



3

RUN THROUGH
THE BATTLEFRONT
(FINISH)

86

[EIGHTY-
SIX]

ASATO
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ILLUSTRATION:
Shirabii

MECHANICAL DESIGN:
I-IV



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NEW YORK





Shin and Lena.
They take to
the battlefield,
each not
knowing the
other still lives.
And so they
fight on.

She
faces the
approaching
enemy,
while he
questions
his reason
to live.



And at that moment, the metallic dragon undoubtedly gazed at his mistress, his empress.

And so the young girl brandishes her pistol to bid a final farewell to the person she once loved.

Shin felt the presence of the chief of staff's smile deepen.

"...If you fall back and retreat, the difficulty of the mission wouldn't matter to you anymore, would it?"

"Given we'd eventually get killed anyway if the Morpho isn't dealt with, it's all the same to us. What's the point of running away today if we'll just end up dying tomorrow?"

"Is that so...? Well, that's all we had to report. Any questions?"

"No, sir."

Having taken over the surface allowed the Federacy to deploy antiair guns and burn down the Eintagsfliege, which meant aircrafts could be flown to the vicinity of the front lines.

"Good lord, those kids are dark. Or maybe inflexible would be the right way to put it. I feel bad for them, but at this rate, they'll die in battle sooner or later."

The chief of staff scoffed shortly, handing his RAID Device to a nearby aide. Believing that seeing the situation with his own eyes would be more reliable than relying on reports, he'd come to the front lines, which were currently bustling with preparations and reorganizations for their resumed progress.

Somehow, they'd finally arrived here, a small hill with a perfect, unobstructed view of old Kreutzbeck City. The place was still full of survivors who chose to remain on the front lines, newly arrived reinforcements, and also the injured and deceased who would be sent back to the rear. The sound of soldiers in charge of supply and reorganization intermingled with the roaring engines of trucks loaded with body bags. Near a smoking, crashed Vánagandr, combat trucks filled to the brim with armored infantry and stretchers loaded with the injured passed one another by.

He squinted his eyes at the empty lot, which was all that remained of Kreutzbeck's urban area in the wake of the Morpho's rampage, pretending not to notice how the armored infantry soldiers stiffened with fatigue when they realized there was a high-ranking officer in their midst.

Looking over the battered ruins of a Reginleif, he found Grethe, who sat in its

cockpit grimacing, nearly unharmed in contrast to her machine.

Yes, nearly unharmed. They were prepared to accept that she'd died once they lost the Nachzehrer's signal, but to their surprise, she was fine. The chief of staff considered keeping that fact hidden from the major general, who, despite appearances, was beside himself with concern for her.

"Exactly who is going to die sooner or later exactly, Willem...? I'm sure the mixed-blood, Republic-born first lieutenant is quite an eyesore for a former noble, a pureblood Onyx like you, but come now."

"I'm not that narrow-minded, Grethe. Those of mixed blood have their own grace and appeal. A once-in-a-generation, grotesque beauty."

The chief of staff's lips curled up in a smile.

"...He wasn't worried for you. Seems to me you didn't do a very good job of taming him."

"Of course he wasn't. If I had to have a boy that's a decade younger worry for me, then never mind the Legion. The shame would kill me."

And besides, that was something the Reginleif's murderous mobility—the fact that they were true to Grethe's vision and requirements—granted them.

"I see your skills haven't diminished one bit, Spider Woman... The Legion-slaying Black Widow, was it?"

A crease formed over the bridge of Grethe's nose.

"Cut that out, Killer Mantis. You know how I got that nickname, after all."

The chief of staff let out a lighthearted chuckle.

"Of course I do. I was the one who made it up, by the way. Brides who have to put on mourning dresses before they even have the chance to wear their wedding dress are rare."

"You piece of shit."

He extended a hand to Grethe as she swore at him, and he helped her down from the Reginleif. Ten of her subordinates—the beastmen of the Vargus—were climbing up the hill. Exchanging a glance with the young sergeant looking

up at them, Grethe shrugged.

“I did it out of respect for the idiot who died, leaving behind the woman who turned me down a month before she became his bride. Especially when the major general and I were getting ready to pick on both of you by covering the church with roses, you know?”

“...”

Out of anger for said idiot, they instead stuffed his coffin—which didn’t even contain his remains, for there was nothing left to collect—full of the damn petals.

“...I feel nothing for that monster. But I hate the idea of seeing you cry again because of him. So in that regard, I don’t particularly want him to die in battle.”

They hid their Juggernauts in the tall underbrush of a deserted evergreen oak forest, where they apparently avoided the Ameise’s detection. The faint footsteps of the patrol unit and their moans of suffering gradually faded, and Shin released his stilled breath. Seeing that, Raiden, docking inside Wehrwolf a short distance away, asked him:

“They gone?”

“Yeah. But let’s wait a while longer just to be on the safe side... Let’s take a break while we’re on standby.”

His words made the suspense on the other side of the Resonance loosen a bit. He could feel some of them stretching. The Reginleif’s cockpit may have been preferable to that of the claustrophobic Republic Juggernaut, but it still had comfort and survivability as its lowest priority. In order to minimize the projected area in the machine’s front, a Feldreß’s cockpit was cramped, not taking the stress of its pilots into account.

Climbing out of the cockpit, they found that the sun, which hadn’t even risen when the operation began, was now almost at its zenith, with sunlight filtering through oak leaves, softly illuminating the shade of the trees. Rays of sunlight intersected, painting an uneven circle over where the five Juggernauts were—accompanied by Fido, which followed after them.

Now, then.

All their gazes gathered on Fido... Or rather, on the container it was towing. Before they'd deployed, they'd been so caught up with briefing and checking their rigs that they hadn't had the chance to check it. And sure enough, they hadn't seen her that morning. Feeling everyone's glare on it, Fido beeped a feeble *"Pi"* and stirred with guilt. The container lacked windows, and yet someone inside felt their gazes and reacted in a panic.

"M-meow... Meow..."

""""Are you a moron?!""""

Everyone but Shin simultaneously quipped back (though Anju had said "Are you an idiot?!" instead), albeit in hushed tones, as they were still in enemy territory. Ignoring the clichéd, over-the-top reactions, Shin spoke.

"Fido."

"Pi."

Swiveling its optical sensor aside in a needless display of shame, Fido kicked its front legs against the ground.

"Open the container. That's an order."

"...Pi."

"You mustn't, Fido, do not open... Ah—"

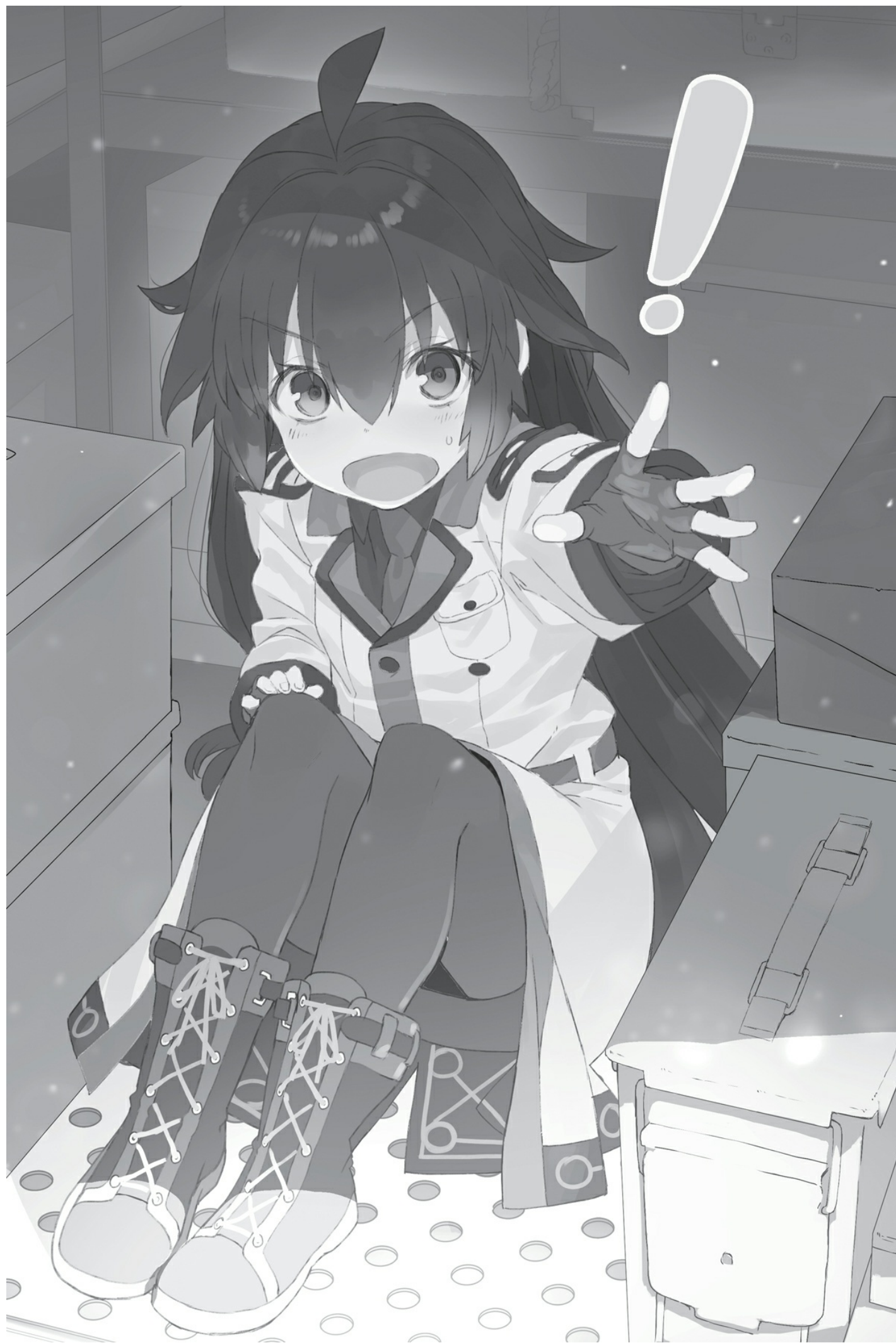
At the back of the opened container, sitting in a squat between a fixed magazine of 88 mm shells and an energy pack, was Frederica. Before she could even say anything, Theo reached into the container and grabbed her by the back of her collar and pulled her out as if she were an unruly cat.

"What are you doing here...?!"

"Aaah...?!"

Frederica flinched at the sound of his voice.

They may have suppressed their voices, but it was a shout of honest rage.



“Don’t you know we might not be able to come back?! Why did you follow us here?! If anything happens, you’ll just end up dying with us!”

For a moment, Frederica’s crimson eyes flashed to life.

“It is that very attitude that unnerves me, you bumbling fools!”

Taken by surprise, Theo fell silent. Realizing the danger raising her voice could bring, Frederica covered her mouth with both hands. She looked up nervously, and Shin shook his head. The Ameise had gotten some distance away from them, and with the dense foliage mostly dispersing her voice, it seemed they hadn’t heard her. They may have been pretending, but there weren’t movements in their main force, either.

“Good grief, what do you mean by ‘might not be able to come back’? Do away with that kind of resolve, I say. How long do you intend to hold on to that willingness to die at any time? How long do you intend to remain trapped in the Eighty-Sixth Sector? Ernst ordered you to return at all costs, did he not...? That is the fate you’ve been entrusted with.”

And so, raising her slender, delicate shoulders, she continued.

“I am a hostage, meant to ensure that you do not run away. Not from the battlefield, but from your mission to return alive... You do not wish for frail, innocent little me to be involved, correct?”

With her face still somewhat pale, her lips alone curled into a smile. Returning her glance, Shin sighed.

“Raiden, if I told you to take her back...”

“Don’t ask me for the fuckin’ moon, man. The only one who could possibly pull that off is you.”

It was like Raiden said. They were seventy kilometers away from the main force and heading east; avoiding the Legion was impossible unless one could tell exactly where they were.

“But we ain’t got a choice. Fine, she can stay in my rig... ‘Sides, no one but me can carry her.”

The Juggernaut’s movements were already fast to the point of damaging the

human body, and Frederica wouldn't be able to withstand riding with vanguards like Shin and Theo and their crazy stunts. A sniper like Kurena couldn't afford to have her concentration interrupted, and that held true for Anju as well, who specialized in one-against-many combat. Having her ride with Fido, which wasn't armored, wasn't acceptable, so by process of elimination, only Raiden was left to carry her.

"Forgive me."

"Don't pull this crap on us again... Even without you doing this, we weren't marching to our deaths."

"...I understand."

Sensing her red eyes turn to him, Shin looked down at her lowered head and said:

"Frederica."

She raised her head, and he tossed something haphazardly in her direction. Catching it in surprise, Frederica then widened her eyes when she saw what she was holding.

An automatic pistol.

It was the old type used in the Republic, larger than the Federacy's standard model.

"You know how to use it, right? If we get wiped out, or you can't link up with the main force, use it to end yourself. The Legion don't toy with their prey, but they don't finish off those who failed, either."

He'd seen comrades who were beyond salvation but couldn't die begging to be finished off more times than he cared to count. And it was this very pistol that put an end to their lives. He had no attachment to his old rig or his Republic uniform, but this pistol was the one thing he refused to part with.

"Are you certain...? This is the pistol you used to deliver the final blow to Eugene and your other comrades."

"...Didn't I tell you to close your eyes?"

"Fool. It was your memories that I saw. It's because you intend to carry

everyone with you that...”

Stopping herself from uttering the very end of that sentence, Frederica embraced the pistol.

“I will gladly hang on to it, then... But my small hands cannot handle such a heavy device. I shall force it back into your hands once we return to base... So we must return together.”

It was getting late, and they were unable to move with the patrol unit still skulking about in the vicinity, so they decided to use this time to have an early lunch. They began setting up a small camp, with the exception of Frederica, who didn’t have the first clue about what to do when it came to camping. They couldn’t afford to start a campfire, so they made do with combat rations, which came as part of the Federacy’s standard gear. The rations were filled with packaged, sterilized food and, out of consideration for situations where fire wasn’t an option, came in laminated, water-based self-heating packets.

As they took the laminated packs, which were emblazoned with the Federacy’s symbol of the two-headed eagle and an explanation of how to use them, out of Fido’s container and spread them out on the gray, urban camouflaged ground, Shin scoffed.

