suddenly changed. They'd started predicting the directions units would go in and luring them in with unusual formations, cornering Federacy soldiers and experienced Eighty-Six alike with ease.

Shepherds. Legion commander units that preserved the intelligence they'd had in life. They were always challenging foes, but never had they appeared in large groups like this, as if they were rank-and-file troops.

No, why or how their number had increased wasn't even the issue. The question was: Why bring them in *now*? Why use them as a defensive force and introduce them to the battle only after the Admiral had been destroyed and half the facility had been suppressed?

"...!"

A new fear overtook Lena as her eyes widened with understanding. She lifted her head.

"Vanadis HQ to all units!"

“—n, Shin! Yo!”

Shin finally came to his senses upon hearing his name and having his shoulders shaken violently.

His crimson eyes, which had been staring blankly into space until now, came back into focus.

“Raiden...”

“Welcome back.”

Raiden sighed in relief. They were both inside Undertaker’s cockpit, its canopy having been forcibly opened. Undertaker and Wehrwolf were pushed against a thick concrete wall, with the rest of their squad’s units forming a strong defensive perimeter around them by arranging their Juggernauts in semicircles.

Theo, Anju, and Kurena were in the outermost circle, locked in vicious combat. It was a do-or-die defensive formation that wouldn’t allow a single Legion or self-propelled mine to pass through. At their backs were Shin, who was incapacitated, and Raiden, who’d disembarked from Wehrwolf to check in on him.

The Legion’s front lines were composed entirely of Shepherds. Their howling thundered in Shin’s ears at this short distance, and their numbers were rising still. Those that stood at the back of the line of battle bolted upright suddenly, and just as he thought the voices of the dead seemed to have stopped emanating from them, a howl with the voice of a different person from the one possessing the front lines boomed into his mind before they pressed forward, as if craving the chance to do battle.

The same scene was apparently taking place in many locations across the underground facility. The distant voices of the Black Sheep, which had been an indistinguishable cluster before, were being replaced with the voices of Shepherds. Shin had to banish the obvious question of *why* from his mind.

“...How long was I out?”

“Less than ten minutes. We dragged Undertaker over here and formed the defensive formation, and I got your canopy open just now... I was gonna drag you back to Wehrwolf if you didn’t wake up.”

Raiden winced at the idea of something so unpleasant.

“You...look like shit. Can you move?”

Shin heaved a long sigh. He’d gotten used to this. The

unending screams were still threatening to split his mind in half, and the voice of Raiden, who was right in front of him, felt way more distant than they did... But he could move.

“...Yeah.”

“Then try to follow us until we can break out of here... We got orders to retreat.”

Such an unexpected statement made Shin look back at him dubiously.

Retreat? At this point in the operation? When the Weisel hadn’t been destroyed yet?

“Retreat...?”

“Allow me to briefly explain the situation, Captain Nouzen.”

She’d finally managed to Resonate with Shin again, but the piercing wails of ghosts that bore down on her like a sharp blade even when Resonated at the lowest possible synchronization rate—and most of all Shin’s own pained, labored breathing—filled her with anxiety.

“The details are still unclear, but multiple Shepherds appeared among the enemy’s forces... This has forced us to suspend our advance and focus on defense or retreat.”

“...I think the simple explanation is that all the Legion here downloaded the Shepherds’ neural networks or whatever. The total number of voices you can hear isn’t changing, but the number of Shepherds is growing, right?”

Lena shook her head as Annette cut into their conversation.

“We can leave analysis for later—the introduction of these reinforcements only occurred after the Admiral, which should have been an important defensive target for the Legion, was destroyed. This mass of Shepherds was introduced when they were more of a confidential secret than the Admiral itself. Which means...”

“Maintaining secrecy—right?”

“Yes. They’re intending to wipe out the invading force for that reason.”

For the Legion, hiding the existence of this mass of Shepherds was more important than the Admiral—more important than this production base. This stimulation of theirs was conducted by the Eintagsfliege, which meant it was likely some kind of data. It was

theorized that what they'd gained was the Shepherds' neural networks, but there were other possibilities as well. Being able to confirm which one was true would have been preferable, but it was too late for that now.

"We've destroyed our first objective, the Admiral. The Weisel can't move now. We've concluded that you've completed the mission and are to retreat from the hot zone immediately... Get out of there as soon as you can."

Cutting her Resonance with Shin, Lena whispered to Annette.

"But, Annette, how is this possible?"

Pulling the outrageous stunt of a download in the middle of battle was beside the point; those were the enemy's circumstances. But how had the Shepherds multiplied? Only one Shepherd could be produced from each dead human. They may have captured many Republic civilians during the large-scale offensive, but would they use them up like disposable pawns in this kind of battle?

"I think what I found earlier, the Legion's guide for removing brains, is the answer."

Annette's voice was bitter. She was currently riding in Dustin's Juggernaut and spoke quietly so he wouldn't hear her.

"That was actually something that always bothered me ever since I read Captain Nouzen's report. If the Shepherds' central processors— If undamaged neural networks are so precious to the Legion, why don't they turn all the Legion into Shepherds?"

Lena had heard about it before. The total sum of Shepherds in all the Republic's past fronts put together was a mere hundred or so. That was the extent of the undamaged brains the Legion had managed to collect. But if they didn't use actual brains and instead used mere copies of their networks, it didn't stand to reason. They could give multiple units a copy of the same neural network, and yet they didn't. They could replicate Black Sheep using damaged neural networks, but not undamaged ones.

"All the brain samples I saw earlier had their hippocampi destroyed. I think therein lies the answer... Could you stay sane if your exact replica was

standing right in front of you, Lena? They probably couldn't replicate them because they still had their memories from when they were alive."

Identity. That one trait possessed by all humans made them impossibly different from the soulless killing machines the Weisel churned out like the black smoke erupting from its chimneys.

"So that means..."

"Yeah, things are gonna be different from now on. The Shepherds are going to start multiplying like never before. All the Legion produced from now on—including the Black Sheep—are going to be intelligent."

This had likely started after the Republic's fall, when the Legion got their hands on more humans than ever before. Undamaged human brains stopped being a rare commodity for them, allowing them to freely test ways to hack human brains so that they could remove the foreign element called individuality in a way that didn't eliminate their value as central processors.

Even if the Legion were capable of autonomous battle in a way that no other country could replicate, their original cognitive capabilities were far inferior to those of humans. But from now on, that sole weakness would be no more. The strong, unflinching Legion, which knew no fatigue, would soon acquire intelligence equal to that of humans, down to their rank-and-file soldiers... They would become capable of executing complex operations, just like humankind.

The implications of that made Lena shudder, and that was likely why Annette didn't say any more. This wasn't something the Processors needed to hear in the middle of a battle. The proud Eighty-Six would likely continue fighting in spite of that knowledge, though.

But in all likelihood, humankind...would lose to the Legion after all.

"...And that's the gist of it. Follow us until we break out of here. And don't go into combat. Stay in the back row with Jaeger and be good."

Shin grimaced when Raiden, who'd boarded Wehrwolf, told him that.

"I'm not sure that's an option."

He realized being treated like a burden was unavoidable...but

given the situation...

"There's a world of difference between a Black Sheep's combat capabilities and a Shepherd's. I can't stay out of this when the enemy's strength is effectively increasing."

"...You serious?"

"I won't do anything reckless... I don't intend to die here."

Six months ago, and maybe even before that, he'd been wandering the battlefield in search of a place to die, without even realizing it. But things were different now.

"....."

After roughly combing through his short hair with his fingers, Raiden sighed deeply.

"...The second things get too dicey, we're knocking you out and dragging you away. Got it? That's my right and responsibility as vice captain. Any complaints?"

"None. But you should probably save statements like that for the day you're actually able to knock me out."

Raiden didn't laugh at Shin's forced attempt at a jab, but he did scoff at it. Even as Shin was holding back a sense of vertigo that threatened to overcome him at any moment, he suddenly remembered something. Something Frederica had told him once... A mere six months ago, in fact.

You should rely on those walking by your side for support.

"...Thanks. I'll leave command to you."

There was a pause, and this time, Shin felt Raiden smirk back at him.

"Yeah. I mean, I wouldn't listen to your orders right now as it is. The way you look, I can only see you screwing something up."

"Theo! We're retreating! Make us a way out!"

"Roger. Uh..."

As he scoured the thick lines of the Legion in search of an opening he could exploit, his eyes stopped on a certain point. A group of self-propelled mines were heading in the opposite direction, paying no attention to the Juggernauts.

"The fuck...?"

The self-propelled mines clung to the pillar supporting the ceiling one after another and self-destructed. It was an act of annihilation that was utterly meaningless in the face of taking out the Spearhead squadron.

No...

Shivers ran up his spine the moment he realized what they were doing.

They're planning to bring the whole place down on us.

"Tch. Anju, Dustin! Fire all your explosive shells at the corridor on the right! Open a way out—now!"

Anju's Snow Witch responded immediately, as did Dustin's Sagittarius a moment later, releasing all the explosive projectiles they had in the direction he'd instructed them to. The Legion units in that direction were blown away, sprayed with fragments, opening a path in the enemy's offensive line.

"All units, after me! Shin, don't lag behind!"

Confirming out of the corner of his eye that Undertaker rose to its feet and Wehrwolf took its position in the back of the formation, Laughing Fox took off down the opened path. He pushed aside the self-propelled mines rushing to get in his way with his muzzle and blew them away with short-range machine-gun fire. Ameise tried to rush them from their flank, only to be crushed by Gunslinger's pile drivers. Covering for Snow Witch, which didn't have the time to reload, Wehrwolf unleashed machine-gun fire left and right.

Behind them, the self-propelled mines were still clinging to the pillar and self-destructing. Since they were mostly antipersonnel weapons, the intensity of the individual explosions wasn't all that impressive. A single antipersonnel mine couldn't even penetrate a Juggernaut's armor. But through repeated blasts, the reinforced concrete pillar was gradually being whittled down.

Shaking off the Grauwolf types in pursuit of them, they dived into the tunnels. There were no enemies inside. Right after Wehrwolf tumbled into the tunnel, the pillar crumbled and finally broke. The other pillars bent under the additional strain, and the ceiling caved in with nothing to support it.

The battlefield they'd been on just a moment ago was buried under a massive shower of sediment, rendering even the Eighty-

Six speechless.

"So. Even the self-propelled mines are intelligent at this point."

Lena nodded bitterly. She'd received similar reports from other squadrons. Multiple parts of the underground facility had caved in as a result of bombing, with self-propelled mines ignoring the Juggernauts in front of them and going after support pillars.

The Legion, which weren't as intelligent as humans, couldn't understand the causality of this act... Or rather, couldn't *until now*. It seemed the self-propelled mines had come to realize that by toppling a minimal number of pillars, they could bury the battlefield altogether, which served as horrific proof of their intelligence.

The self-propelled mines themselves, which were disposable even for the Legion, had become that intelligent.

"But conversely, that means we can read their actions... If the self-propelled mines' purpose is to destroy the facility, they'll have to deploy the necessary numbers to the necessary positions to do so. If we destroy their forward path, they won't be able to sabotage us any further. What this means is that the self-propelled mines would head to destroy the facilities farthest from them."

The Legion attacked in seemingly endless waves, but they did have a point of origin. If their corridors were to be buried by sediment, they wouldn't be able to cross through to the space on the other side.

"If we can just come up with the order they'll do it in, you should be able to escape. And guessing at their order isn't too difficult."

Looking up at the holo-screen gave her a clear view of where each of the squadrons was positioned. The Brisingamen squadron was on the fifth and lowest level. Spearhead, which had been deployed to find Annette, was at the eastern tip of the fourth level. She had to make sure that even they, far as they were from the exit, returned safely.

"Captain Nouzen, I realize this is a difficult request, but search for the enemies' movements again. If we can just tell where the

Legion—where the self-propelled mines—are gathering, we should be able to calculate how to deploy our forces from now on.”

“Roger.”

Shortly after this somewhat pained response, a few points lit up on her map. He’d probably decided that using the barely online data link would be quicker than relaying the information orally. After applying corrections to a few points that seemed to be off on the vertical axis, she looked over the whole image and nodded.