“I guess they didn’t write what’s in each pack because they wanted to make the meals even slightly more interesting, but at times like this, it’s a little annoying.”

“True.”

Raiden, standing nearby, nodded in agreement, but Frederica didn’t understand what they meant. Combat rations came in twenty-two varieties, and there was no way of knowing what you got until you opened it up. It made opening them up feel kind of like unwrapping a present, which was probably the intent here. But when she was handed a ration heated up with the flameless ration heater, she finally realized what they meant.

“It’s pretty hot, so be careful you don’t get burned.”

“Hmm.”

It seemed the Eintagsfliege and the Rabe weren’t deployed above them.

There was no telling how long their trip would take this time, so Fido found a spot with some good sunshine and spread out its solar panels as the group opened their packs.

The laminated packs were to be carried in crates and airdropped, so they were particularly sturdy, but everything besides the external packaging could be opened by hand. After opening her package, Frederica held her breath. The scent of burnt meat leaked out of a hole in the package.

She'd spent half the day in Fido's container. It wasn't pressurized, since it sat in the *Nachzehr*, which specialized in low-altitude flight, and didn't have nuclear or biochemical precautions in place, since a container was never meant to ferry people. As such, for the time she was in there, the scents of the battlefield infiltrated it freely—including the smell of smoke and melted steel, of the heat of bombshells and...the scent of burnt human flesh, which the smell emanating from the pack made her recall in vivid detail.

Shin, who'd assumed this might happen, noticed Frederica cover her mouth with her hands and posed a question to the other four.

"Does anyone have a pack that doesn't contain meat?"

"Oh, I got trout. Let's trade, Frederica."

Kurena snatched the pack from the girl's hands, depositing her own ration in Frederica's arms instead. The characteristic smell of animal meat faded away, and Frederica exhaled in relief. Theo then said, dipping the included spoon into the country-style stew in his pack:

"It kinda goes without saying, but these things weren't made assuming a kid would eat them. The portions are pretty big, so eat up as much as you want."

"Aye. But..."

The memory of the smell of charred meat still remained in her nostrils. Stabbing her plastic fork into the brittle, pale fish meat that had the certain blandness that packaged foods often had, Frederica finally said:

"I'm surprised you can still eat meat..."

She seemed to instantly regret those words, which almost felt like she was

criticizing their ability to remain unchanged in the face of the many deaths they'd encountered. Shin and the others didn't seem to mind, though.

"Eh. We're used to it."

"Having to eat after carrying the wounded away wasn't unusual, after all. We don't really mind, and our stomachs growl all the same."

"At first, you don't even want to see meat, but you forget about that after a while."

As they spoke, the five chewed away at their rations with surprising speed, truly not associating the horrors of the battlefield with cooked meat. This was enemy territory, and they didn't have much time to idle around. Steeling her resolve, Frederica concentrated on eating her trout and cream stew. She chewed, then swallowed. Kurena snickered as she watched Frederica's expression stiffen in silent disgust.

"Is it too harsh on your refined palate, princess?"

".....Yes."

There was some effort put into making the rations palatable out of the understanding that the food's taste could affect morale, but in the end, caloric value and shelf life were prioritized above all else, meaning flavor was often sacrificed. The Federacy's combat meals were usually provided by bases' kitchens or kitchen cars sent out to the battlefield, and these rations were only spares usually placed in storage.

They were still tasty enough for the majority of rank-and-file soldiers and noncommissioned and junior officers, but for the last empress and the adopted daughter of the temporary president, it was the furthest cry from the rich cuisine she had grown accustomed to. Sadly, it was only natural, given it was meant for exhausted soldiers on the battlefield, but the seasoning was too thick, and it was so soft that it didn't have a texture to speak of. The unpleasant scent of heated preservatives clung to her nostrils.

"I apologize for having to say this again, but...I'm surprised you can eat this..."

Thankfully, they didn't take it the wrong way and chuckled in response.

“Apparently, it’s still a step up from the rations they used to serve. Bernholdt says the old rations felt like they were eating starch.”

“It’s pretty funny how people always compare bad food to something you’d never eat in a million years.”

Like soap, or a sponge, or clay, or a rag used to wipe away spilled milk...

“But starch, you say...”

The Far East apparently had some folk story or myth about how eating the starch of small birds would get one punished by having one’s tongue cut off, but that was probably starch made by crushing rice. The starch Bernholdt was talking about was more likely the kind used to make synthetic glue... Not that Frederica had any interest in eating the kind of corn starch that Far Eastern story told about.

“Even that’s probably a hundred times better than the trash they gave us in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. You could search the world over, and you’d never find anything nastier.”

“What did it taste like?”

At her question, the Eighty-Six all exchanged looks and answered in one voice, including Shin, who’d held his tongue for the majority of the conversation. That made Frederica realize that, yes, it was probably that bad... If even he, who placed no importance on the flavor of his meals, made an incomprehensibly disgusted expression.

“““Plastic explosives.”””

“...”

Apparently, it wasn’t even remotely close to being food.

“It stopped?”

Shin narrowed his eyes in suspicion and whispered it just as they were about to set out. Apparently, the Morpho had stopped moving after advancing far to the east and hadn’t budged since.

“Maintenance... They might be changing its gun barrel.”

“Probably.”

Whatever the case, they knew where they had to go now. Their current position was the northwest corner of the old Empire’s borders. Taking the shortest route to the Morpho’s location in the southwestern sector required them to cut diagonally through the Legion’s territories.

Five Juggernauts and one Scavenger rushed onward through the old forest. This afforded them plenty of natural cover, as the Löwe and Dinosauria could not traverse it due to its many intertwining roots and the undergrowth. As decided at noon, Frederica rode inside Wehrwolf. The Juggernaut’s cockpit had a collapsible auxiliary seat to transport and fix wounded soldiers onto, but it was made for emergencies and wasn’t meant to be in use for prolonged periods of time; in other words, it was extremely hard and small.

As such, Frederica got up from it soon enough and was currently sitting obediently on Raiden’s lap. According to Shin’s estimate, there shouldn’t be any fighting in the immediate future, and with Raiden’s height, she wasn’t getting in his way, so he let her do as she wished... Though, if the others were to see this, they likely wouldn’t stop teasing him about it for the rest of his life. Thank God real life wasn’t anything like the giant-robot cartoons he’d watched as a kid, and there were no holo-windows that let them see each other’s cockpits in real time, he thought with a sigh.

“Once the fighting starts, go back to the auxiliary seat. And don’t say a word. You’ll bite your tongue.”

“I know. Do not treat me like an infant.”

But as she said that, she kept getting distracted by the outside view of the optical screens, getting excited just as a child would. She may have tried to hide it, but her eyes were glittering with curiosity and excitement.

“Oh, those were deer! Raiden, there are deer over there!”

“Yep...”

Glancing to the side, he spotted two deer in the distance, their black eyes locked onto the unusual intruders in their midst. One had no horns—presumably a mother doe—and the other was a slender, delicate fawn.

Realizing that his feelings about how tasty they looked probably wouldn't go over well, Raiden kept those thoughts to himself.

Raiden had seen so many dark forests in the Eighty-Sixth Sector that were virtually free of human influence that he had already grown tired of them. But for Frederica, it was a different story entirely. All she knew was the Empire's final fortress, the city of Sankt Jeder, and the advance bases and their surroundings... So for her, these sights were all new.

And that in and of itself wasn't a feeling Raiden was unfamiliar with. It was nearly a year ago, sometime last fall, when they were first sent on their Special Reconnaissance mission. They saw so many new sights back then... Seeing something you've never known of before with your own two eyes is truly something special.

That held true even for Raiden, who'd been kept in the eighty-five Sectors for five years and had the unusual chance to watch television. He could only imagine what it was like for his comrades who'd been thrown to the Eighty-Sixth Sector ten years ago and knew only the battlefield and concentration camps.

When was it again? They'd stopped at some old, abandoned city somewhere. There hadn't been a single cloud out that day, and the sunset had filled the sky. The ruins had shone in the light of dusk, which washed over the townscape made entirely out of white stone and reflected on the rows of maidenhair trees with their fallen, autumn-colored leaves, resulting in a golden glow.

Kurena had frolicked through the ruins happily, tripping over the fallen leaves and tumbling down spectacularly. Shin had broken out laughing when he saw her, and her eyes had instantly gone red.

Right... Back then. He laughed. So when had it become like this...?

He then noticed Frederica was looking up at him with her big red eyes.

"Raiden... You truly are Shinei's best friend."

"Like hell I am. We just can't get rid of each other."

Her overly direct assertion was a statement he would never admit, which made him deny it almost reflexively, but Frederica's earnest eyes didn't waver.

“...You mean since the battle earlier.”

“No, I mean since the large-scale offensive.”

Raiden scoffed. That wasn't the first time she'd mentioned this.

“None of us had any idea what was going on back then during the large-scale offensive, to be honest... There were so many enemies back then, I thought he'd just lost track of what was around him.”

The enemies would come time and again no matter how many they shot down. The screeches and lamentations of the ghosts were endless.

“It was that kind of messed-up situation... Why'd you even Resonate back then?”

They strictly forbade her from Resonating with them before they went on the offensive because they couldn't allow for any distraction when things were that bad. And they didn't want her to hear anyone die, not to mention that the sheer magnitude of the ghosts' shrieks made even Shin go pale. And he wouldn't want to see young Frederica's heart break.

“The Republic... The Gran Mur collapsed. So I wanted to inform you...”

“...”

The moron knew and kept it bottled up, didn't he? Raiden thought bitterly. Shin could discern the movements of the Legion, even from far away, so there was no way he wouldn't know if the Republic was destroyed. And while Shin didn't care for the indulgent white pigs slacking off in the Republic...

We're off, Major.

He did care about their final Handler to an unusual extent.

Frederica curled up her body, hugging her shoulders with her slim hands as if a chill had run through her.

“But he would not answer me. At that time, Shinei was... He was the same as Kiriya at the end of his days.”

That was a worse answer than Raiden had anticipated.

“...That bad, huh?”

“He was incapable of seeing anything. Nothing but the enemy before his eyes. It was the same as when you were fighting earlier... No, it has become more severe since the large-scale offensive...”

“Yeah, it was the first time he lost sight of the fact that we were even there.”

No—there was one other time that had happened. It was back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, during their final battle in the first ward, when they faced off against the lost head Shin had been seeking for five years: the ghost of his brother. He’d said he would do it on his own, and he’d forgotten they were there...

...So that’s what this is.

“Frederica, if...if you were told to go back and leave this moron behind, would you stay here anyway?”

Her crimson gaze didn’t waver in the slightest as she nodded.

“Looks like they’ve decided to set out again.”

The interior of the armored control vehicle, which seemed too boorish to be used by royalty, was dark, with the silhouette of the figure sinking their back to the command seat’s backrest and the girl kneeling at his side barely being visible from outside. The crown prince spoke, standing at the vehicle’s door, dressed in the United Kingdom military’s long-collared uniform.

“The Federacy Esper leading the pursuit after the Morpho reports that the dragon seems to have stopped at the southern territories, atop Eaglebloom. The Federacy military and the Alliance’s army have begun advancing, gradually gaining control of the route. Our military’s working with another detachment of the Republic’s forces to suppress the northern side of Eaglebloom.”

As the figure inside the vehicle rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand, the girl sitting inside kept her gaze locked onto him, her green, catlike eyes sparkling in the darkness.

“I’m going to need you to do one more job... Do you have enough spares to compensate for what you lost?”

“I’ve ordered the rear to send whatever they can our way ahead of time, brother Zephyr. It’ll take a corps-size force until evening to prepare to march again, so we should be finished with our preparations by then.”

The crown prince smiled elegantly at such a wise response and nodded.

“It seems the plan is to use our army as a diversion to support the march, but even still, if the Federacy’s main force goes south, the Legion are bound to notice... Do we have a countermeasure for that?”

“It seems the Alliance military is planning on bringing out an anti-radar weapon they’re developing. It forms clouds of metal-foil particles that blind the Rabe and the Ameise and disrupt the Legion’s communications. It only works for a short period of time, and its range can only cover the southern territories at most, but if they use it all, it should buy our military the time it needs to make its judgment.”

“Once again, that’s rather desperate of the Alliance. That weapon of theirs will only be effective against the Legion once, given how quickly those mechanical monsters are able to adapt.”

“It’s the natural decision to make, seeing as if we lose here, there won’t be a next time.”

“By your will, brother Zephyr... Nevertheless—”

Finally correcting his dishonorable act of not looking at his brother and of covering his eyes—who was his superior both in heritage of the throne and in military rank—the figure turned his gaze toward the crown prince.

“They sent out child soldiers on a suicide mission aboard a prototype aircraft that can’t fly on its own... They condemn the Republic’s manned drone but don’t seem to care for appearances, either.”

“Your little songbirds are just as abominable as that... Things are only going to get tougher from here on out. Think of a countermeasure for that, too.”

“By your will.”

A group of planes soared through the red southern sky, leaving white trails in

their wake. These were remote-controlled, small UAVs. Moving faster than the Stachelschwein could respond, they self-destructed in midair, scattering a mass of tiny metal-foil particles that reflected that day's final rays of sunlight, overlapping and forming obstructive black clouds.

A second wave of UAVs rushed in and self-destructed as well, followed by a third and later a fourth that was exposed to antiair fire. Clouds of metal-foil particles spread out, temporarily shutting down the Legion's communication network.

This obstruction didn't affect the Scout types that lay outside its sphere of influence, however. While this attack pattern didn't exist in their data banks, they could estimate its origins, and the mechanical ants ravenously gathered data regarding the cloud and the aircrafts that scattered it, reporting it to the wide area network. Their sensitive sensors couldn't see past the cloud, and all communications with friendly units under its influence were cut off.

In conclusion—this was an anti-radar weapon that cut off and scrambled all light and electromagnetic waves. Blinding the eyes of the enemy was basic procedure taken before marching on their territory. But however obvious these actions were, the Legion strengthened their defenses both around the metal clouds and in other sectors equally.

A while later, the United Kingdom's and the Federacy's armies began their march in another sector to the north. It was a diversion, after all. The commanders of both sectors sent requests for reinforcements.

"They're moving. Looks like the diversion to the north worked; they took the bait."

"Two diversions, huh? The guys at the north and south must be getting desperate."

Their camp was the remains of a small village in the forest they traveled through over the course of the day. The rose window of the cathedral standing opposite their position cast an intricate shadow over the plaza where they hid their Juggernauts. Raiden shook his head.

“I guess the main force’ll be moving now, too... They’ll be getting pretty far from us now.”

“They’re planning to advance by marching all night long, so I think that’ll close some of the distance between us.”

“Yeah, figures.”

Unlike the main force, which could take advantage of its size and allow its soldiers to rest in shifts, a small unit like theirs had to stop to rest or else they wouldn’t last. Their Juggernauts needed servicing after a daylong march. They could last a few days without sleep, but their efficiency in everything they did—combat included—would plummet.

Thankfully, the Morpho seemed to have remained still. That loaned credence to the maintenance theory. It had an 800 mm barrel, so just loading its several tons probably took a colossal amount of effort. Its armor was capable of deflecting even 88 mm shells, so each of its armor modules was exceptionally heavy, and perhaps going into combat immediately after transferring its central-processor structure diagram impacted its need for repairs, too.

The past residents of this village had abandoned it after it had been attacked by the Legion, or perhaps even much sooner than that, and so its buildings hadn’t been damaged by fighting. There might have still been functional hearths or stoves, so the three girls, Frederica included, went through the houses to check their kitchens. Theo visited the residential houses on the hunt for any good rooms they could rest in, and right now, only Raiden and Shin were near the cathedral.

“...Shin.”

Shin directed an indifferent glance at Raiden, and before he could reply with an apathetic *what?* Raiden cut in with a remark of his own.

“Take Frederica and go back.”

There was a prolonged pause before Shin replied.

“Why?”

“What’re you asking me why for? I told you at noon, you’re the most suited to

do it. You're the only one who can make it back safely with the Legion skulking around."

"But we're in pursuit."

"It stopped moving, and even if it does start moving again, it can only move along the rails, so you can just let us know through the Para-RAID. And thankfully, unlike last time, the others are pulling a huge distraction and drawing the enemy's sights their way."

Shin suddenly scoffed. A smile as sharp as a knife had found its way to his lips.

Yeah, there was that expression again.

That smile that was like a blade. Like madness. Like a warring demon about to walk to his death.

The same smile he'd worn before challenging his brother.

"You think the Legion will actually have their hands full with the main force's diversion? If it comes to a direct confrontation, the Federacy doesn't stand a chance. Crossing through the territories should've been evidence enough of that."

"It's still better than towing you along with us... I knew you were fucked in the head from the get-go, but recently, it's gotten even worse, and that last fight we had settles it."

Fighting like he was walking the razor's edge between life and death, with a savagery that bordered on foolhardiness, was par for the course for Shin. But he had also always maintained a grasp on where the rest of his squad was and had the kind of coolheadedness that let him observe the war situation from a bird's-eye view. So even if Raiden doubted the guy's sanity, he was never worried for him, per se.

But recently, that balance had been steadily falling apart. Shin's constant dance on the razor's edge was as reckless as ever, but the only thing his eyes could see was the enemy standing in his way—the fierce, arduous unfolding battle against these slaughter machines called the Legion, who were far more specialized and optimized for murder and war than any man.

As if he'd been craving what awaited at the end of that battle.

"You almost got dragged along there... What's gotten into you?"

Was it by the ghost of Frederica's knight, the man he'd never met? Or was it by the madness of war itself?

"...Nothing in particular."

Raiden clicked his tongue. He didn't want to believe it, but...

"You really think I'll believe that, you moron?"

Or maybe Shin really didn't notice what had been wavering unsteadily beneath that stone face of his: the conflicted feelings that had been tormenting him for some time now.

"...What's not to believe?"

"Unfortunately for me, I've known you for a long time. That means I'm able to notice certain things about you, even when you don't notice them yourself."

You can't see the expression on your own face. And you don't have the slightest clue what you look like right now.

"You're wavering like a house on stilts... It's like you've regressed back to how you were years ago."

When Raiden first met Shin, he seemed distressingly twisted. It was like staring at a powder keg. Shin may not have had much in the way of social skills these days, but it was still a great improvement from how reclusive he used to be. He'd talk to people only during briefings, when there was something to inform, and when it came time to finish off those who fell on the battlefield.

He hardly spoke to his fellow Eighty-Six squad mates or the maintenance crew. Just like his title implied, he was a reaper who faced someone only when death came to claim them... And in all likelihood, even if he thought of them as his comrades, he never opened his heart to anyone.

Thinking back on it, it was only natural. He was nearly killed by his brother, and then that brother died without ever forgiving him. He was constantly assigned to sectors where fighting was at its fiercest, and his squad mates always died, leaving Shin behind.

You...

You don't die, even when you're with me, do you?

Six months later, after their squad was abolished, they were on a transport plane taking them to their new assignment when he said those words. His voice was a bit higher then—the voice of a child, as it hadn't changed yet. At the time, Raiden shrugged him off with a “The fuck are you saying?” But back then, Shin probably still thought, somewhere in his heart, that his brother's death and the deaths of their comrades were all his fault somehow.

But it ain't your fault, man.

It was only recently, after Shin had managed to come to terms with things, that Raiden could tell him those words without him raising any counterarguments. It was only over the last couple of years, when they gained Name Bearer comrades who survived multiple years on the battlefield, like Kurena, Theo, and Anju... When they gained comrades who couldn't be killed so easily.

Shin's crimson eyes wavered as if he were enduring something, and he hung his head as if to hide them. He then said, without looking Raiden in the eye:

“In that case, you guys should take Frederica back. Better that I go alone than have to carry more burdens.”

“...What did you just say?”

“If someone has to stay behind, it should be me and me alone. If you intend to go back, you shouldn't have to go down a path of no return.”

“Why, you little...!”

Raiden's hand lashed out before he even realized what he was doing. He grabbed the collar of Shin's panzer jacket and took a step forward, pushing him against the pillar behind them, generating a dull, blunt noise.

“...That right there. That's what I'm talking about.”

When they first met, there was a significant height gap between them, and it was no different now, even after they had grown older. He glared down into those red eyes all the same, the words spilling from between his clenched

teeth.

“Stop thinking that sacrificing yourself will make everything better. ‘If someone has to stay behind’? Stop talking like you’re not coming back from this.”

“...I don’t intend to die.”

“Yeah, I bet you don’t. But you’re not fully invested in the idea of coming back alive, either, are you?!”

If you intend to go back, he’d said. Like it was none of his business. Like it would be fine if he died. As if to say that if he alone died, no one would be hurt by it. And it wasn’t something new. It had happened almost a year ago, at the last battle of their Special Reconnaissance mission, when he’d tried to act as a decoy. And even before that, at their final battle in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, when he’d finally faced off against his brother’s ghost.



The fact that Shin honestly believed it would be fine if everything ended right then and there was painfully obvious.

“Why did you even take down your brother? Wasn’t it so that you could move on? *You didn’t live just so you could kill your brother, did you...?* Don’t mix those two things up!”

“In that case...”

His voice sounded like it was creaking, but at the same time, its tone was almost akin to a scream.

“In that case, what was the purpose of it all? What should I...?!”

Shin cut off the question, blurted out in what bordered on wrath, as if he was frightened. He fell silent, realizing that the moment he asked this question, he would have admitted he didn’t know the answer himself.

Yeah, that’s right... I finally understand.

This guy really is...like a blade. He was forged for a single purpose—endlessly sharpened for that one objective. And by the time his objective had been completed, the blade had grown so brittle that it shattered and fell apart. That’s the kind of fragile person he is.

How did I fail to see it until now?

“...I don’t want to die. That’s all. And I think that’s enough. I’m sure the others feel the same way.”

And that was probably the only reason anyone needed to stay alive. But Shin had been assaulted and killed, told that it would be better if he wasn’t around, and he’d fought constantly, until now, to atone for that sin. Having lived like that, Shin probably couldn’t allow himself to live for anything but the sake of living.

“It’s up to you to decide your own path. But you can rely on us, too, y’know... If you start feeling overwhelmed, we’ve got your back. When it feels like the weight of the world is on your shoulders, you can take your time and rest. So...”

Like you did during that last battle of the Special Reconnaissance mission, when you chose to act as bait. Just like you did during the final confrontation in

the Eighty-Sixth Sector, when we encountered your brother's ghost. When you acted like we weren't there...

“...Don't try to fight all by yourself.”

“Y'know, when they leave me out like this, it feels like I'm the one guy in the group who isn't treated like a man. Well, that sorta thing isn't my style anyway, so it's fine, I guess.”

“Shin and Raiden have known each other for a long time, after all. A lot happened between them before they met us.”

“I guess.”

“Truly?”

“Looks like they had one of those ‘fight their way to friendship’ sort of scenes, like from one of those comics. Ask Raiden about it when he comes back.”

...Well.

Hiding behind cover and whispering to one another as they peeked their heads in in height order were Anju, Theo, and Frederica. Their cover, incidentally, was Fido's container, which had been moved all the way to the cathedral's entrance.

The last remaining member of their ensemble, Kurena, had her arms bound behind her back by Anju and a hand clasped over her mouth as she desperately tried to say something but could produce only muffled *Mmms* and *Mhas*. She'd seen the two fighting and prepared to jump in like an angry puppy, but Anju had caught and pacified her.

Having confirmed that the talk was over and the two were gone (Shin shook off Raiden's grasp and walked away after what appeared to be the end of a scuffle), Anju finally let go of Kurena. Suddenly released in the middle of struggling to be set free, Kurena stumbled a few steps forward and turned around with the intent to snap at them, only to be silenced by Theo, who beat her to the punch.

“You know, Kurena, you butting in wouldn't have resolved anything. It might have actually made the situation worse. Restrain yourself a little, girl.”

“Wha—? No... That’s not true!”

“If you’d have come out, Shin would have totally just up and gone, ending the conversation right then and there.”

“Boys have this thing where they’d rather die than let a girl see them being vulnerable, you know?”

“...Ah, yeah, Anju. But when you say it like that, it kind of depresses me, so can you not? Besides, that’s not just a guy thing. Girls have those moments, too.”

“I guess.”

She smiled sweetly, to which Theo looked up and heaved a despondent sigh.

Looks like ever since Daiya died, I ended up getting all the crummy luck that used to fall on him...

Though that was a thought he didn’t put into words. It was too obnoxious of a joke, and he could never let Anju hear that. They all dragged the shadows of the dead along with them, having seen so many of their comrades die.

But that said...

“...He really has been dragging that along. Shin’s been kind of out of it lately.”

Theo couldn’t really imagine the future, either. But with Shin, it felt like he wasn’t looking ahead at all, like he placed a lid on his thoughts and tried not to think about them. The dead were the past. You couldn’t do anything for them but mourn their remains, as they were simply remnants of someone long gone. So trying to look at the future while still being haunted by the past... That was probably harder than anyone could imagine.

“...Actually, he was kind of off since that last battle before we even got to the Federacy. Even though he never let us, or himself, head into a battle he knew we didn’t have a chance of walking away from...”

And that was because until that point, he’d had to make sure he put his brother’s soul to rest. He’d had to survive...for the sake of that goal.

Kurena grimaced and let out a disgruntled moan.

“I don’t think that’s true.”

Theo then said, with his eyes half-closed:

“...You need to look him straight in the eye, Kurena. You can’t keep chasing his back like this.”

“That’s...”

“Shin isn’t really...a reaper for our sake, you know?”

He isn’t an idol for us to admire, to fawn upon, to depend on. That implication made Kurena fall silent. Her gaze darted here and there before she awkwardly looked away.

“...Fine.”

“You’ve always been worried about that, Anju... Did you know?”

Anju smiled bitterly at the question.

“It’s the same for me, after all... I know what it’s like to have your own family tell you that they don’t want you. It completely changes how you think the rest of the world perceives you.”

“...”

“You just keep thinking everything might be your fault. You know, logically, that it isn’t, but that guilt and self-deprecation never go away... And in Shin’s case, his brother telling him he wasn’t needed didn’t boil down to just words, right? Those sorts of things don’t go away on their own.”

Kurena dropped her shoulders.

“So us just being with him...isn’t enough?”

“In the end, it’s like he’s saying we’re only going to be with him until we die. We’re only relying on him one-sidedly, so you can understand him acting like his dying is none of our business.”

In a sense, their relationship with Shin wasn’t one of equals. And that’s why Shin didn’t treat him as a fellow man, Theo realized with an internal sigh. He let them depend on him, to have him shoulder their burdens...but that didn’t mean he shared anything with them.

“...I wonder if we’ll ever feel that way, too, someday. We probably will. We’ve never considered the future, or what we’ll do after this.”

Looking back on it, knowing that they’d die five years after enlisting was, in its own way, a mercy. They could withstand the horrors of the battlefield and the white pigs’ malice because they could see an end to it just beyond the horizon. If they could just last that long, they would win. They could have fought until the very end and gone off with a smile. At least they would’ve had that small bit of dignity.

But now they had been told to live on, to fight and come back alive, without an end in sight. And when they thought they would have to live on for an unknown number of years, for unknown decades, for an excessively long period of time...the sheer perpetuity of it all made them freeze up in fear.

Could they, who had nothing but their pride, sustain themselves for that long now that they had lost that pride? Thinking of that made them lose all desire to think about the future.

“Shin had the tangible purpose of defeating his brother, and realizing that goal must have forced him to understand that he had no purpose beyond that. And it’s probably the same for us. There’s nothing we really want, nothing to look forward to at the end of the road.”

They could go anywhere, but that was the same as having no real destination. It was like standing alone in the middle of a wasteland. They weren’t just unable to go anywhere; all they could do was stand in one place, and even if they were to crouch down and wither away, no one would be there to stop them. It would be the same as being someone who could just as well not exist.

In time, they would eventually succumb to that crippling emptiness. It just happened a bit earlier for Shin.

Theo sighed bitterly.

“Just because he’s in the vanguard doesn’t mean he has to handle this before we do, too...”

That just meant that, however faintly, they could be prepared for the time when they would have to face that simple fact head-on. They had to accept the

fact that they couldn't live the way they did on the Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield, prepared to die on any given day.

"But I think it's very typical of Shin to worry about us so much, even if it doesn't seem that way at first."