“At present, we conclude that our objective of destroying the Legion’s production facility has been successfully completed. All engaging squadrons are to begin their retreat from the hot zone immediately.”

She then took a deep breath.

“Second Lieutenant Michihi, set out and deploy the Lycaon squadron around the center of the first and second levels. The Nordlicht squadron is to lend three of its platoons to the Lycaon squadron.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“So only half of us will be defending HQ... No, we’ll make do somehow.”

She sent in her reserve forces and some of the defense unit so they could maintain an escape route for the squadrons inside. They would have to find a way out in the meantime.

“All units deployed in the facility—we will now begin navigating the retreat path and procedure. Obey my commands...without error and without delay.”

Traversing the pitch-black darkness, the four-legged headless skeletons, those mechanical knights in metallic armor, faithfully followed the orders from the voice like a silver bell.

“Thunderbolt squadron, cling to the central bypass between the fourth and fifth levels. Brisingamen squadron, report upon passing through... The Claymore squadron is to deploy in its current position. Maintain the position in question until the Spearhead squadron passes through.”

“Roger. But the remaining ammunition for both of our main armaments and our machine guns is down to twenty percent. We can’t fight for long.”

“Roger that... We’re running low on ammo, too, so hurry back, Cap’n!”

While they had prioritized the destruction of the Admiral and the Weisel, the Legion had advanced in all directions. According to Shin's report, part of the Legion's remaining forces were retreating to the Legion's territories from each level's northern block. They left behind the strategically inferior self-propelled mines, the Black Sheep that hadn't had their central processors changed, and damaged units that needed to be repaired as their guards while moving all their other forces to the central blocks first.

"Brisingamen squadron has secured the fourth-level central block."

The most basic strategy when it came to marching through enemy territory was alternating advance. Multiple units moved in an alternating fashion, with those who were stopped holding the line to cover for those ahead of them. This held true during retreat, as well. A unit would hold the line until the forces ahead of them finished moving and then covered for them in turn, keeping the enemy in check with heavy fire.

"Thunderbolt squadron has linked up with Brisingamen squadron. Spearhead squadron, hold your position until the Claymore squadron reaches the third level."

Damage reports were pouring in. Machine-gun ammunition depleted to zero. Light damage to armor. Slight damage to one rig. Medium damage to another. Troops injured—troops dying. As the squadrons and the armored infantry attached to them were being chipped away, they made their way to the surface. The transition from engaging to retreating came with great difficulty.

"Lycaon squadron, we've confirmed the presence of Grauwolf types that purged their armor to reduce their overall width. This increases the number of paths they could take, so do be careful."

"Roger that...! I'm not sure we can handle many more of them, though..."

"Quit your whining, princess! It's just a little bit more! Show us you got what it takes to survive!"

It was like a game of chess taking place in total darkness, with each side chipping away at the other's pawns.

Shepherds had an intelligence comparable to that of humans, so at times, they could predict people's decisions and devise

countermeasures.

"Raiden, stay where you are! There's an enemy ahead!"

Just as Raiden was about to take a turn at an intersection, Shin's warning prompted him to force Wehrwolf to emergency brake. Looking down the intersection's turn, he saw a small tunnel with a Löwe's massive form hidden inside. It lay in wait, its turret aimed directly at them, and with the tunnels being as narrow as they were, there was no way of crossing without getting in its line of fire. Defeating it would be challenging in and of itself.

"Lena! We need a change in route—"

"It's fine. Let's keep moving."

Just as someone interrupted Raiden, a Juggernaut slipped by Wehrwolf's side, one that insisted on not exchanging its sniper cannon even in these cramped conditions. With a Personal Mark of a rifle with a scope attached to it.

"Kurena?!"

"We have to hurry back, right? I'm worried about Shin, too... If it can't move, it'll be easy enough..."

Gunslinger casually jumped into the intersection. The Löwe reacted, its turret trembling, but before it could shoot, Gunslinger fired from a prone position. Flying in a trajectory that intersected with the Tank type's 120 mm cannon, the 88 mm APFSDS rushed ahead, accurately connecting with the needlelike gap in its front armor, which was meant to enable the turret's movement.

It was the sole structural weakness in the Löwe's bulky frontal defenses. Needless to say, it wasn't a weakness one could easily aim at in a battlefield where both aggressors moved rapidly and aimed their turrets at each other.

"...to hit it."

Gunslinger turned around calmly as the Löwe burst spectacularly into flames behind her and broke down.

"Continue advancing at current speed for fifteen seconds, then take a left at the next corner."

The instructions led them to some kind of vast, warehouse-like space. There wasn't a single source of light to illuminate the pitch blackness. At one corner of the elongated warehouse, which

seemed to go on forever, groups of *something* wrapped in cloth were tightly packed together in a pile.

The moment Raiden realized what they were, he instinctively shouted:

“Frederica! Close your ‘eyes’!”

“Aaah...?!”

The warning came too late. The sound of the small girl’s screech filled the Resonance, followed by her anguished coughs and violent vomiting.

Filling the large space, piled up to the ceiling, were deformed human skeletons stained and discolored by necrotic liquid. They numbered not in the hundreds or thousands, but roughly in the tens of thousands... A number that exceeded even the amount of people who’d died in the operation to eliminate the Morpho during the large-scale offensive lay before them, piled up like garbage after it had been processed. In all likelihood, the Legion saw them as one and the same.

The skeletons at the bottom of the pile had been crushed by the weight of those above them, becoming a jumbled mess of corpse debris blended together. There wasn’t so much as a hint of dignity to them. Raiden averted his gaze from the corpses at the edges, which seemed to be relatively newer, as they were only partially discolored and mostly maintained their original forms.

Raiden finally realized why the Legion had built this base here, even with the dregs of the newly weakened Republic being a prime target for elimination. They wanted to process these new corpses as quickly as possible. There were simply too many of them—so many that they couldn’t waste time bringing them all back to the rear.

The only consolation was that these people likely weren’t conscious when they were dissected. Raiden shook his head, trying to shoo away the thoughts clinging to his mind. A human’s physical strength couldn’t even fight off a self-propelled mine, the lightest of the combatant Legion types. The Legion had no reason to suppress their “ingredients” by knocking them unconscious in the event of a struggle. Nor did they have any need to show pity.

Capturing the enemy alive on a battlefield where each side sought the death of the other wasn’t simple. That meant most of

the corpses here were captured Alba, who'd willingly forfeited the means to fight. But even still, thinking of the atrocities that had taken place here, far below the earth, for over six months...left a nasty taste in Raiden's mouth.

The ground the Juggernauts trod was oddly sticky for reasons they preferred not to think about. At the top of the mountain of bodies, at what was essentially its peak, was a skeletal corpse dressed in a familiar desert-camouflage uniform. A decomposed corpse they didn't recognize, clad in a dress. A new corpse, lying around. Corpses. Corpses. So many corpses—

As he ran between them, Raiden was overcome by an odd sense of despair. Death—and the Legion that delivered it—knew true equality. The Republic oppressors and the oppressed Eighty-Six were all the same to the Legion. They were the enemy—resources to be harvested. There was no room for distinction. No room for discrimination.

The concept humankind couldn't achieve despite pursuing it for thousands of years—equality—had been achieved by the mindless killing machines known as the Legion...in a manner that was all too ironic for humanity.

The old woman who'd raised Raiden had once told him that humankind believed itself to be a unique presence made in the image of God. And if that was true, then humanity was, despite all the effort put into making it, a useless, failed product.

“...It's all pointless...”

What was pointless? And why was it so? Even Raiden didn't know as he whispered to himself so quietly it wasn't even audible through the Para-RAID.

“...So we gotta do this before it's too late, huh?”

The iron door to the warehouse flew open, probably because of the vibrations from the battle. Sitting inside Cyclops's cockpit, Shiden sighed as she looked around the now-exposed warehouse.

So that's why humans were suddenly mixed into the battlefield.

Lying on the warehouse floor were humanoid figures blackened with grime and filth. Their glass-bead-like silver eyes faintly reflected the dim light. They weren't self-propelled mines, but

humans. A group of Alba survivors captured during the large-scale offensive, it seemed. They were alive, and if given proper medical treatment, they would probably survive.

But that would be the extent of it.

The eyes staring into space were, as expected, completely void of consciousness or reasoning. They were the eyes of one who had already succumbed to insanity.

Human sanity could be surprisingly fragile. If one were to simply deprive another of sunlight, proper food, their freedom, and their dignity, leaving cold, hunger, and fear in their stead, any strong-willed person would eventually snap.

...She felt no pity for them.

They were the sort of people who let countless Eighty-Six die, and they had met with a similar fate. Looking around, she saw no others like her here—not a single person without silver hair and eyes. Unlike the white pigs, Eighty-Six captives could have been captured on the battlefield but could have managed to kill themselves rather than be taken alive. Or maybe they'd simply lost to the white pigs' numbers and been dissected first.

“...Hmph.”

Calling up her armament-selection screen, she loaded her weapon with a projectile that had high antipersonnel firepower. Tracing her gaze, the arm-mounted 88 mm smoothbore gun swiveled oddly and locked its sights. A target mark signifying a lock rolled over, and Shiden applied force to the trigger.

“...I’ll pass.”

Mumbling to herself, she moved her finger away. The Reginleif’s gun camera’s footage was compressed and preserved by the mission recorder, and this wasn’t the Eighty-Sixth Sector, where it went unchecked, so the Processors were required to submit it at the end of each mission.

And while she didn’t feel an ounce of obligation toward it, she was currently one of the Federacy military’s dogs. She would have to abstain from any acts that might disturb her precious owners’ overinflated sense of pity and justice. The Federacy was all the same as the Republic in that once it grew tired of them, given an excuse to do so, it would dispose of the Eighty-Six at any time.

“...What do we do, Shiden?”

"Nothin' we can do. They're beyond saving."

Shiden answered Shana's apathetic question with a snort. The reason the Legion didn't use these humans wasn't because they didn't have enough time to remove their brains. It was likely because they were far too broken to be of use to them as Shepherds. Going to the trouble of bringing them back and trying to rehabilitate them would be a fruitless endeavor that *wouldn't do anyone any good*.

She turned around, her eyes lingering on the remains of a human skeleton that appeared half-eaten, scattered by the entrance. The skeleton's skull was missing from the eyes up. The Legion had a disposal site somewhere else to dump what was left after they took what they wanted, so whoever was thrown in here was likely meant for some other purpose. Imagining it made Shiden sick.

It didn't just *look* half-eaten.

"...Let's go," Shiden spat over her shoulder as she turned her back on the fate of the white pigs.

By the time the Spearhead squadron reached the third level's central hall, they felt as exhausted as if they'd spent the whole day running around. The pained breaths streaming in between the ghosts' wails through the Sensory Resonance made Shin grimace.

The strain on Shin was exceptional. Theo had taken over as vanguard, and they'd somehow managed to successfully withstand combat, but Shin's breathing was quickly becoming more and more labored.

We've gotta hurry and get to the second level fast...

Once they regrouped with the Lycaon squadron—once they had more rigs on their side—the Spearhead squadron would feel confident enough to leave the area even if a total idiot gave them the order to do so. The more distance they put between themselves and the retreating Shepherds, the better.

But contrary to Raiden's hopes, his borrowed senses picked up wailing voices approaching them. Even the Juggernaut's relatively narrow proximity sensors detected moving bodies coming toward

them. From all of the hall's exits, from behind every cover possible, they appeared. The angular silhouettes of self-propelled mines, Ameise, and Grauwolf types—a mixed group of Shepherds and Black Sheep that had stayed behind.

The angular, metallic silhouette of a Grauwolf standing at the forefront suddenly emanated the familiar scream of a girl.

"I don't want to die."

"Kaie...!"

That voice.

The voice shriveled up and faded—only to be replaced and utterly drowned out by an unknown, thundering voice.

†

<Hermes One to wide area network.>

<High-priority target—call sign Baleygr—detected.>

<Confirming recommended coping measures.>

<Confirmation complete. Initiating coping measures.>

†

Black Sheep, which were created from brains that had decayed with the passage of time since their death, didn't retain their original personalities. But even so, Raiden and his comrades couldn't help but feel deeply when faced with Black Sheep that possessed the voices of their dead comrades in their final hours. They would gun them down in battle with the hopes of setting them free, even if they were only copies. Kaie was that precious of a friend to them.