"Definitely."

Nodding, Theo turned a sidelong glance toward Kurena.

"Just saying, Kurena, but now's a huge chance for you. You could take advantage of him being depressed, y'know?"

"Just saying, Theo, but even if it is a huge chance for her, it would take a real nasty woman to take advantage of that. And that doesn't suit our Kurena."

"Figures."

"Y-you're wrong! That's not how I—"

"Yeah, yeah. Hearing you say that is starting to get old. I mean, you're not exactly doing a good job of hiding it."

"Besides, you already admitted it yourself, Kurena. What's the point of saying that now?"

"That was..."

Kurena went red in an attempt to argue but then suddenly blushed even harder. She then asked in the thinnest voice they'd ever heard:

".....Do you think he's noticed, too?"

"" ...""

Theo and Anju exchanged looks despite themselves. The answer to that question would be a terribly cruel one, enough to make them hesitate saying it to her face.

"...I would presume he realized it a long time ago but sees it as a, shall we say, childish longing and desire to monopolize of sorts."

And someone just went and said it.

"He treats you as a younger sister... A difficult, troublesome sister, at that. In

all honesty, he probably does not even acknowledge you as a woman.”

“ ...”

Ah. Did Kurena’s soul just leave her body?

As Anju faced Frederica with a somewhat incredulous smile and grabbed her by the shoulders, Theo regarded her with a glance as she shook her head with a pale face and tried to salvage Kurena’s shattered psyche.

“I mean... C’mon. He does see you as a reliable comrade. Isn’t that enough for now?”

“Y-yeah. I—I am a great sniper, after all! I’m totally reliable!”

Theo nodded, as that much was true. For an expert in hand-to-hand combat like Shin, who needed someone capable of providing laser-accurate cover fire in the midst of his melee skirmishes, Kurena was a priceless comrade who was hard to come by.

...Probably.

“But still... Yeah, um. So the Republic’s fallen, huh...?”

For a decade, it had oppressed the Eighty-Six with the might and weight of a nation and ordered them to march to their deaths—and it was gone in the blink of an eye.

“I only saw it through observing Kiriya, so all I could see was the Gran Mur’s fall and the sight of the Legion flooding its ruins. Unlike the Federacy, the front lines were shattered almost immediately. And at the pace things were going... I doubt they would have been able to sustain any semblance of a country in that condition.”

“Figures. The Republic was willing to sacrifice the Eighty-Six if it meant their survival, and they based their entire defensive strategy around that.”

“And in the end, we’d have to go down with them... Really, it’s too disgusting for words.”

The white pigs didn’t care one bit, but to the Alba, who actually saw them as people, as well as their fellow Eighty-Six, the fact that an entire country was forced into this folly only to vanish into thin air...

They truly couldn't find anything to celebrate.

Kurena sighed dejectedly.

"Shin probably knew it first... Even though he said we're going on ahead."

Those were probably the first words he entrusted to another—the first time there was a person he wanted to entrust something to.

"The major never did catch up to us, did she...?"

Hearing the crunching sound of fallen leaves being crushed, Shin turned around to find Fido standing there. Their Juggernauts were enjoying a momentary rest in a corner of the paved square after heavy use over the course of the day. Feeling the gaze directed at him by the round optical sensor, Shin shrugged, standing beside his rig.

"You don't have to worry. I won't run off on my own."

"...Pi."

"Though, I'll admit...going out alone would make things easier."

That way, he wouldn't have to dig any more graves.

The only one to hear the Reaper mutter those words was the obedient mechanical Scavenger that always followed in his footsteps.

Running through velvety-green fields glittering with specks of white flowers, Kiriya rushed along, scattering petals in his wake. The massive mechanical dragon sped through the Legion's territory with nothing to stand in its way. Escaping the woodlands, he crossed the bridge, cutting through a river and across hills that were like the waves of a surging sea, and eventually stopped at the edge of his assigned sector.

While he was capable of single-handedly annihilating a fortress, his current body came with the disadvantage of requiring long cooldown periods. Firing a mere few hundred shells rendered his barrel useless, and replacing that alone took over half a day... This aspect would never cease to be an inconvenience.

That white Feldreß's cruising speed may have equaled Kiriya's, but unlike him, who traveled unimpeded through friendly territory, they had to break through

enemy lines. They wouldn't catch up to him that soon.

He spared a glance at the maintenance units beginning their work, then his gaze settled on the great gray shadow standing on the horizon.

<Pale Rider to No Face. Reporting arrival at appointed sector. Bombardment will recommence after maintenance work is complete, forty hours from now, at first light.>

<Acknowledged.>

Now, then.

His unexpected reunion and showdown with his kin or the fireworks display that would herald the beginning of the end for the human race. Which would come first...?

"Major General, it's time to get up."

While the three countries' fighting lasted through the night, that merely meant that the combat units alternated. The military personnel still managed to get some sleep. Be it inside combat jeeps or in the cargo spaces of their Vánagandrs, the combatants slept atop makeshift beds. This held equally true for the officers at HQ, which advanced farther into the battlefield in accordance with the changing of the front lines.

The major general frowned at the chief of staff, who stood in the corner of the canvas tent that served as HQ. He was dressed impeccably, even at this ungodly hour, and wore a disgruntled gaze. This man had stayed up late with him last night, working on today's operation plan, and had probably gone to sleep even later than he had, but he looked none the worse for wear.

"It's the difference in our ages, Richard... Or so I'd like to say, but you're still only thirty, aren't you? If you're not careful, your gut might start sticking out."

"Still cheerful, aren't you, Willem...? Being young allows you to do things that are beyond your means. You'll be like me before you know it."

"Will I, now?"

"You can keep talking a big game. It'll all catch up to you before you know it when you hit your thirties."

Maybe it was because he'd only just gotten out of bed, but the major general's voice reverted to his tone from years ago, when they were still in the military-staff college. He shook his head, trying to shrug off the grogginess the mere three hours of sleep had failed to do away with, and put on the jacket the chief of staff threw his way. Focusing on their primary objective, he asked straightaway:

"What is the status of the Eighty-Six?"

"We finally managed to Resonate with them just a short while ago... The Republic's technology does come in handy... Not that I'd want the Empire's laboratories to do anything like it."

He gave a thin smile, presenting the metallic collar known as the RAID Device. It was communication that linked the consciousness of one human and another, which meant animal experimentation was pointless. He could imagine the number of people—or to borrow the term the scum in the Republic used, *pigs in human form*—who had to be sacrificed to complete it.

From the major general's perspective, he'd have preferred to not rely on the fruit of the theory and technology established over such inhumane conduct, but the chief of staff didn't seem to share that sentiment. He may not condone those terrible crimes against humanity, but since they were available to him, he'd still make use of them if they were useful as a tool.

But, that aside...

"You *finally* managed to Resonate?"

"This thing requires both sides to be conscious, so it won't connect if they're asleep. I find it hard to believe they can sleep when they're crossing enemy territory with a small force of just five units, but..."

For the Eighty-Six, who'd lived in the battlefield before they'd even reached puberty and who'd survived for a month in the Legion's territory, it probably felt like nothing more than an extension of their everyday routine. So they were used to it.

He recalled the exchange they'd had two months ago. The major general had been in service for over twenty years, if one included his time in the military

academy, and had been on the front lines for ten, since the war with the Legion began. And even for him, the stress of combat weighed heavily on his mind and body.

But this was their routine, their day-to-day life. And what registered as normal for the Federacy seemed abnormal from their perspective. It made sense, then, that they didn't have enough time to get used to living in peace.

It took her five years to tame that thing... And how did she tame it?

The chief of staff's following words brought his speculation to a screeching halt.

"Where do you suppose they are right now? One hundred and twenty kilometers west of the old national border. When we had to march the whole night just to get this far. Isn't it infuriating?"

Realizing what the chief of staff was getting at, the major general cocked an eyebrow.

"Now, this is a surprise. I thought you intended to use those kids up in this battle until there was nothing left of them."

The chief of staff gave a detached shrug.

"You seem to be misunderstanding. All I want is for this sharpened sword to be put to good use. If we can make it last for a bit, even better... But if they end up being assimilated by the Legion, it'll be more than just trouble. We need them retrieved as soon as possible."

Having spent so long running through the battlefield with their machines, first Vánagandrs and then Reginleifs, waking up to a morning without either of those by their sides was off-putting for the Vargus. As they were preparing to set out again on their march, Bernholdt sat in a circle with his comrades in the corner of the camp. His assault rifle, the sole thing he took back from his abandoned unit, sat by his side as he raised his head, noticing Grethe's approach.

"We're setting out at second dawn, everyone. Are your preparations complete?"

"Affirmative, Lieutenant Colonel. We're ready to go whenever... I mean—"

He brandished his stock, collapsible Feldreiß-pilot assault rifle.

“—we’re traveling as light as possible here.”

It was a 7.62 mm assault rifle with enough punch to blow off an adult male’s limb, depending on where it hit, but against the Legion it was still insufficient. Grethe smiled at the infantry, who still stood on the battlefield even if the most they could do was fight off the Ameise or Grauwolf.

“Are you worried for the first lieutenant, Sergeant?”

“I’ll be directing that question right back at you, Lieutenant Colonel. Are ya worried about ’em?”

“I’ve done everything I can. All that’s left is to believe in them.”

“Yeah, I’d say ya did. You got the boys over at maintenance to bring spare Reginleifs and repair parts just in case. Y’even twisted the big bad chief o’ staff’s arm into letting you get that transport plane o’ yers ready.”

And she made that appeal with a desperation tantamount to unconditionally surrendering any impression of being a sharp, coolheaded officer.

“My, but you chose to stick around even though I allowed you to retreat to the rear since there’s not much more you can do here.”

“Well, we’ve still gotta keep up appearances. If these kids come back from hunting that huge centipede, we can’t let ’em see us geezers sitting on our asses gettin’ drunk, can we? Wouldn’t be able to live that down, y’know?”

That felt like just about the worst future possible. Heaving a long sigh, Bernholdt continued.

“...It’ll be hard with an army o’ these bulky tanks, but we should hurry. Your Juggernaut ain’t half-bad, Lieutenant Colonel, but it doesn’t have any experience running operations this long. We don’t know what kinda issues might pop up.”

“Right.”

Not just the Reginleif but all Feldreiß required maintenance time equal to their operation time. They weren’t so fragile that they’d stop functioning immediately due to lack of maintenance, but the Reginleif was only recently

deployed into live combat. There could still be some undiscovered defects.

Grethe nodded, and then she suddenly scowled.

“But it would seem even you lot call it the *Juggernaut*...”

“Reginleif’s a name for a pretty Valkyrie. Doesn’t fit a bunch of rowdy mercs like us.”

He raised an eyebrow at the lieutenant colonel’s disgruntled expression.

“Or for a bunch of brats who keep pulling crazy stunts no matter how many times you tell ’em off.”

“Ah, shit.”

Hearing Theo mutter that from the other side of the Resonance, Raiden turned his attention to Laughing Fox, ignoring the flaming wreckage of the Ameise in front of him. The sound of gunfire traveled far. It wasn’t as audible in the contested zones, where shots were exchanged all the time, but the Legion’s uninhabited territories were a different story.

For this reason, the Nordlicht squadron avoided combat as much as possible and, in cases where it was unavoidable, went on surprise attacks using melee weapons to dispatch their opponents quickly. And as Laughing Fox tried to jump over the remains of one Grauwolf they dispatched in such a fashion, it suddenly froze in place.

Apparently, its right front leg got caught in the Grauwolf’s armor, and when he tried blowing it off with gunpowder, the pile wouldn’t retract, effectively nailing him down.

“Can you get it off, Theo?”

“No can do. It won’t budge... I’ll have to purge it.”

Using the actuator’s output to forcibly extract the pile that was submerged into the thick metal armor put a great strain on the Juggernaut’s joints. A moment later, the detonation bolt activated, and Laughing Fox got off, leaving the detached pile driver behind.

“So now Laughing Fox is damaged, too, huh...? I didn’t think the damage would rack up this fast.”

“...Anju and I got hit with shrapnel during the fight yesterday, and one of your machine guns broke when you got blown back...”

They'd each lost a machine gun, a wire anchor, or a pile driver, and they all had damages in the form of broken armor or bent frames. As they looked at the status window, they saw that Fido's remaining magazines, energy packs, and spare parts were starting to run low, too. The operation was expected to take less than half a day. They stocked up since there was a chance of them being isolated, but they didn't have enough for an operation lasting several days.

“I think Shin's the only one who hasn't taken any damage... Though we're all out of spare blades.”

“...No.”

Raiden raised an eyebrow. He and Shin hadn't really spoken since the fight they had last night. His tone was the same as always, and Shin wasn't one to strike up conversation for no reason to begin with, so it didn't feel like he was avoiding him.

“My propulsion system's been in bad shape since yesterday. I think I overburdened it in the first fight.”

“...You still keep screwing up the suspension system after all this time?”

He'd still had an excuse when they were piloting the Republic's walking coffins, but how far did he push his rigs if even the Reginleif's propulsion system, which was built to be sturdy even when considering high-mobility battle, couldn't keep up with him?

“For the time being, I think I might be able to make do with some maintenance. It's not bad enough to stop it from moving.”

“Yeah, but if you go too crazy with it, it'll fall apart before you know it. Don't pull any crazy stunts for now.”

“...”

So this is the one request you can't respond to? What are you, a brat?

“Judging by our remaining ammo and energy packs, we have enough for a full day's pursuit tomorrow, and then that's it. We'll probably catch up to it before that happens, but we should conserve what we can until then anyway.”

Hearing that terribly roundabout answer, Raiden dropped his shoulders with a grumble. He was still saying that bullshit.

Until we “catch up to it.” Not “Until we regroup with the main force.”

“...Roger that.”

Sitting in Wehrwolf's cockpit, Frederica opened her “eyes.” Her special ability allowed her to view those close to her and their surroundings, as if she were standing by their side. When viewing the present, she saw what they were seeing at the moment, but when it came to their pasts, she could see what that person was currently remembering, even if only subconsciously.

It seemed someone was recalling last fall, when they were forced by the Republic to march into the Legion's territories even at the risk of death. That was the beginning of their journey to freedom, which wasn't even supposed to last a month.