And that very same Kaie was right before their eyes.

"I don't want to die."

"I don't want to die."

Even as the "Kaies" were fighting, they vanished, one after another. They were overwritten by the neural network of some deceased soul they didn't know, and they faded away without a trace. That, too, was a sort of release, but the coldness of sending

her out to fight and then erasing her when she was no longer needed... Even if she were to fight here, she would be destroyed and wiped out without a trace. Even after death, she wouldn't be free from the fate awaiting all Eighty-Six, to die as they had lived... And that was all too infuriating.

“Shit...!”

Swearing, Raiden trampled the Grauwolf opposing him. That *thing* wasn't Kaie anymore. That thing that, despite how tortured its mechanical scream was, likely lacked any will or words wasn't her.

At that moment, a heavy crashing noise rumbled through the area. The destructive sound of ten-ton units clashing against one another at high speed. A Juggernaut was blown back, directly taking a Grauwolf's ramming attack. At the flank of its armor was the Personal Mark of a headless skeleton bearing a shovel.

“Shin?!”

The moment Shin realized what was happening, it was already too late. The high-frequency blade he swung down failed to stop the “Kaie” before his eyes from rushing him, and he tried to take a slight step to the right to avoid it. The blade cut into the left side of “Kaie’s” mass but did nothing to slow down its tackle. It drove all its weight and momentum against Undertaker’s cockpit block.

“Nng...!”

Even Shin, with his borderline superhuman reflexes, couldn't avoid the tackle. Taking the full brunt of the blow, Undertaker was blown backward. If this had been the Republic's walking coffin, whose cockpit was connected loosely, the attack would have unhinged the frame and cut the whole thing—the Processor included—in half. The Reginleif was sturdier than that, though, and was only thrown back.

As he soared through the air, he saw a circular structure surrounded by decorated, arabesque silvery glass behind him: the main shaft, meant to funnel sunlight into the lower levels.

“Oh no...!”

The rig's positioning in the air was too poor for him to fire a

wire anchor. The earsplitting noise of him crashing into the reinforced glass sounded like a shout of a creature in its death throes. The white shadow of the falling Feldreß disappeared into the darkness.

The two of them fell, intertwined, into the main shaft connecting the third and fourth levels. For whatever reason, it had the length of several floors. There were six spiral staircases running along the outer circumference, and countless metallic walkways intersected along the decorative glass, coming together in what looked like the spiral structure of DNA.

As Undertaker fell down, facing up, Shin felt as if he were falling into a bottomless abyss.

“Tch...!”

He swung Undertaker’s front legs forward, kicking the Grauwolf away, and used that momentum to turn over. He then landed on one of the walkways, smashing through the glass. Of course, it wasn’t built to support the weight of a Juggernaut’s ten tons landing on it at crashing speed. The screech of a wire shooting off ripped through the sound of the glass shattering as the walkway collapsed.

With most of its falling velocity curbed, Undertaker hopped onto an adjacent walkway. Repeating this action a few more times, Shin avoided the mezzanine floor and landed at the bottom of the shaft.

The blue light filling the space wavered as if they were underwater. It was a wide hall, covered by Prussian-blue surface tiles. Some of the broken walkways stuck out diagonally, and the shards of the glass broken by the straight, taut wire glistened. A tower of intersecting, clicking flywheels stood tall in the middle, reminiscent of the inner mechanisms of a clock tower—a device likely meant to store electricity.

At the base of the tower were jumbled-up human skeletons and the remains of mechanical butterflies that looked like intersected shadows. The blue glow of a quasi-nerve crystal shone from between some of the corpses; some of them probably belonged to Handlers or Processors.

Feeling a faint discomfort on his neck, where the RAID Device was, Shin cast his gaze at the metallic shadow standing still a distance away. That was all he could manage.

"What are you trying to do...Kaie?"

"Kaie" didn't move.

He'd managed to catch sight of "Kaie" running down the wall after he'd kicked it away. One of its blades had snapped, likely driven into the wall to slow its fall. It hadn't taken so much damage that it couldn't move, yet it stood still, its optical sensor fixed on Undertaker. Regardless of the fact that it clearly perceived the presence of a Juggernaut, a hostile element, it remained unmoving.

"I don't want to die."

"What were you trying to show me by bringing me here?"

"I don't want to die."

"Kaie" gave no answer. Black Sheep lacked human intelligence. They didn't have the memories or personalities they'd had in life. Shin's ability didn't allow him to communicate with the Legion, not even the Shepherds, who maintained the memories and personalities they'd had in life. There could be no communication with them.

"I don't want to die."

"Kaie" squatted, preparing to pounce on him like a predator...

...when not even a moment later, it was split cleanly in two by something that came falling from straight above.

It was the worst possible report she could have gotten.

"Captain Nouzen is—?!"

"Yeah. The Para-RAID is still connected, and I can hear what sounds like fighting, so he ain't dead or incapacitated, but it sounds like he's struggling so much, he's not gonna come back."

"....."

Lena bit hard into her flower-petal lips. The self-propelled mines' demolishing of the facility was ongoing, and the fighting with the Legion was still raging on as well. In the middle of all

that, Undertaker was isolated. And based on the number of enemies where he'd presumably fallen, the situation seemed to be just about hopeless for him.

"We...can't afford to stage a rescue in this situation."

"Pathetic, ain't it?"

The Spearhead squadron had its hands full stopping the Legion heading for the shaft. If she ordered forces to search for Shin, there would undoubtedly be casualties among those left to defend against the Legion. And on top of that, while it was preferable to a treadmill model, a surface weapon like the Reginleif was bad at attacking anything directly below it.

"Then our only choice is to wait for the captain to return on his own..."

Even as she said that, a cold thought crossed her mind. The Spearhead squadron was currently at the third level's central block. The Claymore squadron was en route, climbing the staircase leading to the third level. The Brisingamen and Thunderbolt squadrons were in the fourth level's central block, and each squadron had armored infantry attached to it.

If they were to wait for Shin to return, each squadron would have to tighten its defenses in its position around the shaft. The Legion didn't hesitate to sacrifice their comrades if need be, and they would topple the shaft even if their friendly units were inside. So the squadrons had to defend the shaft until the fighting inside it had concluded in some form. And while saying they would defend a comrade no matter what sounded nice on paper, it would mean delaying four squadrons from escaping a combat zone that was under risk of collapse. Conversely, abandoning Shin would enable all her forces to return to the surface safely.

That fact rendered Lena speechless.

The situation wasn't pressing enough to force her into those kinds of decisions just yet. But what if the Legion's numbers exceeded predictions? What if the rate of casualties in her squadrons were to go over permissible values? It was true enough that in terms of pure fighting power, Shin was of the highest value among the Processors. As a single unit, he had the highest combat potential, with seven years of experience fighting the Legion under his belt, and most of all, he had the rare, singular

ability to trace the Legion's voices from afar.

But did he carry enough value to justify countless sacrifices? Was it even right to quantify the value of one's life with their combat potential? This was a question Lena had grappled with countless times before as she served as a Handler commanding the Eighty-Six from within the safety of the walls and eventually came to be known as the Bloodstained Queen.

She had been forced to make this choice time and again. But as soon as Shin was thrown into the equation, her resolve was shakier than ever before.

If the need arises, will I be able to make the same decision again? Will I be able to calmly declare that I'm abandoning him, like I've abandoned countless Processors before?

Sensing Lena's hesitation, Raiden's voice grew colder.

"...Lena. Just letting you know, we ain't retreating until we get him back."

That served only to solidify her resolve.

"Of course. I will never, ever needlessly command my forces to leave a subordinate to die... But if it becomes necessary, follow my orders. Absolutely."

If the situation requires me to abandon Shin... If I deem it necessary, I'll make that call. I will order Shin's death. And I won't have anyone else do it. Only me.

"I am your commander... I can't save one soldier's life at the cost of losing countless others."

It was natural for Processors, who stood side by side and faced life and death on the battlefield together, to never forsake a comrade. It was because they shared that sense of trust that they could stand together on the precipice of life and death.

But Lena was a commander. She stayed behind, where it was safe, commanding from above to guarantee the best possible outcome and never fighting directly. It was because she was able to make calls that ensured the survival of the unit—by making the heartless decisions a comrade never could—that she had the right to command subordinates.

Never standing on the battlefield, never fighting anyone. This was the way of fighting she'd decided on for herself. And that was the way of fighting Shin acknowledged.

She could sense Raiden's brow furrowing.

"Are you really doing this aga—?"

But Shiden interrupted.

"Don't you worry, Raiden. Our queen never once fucked up and got someone killed for no reason."

There wasn't so much as a hint of a smile, not a touch of mirth in her tone. She'd delivered that statement with the utmost sincerity.

"Some of us did die, and there were even times when I asked myself if this crazy woman was really trying to kill us, but no one ever died in vain... If nothing else, I could tell she was always desperately trying to minimize casualties as much as possible. Wasn't that why you and the Li'l Reaper followed the orders of some rando inside the walls two years ago? Someone you'd never even seen before?"

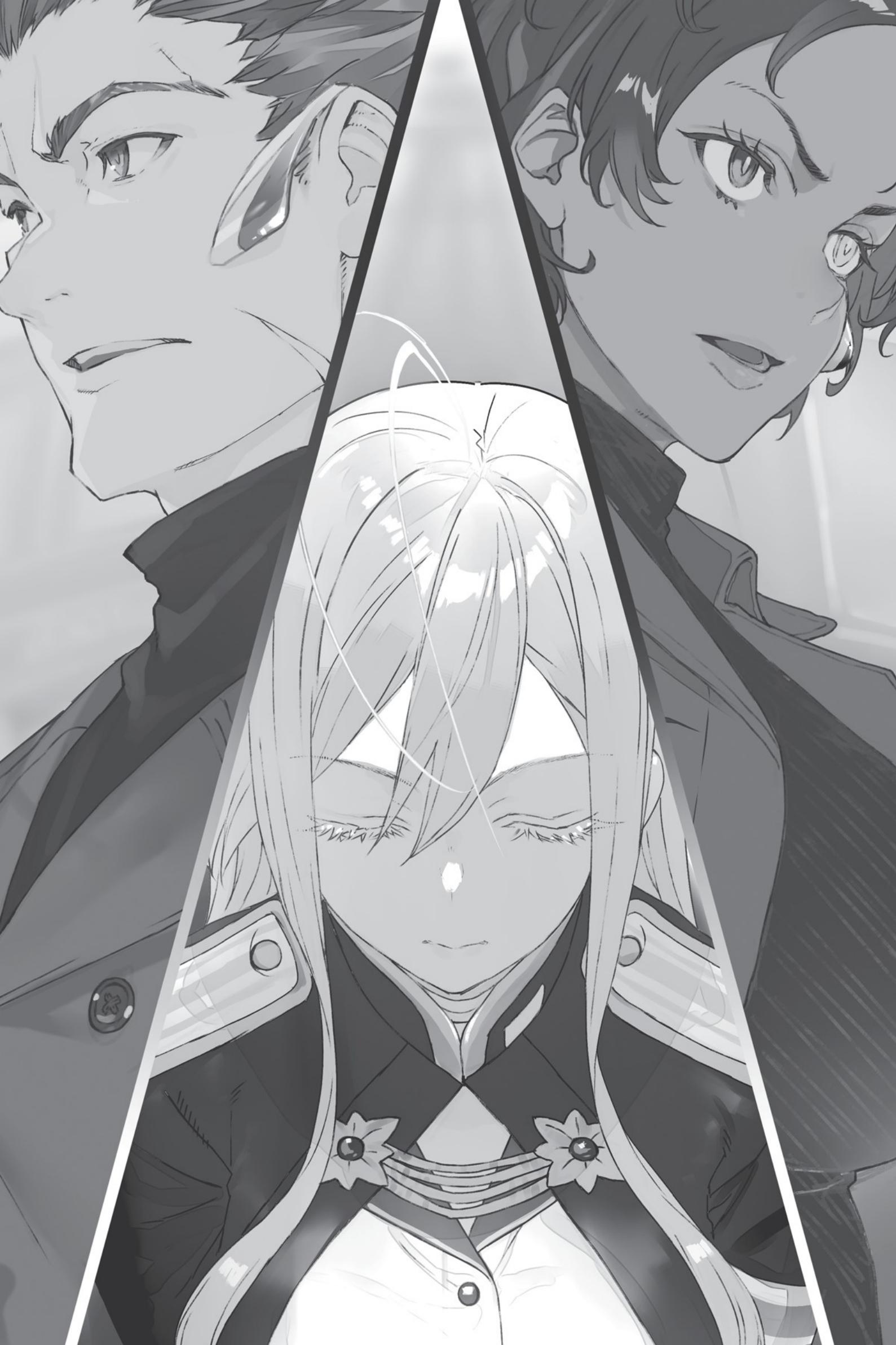
Raiden fell silent for a moment.

"Yeah... I guess."

"That's what I thought. So tighten up."

Lena was silent as she closed her eyes.

"Thank you very much, Second Lieutenant Iida, First Lieutenant Shuga."



For giving me so much trust when all I can do is command you from where it's safe.

"All infiltrating units. Deploy in your current positions and protect the main shaft at all costs... Defend your Reaper with your lives."

The moment "Kaie's" bisected remains loudly clattered to the ground, Shin's ability picked up a wailing voice charging toward him.

A voice and nothing else.

".....?!"

There was nothing in front of him, according to the main screen's footage. Nothing on his radar screen, either, even if it was set to passive. But a sense separate from his usual five picked up on the artificial killing intent and urged him to pull his control stick sideways. Undertaker evaded by tumbling aside, and the moment it did, the ominous sound of wind swept through where it had stood just a moment ago. A single shard of glass on the floor sprang up, as if something had stepped over it.

The wailing voice continued, colliding with the wall directly behind Undertaker. The moment he realized it, the source of the voice turned its flank and jumped up again to the flywheel tower. The rotating of the gears was disturbed two times as it jumped up before reaching the top.

It's quick...!

Shin switched his radar to active, but it detected nothing. Invisible both visually and to the radar, it moved with dizzying speed, surpassing even the highly mobile Juggernaut, jumping up and then somersaulting back down to clash with him.

The enemy was still invisible. No—it was hardly noticeable unless one focused on finding it, but there was a slight wavering in the air, like a heat haze... Like the flapping of butterfly wings swaying in the dim light. Tracing the incomprehensible wailing voice, he focused on that single wavering point—and drove his high-frequency blade into it. The blade sliced through the heat haze, which was only slightly visible even at this short range.

The blade was capable of cutting through a Dinosauria's

composite armor like butter, but in the next moment, its vibrations were interrupted by *opposing vibrations*, and a vector of the opposite direction forced *both blades* and the enemy fuselage to deflect off each other. The high-pitched screech of metal rose up, cutting through the blue air.

Taking a slash from above, Undertaker was knocked back. Meanwhile, the unknown Legion was cut diagonally and soared through the air, drawing a parabola. Shin still couldn't see it. It was there but didn't exist on any of his screens. It wasn't some kind of projection or some kind of camouflage unit that could be seen through with enough effort. Perceiving the trajectory of its invisible fall, Shin pulled the trigger on his 88 mm cannon.

It was loaded with a high-explosive anti-tank warhead. He'd set the fuse from bursting on impact to a timed explosion. There was no point in using an automatic sight against an invisible enemy. Abiding by his manual aiming, the warhead soared through the air, and the timed fuse burst a second later at close range. It wasn't a direct hit. Shin hadn't intended to hit it, either. However...

...if Shin's assumption was correct—its camouflage would be stripped off as a result.

Eight-thousand-meter-per-second shock waves spread out spherically, with sizzling flames rushing after them. And as planned, the faintly wavering heat haze was torn open and exposed. The shock waves capable of easily bending iron plates were merely a by-product of producing the metal jet, but they tore off the scenery surrounding the enemy. Lapped at by tongues of black-orange flames, fragments of silver flaked off and burned away.

It landed, wreathed in flaming silver shards. Fragments of the scenery turned back to silver with a flap of their wings and rose into the air while burning. It was a flock of silver butterflies, small enough to rest in the palm of one's hand. The type of Legion capable of disturbing and refracting all manner of electronic waves and light, the Eintagsfliege.

Shin had never imagined they could be used like this.

It made sense that the Phalanx squadron had been decimated in the way they'd been. The eye couldn't see it, the radar failed to

detect it, and since the Legion moved silently, audio sensors couldn't detect it, either. The only thing that did pick up its presence was a vibration sensor, which detected its movements along the ground, but that wasn't enough to rely on in battle. No one but Shin, who could pick up the sound of the Legion's weeping, could break through its optical camouflage.

Shin got his first glance at the enemy as it stepped through the flames to look back at him. The thought that it resembled an animal of some sort crossed Shin's strained consciousness. It stood at just under two meters tall and had a nimble four-legged form. A pair of optical sensors flashed a blue light from the sensors on its beast-like head. There was no sign of any projectile weapons like machine guns, launchers, or turrets, with only a pair of black metallic arms that resembled a beast's mane extending forward from the rear of its fuselage.

In all his seven years of fighting the Legion, Shin had never seen anything resembling this unit. It was likely a new type. Judging from its shape and prior movements, it was a High-Mobility type, surpassing even the Juggernaut in agility. The weeping in his ears came off as incomprehensible robotic babble. It wasn't a Black Sheep or a Shepherd. It was a Legion with a purely mechanical intelligence, the kind that should have long since exceeded its preset life span.

With his gaze still locked with his opponent's, Shin reconnected to the Resonance.

“—Colonel.”

“...Shin! Are you all right? What’s the situation?!”

“I’m engaging the enemy... I’ve encountered the Legion that wiped out the Phalanx squadron.”

He could sense Lena’s breath catch in her throat. Not giving her time to say anything, he spoke rapidly:

“The truth behind its attack was optical camouflage by way of the Eintagsfliege. It deceives both the optical sensors and the radar. It hides a new type of Legion that uses weapons similar to high-frequency blades to attack. Judging from its shape and movements, it’s capable of maneuvering faster than a Juggernaut... I’ll relay any further information as I acquire it.”

There was no telling when the fighting would resume, so he

wanted to relay as much information as he could. After all...

“I’ll relay as much combat information as I can... But if I don’t return...”

If he were to lose—to die here and not make it back...

Perhaps the fall had damaged his RAID Device, because the Resonance was thick with noise for some reason.

“But if I don’t return...”

Shin’s breathing was still rough and labored, as if he was constantly being exposed to pain. It was perhaps natural for him to consider the chance he wouldn’t return, but even knowing so, Lena replied:

“Roger that, Shin. But I won’t let you finish that sentence.”

Lena’s voice was unwavering.

“You will relay the data you collect on this new Legion unit to me in person. I will accept nothing else... This is an order, Undertaker. Follow it, no matter what.”

Shin’s eyes widened for a moment, before he cracked a light smile, despite the situation.

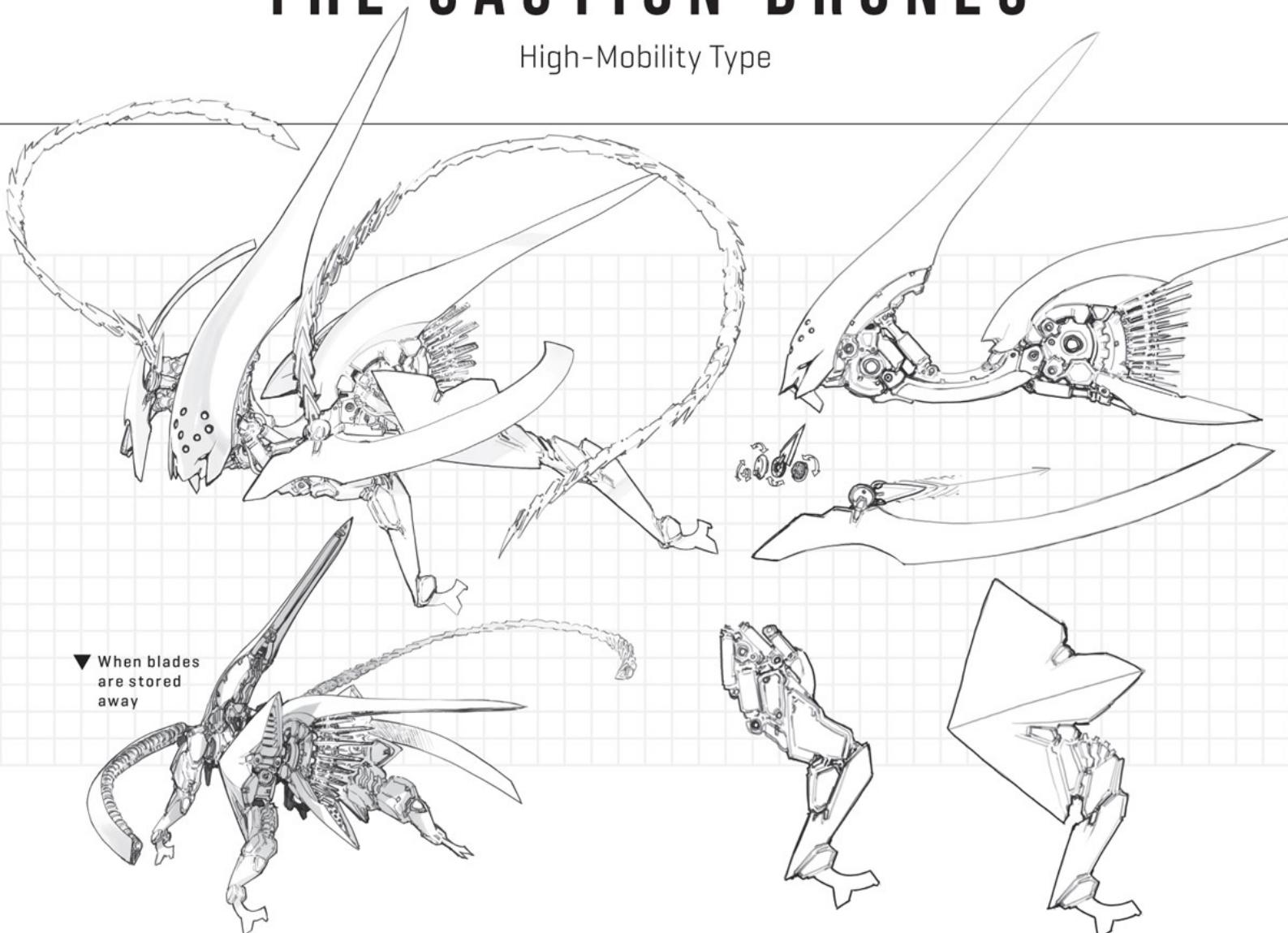
“—Roger that, Handler One.”

Inside the command car on the surface, with no enemies in the vicinity, Lena harshly looked down at the fighting taking place underground through the main screen as the two mechanical weapons locked in battle, each aiming to kill the other.

“Vanadis HQ to all units.”

THE CAUTION DRONES

High-Mobility Type



Unknown

[A R M A M E N T S]

Special mobile high-frequency chain blades x2

[Other specifications unknown]

[S P E C S]

Height: approximately 2.6 m

Width: approximately 2.1 m

Weight: unknown [presumed to be extremely lightweight]

Special Note: Covers its body with the Eintagsfliege to achieve a form of optical camouflage. Excels in stealth and is nearly undetectable by current human technology.

A black armored unit that suddenly appeared before Shin and his companions, presumed to be a new Legion type. Differing from the Shepherds, who have assimilated human neural networks and possess personalities and a clear intelligence, the “voice” Shin hears from this unit is only incomprehensible mechanical noise.

As it is an advanced class of weaponry, it is graced with beast-like agility and mobility, not only greatly outperforming its fellow close-range combatant type, the Grauwolf, but even putting the Reginleif, which was developed for high-mobility battle, to shame.

Using its optical camouflage and uniquely shaped high-frequency chain blades, it was capable of easily dispatching the Phalanx squadron, which consisted of skilled Name Bearer Eighty-Six.