Where was this? The scenery was dyed with deciduous colors; standing nearby was a damaged four-legged Feldreß that looked brittle, even to her unknowledgeable eyes, and was covered with battle dust and a flash of a desert camouflage uniform. It was likely near the end of their journey, when they realized they probably wouldn't be able to advance much farther.

Still, they were smiling. Even with their faces pale and tired, they exchanged jokes and chatted and laughed. From Frederica's perspective, the black-haired boy stood with his back to her, but the smile playing on his lips was etched into her gaze.

Shin was smiling after having simultaneously accomplished and lost his objective of burying his brother, yet still saw the path to tomorrow spread out before him.

Why did he lose that smile...?

Shaking her head, Frederica closed her eyes.

One hundred and twenty kilometers away from old Kreutzbeck City, an Ameise on patrol found it in the evergreen oak forest. Something two meters in height had passed by earlier, crushing the twigs. It was the footprints of a four-

legged weapon that wasn't of the Legion.

Scanning the vicinity for further traces with its multipurpose sensor, the Ameise sent a report to the main force.

<Foxtrot 113 to tactical data link. Existence of a hostile element infiltrating the territories confirmed.>

The Reginleifs rushed through the abandoned battlefield, tearing across the eastern horizon and leaving it behind, chasing the setting sun toward the south. The United Kingdom's army successfully kept the Legion's main force at bay, as did the joint forces of the Federacy and the Alliance along the high-speed railway of the southern route of the Eaglebloom. Even with Shin's ability, being able to avoid engaging the enemy with the exception of the first battle was impressive.

Cruising through the oddly peaceful battlefield, Frederica found herself mesmerized time and again by the sights of the Legion's territories displayed on the optical screen. Clusters of blue flowers bloomed magnificently, growing en masse in the forest. Sunlight shone through the foliage growing between pillars, making the sky-blue petals sparkle like gemstones.

She saw a town overrun with greenery. The grass grew uninhibited, penetrating the flagstones and enveloping the roadside, the abandoned automobiles, the flag posts, and a statue of a saint. Vines coiled around the neglected residential houses. Atop those rusted remnants bloomed gentle flowers of autumn.

She saw an abandoned village. Perhaps owing to the quality of the land there, the houses were formed of bricks in soft, colorful pastels, making it seem like a place taken straight out of the land of picture books and fairy tales. In the center of a grassy thicket—once a wheat field—that grew wild and up to the height of an adult stood a thin, faded scarecrow. There it remained, as if patiently awaiting someone's return.

At noon, they took a long break in the ruins of an abandoned city. They chose to settle down in a church that seemed to be designed in the style of a gothic cathedral. It was a grand, solemn sight. The subtly designed stained glass that

reached up to the ceiling sparkled in its transparency, casting a colorful shadow on this deserted sanctuary and granting its eternal blessing even without anyone being there to receive it.

By the time the sun reached its zenith, any forests and cities they could take cover in had all been left behind them, and they were forced to run along an open shore of a large lake despite the risk of detection. An abandoned castle loomed in the distance, casting the reflection of its white spires and ramparts into the water alongside the blue sky as crimson petals soared overhead. The wind blew through the crumbling arrow slits, and the shadow of a black bird of prey soaring in the sky flew above them. Its wings seemed tattered even from afar, and yet, this lone bird rode the winds to parts unknown.

It was serene. And beautiful.

Frederica thought that maybe now she understood a bit why the Eighty-Six's values were so detached from the Federacy's—and even humankind's fate. If they could regularly witness such spectacles reclaiming the settlements people once inhabited, it would only be natural to feel that way...

This world was a beautiful place. Even without the presence of humans, the world was serene and beautiful. There wasn't a single place in this world that required the presence of human beings to flourish.

This world really didn't need humans.

There's no such thing as a "place to belong." Not anywhere, nor for anyone... No matter who.

Eventually, the sun dipped below the horizon. The final rays of sunlight for that day blazed over a cloudless sky, etching long shadows into the plains below. A large, distant mountain range cut out the sky to the south with its black spires as the Juggernauts sped through a sea of grass dyed in red light, dragging shadowy silhouettes in their wake.

Looking at the fields that were awash with red sunlight on one side and flooded with black shadows on the other, Frederica finally parted her lips to speak. It was like a sea, they said. It was a trite metaphor, but its movements were like receding waves.

“...Have any of you seen the ocean?”

It was neither a question nor a monologue, and as such, no answer came from anyone, including Raiden, who shared the unit with her.

“I have not. Such a sight is unknown to me... There are far too many things that remain unknown to me. What of you?”

Her crimson eyes narrowed sadly as she gazed at the optical screen with longing.

“I wish to see the sea. And I would like to try swimming. Ernst showed me pictures of his honeymoon, from some sea in the south. There were so many people... It was lovely, I’m sure.”

The Federacy didn’t have an ocean in its borders. During the Empire’s reign, it had a single connection to the sea, a naval port in the northern border. If one wanted to go swimming, one would have to go to a neighboring country, such as the Republic of San Magnolia’s southern shore or farther south to the Alliance of Wald, and currently, neither of those were accessible to the Federacy with the Legion standing in the way.

After a short pause, Kurena said:

“The sea... I never did get to see it.”

“None of us really ventured too far from where we lived. Being taken to the internment camp was probably my first time traveling. I think I saw the sea one time when they took me to a new sector on a transport plane, but looking back on it, maybe I’m remembering wrong.”

“It wasn’t a beach, but they did let us play around in a nearby lake once when I was little... It was fun, I guess. Lots of good people came from all over.”

“I think elementary schools had an event like that every few years, but then the war started... And that was that. Never seen the sea myself.”

Shin could feel a small, almost childish chuckle come from the Resonance. He couldn’t tell who it was.

“The ocean, huh...? I would like to see it. Let’s go there together, once the war’s over.”

“If we’re on the topic, a southern island sounds like a nice idea. Y’know, white sands, coral reefs, palm trees, the whole shebang.”

“Or we could go to the north. See the frozen sea, maybe. I hear that when it gets really cold, you can walk over the ice. That’d be pretty cool.”

“Guess we can make do with the sea of stars, for now. Kujo kept talking about watching the moon. We should make preparations next time.”

They were marching cautiously enough, but there was no sight of the enemy for the moment. Before long, the suspense wore off, and they started chatting about whatever came to mind. But there was one among them who didn’t participate. It was something everyone noticed but decided not to address.

For their second camp of the day, they chose an elaborate exhibition hall sitting in the center of the ruins of a large city. Before it got too dark, they sped through their Juggernauts’ maintenance—after an entire day’s march. Once the sun had set and dinner was finished, all that was left was to get some sleep.

After they had retrieved the collapsible beds from Fido’s container and drawn blankets over themselves, Raiden and the others were asleep in the blink of an eye. It wasn’t a comfortable sleep by any means, but the Eighty-Six were no strangers to resting in harsh conditions. In the Eighty-Sixth Sector, it wasn’t unusual to spend some nights out with nothing but a thin blanket for warmth.

But it was certainly hard on Frederica, who up until now had spent every night of her young life on a soft mattress. She was lying down in the pitch-black darkness, unable to fall asleep even with her eyes shut, and eventually gave up. Crawling out from her blanket, she rose from the pipe-and-canvas contraption that was a bed only in name and slid her feet into her small military boots.

The bed’s makeup was such that the canvas hung low to the ground, making it as cold as the concrete beneath it. Near the bed, she noticed some insect, the likes of which she’d never seen before, crawling about like it owned the place. She recoiled slightly from this strange creature. Sleeping without the stuffed toy she’d spent every night with for the last six months made her anxious.

They were in an atrium on the top floor, which they had accessed through a wide corridor that connected to several halls of differing sizes comprising the exhibition hall. The atrium’s canopy was torn, with starlight pouring into the room.

They were in the farthest depths of the battlefield, without a single artificial

light in sight, and Frederica didn't realize true darkness could be so...dark. At the end of the corridor sat a Juggernaut with its limbs folded in. And standing next to it, watching over the others as they slept, was Shin, serving as the first person on night watch. He raised his head to look at her sharply.

"...Can't sleep?"

He regarded her not like he might a Legion on patrol but, rather, with the caution he might reserve for a wild animal.

Animals born after the Legion took control of this land over a decade ago had never seen humans and, as such, didn't fear them, either. They didn't distinguish between people and animals, or rather, homeothermic mammals of a similar size, but they did fear the Legion: beings capable of massacre far beyond the scope of what humankind could ever hope to accomplish. As such, they tended to shy away from the scent of metal and gunpowder, but one still needed to stay vigilant.

When they spent the night back when they had to cross the territories and were unable to light bonfires, they took shifts like this. They kept watch for a few hours per rotation, and the others probably assigned him the first shift (the easiest) out of consideration. The voices of the Legion reached Shin even as he slept, and no one else could help him shoulder that burden. So if nothing else, they wanted to let him sleep the longest.

"Aye. Forgive me; I'm here despite not having been appointed to the sleepless vigil like you. I simply cannot fall asleep..."

Receiving a mug of instant coffee, she sat down next to him on his collapsible bed, which served as a makeshift chair. Their combat rations came with enough solid fuel to boil instant coffee. They'd boiled it earlier during dinner, so it was now only lukewarm—and sweet due to all the sugar they mixed in to compensate for the calories they burned during battle. Frederica gulped it down.

"Don't let it bother you. If we were going to let someone who can't hold a rifle handle night watch, we'd be better off letting Fido do it."

"Pi."

“...Fido. Didn’t I tell you to stay in standby mode until we woke you up tomorrow because staying activated eats up your energy-pack charge?”

“Pi.”

“.....Fine. Do whatever you want.”

Its optical sensor flickering as if to signify a nod, Fido made no sign of moving. It probably intended to stay there until Shin’s shift was over and he could go to sleep. Seeing Shin sigh at it following him around like a faithful—if stubborn—attendant made Frederica crack a smile...and then suddenly frown.

It was probably due to them being on the battlefield, but the Eighty-Six—Shin included, of course—often tended to stand close to their Juggernauts. The other four slept as if snuggling up to their rigs. Shin, meanwhile, entrusted his back to Undertaker as it was bathed in starlight, standing on night watch with his assault rifle propped against his shoulder. Like a child afraid of going to sleep without his favorite stuffed animal.

The warped circumstances in which they grew up—between the threat of the Legion on one side and the persecution at the hands of the Republic on the other—attributed to them living like this. Their only true home was a battlefield where tomorrow wasn’t guaranteed, and they were unable to look away from the deaths staring them in the face.

Perhaps, in a way, they were far younger than they looked.

“...What?”

“It’s nothing.”

Frederica was just as warped. She looked to the night sky, as if trying to flee from his familiar crimson eyes.

In contrast to how the cold of winter seemed to sharpen the starlight, the stars of autumn twinkled peacefully like a silent whisper. The glow of countless distant stars filled the heavenly sphere. The vivid scent of grass she’d enjoyed throughout the day died down. And the aroma of flowers played against the starlight, resulting in a sweet and gentle darkness.

But to Frederica’s eyes, this sight was as cruel as it was beautiful. This aroma

of the flowers and starlit darkness could exist only because there had been no people to sully their presence. If there had been people here before they showed up, the lights and commotion of the city would have corrupted this transient spectacle. A scorching desert, an infertile wasteland, ruins polluted to the point of being uninhabitable, and this picturesque view, in a sense, were all fundamentally the same thing.

Desolate.

Looking away, she faintly made out the lonely form of a worn-out, abandoned rabbit doll lying in the corner of the large room.

“...Is this sight...”

Those mechanical monsters were originally created to be ruthless instruments of slaughter, but some, even if not by choice, carried the souls of what were once humans.

“...the world the Legion wish for?”

Frederica’s words were less of a question and more of a soliloquy, but after a moment of pondering, Shin shook his head.

“Who can say?”

Shin could only speculate as to what the Legion were thinking from the voices of the dead trapped within them, repeating their final thoughts. The cries of the mechanical ghosts reaching his ears all seemed to wish for the same thing—to go home.

“...They might not be wishing for anything.”

They were originally weapons—tools to facilitate the wishes of others.

“They’re ghosts. Both those that took in the dead—and those that didn’t. And the dead...don’t wish for anything.”

“How can you tell?”

“...Because I’m just like them.”

He had been strangled, but he had cheated death. But in a way, he probably had died. And ever since that night, he truly hadn’t wished for anything. Having

killed his brother, he had nothing left. Not a thing he wanted to do nor a place he wanted to see. He never could think of the future.

He purposefully did not meet the crimson eyes staring up at him. But even if he ignored them, he remained just as conscious of them.



“The ocean...”

It was a sight the Legion stole away from them. One that Shin—who was born in the Republic’s capital of Liberté et Égalité and then sent to the concentration camps, which he couldn’t leave—never got to see.

“I can’t honestly say I want to see it. There’s nowhere I want to go or anything I want to see, and that doesn’t particularly bother me, either... But I do understand that not having something you want to try, as they mentioned earlier, is strange.”

Truly not having any desires that could be summed up into such trivial little wishes was all too strange. But last autumn, when they were crossing the territories from the other direction, he truly did enjoy it... Yes, he thought it was fun. The sights of nature no one but they could see, the customs of the many different cities and villages they visited. Sometimes they stopped to rest, and other times they passed through, but whatever they did was of their own choosing.

It was their first taste of true freedom. And at the time, Shin truly did enjoy himself, as his companions did. And that was because he knew it would end. Someday, at the end of his journey, he would die in the embrace of his aluminum coffin in some remote corner of the battlefield, without having reached anywhere or achieved anything, with no one to tell his tale.

And that’s how it should have been. But his brother saved him, and the Federacy sheltered him. He survived longer than he expected and was suddenly faced with a future that was longer and more uncertain than he could have ever imagined.

For Shin, who was prepared to die at a moment’s notice, it was far too long a future and far too distant a destination. The future they obtained was far too vast, and without kin or country to serve as their guides, that emptiness was far too...terrifying.

His friends would have been the same, but somewhere along the road they found other things to keep them going. Other things to live for. And having nothing to live for was the same as not being alive. Having nothing to live for meant you weren’t even trying to live. And so he remained the only one who

was not yet alive.

“I’m not your knight.”

Once again, he repeated the words he’d spat at Frederica a month ago, when the operation had just been decided, and sighed slightly.

“I knew that, and yet... I’m sorry. I used your knight as an excuse.”