The silver-bell-like voice gave its order at the same moment the two units kicked off their mortal combat.

†

Even as he promised to return at all costs, Shin realized just how dire his situation truly was. The automatic sights of his arm control system couldn't keep up with it. His Juggernaut's propulsion system was screeching, struggling to bear the absurd maneuvers the Legion was forcing it to commit. Most of all, exposing himself to the constant sudden accelerations and braking and forcing his own nervous system into a constant state of heightened concentration was bearing down on Shin's body.

The High-Mobility type zipped from one side of the shaft to the other freely. Overwhelmed by its agility, the reticle danced drunkenly across his main screen, and he evaded the Legion's blades and executed attacks not with conscious thought, but with something closer to reflex. These were automatic movements, predictions born of his tempered warrior instincts, like programs carved into his body.

And even still, the High-Mobility type was quicker. The long metal line at its back was raised. It extended upon being swung horizontally, and the countless gears lining it screeched in high-pitched noise as they began rotating rapidly.

The high-frequency chain blade skimmed against him, sending his front left leg's pile driver flying into the air, cut in half. Shin purged the pile driver without pause, taking the chance to fire a kinetic-energy penetrator at the enemy. The High-Mobility type effortlessly jumped away. Hopping up into the air, onto the rubble of the walkway, and stepping on a tightened wire, it ascended with a grace inimitable by a Juggernaut. Its agility and lightness were truly unparalleled.

A movement speed that bested a Juggernaut, which was built for high-mobility combat, not to mention Shin, who specialized in a form of melee combat that mixed offense and defense...

This Legion unit was the first and only killing machine that completely lacked human influence.

Humans were weak when it came to impacts and sudden accelerations, and their reaction speeds had limits. Having to house a fragile human body in order to move forced absolute limitations on a mobile weapon's maneuverability. Limitations an unmanned weapon lacked. For as long as its technology allowed, its speed and mobility could skyrocket.

It seemed that so far, the Legion's central processors could handle fighting only up to a certain speed, but it appeared those shackles had been broken. By researching the human brain, they had seemingly achieved an advanced artificial intelligence that likely dwarfed that of humankind.

As Shin faced it, all things that weren't necessary for fighting gradually faded from his mind. His red eyes saw nothing but his enemy. He couldn't hear anything but the sound of the High-Mobility type's wailing anymore. Even the screams of his own strained body were pushed to the back of his mind. As was the duty cast upon him, to bring back the information, to survive and live on.

They were disappearing one after another. The needless sense of duty; his wishes, desires, and thoughts; and all that contributed nothing to his battle were being cut off. And the thought that this encounter might be terrifying was the first to go.

He switched his sights to manual, and percussion followed a moment later. The high-explosive anti-tank warhead he fired exploded. The High-Mobility type hopped horizontally, evading the fragments scattered into the air. It bent its body as it landed forward before jumping at Undertaker.

Watching it as it did, Shin pulled the trigger a second time.

A high-explosive anti-tank warhead that had its minimal triggering distance eliminated burst in the air between both units. It was a dangerous distance that put Undertaker at risk of being hit by the shock waves and debris, but it was for this reason the High-Mobility type would fail to predict that Shin would do this. Bursting at closer range than ever before, the fragments rushed at the High-Mobility type. But it simply responded by twisting its body, thus reducing the surface exposed to the shards and having them stab only into its front armor.

...It can even dodge that? Shin whispered to himself.

His crimson eyes, reflecting the main screen, gradually glazed over with the same artifice as the optical sensor they were looking into.

Lena was connected to the duel by audio only, so she could only partially pick up on what was happening. Shin was likely fully concentrated on the enemy before him, because he wasn't acknowledging her presence anymore.

It was just like the time with Rei, when he fought his deceased brother, who had been assimilated by the Legion. Lena's voice hadn't reached him at the time... No one's voice had. And a part of her thought that was to be expected. The Legion were stronger than humans, and to fight them, one would need to loosen their grip on their humanity.

But was that truly permissible? Unlike the Legion, which were tireless murderers, people were exhausted by war. It hurt them, exhausted them, scarred them. Their minds and bodies would scream in protest, rejecting combat. Humans weren't made for war. Humankind was fundamentally unsuited for battle.

And despite this, Shin—and the Eighty-Six as a whole—sometimes forgot that pain and fear should rightfully be present, rendering them beings who knew only war.

And that left Lena feeling terribly lonely and afraid. It made her fear that they were becoming the same as the mechanical ghosts they fought. As if they were losing their humanity and would one day be unable to return to the way they'd been before.

It...frightened her.

"...I'm begging you, please come back."

That prayer escaped her lips before she even knew it. But it didn't reach him. The way he was now, Shin couldn't perceive that the girl was even there. Yet still.

"Please...come back to me. Whatever it takes."

An unavoidable blow swung down on him, and his right high-frequency blade snapped at the base, unable to withstand the burden.

"Tch...!"

Now both of his blades were lost, as well as the armor of his front legs, with their wire anchors rendered unresponsive. With the other blade bearing down on him, Shin had no means of blocking it. Even so, he ignored the countless warnings blaring up from his propulsion system and forced Undertaker to jump. Undertaker's right front leg was exposed to the slash, and Shin's efforts to evade ended in vain as the leg was cut away, a shower of sparks emanating from it like a splash of blood.

Half of his segmented leg took to the air, and Undertaker lost balance, falling to the ground pathetically. With his field of vision turning red and slanted from the blood, Shin watched as the High-Mobility type's metallic shadow advanced to pursue him.

It was then that he heard someone's voice, like the chiming of a silver bell in his ears.

"I'm begging you, please come back.

"Please...come back to me."

Lena.

"...?!"

It took him a moment to realize it, but when he did, his breath caught in his throat.

Had he just...? Lena... And the order she'd entrusted him with...

Had he just completely forgotten about her...?

Despite the shock he had just experienced, his body nearly automatically moved his 88 mm turret in the direction of the approaching High-Mobility type. At the exact moment Shin squeezed the trigger, the High-Mobility type canceled its pursuit and leaped out of the line of fire, taking to the air to avoid the blast.

As it did, Shin dragged Undertaker's mutilated leg, retreating. As the opponent couldn't attack him from midair, Shin took cover in the rubble beneath the mezzanine floor. Like a powerless insect, he hid in the space between the mezzanine floor and the spiral staircase that intersected with it. And while pushing aside his doubts and apprehensions, he directed his attention once again to the enemy. Now wasn't the time for him to fall into old habits.

He'd been told to return at all costs, after all.

But the situation was far too unfavorable right now. He'd lost all his armaments aside from his main one. His mobility was shot. Undertaker was damaged all over, and his turret had only three rounds of ammunition left.

...If I'm gonna have any shot of making it out of this, I'll have to roll the dice.

Lena's battle was ongoing.

"Colonel! The results of the map inspection are in! Confirming them right now!"

She almost told him to leave it for later, but she stopped herself. The Phalanx squadron had likely been ambushed and lost because of a discrepancy in the map. They couldn't afford to get caught in the same pitfall again.

"Send it over to my third sub-window— What?!"

A large discrepancy that one could immediately detect was highlighted on the map in red. Of all places, the area directly beneath the main shaft connecting the third and fourth levels—the very place where Shin was engaging the High-Mobility type—had an open space that wasn't reflected on the map.

The seven shafts going through Charité's central station's underground space were built to funnel sunlight to the bottom level. With the shafts intersecting to form a gentle spiral, the tops, bottoms, and slanted sections of their interiors were set with mirror panels. The sunlight would refract between the mirrors, set opposite to the ones in adjacent shafts, and by repeating that, the light would be funneled downward through each shaft.

This was the space meant for installing the mirror panels. It naturally wasn't one large panel, but multiple ones, enough to fill the main shaft and its diameter of twenty meters, as well as its floor space. This space was meant to install all of those—and diagonally at that. It was likely very large in both diameter and of course height. Even a Dinosauria could pass through it, albeit with some difficulties. And of course, since it was built to allow maintenance staff to pass through, so could the self-propelled mines.

“...!”

Should she send forces there? No. It was as she'd told Raiden already. None of the units could afford to split their forces any further. And the area leading into the panel space was still within the Legion's grasp. Even if they were to rush them, it would take time to gain control over it...

Only then did her erratic thinking suddenly calm down.

But if that was the case, why were the Legion keeping the shaft intact? All her forces were currently deployed around the shaft, and if the Legion were to topple it now, they wouldn't just get Shin, who was still fighting inside, caught up in the collapse; all forces stationed around it might end up getting buried beneath the sediment.

So why weren't they doing it? Why was the fighting even going on this long? The Admiral and the Weisel on the fourth and fifth levels were already buried beneath earth and sand, and the only Legion still charging Lena's forces were the expandable self-propelled mines and the old lightweight classes, with the heavies that had completed their repairs and the mass-produced Shepherds having mostly fled the facility.

The Legion were never compelled to take revenge, no matter how many of their consorts were destroyed. Once their losses passed a certain threshold, they ceased combat and retreated. The rear guard had completed its task of keeping confidential information hidden, and their rate of casualties was only escalating, and yet more and more Legion kept charging the shaft.

Why...?!

And soon enough, Lena arrived at an answer.

It's Shin.

The Legion went on Headhunts in order to keep operating past their central processors' designated expiration dates and to enhance their capabilities as weapons. They assertively sought the heads of the recently dead and the still living. And now that they had stocked up on more than enough brains to reinforce their rank-and-file troops, if they were to seek anything further, it would be the head of an elite capable of single-handedly changing the tide of battle.

She didn't know whether the Legion were aware of his ability to hear their voices, but his phenomenal combat skills would have been enough to make them seek him out. And while this may have been coincidence, the new type of Legion they'd produced was a High-Mobility type. Shin, who specialized in melee combat just as it did, would be the perfect component to complete it.

If her conjecture was correct...

"Second Lieutenant Oriya, Second Lieutenant Iida. Temporarily abandon point 47 in the seventh route and point 23 on the fourth level."

"Huh?!"

"Abandon— But weren't we defending this place so they wouldn't self-destruct and bring the whole place down on us, Your Majesty?!"

"No. The self-propelled mines are unlikely to self-destruct in those positions, so hurry."

If her speculation was wrong, those spots alone wouldn't cause a cave-in. A few seconds passed after their reluctant responses, and then new, more surprised reports came in. The self-propelled mines in those positions did not self-destruct as a group. They weren't even prioritizing those positions, instead going after the Juggernauts.

"The objective of the remaining Legion forces isn't to blow up the main shaft but to get inside and destroy all enemy forces. In that case, we should use this against them. Tighten your defenses around the entrances to the main shaft, and all remaining forces are to mount a counteroffensive."

Sneaking a look to the side, she caught sight of Frederica nodding lightly at her. Now that Shin was focused on fighting the High-Mobility type, they had to depend on her ability to trace the enemy, as limited as it may be.

The Legion hunted heads, but only when the situation permitted it. The moment the situation became unfavorable for them, they abided by the unflinching instincts hardwired into them—and shifted to the offensive to destroy the enemy at all costs. So before that happened...

"We have to change our approach before they can react—wipe out all remaining Legion forces!"



The moment it descended to the main shaft's floor in pursuit of the enemy hiding in the shadow of the staircase, a flash of gunfire was picked up by the High-Mobility type's optical sensor. The enemy waited for the moment it would land and fired a truly perfect shot. Three shots of high-explosive anti-tank warheads aimed at three different points, each fired to decisively destroy their target, and blew up consecutively with a gap of split seconds. They became three lines of fire and metal jet coursing through the darkness, moving at an ultra-high speed even the High-Mobility type couldn't keep up with.

However...

This was a pattern that had been repeated several times already in this battle. Enough times for the High-Mobility type—a new type of Legion with advanced learning capabilities—to predict it. The High-Mobility type quickly stepped to one side as it landed, evading the enemy's fire that followed a moment later with just that small movement. The rapid trail of metal jet pathetically shot right past the High-Mobility type, with the warheads' fragments only faintly tearing through the High-Mobility type's armor.

The resulting fire and black smoke ironically served only to obfuscate its form from the enemy. That was why it had dodged with such minimal movement. Had it jumped too far away, the enemy would have immediately seen that it was unharmed, but because it had evaded so the flames would hide it, the enemy would have no means of knowing it wasn't damaged.

The smoke expanded rapidly to fill the underground battlefield. Caught in the wind generated by what air-conditioning facilities still remained active in the structure, it scattered in small swirls. Before it could clear, the High-Mobility type charged through the gentle curtain of black smoke, jumping forward.

It wasn't a speed human reaction time could hope to match.

The target's red optical sensor turned toward the High-Mobility type. But that was all it could do. A sharp black blade was driven into pearlescent, bone-like armor.

†

Having been ordered to counterattack, the Juggernauts were like hunting dogs freed from their chains, accurately and ruthlessly tearing into the swarming Legion.

“—Second Lieutenant Crow, have the Thunderbolt squadron’s second and third platoons move forward and eliminate all enemies in the position.”

“Roger that, Colonel Milizé.”

“This is Raiden. The position’s ours! Where to next, Lena?”

“We’ve got ten more seconds or so. We can see the next enemy unit, so we don’t need directions.”

“Roger. First Lieutenant Shuga, detour to point 12 and strike the next enemy unit from behind.”

At that moment, a Sensory Resonance target was cut off. It wasn’t from any of the squadrons under her command. There was only one person missing.

“Shin...?”

†

The High-Mobility type destroyed the bottom of the unit’s fuselage. Judging by its sensors, it was the source of the machine’s heat—its power pack. Stopping the vibration of the chain blade, it pulled it out as the machine crumpled heavily to the ground.

The High-Mobility type approached the Reginleif, which lay still, its sensor’s focus unmoving, with cautious steps. No moving bodies. No electric reactions. The temperature of its power source was dropping. A temperature that ensured it wouldn’t be able to start up immediately had been achieved, but it continued to plummet.

<Confirming disarmament of call sign: Báleygr.>

The High-Mobility type had no sense of personality, so it expressed no elation at having defeated its opponent. All it did was plainly report its success at downing a high-value hostile enemy to the wide area network.

<Acknowledged. Is seizure of Báleygr possible?>

<Presumed possible.>

It had avoided the enemy's cockpit block and instead damaged its propulsion system. The human body inside may have been brittle, but its vitals should still be functioning. The High-Mobility type was capable of taking such peculiarities into consideration.

<Commencing retrieval.>

It turned its optical sensor to a protuberance that was likely the opening lever for the cockpit and lowered the tip of its chain blade to pull it... But it wouldn't open. The lock mechanism was functioning. Activating the chain blade's vibrations, it cut through the lock, forcing the canopy to swing open.

†

Looking down, he saw Undertaker's canopy swing open after it was cut through.

Gotcha.

Lying hidden beneath the rubble, Shin aligned the sights of his assault rifle with the rear armor of the High-Mobility type as it peered into the cockpit. With the exception of the Ameise, with their specialized sensory capabilities, the Legion's sensors were weak. Gambling on that fact, Shin had escaped the cockpit under the cover of the high-explosive projectile's blast and smoke, taking cover inside the mezzanine floor's rubble. The High-Mobility type didn't have any part that looked like a composite sensor unit. It was a gamble in Shin's favor.

Feldreß pilots were provided with a 7.62 mm rifle for self-defense in case their units were lost. It didn't have a laser sight, only two primitive sights: one over the muzzle and another over the body of the weapon. And it was precisely for this reason that the Legion's fire-control system, which would usually detect and alert in the presence of a laser sight, couldn't detect this assault rifle. The selector was set to full-auto, and the first round was already in its chamber.

Shin pulled the trigger.

The assault rifle unleashed a barrage of 7.62 mm armor-

piercing rounds at a speed of seven hundred shots per minute at the High-Mobility type. Rifle rounds of this caliber had enough firepower to blow off a person's limbs but weren't as effective against an armored unit. Even the relatively lightly armored Ameise would deflect the rounds if their front armor was hit.

However, armor wasn't equally thick across all sides. An armored weapon made on the assumption it would face the enemy head-on was armored relatively lightly except for the front. Like, for example, on its underside. Or...the top section of its rear.

Especially when it was a weapon specialized for high-mobility combat, light enough to support its weight on a single wire and seeming to excessively avoid the self-forging fragments, it likely wasn't heavily armored. And most of all, the self-forging fragments had cut into its rear earlier, creating a nick in its armor.

Rifle rounds, which traveled at twice the speed of sound, rained down on the High-Mobility type's back, stabbing into the crack in its armor as planned. The broken armor flicked off like the scales of some lizard's hide, and further tungsten-alloy rounds dug into the now-larger hole in its armor, penetrating its frame and rebounding into its propulsion and control systems.

Shin thought he could hear a voiceless scream rattle the air.

His magazine of thirty rounds was emptied within three seconds. Just as the final bullet entered the chamber, he ejected the magazine and loaded a fresh one, continuing his barrage. Tactical reloading. A technique for consecutive shooting that didn't afford the enemy the time it would take you to load the next bullet.

The severe recoil of a full-size rifle firing at full-auto dug into his shoulder. He suppressed the jerking barrel with all his might as he continued shooting. And after six seconds that seemed to go on forever...

The High-Mobility type staggered to face him, its ruined armor and limbs rattling.



<Gunfire detected.>

<Amendment to previously transmitted data. Call sign: Báleygr survival confirmed.>

†

Wehrwolf stomped out the final Ameise with his pile driver, and Cyclops's buckshot cannon blew away a flock of self-propelled mines.

"Clear!"

All enemies in the vicinity of the shaft had been eliminated. All that was left was to head into the main shaft—and help with the final battle taking place.

But a faint sound had echoed—between the shock waves of that stomping and the blasts of the buckshot cannon—without anyone to notice it.

The High-Mobility type turned to face him, bending its body like a panther preparing to pounce on its prey. Ejecting his depleted magazine, Shin inserted his second spare magazine into the magazine inlet. It was an extra maneuver that took less than a second to perform, but within that long moment, Shin realized something.

The enemy was faster. The best he could hope for was to shoot it down as it killed him. And even as he knew this, his finger still moved to squeeze the trigger, when...

...a single metallic sound, so quiet it would normally be inaudible, reached his ears. The multi-rocket launcher hidden within "Kaie's" remains, which lay scattered at the corner of the hall, suddenly flashed and burst. The repeated rumblings of the battle taking place in the shaft had likely made its firing pin fall off, and the continued fighting had set off and activated its fuse, with the man and the machine doing battle being none the wiser.

The rocket shells burst and exploded within the ruined remains of the barrel. Sizzling fragments prompted the surrounding shells and the ruined fuselage itself to explode in response. A flash of

light filled the depths of the shaft, preluding the severe shock waves that would follow. The intense light, which even outmatched that of a HEAT missile, was reflected and dispersed off the mirror surfaces set up across the shaft.

A flash of pale blinding light filled the dark bottom of the shaft. For those who used optical information as their basis for perceiving the outside world, overwhelming light was no different from total darkness. The volume of light painting over its optical sensor made the High-Mobility type lose sight of Shin.

Shin, on the other hand, abided by his animal instincts and reflexively closed his eyes. He couldn't see the High-Mobility type, either, but there was a major difference between the two of them. The High-Mobility type had fought through only this one day. Shin, however, had fought for seven years.

Yes.

A crucial difference in the time they'd spent on the battlefield, in the combat experience they'd accumulated.

The High-Mobility type froze, unable to properly judge what it should do in this unpredictable situation. But Shin pulled the trigger. With his eyes closed. Even with no vision, his ability to hear the ghosts' voices accurately conveyed the enemy's position. And through seven years of experience with handling an assault rifle, his sights didn't waver at this distance, even though he couldn't see.

For a moment, he thought he could see a black-haired Orienta girl with a ponytail smile at him.

The assault rifle fired at full-auto, its recoil and roar reverberating through the shaft's walls. From the darkness behind his eyelids, Shin heard the sound of something crouching down—too light for the Legion yet too heavy for any living thing.

†

<Accumulated damage exceeding permissible parameters.>

<Abandoning exterior unit. Commencing form shift: forced override. Executing special



He'd closed his eyes reflexively, but his retinas still hadn't recovered from the flash. His field of vision was still somewhat dazzled. Squinting his eyes, which still ached from the sharp pain, Shin pulled his pistol from its holster. The High-Mobility type lay crumpled, its interior smoldering with the color of flames. But the indecipherable sound of its mechanical wailing hadn't died out. It couldn't move, but it wasn't completely broken yet.

The Legion were too menacing to look down upon, even when they were wounded. With his rifle, which was overheated from the rapid fire—and also out of ammo—in one hand, Shin stopped when he was only a few steps away, just out of range of its blades. The accurate sights of his pistol were aimed squarely at the High-Mobility type.

It was then that rays of silver light began welling up from the bullet holes in its back. That light was Liquid Micromachines. The very life and nervous system of the Legion bubbled forth in liquid form, bursting out of its wound like blood. They then spouted out of the machine violently, like a geyser.

As Shin stepped away cautiously, a figure floated out of the wreckage and stretched out into the air, seeming to defy the laws of gravity. Like a bud maturing in the blink of an eye or a butterfly hatching from a cocoon, the figure raised its head, bending it backward as if facing the heavens.

Yes, its *head*.

Its long hair trailed over the darkness like a clear stream. A prominent forehead, gentle eyes, a slender nose, thin lips, and a pointed jaw. The contour of its exposed throat down to its chest made the figure appear distinctly feminine. And yet every part of its body had a metallic sheen to it as it suddenly sprouted from the surge of Liquid Micromachines.

Its eyelids fluttered open. With its silver eyes staring into space, it swerved its slender form. The way its strange gaze didn't seem to focus on anything made Shin shudder in

incomprehensible fright. The Legion had no eyeballs, so they likely had no perception of focusing their gaze.

It looked human, but it wasn't.

And as if to drive home the message that this being wasn't some clumsy mechanical monster, but something far more ominous and incomprehensible, its lips moved.

C O M E F I N D M E



Come find me.

It had nothing in the way of vocal cords, so it had no voice with which to speak, but just the movements of its lips silently formed each word. Its eyes were unfocused and inhuman, with both the irises and the whites colored silver. And yet they were human shaped.

The standoff came across as extremely long to Shin, but it took only several seconds. The feminine face then suddenly melted away, and the entirety of the Liquid Micromachines scattered away soundlessly, turning into specks of light that blew away like balsam-flower seeds dispersing in the wind. The particles paused in midflight for a moment and changed shape again, taking the form of a flock of silver butterflies, small enough to sit in the palm of one's hand.

They flapped their thin, brittle, paperlike wings, which were too long to belong to actual butterflies. The silver wings rode the wind and soared, whirling in an upward helix pattern, like a galaxy's spiral arm, across the main shaft's aperture before flying off and disappearing.

"What...?"

It got away.

He realized that when his ability once again picked up the wailing of the High-Mobility type from afar, mixing in with the retreating Legion.

It abandoned its ruined unit and disassembled its central processor to escape...?

The thought of it made it all oddly click into place. If one were to take things far enough, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say the Legion's actual form was the Liquid Micromachines making up its central processors. Being liquid, they could change their shapes into anything—like human neural networks, which were radically different from their original central processors. His brother, who had been turned into a Dinosauria, had transformed the Liquid Micromachines into countless extending human hands.

A system—a program—is fundamentally an aggregation of countless modules, so separating and reassembling them shouldn't have been impossible. However, taking out a human brain, picking it apart, putting it back together, and returning it to

where it had been wasn't an idea a human mind would ever conceive.

Not a human mind, hmm...?

An artificial intelligence meant for combat likely didn't see it as madness. Shin thought he could finally understand Lena's anxieties a bit. The Legion constantly learned and improved themselves in order to increase their combat abilities and efficiency. The Shepherds had human intelligence, but at times they exhibited illogical behavior because of the memories they'd had of being human, like Rei and Kiriya had.

But the mass-produced Shepherds, which had their memories removed, lacked that tendency. And the High-Mobility type, which had an intelligence based on a human brain—but not any specific one—lacked any memories to begin with. If the end result of cutting away those memories...was that entirely inhuman, efficient, specialized-for-combat High-Mobility type... And if Shin were to keep on forgetting the wishes he'd been entrusted with and become the same kind of war machine as the Legion...