An excuse to return to the battlefield when he had nowhere else to go.

“I’m heading toward my final destination all the same, but my brother isn’t there anymore. So I needed something to take his place.”

Frederica scoffed.

“I believe there’s more to it than that.”

“...?”

“You should be aware that the way you observe your reflection in the mirror is wrong. You are not as coldhearted nor as cruel as you might believe yourself to be. You would even cast aside salvation if it meant bringing peace to another. Even for a mere ghost... You truly are a kindhearted reaper.”

Staring far into the distance, she whispered.

“If nothing else—thanks to you obliging my request, I will set Kiri free.”

Shin turned his attention to the far horizon, where her knight continued to wail.

“I pitied him, trapped as he is in the battlefield, lamenting his fate for eternity. I wanted to set him free... I wanted to set *myself* free from his anguish. What of you?”

“...No.”

He may have wished to soften the voices crying out from the depths of the battlefield, but not once did he wish to silence them completely.

“Even I...”

At that moment, Frederica smiled, looking to be on the verge of tears.

“...*am afraid of ending Kiri.*”

She was afraid of losing anyone else...

“I am an unwanted child in this Federacy. Now that it has become a federal republic, my being alive could become the spark that ignites turmoil. I am a child of calamity... My absence would only benefit everyone.”

The Federacy had gone from a dictatorship to a federal republic, but some of the former nobles, who had once held power and monopolized all authority, still maintained some latent political influence. Even Shin, who had only been in the Federacy for less than a year and spent the majority of that time in the military, noticed that fact. Once he examined things more closely, he noticed those in the higher ranks were almost exclusively those of pureblood noble birth. The majority of the generals were either Onyxes or Pyropes.

If those among them with ambition were to learn that an empress—a just cause to subvert the government—still lived...

“And yet, I lived on, believing that I would one day have to put an end to my knight... But once I do end Kiri, I will have lost that reason. And that...frightens me.”

“...”

And yet.

If she didn't bury him... If she didn't make things right, she wouldn't be able to move on.

“...The reason the way forward makes you shudder so much is because you're properly looking to the future. Because you realized you're walking an untrodden path. There's no shame in that, and even in such times of doubt, you should rely on those walking by your side for support. That is why comrades exist. That is why...people stick together.”

“...Raiden told me that, too.”

But cold thoughts stabbed their icy daggers into his heart.

Even if they're with me now, at this moment...even those who call me “our Reaper”...will one day, certainly...

“Leave you behind...?”

“...?”

“...Never mind.”

The seemingly ambiguous statement was left at that, and it faded into the darkness of night.

It was first light. The sun peeked out over the horizon in the wee hours of morning. Detecting the first rays of light just barely illuminating the surrounding area, Kiriya awakened from standby mode. Like swords serving as grave markers stuck into the ground, countless bent and burnt-out cannon barrels littered the battlefield as dawn broke. His countless extensions, having covered the ground like a filament, also awoke and rose into the air with a flutter of their wings.

It was time to begin the sweeping operation. The Eintagsfliege that had helped keep him under the cover of night retreated, and the Legion under his command began moving from several dozen kilometers away. There were no signs of movement from the enemy forces yet. Attacking at dawn was a relic of past eras when radar and night-vision devices didn't exist. But such tactics were still effective against an enemy who could employ neither.

The Ameise's observational data transmission arrived. Using this, he observed the armor-plated concrete structure in his optical sensors. Capable of seeing only a few dozen meters ahead, he could just barely make out the summits of the horizon.

<Pale Rider to No Face. Commencing sweeping operation.>

The unsleeping combat machine's reply arrived immediately.

<No Face, acknowledged... A transmission arrived from the wide area network.>

...Mm?

<Traces of an enemy unit that had infiltrated the territories were discovered. Given the situation, it is hypothesized they are in pursuit of you. As such, commence search activities in sectors adjacent to your location.>

<...Acknowledged.>

So you did come after me, kinsman.

The fireworks display is starting soon. So before it does...make it to me.

“Let’s go.”

It was the third day of the operation. Regardless of the outcome, today would be its final day. Within the blue darkness of dawn, the Juggernauts slipped through city ruins, moving in a modified platoon-wedge formation. They moved through a main street, where a faded, tattered, five-hued flag flapped noisily. They rushed over the shards of glass littering the pavement and passed over the fallen statue of a woman.

Suddenly, the skies to the west flashed, and the sound of impact echoed from afar. As concentrated fire rained from the sky, a thick cloud of dust rose up in the horizon.

“That’s...not the Morpho. This is Skorpion fire.”

“They’re pretty much off the mark, though... That’s not where the Federacy’s main force is. What are they trying to shoot at...?”

And just as Anju said it, everyone—herself included—held their breath in unison. In the wake of the dust clouds, raging flames dyed the sky over the impact point a deep crimson.

“Incendiary bombs...?!”

Those were shells that had fuel mixed with thickener injected into them, which would spread out and ignite during impact. The intent was to set the enemy ablaze. Since both the Republic and the Federacy employed stone architecture that didn’t ignite easily, the Legion rarely used them, but they were a vicious type of bombardment.

The viscous fuel inside the shells was capable of clinging to its victims as it burned, and it couldn’t usually be extinguished by water. Should a human be splashed with it, the only fate awaiting them was an agonizing death.

The sky flashed again. From between the buildings, they could see the treetops of the forest in the horizon catching fire within seconds.

“God dammit, they’re trying to smoke us out!”

The Legion probably found traces of their infiltration of the area. Even state-of-the-art Reginleifs weren't able to march through a sea of burning flames. They lacked the coolant necessary to do so, and with all the oxygen in the air burning, the pilots would eventually suffocate.

A third bombardment. An even closer spot caught fire. They were systematically destroying every hiding spot in the area.

"Shin!"

"We've got no choice. Let's go. All units, prepare for combat. We'll make contact with the first enemy line in three hundred seconds."

Confirming the positions of the Legion in the area, they rushed through the ruins by way of the path of least resistance and kept going until they reached the plains.

When the Skorpion types roared again, and their bombardment rained from the heavens, the city ruins finally entered the range of their fire. A shell impacted nearby, and the street was engulfed in flames almost instantly. Live trees didn't normally burn as easily, but when exposed to fuel with a combustion temperature reaching as high as 1,300 degrees Celsius, that didn't matter.

The area was doused with muddy fluid time and time again, turning into a sea of fire within moments as tongues of flames licked the vaporizing surfaces. The ruins turned into an inferno under the cover of dawn, black-and-red shadows dancing across them. As old buildings crumbled under the tyranny of those flames, the group barely made it out of the city.

"Ah, they found us!"

Shin made out the silhouette of an Ameise standing near the horizon, its sensors pointed right at them. In the next moment, Gunslinger sniped it down. But the data transmission likely traveled through the data link before her 88 mm could even finish its roar. The surrounding Legion units had already been alerted to their presence. Then they crossed over the horizon and were faced with a massive army that spread out before them like a veil of black clouds, making even Raiden's breath stop in his throat.

"What are those numbers...?! How do they always keep coming out in droves like

this...?!”

“Just goes to show that the Morpho is extremely important to them... The left wing is the thinnest. Break through at maximum combat speed.”

“...Roger.”

Flames danced on the wind. The waste and debris left in the wake of the burning rode the updraft into the heavens, absorbed water, and became rain. The Juggernauts crossed the plains as black rain, thick with soot, washed over them, rushing through the low, thorny mountainous road. Having accomplished its objective, the onslaught of incendiary bombs came to an end. A shower of howitzer shells took its place as the silent metallic shadows peeked through the shadows of the trees.

The mountain’s steep formation made the tree trunks and roots intertwine, preventing the heavyweight Löwe and Dinosauria from entering. But the Ameise, which were in a similar weight class to the Juggernauts, remained in hot pursuit. Through the gaps in the branches, a formation of Löwe could be seen closing the gap by way of a relatively calm riverbed. They were kept up-to-date with their targets’ position thanks to a data link. The children caught a glimpse of a cliff beneath them.

“Shin, how far to the target?”

“Fifteen thousand meters, straight ahead. It moved forward for a bit before stopping again... I can’t tell what they’re planning, but let’s take advantage of this and close the distance.”

Frederica then said:

“It looks like he’s aiming at something... But I cannot tell where he is. He’s got fixed cannons lined up; he should not be able to provide covering fire to the front lines...”

Having said that, she gulped nervously. Her silence suggested there was a development she couldn’t make sense of, but there was no time to confirm.

“They’re shooting at us from below!”

One of the Löwe below swerved its turret, turning its 120 mm barrel in their direction. Folding its segmented front legs, it forced itself to fire from an inconvenient angle of elevation.

“...!”

It impacted the face of the cliff, crumbling the ground between Laughing Fox and Snow Witch as they advanced in the wedge formation. Mud and dirt flew into the air as a Skorpion shell impacted nearby, as if to make doubly sure they were hit. A 155 mm shell, capable of reducing sturdy trenches into piles of sediment, burst upon hitting the ground, uprooting the trees that supported the muddy hill.

“Ah...?!”

Caught in the landslide, Snow Witch slipped down the hill.

“Anju?!”

“Nng... I’m fine. The unit isn’t damaged, either. But...”

Having slipped roughly ten meters down to flat ground, Snow Witch pulled her legs out of the dirt and turned her head. The red optical sensor surveyed the crumbled cliff face, then shook left and right. The Juggernaut’s optical sensor operated by tracking the pilot’s line of sight, which meant Anju probably shook her head.

“No good. I don’t think I can climb up. I’ll try to hold them off here... Fido, leave me all the spare missile pads you can!”

Fido hit the emergency brakes, pitched forward, and deployed the container behind it, sliding all the missile pads it had down the crumbling cliff face. Sparing this sight a parting glance, the remaining four Juggernauts moved along the solid ground, rushing forward. The Ameise in pursuit of them spread out to avoid the Skorpion fire but still came after them from another route. They couldn’t afford to stay put.

As Fido struggled to keep up with the rest of the group on the winding road, they could hear explosions coming from the riverbed behind them. They fired anti-armor explosive shells into the air, their fuses going off as they crashed down onto the Löwe, specifically the weak points on their upper armor. They heard roars echoing a second and third time, from different directions, but the Juggernauts—traveling at a cruising speed of over one hundred kilometers per hour even on the unsteady mountain road—left those explosions behind them before long.

The Ameise, despite not comparing in terms of cruising speed, could move along the road just as easily, but having the benefit of a data link led them to drop the pursuit and request that another unit take over. Shin could sense the Legion patrolling several kilometers ahead of their current position switch directions, moving to block their expected path.

Hearing the same voices through the Sensory Resonance, Theo scoffed.

“They’re still coming, the persistent bastards... Only ten thousand meters till we reach the target. If they cling to us like this, they’ll get in our way while we’re fighting the Morpho.”

Escaping the clouds of ink-black rain, they got off the mountain by skidding down an incline. They dug their feet into the steep foothills as they slid and rushed toward the stone structures of the small city ahead.

As soon as they entered the main street, Laughing Fox moved to the rear and turned its bearing. It fired a wire anchor into a building as it turned in a half circle and then mowed it down with another revolution of its fuselage. The building collapsed with a crash, nine years of exposure to the elements taking their toll, on top of having its supporting pillar destroyed with pinpoint precision. The rubble collapsed, as if to cut Laughing Fox, who stood at the rear of the formation, away from the remaining three Juggernauts.

The Legion, noticing the collapsing building’s vibrations and reverberations, began rushing toward the center of the commotion. Hearing their voices close in on him, Theo laughed sharply.

“It’s all flat land ahead of here, right? Well, I’m not really useful outside of a place like this, so I’ll stay here and play decoy! I’ll do what I can to distract them, so you guys handle the rest!”

The numbers of the small invading force seemed to have been *reduced by two*, and both seem to have been caught and are currently engaging surrounding friendly units.

<Acknowledged.>

Receiving the report from the wide area network, Kiriya withstood the urge to sigh in exasperation. Not that he had the lungs or mouth to do so even if he

wanted to. It seemed a few small fry were detected on one of the mountains. Such a blunder was unbecoming of someone who had Nouzen blood coursing through his veins. And yet, Kiriya applauded the coolheaded judgment that allowed him to leave his comrades behind to serve as decoys while he advanced, even at the cost of their sacrifice.

Contrary to the report, his own radar—which boasted high fidelity and a wide range for anti-air-defense purposes—had already detected the approaching enemy force. It was separate from the enemy engaging the Löwe in the mountains and the one running around in the ruins; it was a third detachment that wasn't recognized by the wide area network. It was a total of four units, and judging by their reactions, three of them were the new Federacy Feldreiß model.

<Pale Rider to wide area network.>

It was his chance encounter with his kin. He couldn't let the rank-and-file weaklings get in the way.

<Executing bombardment schedule as ordered. Henceforth, all communications until objective completion will be blocked.>

Choosing not to transmit the information he'd acquired, he sent that single transmission and shut off his connection. But with that said, the other side was bringing its own share of nuisances. So for starters, he would have to separate him from them.

"Get away! He's shooting!"

Frederica shouted to Shin from the Resonance at almost the same moment as the Morpho's cries increased in magnitude. A moment after he reflexively pulled back the control sticks, a shell impacted near the point Undertaker had leaped to. Having traveled at supersonic speeds, the shell's shock waves sent his unit flying as sediment and earth bashed against its fuselage-like bullets.

"...!"

A second blast. The barrage that fell on the dusky hills, undulating like waves in a stormy sea, was almost like a barrage of machine-gun fire—no, it truly was

a barrage of shells, making the three units spread out almost like they were scattered away by the force of its shots.

How can it fire so precisely...? Wait, no.

“It’s his close-range armaments.”

What they’d seen in the Republic’s first ward and right before they’d entered the Federacy’s territories, as well as the concentrated fire that had destroyed the western front’s FOBs—all were far weaker bombardments than what the Morpho had fired directly at them the last time they’d engaged it. Shin’s support computer calculated the shells’ initial velocity to eight thousand meters per second. Rather than using its main armament as is, it probably reduced the warheads’ mass using an autocannon with a lower aperture that granted it a rapid-fire function. Even the anti-air-defense system it had installed to shoot down approaching missiles was configured around the Morpho’s railgun.