As Frederica had once said, three things make a man: the homeland he was born into, the blood running through his veins, and the bonds he forms. And Shin had never once thought to internalize what she'd said. He had never wished to reclaim the things he'd lost to the fires of war. But perhaps the ones that found their way back to him...the ones that reached out to him... Maybe caring for those connections would be the right thing to do.

That was what Shin thought.

It was when he thought to tell Lena that the battle was over that he realized his RAID Device had fallen off and slipped away at some point. Returning to Undertaker, he rifled through the cockpit, searching inside until he found it and reconnected to the Resonance.

“—Shin! Are you all right?!”

“Somehow.”

“Thank God...!”

Lena let out a sigh filled with relief. Frederica was saying

something in the background, but her high-pitched voice grated a bit on his ears at that moment. Shin spoke, contorting his face from the constant cacophony reaching his ears.

“Lena, I have a favor to ask.”

“What is it?”

Apparently, she could tell how bad he was feeling from his tone. Hearing her silver-bell-like voice fill with tension made Shin feel all the more pathetic.

“Could you send someone over to pick me up...? I’m not injured, but I can’t move.”

The Legion had probably retreated already, judging by how the wails of the Shepherds were moving farther away. Which should have made Shin feel a bit better, but having all the tension drain from his body only made him feel even worse. White noise assaulted his senses, and the stronger the sensation became, the harder it was to stay on his feet.

As he leaned back against Undertaker’s armor, he could sense Lena smile in relief.

“Yes. If that’s all, I’ll have someone right over—”

Before she could even finish, he heard a familiar prattling and the sound of loud footsteps approaching him. It came from two different points. From a rectangle that served as an exit to the same floor and from an aperture higher up in the shaft appeared two Juggernauts, covered with dust. Both their canopies swung open at roughly the same time, and two familiar faces peeked out of them.

“Yo. It’s been a while since I’ve seen you *this* fucked up,” Raiden said, standing at the top of the shaft. His unit was also in pretty bad condition, with both of its machine guns lost.

“I heard you needed someone to give you a ride, Li’l Reaper? Who do you want a piggyback ride from—the werewolf or the cyclops princess?”

Shiden gave a toothy smirk, flashing her canines, as she rested her chin against the edge of her armor.

Somewhere in the foggy recesses of Shin’s mind, he thought both options sounded pretty lousy.

EPILOGUE

WOUNDED IN ACTION

His habit of forcing people to write paper reports in the Federacy, where electronic documents were the norm, and making someone write one down on paper was mostly just a form of bullying, was one reason Grethe couldn't stand her killer mantis of a commanding officer.

“—The aforementioned new Legion unit will henceforth be designated the High-Mobility type—Phönix.”

Sitting behind his long table stacked with papers, the chief of staff seemed unusually elated.

“In addition, the mass-produced intelligent Legion will be designated Sheepdogs... A new type that’s immortal on top of employing optical camouflage—and the small fry becoming intelligent. Looks like we’ll have to reconsider our basic strategy again. Irksome.”

“And in addition, we have the Legion making human farms and filling warehouses with skeletons. Our mental health squad’s gonna have their hands full right off the bat, aren’t they?”

As she cast her gaze at him, the chief of staff raised his hands apologetically.

“Sorry, sorry, don’t glare at me like that. I wouldn’t have had them go on this mission if I knew.”

While they may have been elites compared to the Federacy’s

troops, the Eighty-Six were child soldiers, and the example of the original five they'd shouldered made it abundantly clear they had a certain mental fragility.

The human psyche hinged on the early memories of one's life, when one was loved unconditionally. And so the Eighty-Six, who'd had their families robbed from them, their dignity stripped away, and their existence denied all before they even reached their teens, matured while lacking that basis. Having to survive on a battlefield that demanded they be strong may have made them appear to be toughened, tempered swords, but at the same time, their blades were so terribly fragile.

Grethe kept her steely glare fixed on the chief of staff, who then spun his chair around and looked away.

"Fine, fine. I'll arrange a vacation for them. Maybe a hot spring? Would you like to join me while I inspect the place?"

"Where do you get off nonchalantly asking me out on a date? Are you sick in the head?"

As the chief of staff shrugged wordlessly, his capable aide pulled a guidebook full of tourist attractions out of the pile of paperwork and left the room. Watching the aide walk away, the chief of staff then added, "...Grethe. There's a question that's been bothering me for a long while now."

His tone had turned sincere. Grethe looked up into his black eyes, which shone with wisdom.

"Just how...did they get the idea to assimilate human neural networks?"

Grethe furrowed her brow.

"What do you mean?"

"How did machines, with no functionality but to destroy things, come up with the idea to assimilate something, and then learn how to break it in such a way that they could make it a part of themselves?"

Now that he mentioned it, it was odd. Humans thought with their brains, the most developed among all mammals. Those were all things that were taught in middle school, but it wasn't some self-evident truth one would come to on their own without being told. It was said that far in the past, people once thought the soft organ nestled within the human skull was something of a useless

intestine that produced phlegm.

So how would killing machines, whose neural networks were different down to their very composition, arrive at that conclusion?

"Hearing that message Captain Nouzen received got me to thinking, so I looked into things. Zelene Birkenbaum, the developer of the Legion. The genius researcher who improved on the AI model the United Kingdom developed—aka the Mariana Model—when it was released over the public network and who single-handedly developed the Legion's control system."

"But I thought she didn't live to see the Legion she put her heart and soul into developing put into action and passed away from disease shortly before the first series of Ameise was rolled out."

"She didn't leave a body."

Grethe's face froze in shock.

"...What?"

"There's no death certificate or record of her burial. There's the chance they were lost in the upheaval before the government was overthrown. But considering even her mother didn't see her remains, it's odd."

"....."

"On the other hand, I received a report from the United Kingdom about a commander unit they're facing off against. Its identifier is the Merciless Queen. Most commander units are Dinosauria models, but that particular one is an Ameise. And one from the first series, from the early stages of the war, at that. A model that, as far as we know, shouldn't be operational at this point."

For the Legion, undamaged neural networks were precious bounty. At least, they had been until now. It was for this reason that most observed cases of Shepherds used the Dinosauria—the most bulky and defensive of combat Legion—as their vessel. Of course, there were exceptions, like the Morpho and the Admiral, but there were no recorded cases of a fragile unit like the Ameise being used.

And it was the only type of Legion developed prior to the developer's death.

"So where do you think she went?"

†

"...About Major Penrose..."

After a meeting that involved the people in charge of every division in the Strike Package, only Lena, Annette, and Shin stayed behind in the meeting room, and Shin suddenly spoke.

"I've been trying to remember ever since, and this morning I think I finally recalled a few things."

"That's amazing! Good for you."

Putting aside the tablet terminal she had picked up, Lena brought her hands together with a gentle clap, and Annette's face took on the terrified visage of a convict waiting to have their verdict read to them. Shin's expression, on the other hand, looked oddly uncomfortable.

"You were...more than just a lively girl—you were like a little monster."

...Pardon?

"You'd pick up sticks and swing them around. You'd jump into every puddle and then start throwing mud everywhere. You hated hiding in hide-and-seek, but whenever you were It, you'd spend the whole day seeking, only to cry a river when the game ended."

"...Shin?"

"You'd always insist that you liked making candy, and you'd give me a lot of them, too, but most of them weren't edible. Looking back on it, that might be half the reason I ended up disliking sweets."

"Oh, that part of her hasn't changed to this day."

Even so, these days, she could make something tasty every once in a while, so perhaps that was progress.

Or not.

"Your mistakes weren't something as basic as adding too much sugar or mixing it up with salt. Sometimes all you had to do was melt chocolate, but you somehow ended up turning it purple. And from what I heard, you'd have your father taste your sweets, and he'd end up fainting, so I never knew what I was supposed to do

when you brought them to me. Oh, and also..."

Speaking in a drawn-out tone one wouldn't normally expect, given how taciturn he usually was, Shin fixed his gaze on Annette.

"...you probably didn't know, but your mother would come in later to take your sweets and then give me ones she made instead. Those were normal and delicious."

"Ugh, whatever! ...No, wait, wait up. What the hell?!"

Annette finally jumped to her feet, the device she'd brought in to project electronic documents tumbling to the floor.

"I'm sitting here, listening to you, and you just go running your mouth! You had sword fights with sticks and played in the mud same as me, and when we played hide-and-seek, you'd hide in crazy places like on top of the highest tree in the thicket near the neighborhood! That was awful, and I know about how you cried when your brother scolded you for it later!"

After a moment's pause, Shin's gaze seemed to waver a bit.

".....I have no recollection of that."

"Liar, you just paused and thought about it!"

Her scream echoing in the conference room, Annette breathed heavily, her shoulders rising and falling. Her face then contorted with her outburst of emotion.

"What the hell? Are you doing this on purpose? Aren't there better things you could remember, dammit...?!"

What Annette wanted him to remember—what she wanted to apologize for—wasn't anything as trivial and silly as those memories.

"Not much I can do about it... We always used to argue like this, though."

"You dummy!"

Shouting as if to shove that word at him, Annette rushed out of the conference room. Watching her leave with a bothered expression, Shin gestured toward the exit.

"Could you?"

"Sure. I'll be leaving, then!"

Thankfully, Annette hadn't gotten too far. She stood in the intersecting corridor, her back to the corner wall. Her face was the

picture of dejection.

"...It's fine. He really doesn't remember the last time we fought," she spat peevishly as Lena approached, not looking at her.

"The fact that I didn't save Shin has been tormenting me ever since, but if nothing else, it doesn't seem like that bothers him anymore. Why would something that meaningless linger in his memories, right? It's fine... He doesn't have to remember anymore. Not at this point."

Even if that meant she'd never be able to apologize. Even if they'd never go back to how they were before.

"In the end, I was just acting based on my own wrong impressions I'd made as an ignorant child. That my relationship with my childhood friend...that the world being so small would be things that never changed. So even if he does remember anything else, it's fine if it's just more pointless things."

Annette then stole a glance at Lena.

"Like how I said we'd get married when we got older."

"Huh?"

Lena looked back at her, an odd squeak escaping her lips. Annette then smirked all of a sudden. It was the first bright, carefree expression Lena had seen her make in a while.

"Just kidding. Though it's true... Shin's always been thick when it comes to things like this. There are girls who've been in the same squad as him for a long time now, so he might get snatched away if you're not assertive, you know."

"A-Annette...?!"

As Lena glanced around in a flustered panic to check that there was really no one else in the abandoned corridor, Annette grinned fiendishly.

"Do your best with him."

Lena wasn't so ignorant as to not realize this was Annette's way of severing her lingering affections, of bidding farewell to the first love of her youth.

"...Thank you, Annette."

"Don't mention it. Now, off to work with you! A tactical

commander can't leave her troops neglected. Wouldn't set a good example, would it?"

Nor was she so blind as to not notice that Annette looking away was her way of asking to be left alone for a while.

"Thank you... I'm sorry."

Perhaps he'd expected her to come back, because Shin was sitting alone in the empty meeting room. The information terminal was turned on and streaming some news program while he was writing a document. He addressed her without turning his gaze in her direction.

"There's no problem with me using this room so long as no one has it reserved, right? I've got some reports to write, and the office is kind of loud."

"Yes..."

The Processors had been given a shared office, but since they'd been treated like drones until now and hadn't been given proper schooling, the Eighty-Six had no habit of sitting silently by a desk. And to top it off, they had a lot of energy to spare. That resulted in the office being relatively—or rather, very—loud. Looking at it another way, it was a very fun office to work in but entirely unsuited for when one wanted to concentrate on their paperwork.

"Have you gotten used to writing reports now?"

"?"

"Back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, your battle reports and even your patrol reports were always a mess."

His Handlers before Lena had never bothered to read them, and Shin had never needed to go on patrol, so their contents had always been arbitrary nonsense. With her words reminding him of that, he gave a faint, wry smile.

"I don't have much of a choice now. Colonel Wenzel can be harsh about those sorts of things."

"Can she? I guess I should have been harsher on you, then."

"...Spare me, please."