Having Frederica accompany them turned out to be a good thing, after all, Shin noted with a bitter smile. It seemed that when it came to this knight of hers, Frederica was faster to pick up on the Morpho’s attacks than he was. The relative difference between them and the Morpho was seven thousand meters, which meant the Morpho’s shells would impact within less than a second of firing. In these conditions, having her around was a definite advantage.

The shower of tungsten shells, charged with monstrous kinetic energy from its high-speed propulsion, decimated the battlefield in moments. Leaping, strafing, and rolling around, the three Juggernauts had to employ every bit of technique and intuition at their disposal in order to keep evading. If an armor-piercing shell was to impact one of them at this speed, a Vánagandr wouldn’t be able to withstand it, to say nothing of a Juggernaut’s aluminum armor. Their only choice was to keep dodging.

“You little...!”

Clicking her tongue as she took advantage of the several-second pause the Morpho needed in between attacks to prevent its gun barrel from overheating, Kurena deployed her sniper rifle. Aiming beyond the hills with an accuracy none of the others could imitate, she fired, forcing the target to flinch and pause its attack.

“I’ll distract it, so go! It was a buckshot, so it didn’t do much damage!”

She fired a few more restraining shots, then leaped a short distance from the direction Undertaker and Wehrwolf were dodging in just as she fired her last one, putting even more distance between them. Another barrage of shells rained from the heavens, obliterating her former position, and the resulting line of fire moved in pursuit of Gunslinger.

“Hurry!”

“Sorry.”

Shin could feel the pride in Kurena’s smile.

“I’ll handle this.”

The enemy unleashed an endless spray of bullets at Kiriya from beyond the hills. It seemed to be coming from a single unit. It disappeared from his radar once it took cover in the hills, but there were still four units in the position it was last sighted. At this rate, uninvited guests may end up coming here, and engaging the enemy while this sniper kept firing on him would be irritating. It would have to be eliminated, promptly.

He lifted his upper half. Twisting his body, he turned his rear optical sensor, and in the next moment, bolts of blue electricity began slithering like serpents at the base of his gun barrel.

White noise suddenly crackled over their optical screens.

“What’s going on...?”

“This isn’t electronic jamming. It looks like it’s just some electromagnetic waves in the air.”

And as soon as he said it, he realized. A railgun was a projectile weapon that employed vast amounts of electricity to accelerate and launch spherical projectiles. So whenever it attacked...

...it scattered powerful electromagnetic waves in its vicinity.

The Morpho’s roar intensified.

“Kurena, that’s enough; get away from there!”

A bright light flashed from beyond the hills, and a thunderous roar echoed overhead before landing behind Undertaker and Wehrwolf.

“Kurena!”

“Aaaaaaaaah!!”

They could hear the sound of something slicing the wind—like the fragments of a massive shell that exploded in midair and violently rained shrapnel—and then the sound of impact. Gunslinger’s blip disappeared, and Kurena’s Para-RAID shut down.

For a moment, both of their minds ground to a halt. Taking advantage of this momentary pause, the Morpho resumed firing its close-range armaments. A fan-shaped firing line ravaged the earth. The arrow of metal traveling at supersonic speed painted the blue skies over with the color of metal for a moment before the shower rained down on them diagonally.

They didn’t have the presence of mind to dodge. The most they could do was crouch and reduce the surface area exposed to the shells. And still, the bombardment grazed against the side of Shin’s unit, blowing off Undertaker’s front left leg.

“...!”

“Raiden!”

That moan of subdued pain and Frederica’s scream made Undertaker freeze in place halfway through its attempt to get up. Looking onward, he saw that Wehrwolf was also crouching on the ground, unable to get up.

“...You’re injured.”

It wasn’t a question, but a confirmation. His Para-RAID was still connected, but the damage to his rig was severe. Both of its right legs were blown off, and the cracks in its armor clearly extended all the way to the cockpit. And from the looks of things, the ones sitting inside couldn’t have gotten away unscathed.

“Y-you covered for me.”

“It ain’t bad enough to kill me, but...sorry, this is where I’ll be dropping out of the race.”

Multilegged units had the advantage compared to treadmill units in that they were able to keep moving to some extent even after taking damage. But with all legs of one of his sides gone, that was impossible.

...A thought occurred to Shin.

I guess that would still be better than leaving her with Wehrwolf, now that it's completely incapable of fighting.

"Fido. Let Frederica ride you."

Fido approached with a clatter. Because it kept a certain distance away from them, it wasn't exposed to the shelling, but there was still a wobble to its gait. Its legs had probably gotten damaged by shell fragments or the shock wave. Shin realized that in this condition, his order was too much for the unarmed scrap-collecting robot.

"If I don't make it, take Frederica and retreat. Don't bother recovering the others, either. Bring her back to the Federacy, no matter what."

"Pi."

"Shinei!"

Fido beeped back in what felt like a solemn nod, and Frederica cried out in protest. Shin continued, ignoring her voice.

"You're afraid of losing him, but you still want to save him, right? Then live on so that you can accomplish that."

"..."

He could feel Frederica nodding as she bit her lip. Wehrwolf's canopy flung open, and a small shadow climbed out of it and then ran into Fido's opened container. Shin nodded at the tall shadow, raising a hand to him from the cockpit, despite knowing he couldn't see it.

"Don't die on us."

"...Yeah."

Whispering under his breath, Undertaker, the last remaining unit, rushed onward. Only three thousand meters remained. He sped around the final hill, and...

...a layer of pure, boundless blue spread out before him.

CHAPTER 9

VENI, VENI, EMMANUEL

The azure spectacle before him was the product of countless blue butterflies. They spread their metallic wings, the color of lapis lazuli, as they blanketed the fields as far as the eye could see. They were similar to the Eintagsfliege, and just like the Admiral, which they served under, the wings of these Legion units served as solar panels. The Generator Extension type: Edelfalter.

The kaleidoscope of mechanical butterflies looked like fragments of the sky had frozen and flaked away. They kept their forms folded under the darkness of early dawn but suddenly spread their wings out all at once and flew away as if fleeing from the white metallic spider creeping into their territory. Countless gun barrels were planted into the ground like headstones, perhaps the remains of past battles. The shards of lapis lazuli fluttered through the air like flower petals.

On the other side of this field, on top of an eight-track railway, a Legion unit stood like an evil dragon of legend, boasting an incredibly long, menacing body and carrying a gun barrel exceeding thirty meters on its back. Being the greatest weapon employed in the final war against humankind, this railway artillery could be described only as majestic.

Its black armor modules were like a dragon's scales, and the rails that comprised its barrels were like two spears, turning their backs on the sky. There was a blue optical sensor where one would expect its head to be, glowing ominously like a will-o'-the-wisp. Its six close-range armaments—its 40 mm six-barreled revolving autocannon—wavered in a heat haze generated by its previous shots.

Dwarfing even the Dinosauria, the largest of the mass-produced Legion, with an overall height of 110 meters and a total length of over 40 meters, the

massive butterfly towered high into the morning sky. Its wings that seemed to be woven of silver threads—probably the components in charge of cooling it down—sprinkled what looked like stardust into the heavens.

This was the Morpho.

The moment Undertaker leaped over the hill, its optical sensor and Vulcan cannon fixed onto it immediately. It had probably lain in wait even after losing Undertaker's signal, and its movements were efficient and swift.

But it wasn't enough.

Undertaker jumped again and stopped suddenly as it landed. Its actuator, which was designed to be sturdy in anticipation of high-maneuver combat, creaked in effort. The Vulcan cannon, which deployed in the direction it should have moved in order to lock its sights on it, couldn't respond to this sudden action in time.

At the very moment it felt like their gazes intersected, Shin had already locked Undertaker's sights on it and pulled the trigger of his 88 mm cannon.

Those movements...!

From the other side of the blue glow emitted by the Edelfalter, Kiriya was faced with the sight of the enemy unit maneuvering with the keen agility of a predator on the hunt. He was left astonished. The enemy made a low, diagonal jump to the back, performing a somersault in midair and landing while changing his bearing, then executing a sudden brake as he landed, to boot.

Even Kiriya, who'd piloted his family's exclusive Feldreß as a descendant to a line of warriors during his lifetime, found it hard to believe there was a human pilot behind those death-defying maneuvers. And in spite of it all, the sights of its 88 mm cannon remained fixed on him the entire time.

The deformed Feldreß moved like lightning, like a white nightmare, like a skeletal corpse prowling in search of its lost head. Below its canopy was the personal mark of a headless skeleton carrying a shovel.

Ah.

Maddened ecstasy mingled with his ice-cold thoughts, and alongside them was a hint of relief.

You made it. You truly were worthy of appearing before me. I expected nothing less.

Kiriya could feel him pulling the trigger. They were separated by two layers of armor and a relative distance of three thousand meters, but Kiriya could sense it vividly.

Anything less than this wouldn't be interesting.

"...Still too shallow," Shin whispered, staring at the black smoke issuing from one of the Morpho's armor modules. The shot hadn't fully penetrated it. And there was too much black smoke resulting from that impact.

Explosive reactive armor. It was a unique type of armor that reacted to an anti-tank warhead's explosion by setting off explosives on the armor's surface. It used the blast to disperse the metal jet generated by the warhead and therefore prevent penetration.

The Legion treasured the Morpho. They ignored orthodox theory, which dictated that heavy artillery normally only had armor thick enough to repel shell fragments, and granted it heavy armor on the off chance it would be exposed to a crippling attack.

Anti-tank warheads were no good, then. Which meant high-speed armor-piercing shells wouldn't be effective at their usual range, either.

And yet...this was no different from when he had to face off against Löwe or Dinosauria in that walking aluminum coffin.

The enemy's gaze and malice bore into him. It turned its massive body—which was too heavy to move off the rails—in his direction while its six autocannons rotated toward him as if they had a will of their own.

It was going to shoot. He maneuvered his unit left with movements so reflexive they didn't travel through his mind as thoughts. A muzzle flash followed immediately after, and machine-gun bullets flicked off the ground to Undertaker's right. Sparing it a fleeting look as he repeated the procedure, he

dodged a second volley and then jumped away as a third one came hot on his tracks.

The six-barreled Vulcan cannon revolved as it fired. While it was capable of unloading a heavy barrage, this rapidly depleted its bullets and caused it to overheat easily. In other words, it couldn't maintain this rate of fire for long. Undertaker advanced through the momentary lulls in its barrage in a mixture of small, intermittent leaps and emergency brakes that was astounding to behold.

Shin's calm crimson eyes never wavered even as the heavy roars of the cannons echoed down to his core and the whistling of shells cutting through the wind tore into his eardrums. They simply reflected the faint light of his holo-screen: that steady, artificial glow.

The Republic cast the Eighty-Six out onto the battlefield, and the experience they gained there molded them into readily adaptable, hyper-efficient, battle-hardened warriors—albeit with the occasional quirk. So in the midst of combat, any notion of humanity within these children was dampened. Ironically enough, this made them every bit the emotionless combat machines that the Legion were. Fearing their foes simply wasn't an option. And this was especially true for Shin, who specialized in hand-to-hand combat as a vanguard.

In order to slip through the blades of his foes and evade their barrage of bullets, Shin required an extreme level of concentration, which made him lose all grip on his humanity. He suppressed all his conflicts, his anguish, his pain and regrets, along with all other unnecessary thoughts, and buried them at the bottom of his mind, leaving them to fade into oblivion. It was easier that way, so whispered a voice from some corner of his hardened heart. That way, he wouldn't have to think of anything pointless in the middle of battle.

He could forget everything and anything.

It was so terribly...easy.

Some part of him realized the reason behind the madness of this knight standing before him, whose face he'd never known—this ghost, driven crazy by war and slaughter.

How easy would it be...to become like that?

Another lull in the barrage, and Shin changed his line of fire. The Morpho momentarily paused its fire to cool down its machine guns, and Shin shifted his gaze to its left-rear autocannon. The Juggernaut's system automatically traced his gaze's movements and locked onto its target, and he squeezed the trigger just as the reticle inverted into red. No matter how solid the Morpho's armor was, its autocannons couldn't have been fortified.

Hit with an anti-tank warhead to their mechanical section, the Vulcan cannons dispersed. As black flames billowed forth, lightning streaked through the pale sky. The flock of Edelfalter took off, as if startled away, while Undertaker rushed through the blue flocks and the flames it created.

Remaining distance: two thousand meters. The enemy was within range of his main armament, his 88 mm cannon. At this distance, the battle was in no way different from fighting a Löwe or a Dinosauria. The fact that there was no time to escape once they'd been locked onto held just as true for Undertaker's 1,600-meters-per-second cannon as it did for the Morpho's 8,000-meters-per-second railgun.

And once he'd gotten this close, the Vulcan's fire couldn't spread out. The Morpho lacked the destructive mobility the Löwe had, and the absurd size of the turret it prided itself on made it that much easier of a target.

Evading the persistent side-sweeping barrage, Shin closed in on it from the left. The Morpho had three cannons on each side, but if approached from one side, its own massive frame prevented it from shooting at the opposite side. With half of its autocannons sealed, it had to increase the rotation cycle to maintain the same rate of fire. One eventually stopped, apparently having run out of bullets, and another overheated, having not received sufficient time to cool down, and burst in a puff of black smoke.

Relative distance: one thousand meters.

Even with the witch's blood running through his veins, he truly was worthy of being called an heir to the Nouzen name—the last of their line. Watching the white Feldreß take advantage of those momentary lulls that could hardly be called pauses to slip through a near ceaseless barrage of quite literally hundreds

of shots per second, Kiriya couldn't hold back his admiration.

The coolheadedness to dance upon the razor's edge that separated life from death. And the slyness to seal and shave away Kiriya's own weapons. And there wasn't a hint, not even a sliver of fear clouding any of those actions. If he'd been in the Empire—together with him by his mistress's side—his homeland may have remained as brilliant as it had been in the days of their forefathers.

The strategic decision to capture and utilize this performance by placing it in a commander unit crept into his mind, but Kiriya scoffed at the idea. Capturing a target alive was much harder than burying it and was that much harder when the opponent was as menacing as this.

The relative distance between them was 1,012 meters. He was moving even closer. His judgment was correct; his 88 mm cannon, smaller than the standardized 120 mm caliber, was incapable of penetrating his armor even at this distance. And yet, the reckless way he approached him... *It was almost as if he was rushing to his death.* It wasn't brave; it was foolhardy.