Lena chuckled at how displeased he sounded. But once her laughter died down, she asked a question that had been

bothering her. Was he...?

"Were you actually just...being considerate of Annette?"

To spare her from being bound by her guilt. Perhaps he really did remember everything but chose to mention only those trivial memories out of consideration...

"No."

But Shin responded with a denial.

"I really don't remember much at all. Like I said, we used to argue all the time, so it must not have left much of an impression."

Almost as if to contrast how deep of a scar the guilt had left on Annette.

"I can't remember her face clearly yet... Though maybe I just didn't have the leisure to think about it so soon after the operation."

Lena bent her head to one side with concern.

"...Are you sure you shouldn't have rested longer? You felt so bad after the operation, you had to stay in bed for several days."

That was, without a doubt, the influence of the sudden increase in mass-produced Shepherds—the Sheepdogs. Even though he had no visible symptoms, like a fever, he'd spent several days following the operation mostly asleep. The medical squad had looked after him, and he'd been approved to go back to full operational duties, but...

"I'll get used to it soon enough. I was like this when I first started hearing the Legion, too."

"....."

There was one thing she'd come to understand. Regardless of whether he said he was fine, Shin could not be trusted to be completely honest about his health. He had a tendency to run his body ragged...without even being aware that he was doing so.

The sound of the news report from the holo-screen tore through the silence between them.

"Next, we have an update on the recapture operation for the Republic of San Magnolia's northern administrative Sectors."

Looking to the holo-screen, Shin reached for the sensor set on the edge of the table. He intended to either change channels or turn it off, but Lena stopped him. Unfortunately, the Bleachers'

behavior had continued as it had been until the Eighty-Six had left the garrisoned base. Criticizing it felt like a pointless endeavor.

The news program explained the war situation plainly. The current front lines, what Sectors had been retaken, how many casualties had been taken, and the number of downed enemies. It also discussed the human samples found in Charité's underground, and while some truths were covered up, the report was mostly accurate. At the very least, there was no attempt to falsify the war condition.

“—Furthermore, the battle for Charité’s terminal was conducted by the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package, formed by child soldiers given shelter from the old Republic of San Magnolia, aka the Eighty-Six—”

Lena looked at the program, pleasantly surprised to see the report went down to such details. It discussed not only the achievements but also who’d achieved them. The Republic never reported on such things, but this was likely how things should be...

The program continued and went into an explanation regarding the Eighty-Six. It told about the five child soldiers who’d been rescued in the western front. Of the terrible persecution their motherland had inflicted on them. Of how after the Republic’s fall, countless other children were discovered to have undergone the same treatment.

The coverage then went on about how these very children took it upon themselves to save their old homeland. Of their own wills.

“...Huh?”

Of how they swore loyalty to their new country, in the name of noble benevolence. Of how these heroic child soldiers offered up their bodies and lives in the name of the Federacy’s justice, to save the homeland that had once tormented them.

“What...?”

It was a tragic, sublime, faultless story. A sad yet sweet fairy tale that would make anyone shed tears, grow angry, and tremble in deep admiration. A story meant to generate luxurious sympathy for one to drown in, served up with tears and garnished with emotion.

“Wh-what is this...? What is the meaning of this...?”

The one thing she could say for certain was that this wasn’t

the kind of coverage Shin, who was sitting right in front of her, Raiden, Theo, Kurena, Anju, Shiden, or any of the other Eighty-Six she knew wished for.

There was nothing these proud people would hate more than to be arbitrarily treated as pitiful children...!

But contrary to Lena's outrage, Shin simply gave an indifferent grunt.

"This kind of broadcast's been going on since the large-scale offensive. They've been treating us like we deserve mercy since the day they saved us, and it's been escalating as the war gets worse... If they can pity us and feel rightful wrath toward the Republic for what it did, they can easily feel like they're superior and just. That's all there is to it."

The Federacy hardly remembered themselves how similar this was to eleven years ago. When the Republic had suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Legion, its citizens had looked to the Eighty-Six as an outlet for their frustration. This was the same. All they did was trade one form of discrimination for another.

He looked up at Lena as she shivered with rage, tilting his head quizzically like an innocent monster, just as he had when they'd walked through the streets of *Liberté et Égalité*.

"...Is it really something to get that angry over?"

"Of course it is! You didn't fight just to be propped up for some tragic story! To be looked down upon like pitiful children! Don't you...?"

Losing her strength, Lena hung her head. This was just like...

"Don't you feel anything...? Aren't you upset by how the place you fled to is treating you...?"

"...Not really."

His voice seemed truly and honestly indifferent. She also thought he might find her annoying for caring so much about the matter.

"It's not pleasant—that much I'll admit—but after all this time, both pity and scorn are the same to us... Didn't I tell you already? The Federacy isn't a utopia. It's a country made up of humans, same as the Republic."

He then broke into a callous smile. A desolate, resigned, and

somewhat relieved smile.

"Humans are all the same, no matter where you go. That's all there is to it."

That distorted smile...filled with cold fury and disdain. The same emotions the Eighty-Six in the Eighty-Sixth Sector had directed toward the white pigs.

"Shin...is this world beautiful?"

His expression turned dubious at the sudden question.

"What are you—?"

"Is this world kind? Is it a good place...? What about people? Are they beautiful? Kind? Are they good?"

His graceful face, at first contorted with confusion, gradually lost all expression as Lena's questions dragged on. And paying that no attention, she continued her questioning.

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

No answer came.

"I understand... No, it makes sense."

The world wasn't beautiful to them. No, maybe it was, but it certainly wasn't kind. And people weren't kind, nor were they good. They certainly weren't beautiful. And that wasn't limited to the Republic. It was just as true for the Federacy... For all people. The Eighty-Six had all but given up on the human world, deeming it cruel and wretched...and hopeless above all.

"It's not that you can't remember your childhood. You don't *want* to remember it. Because that way you can keep thinking that the things you lost, that were taken from you, never existed to begin with. That way you can keep believing people are despicable."

The Eighty-Six had been subjected to severe persecution and cast out into a deadly battlefield, and in the process, many things had been chipped away from them. Their families, their names, their freedom, their dignity. But as the blade of malice continued to swing, peeling away layer after layer, they cast away the past they loved in order to preserve their pride. They had to willingly wipe away the affection they'd once known, the kindness, the warmth, the joy, and the memory of the people who had granted them.

Because if they were to remember those things, they would

come to hate them.

That they'd once had joy to lose, that people were inherently good, that this was humankind's truest form... They would come to loathe the world right before their eyes, because it was *none of those things*. They would loathe it and eventually lapse into being as despicable as the world was. They would descend to hating their persecutors and lose the final pride they had left, believing base vulgarity to be the true essence of man.

And what few kind people they did meet, who were willing to extend a helping hand, they would simply set apart as precious exceptions to the rule, who tried to protect the world and its people from despair.

That was why they felt nothing. No scorn. No contempt. Not toward people, not toward the world. They held no expectations for goodwill or justice. Not embracing so much as a sliver of hope...

To this day, Shin *still* couldn't answer her question about whether there was anything he wanted to do. All he did was reflect Lena's wishes. He still had no answer to the question of what he wanted for himself. He simply *pretended* he was trying to remember to smooth that fact over. But he never did try to face his lost past.

"You... All of you might have left the Eighty-Sixth Sector. But you're still trapped by it. You're still trapped by the Republic. By us—the white pigs."

They forgot everything so that they wouldn't have to loathe others.

To protect that pride, they had to cut away everything else.

Even the very perception that something precious had been taken from them.

And that was why Shin and the rest of the Eighty-Six were the same as they'd been when they were trapped in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. Clinging to their last remaining vestiges of pride and never looking back on what they'd had to cut away to preserve it. Just as they'd been when they ran through that battlefield of certain death, sealed by human malice—the Eighty-Sixth Sector, where the whole world was their enemy. Without the happiness of the past to look back on, they couldn't imagine knowing happiness in

the future.

They'd survived and gained freedom. But they had to cast away the strength to imagine the happiness ahead, and even the strength to wish for it.

Shin simply looked up at Lena, silent and expressionless. Her words likely didn't resonate with him. The shadow of a bird of prey in flight filtered in through the window. The shadow of its wings fell over the room, as if to signify the break between them.

She thought she stood on the same battlefield as them. That she had finally caught up to them and would fight by their side from now on. But that wasn't the case. They might stand on the same battlefield and throw themselves into the same battles... But she saw the world in a way that was too radically different from their own perception.

I am a Republic citizen. The side that stole from them and chipped away at them. So saying this is probably terrible hubris. But even knowing this...

"That makes me...so sad."

A single tear rolled down her soft white cheek.

The Republic is the enemy.

The scars of the Republic's atrocities etched into the Eighty-Six, the despair toward this world that runs all too deep, are my—and likely their—greatest enemies.

—VLADILENA MILIZÉ, *MEMOIRS*

AFTERWORD

Raid units get the blood pumping! Hello, everyone, this is Asato Asato.

An elite unit that goes behind enemy lines to raid and suppress important positions and secret weapons! Isn't it just the coolest? And with that in mind, this time I had Shin and his Eighty-Six comrades get organized in that kind of unit. Its name is...the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package!

The numbering is probably some kind of cruel joke by the Federacy's elite. If I could have my way, I'd love for them to have their own exclusive flying battleship or something, but the technological level in this work's setting makes that kind of impossible, and aerial weapons aren't in the story, either.

God dammit, Legion! Or rather, goddamn, the Eintagsfliege are annoying!

Now, then.

Thank you all as always! *86—Eighty-Six, Vol. 4: Under Pressure* is out for your reading pleasure! This volume's story is a bit lighter than usual. I actually made it light this time around! After how dark Volume 3 was, those two just keep flirting and flirting and flirting. To hell with them! Dammit!

If I had to sum up the twists, it'd be something like "tasty sweets before bitter coffee." There isn't much of a deeper meaning to it, though.

- This volume's battlefield:

It's an underground labyrinth, or rather, a subway terminal. The inspiration comes from my grudge over how I used to get

lost in Shinjuku Station, Otemachi Station, and Tokyo Station. I still get lost sometimes. How many exits and lines can one station have...?!

Also, since the mecha is a short polyped type, I wanted it to fight in a low-ceiling, cramped scenario a humanoid mech—which is necessarily tall—wouldn’t be able to fight in.

- The whole part about Shin’s high body temperature:

That’s actually entirely based on my little brother (who had a single-digit body-fat percentage throughout his high school and university years). Apparently, the closer the human body gets to a state where it’s all muscle, the higher its body temperature becomes. From what I hear, the average body temperature in that state can get to thirty-seven degrees Celsius. Athletes are amazing.

Shin’s body temperature is probably pretty high, too, so Lena could snuggle up to him during the cold winters... Or not. Those two are kind of impossible...

Finally, some thanks.

To my editors Kiyose and Tsuchiya, who gave me so many helpful comments and advice. I already checked out all the references and recommendations for a breather you suggested.

I apologize for the sudden increase in characters, Shirabii! And this time you’ve finally bestowed upon us the sight of Lena in *that* state of affairs...!

That one guy whose name I’ll omit for spoiler purposes was awesome, I-IV. I really wanted to get into the self-propelled mines’ posing capabilities in the story proper, though...! I’ll do it at some point.

And finally, we’ve gotten a manga adaptation! Yoshihara, I get excited every time I read it. I’ll work hard to make the novel’s battle scenes be as exciting as yours are!

And to all of you who picked up this book. Thank you so much. In fairy tales, the evil witch is always defeated, the princess gets saved, and everyone gets their happily ever after. But do people always necessarily achieve peace and joy after evil is vanquished,

the tragedy ends, and everyone is saved from adversity? Even with the wounds they've been inflicted with left as they are?

This story of these boys and girls who know only the battlefield, *86—Eighty-Six*, is about what lies beyond the happily ever after.

In any case, I hope that for even a short moment, I could show you the reunion those warriors experienced in a fleeting moment of blissful rest. To put you on their level as they grappled with the darkness in the depths of their memories.

Music playing while writing this afterword: "Raise Your Flag"
by

MAN WITH A MISSION

References: *Railway Corridor* by Hiroki Tokugawa
and *Transparent Specimens* by Iori Tomita

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