Sitting inside Fido's container, hidden behind a large hill, Frederica watched over the battle with her special ability. When she was in the Empire's fortress, she *saw* the Imperial guard's battles many times, and aside from Kiriya, there were several others among them from the Nouzen clan. But even compared to them all, Shin was exceptional.

The latent prowess passed down through his bloodline and the talent he was born with. Five years struggling against death polished those skills to make him into one of the most skilled warriors in his clan's history, if not the strongest of them all. Had Kiriya still been alive, even with the four-year gap between them, Shin would have probably still been better.

But Kiriya was not human anymore. He was a weapon, equipped with a powerful 4,000 mm barrel, armor much thicker than the Juggernaut's, and Vulcan cannons. And for Undertaker, who specialized in close-quarters combat, he was the worst possible opponent.

Undertaker closed their distance, almost literally slipping through the endless curtain of bullets. A single error in judgment, even one maneuver incorrectly

executed, would decide the result of this duel. Just watching it made her heart ache with concern.

“...Pi.”

The container rattled as Fido wobbled nervously. Perhaps the faithful Scavenger wished to rush out and help its master in his clash with the giant metallic dragon. Perhaps to expose itself to the enemy’s fire in his stead or to serve as a diversion to create an opening for attack. The only thing stopping Fido from doing that was that it had Frederica to keep safe. Because its one and only master had ordered it to bring her back to the Federacy at all costs.

“...Forgive me.”

“Pi.”

She couldn’t help but smile at how its reaction resembled that of an obedient hound, and then she refocused her “eyes.” She had to see *this* through, if nothing else.

And then she realized.

The knights of the Nouzen clans piloted special Feldreß, different from the Vánagandrs, and even tuned them up to suit their individual specifications. Meanwhile, the high-speed, lightly armored Reginleif was an outlier Feldreß in the Empire’s and Federacy’s development history, which focused on heavily armored units—high-firepower units.

That held equally true for the unique model piloted by Kiriya. It had thick composite armor, a heavy 120 mm tank turret, and a massive frame and propulsion system to support them. Kiriya’s fighting style was based on employing this heavyweight frame with its high-output power packs to trample his opponents.

And she recalled what the boy who’d died the day she’d met him, Shin’s comrade, had told her.

Do you know about Shin’s legendary zero-point failure?

He tried to get a Vánagandr to jump in a mock battle during combat-maneuvers practice. Got himself disqualified immediately for risky piloting.

But despite it being such an amazing feat of piloting capability, Frederica wasn't surprised to hear of it. Because she already knew someone capable of it...

She leaned forward inadvertently, trying to focus on Kiriya's figure reflected in her mind's eye. Thick armor, capable of blocking the penetration of an 88 mm cannon. A massive 800 mm caliber cannon. An elongated frame capable of supporting them, reminiscent of the form of a dragon. A massive form that required an eight-track railway—four times the number of tracks required for a normal train to move—to withstand its weight.

And still.

This Kiriya was still capable of the same feat...!

“—Shinei, no...!”

A long barrel was indeed at a disadvantage if the opponent got to its side. It was easier said than done, of course... But in most cases, a weapon had to pay for its long range by struggling to rotate in close range. Ironically, this Long-Range Artillery type was entrusted to a weapon system of the opposite attribute. And even if it wasn't, Kiriya would never let an opponent take advantage of that weakness...

“You mustn't carelessly get close to him! ...Kiri was, originally, an Operator focused on melee combat, just like you!”

The giant dragon danced about. Its countless pikelike legs kicked against the rail, launching half its massive form high into the air like a serpent raising its head. As it reached its zenith, it twisted its body and turned, falling down into the trails on the opposite side like a wave of metal.

Kicked apart by sharp claws and battered with massive weight, the rails' skeleton—weighing several tons on its own—crumbled, broke apart, and took to the sky. He had destroyed his own means of transportation. Several layers of explosive modules tumbled off his armor. His heavy artillery cannon—never meant to move much at such speeds—likely had its inner mechanisms damaged by this nimble feat.

But in exchange...

...three of its unharmed antiaircraft guns were now turned in Undertaker's direction.

"Wh—?"

Time ground to a near halt as Shin sensed their line of fire fix perfectly on Undertaker. He was in the center of the cross fire. No matter what direction he tried to move in, there was no escape.

As if to make doubly sure, its 800 mm turret, which had remained still until now, swerved in his direction. Electricity crackled at the base of the turret, as if to show off that its charging was complete. From the pitch-black darkness on the other side of the turret's bladelike tips, Shin could hear the familiar sound of agony and hatred...

"Shin! Get back!"

And in the next moment, something impacted against the surface of the Morpho's turret. A fuse set off and burst. Caught by surprise, the massive beast's turret wavered as further autocannon fire assailed it. Using its remaining left legs and a wire anchor to climb up the hill, Wehrwolf fired at full-auto. The Morpho's consciousness shifted toward him.

Stay out of this, nuisance.

Its irritation was palpable. With bullets ricocheting off its body, the Morpho's heavy main armament swerved in Wehrwolf's direction with ominous churning, growling sounds issuing from its inner mechanisms. Having finished revolving, the turret belched fire in what wasn't so much a roar as it was a sheer shock wave. Taking a direct hit, Wehrwolf was blown away from the top of the hill. Shin couldn't tell if Raiden got away in time or not.

In the brief moment that the cannons' sights turned away from him, Undertaker escaped the Vulcan cannons' line of fire, but the three machine guns deployed once again, tracking his movements. With eighteen gun barrels and the fire of an arc discharge on his tail, Shin had to retreat to avoid the line of fire sweeping him down from the side. It was the Morpho's weapon control system. Once it had locked onto the target, its anti-air machine guns tracked and aimed at it automatically for as long as their effective radius allowed.

Their relative distance was once again widened to one thousand meters. The three machine guns he'd supposedly conquered and the Morpho's main armament remained intact.

This...

An icy smile inadvertently played over Shin's lips.

This...could be checkmate.

But contrary to this creeping thought, Shin's frozen eyes scoured the situation, busily groping for an avenue of approach as his combat instincts awakened in full force. The Vulcan cannons began revolving again after pausing for a moment to cool down their machinery.

As he fought as if dancing on thin ice, in the span of a moment that felt as long as an eternity... Just as he got into position to shoot, to cut a path to the enemy, at that very moment...

Suddenly.

A new Resonance target connected to his Para-RAID.

The Federacy's RAID Device was developed based on the quasi-nerve-device data taken from the data tag of the ear cuff model implanted into Shin's and his friends' bodies. Their connection-target settings were wiped when their Republic military records were erased, but if they were merely deleted, restoring the lost data wasn't all that difficult.

Those restored settings were stealthily reinstalled onto the Eighty-Six's RAID Devices on a playful whim by the researchers. No one from the Republic would ever think to Resonate with them anyway, and no one would notice it was there. It was merely a joke, done in honor of the device's original developers.

But settings were settings. And given the right conditions, they would still work as intended.

For example, if someone was to set their Resonance targets to all possible recipients in range other than themselves, the Sensory Resonance would activate...

“To all Juggernauts along the fortress walls!”

Shin didn't recognize the owner of the voice at the time. As the RAID Devices were developed differently, the voice, which would have been perfectly clear under normal conditions, crackled with static and noise.

“Direction 120, distance 8,000, load armor-piercing rounds— Fire!”

In the next moment, the Morpho's entire body was impacted with explosions. It wasn't the destructive blasts of 155 mm and 203 mm artillery fire, which would peel away light armor and destroy with just their shock waves. These impacts came from smaller, weaker, low-caliber rounds. But the sheer number of firing lines was astounding. How many cannons did whoever ordered this deploy to shoot such a barrage of concentrated fire? These rapid, low-flying warheads traveling almost parallel to the ground at a speed beyond the perception of human kinetic vision were probably fired concurrently from countless tank turrets.

Having destroyed the tracks—its only means of movement—the sluggish beast could only sit idly by as it was showered with cannon fire. The anti-armor rounds boring into the Morpho weren't capable of penetrating its heavy armor, but it stiffened as if snapping out of a slumber when the consecutive fire and fragments set off its own reactive armor.

“Resume fire and, in case of a counterattack, dodge at your own discretion! Unidentified unit!”

It was a one-sided, extremely vague query, but Shin somehow realized it was referring to Undertaker.

“You're trying to close in on it, aren't you? We'll hold it at bay, so take the chance to attack!”

Bombardment fire. Its shock waves and flames. The blast issuing from the reactive armor. The countless persistent, heavy flashes and impacts. These all stunned the Morpho's central processor made of liquid micromachines, blanking out its ground-to-ground antiair radar for a moment. As if aiming for that opening, a short-range missile flew into the sky above the Morpho. The shell's fuse triggered and burst. Self-forging projectiles rushed down on the

Morpho like a rain of spears, penetrating its armor, its remaining Vulcan cannons, and its countless segmented legs.

For the first time, the massive beast lost its balance. Its massive steel body bent back in what looked like anguish and then crashed. Without its legs' buffering systems softening the impact, the ground quaked with a heavy thud.

"All units, hold your fire! Now's your chance!"

Shin didn't need to be told. Just as the missile burst, he spurred Undertaker on at maximum speed. Covering the shortest distance between them in little over ten seconds, he somersaulted as the Morpho turned its railgun toward him in a last-ditch effort, finally reaching the range for melee combat, his field of expertise.

Suddenly, chills ran down his spine like a jolt of electricity.

Reflexively pulling back his control sticks, his unit braked suddenly. It wasn't foresight or prediction, merely a movement compelled by a feeling his opponent still had a card up its sleeve. Shin didn't have the time to move any more than that. As his line of sight tipped upward in vain, the footage on his main screen shifted, filling up with silver.

Don't underestimate me...!

Even as his entire body seethed, mangled by the sudden shower of flames, Kiriya wouldn't stop fighting. The armor covering his body shivered as he forced in commands to shake off the explosive shell fragments and self-forging fragments biting into his armor.

I can still fight. Even if I have to take them all down with me, I can still—still kill every single one of them!

Why?

An oddly calm voice drifted into his consciousness. It was Kiriya's own voice from four years ago, when he still had a body capable of maturing. From when, while it had already deepened a long time ago, his voice was still higher than a full-grown adult's. His voice from four years ago, perfectly unchanged.

Why do you go this far? Why do you fight so much? Why do you...try to slaughter everyone like that? Even your last remaining kinsman, who you've never met?

Kiriya laughed, even without lips to curl upward or a throat to produce sound.

Isn't it obvious? It's because fighting is all I have left. The only thing available to me is to throw myself headfirst into this burning battlefield. Nothing else remains to quell the emptiness in my core, in what might be called my soul, but the flames of war and endless conflict.

Catching sight of the enemy reflected on his optical sensor, Kiriya swung toward its cockpit. As a countless flurry of side blows (that would no doubt make a saner person flinch) assaulted his flank, he struck at his last kinsman recklessly, as if to say nothing else mattered anymore. Not even his own life.

If it'll make you...

Those unconscious words bubbled out suddenly, from beyond his seething thoughts.

You, who have nothing, just like me...

If it makes you into what I am, I'll do anything...

The source of the silvery deluge was the snapping of countless wires. The Morpho's four wings spread open, their wires reaching out like a silver torrent that rushed forward at lightning speed. From the massive dragon's perspective, they were strands of hair, but each of the cables was as thick as a child's arm.

Whipping down, they gouged deep into the ground, perhaps drilling into it with their pointed tips. The dirt flew into the air, skimming the area right before Undertaker, which braked suddenly as it all began to transpire. Mud splashed from the ground, clinging to his right pile driver.

And then—

"...!"

After a purple light flashed before his eyes, shocks ran through Shin's body. Every single optical screen, holo-window, and gauge in Undertaker whited out.

Undertaker was thrown back, staggered by electricity traveling through the ground, and Shin barely managed to prevent the machine from toppling over.

His main screen flickered back to life, and several gauges likewise returned to normal. But the holo-windows wouldn't recover, and some of the gauges still displayed random figures, their alert lamps lighting up. And as the scent of some of the parts burning up filled his sealed cockpit...

...he looked up to find the Morpho's countless extended wires creeping in from all directions, with the main body hidden between them. These were wires for close-quarters combat... The Legion were so wary of losing the Morpho, they'd equipped it with countermeasures for every possible scenario.

A tank turret, developed and designed with the intent of concentrating its power to a minimal point in order to penetrate the enemy's thick armor, was a bad option to blow away the countless wires at once. The uneven grid of wires piercing the ground seemed to possess an irregular pattern, but it actually didn't have a single gap large enough for the Juggernaut to slip through, and any attempt to tear through them would likely result only in them coiling tightly around him.

“Capacitor overload confirmed... Those are conduction wires. What an ugly weapon...”

The voice on the other side of the line was thick with tension and anxiety. It looked like they hadn't anticipated this, either.

“Avoid contact with the wires. They're coursing with the electricity powering that gigantic thing and its railgun. Your weapon and propulsion systems likely won't be able to take it... This isn't an obstacle someone like you, who's focused on close-quarters combat, can conquer.”

Then what am I supposed to do?

He didn't actually put that question into words, but it seemed the person on the other side nodded.

“In which case—?”

At that moment, the owner of the voice on the other side of the lines seemed to have narrowed their eyes coldly, as a tinge of true, awe-inspiring fighting spirit, as sharp as a blade, filled their voice.

“We’ll do something about this.”

Just then, another missile sailed into the air. Several wires bended and warped like whips, slapping the approaching projectile away from the side. Attacked from both sides, the missile was cut into round slices. But what spilled from within it weren’t solid explosives or rocket fuel, but large amounts of a muddy, highly viscous liquid.

As the liquid dispersed into the air, gravity took effect, causing it to rain down on the Morpho. The Morpho’s black armor and wires were drenched in brown as the liquid clung to them stubbornly.

And then:

“—Five seconds... Two, one... Ignition.”

A timed fuse activated. The combustible liquid caught fire within seconds and flared up.

?!

A silent scream shook the air as well as the Morpho’s own body as the flames began consuming it. It was almost like an odd sort of revenge for the Legion’s previous tactic of smoking them out using fire earlier—a bombardment by way of incendiary bombs. The Morpho writhed, unable to move with its rails destroyed and its legs lost. Its remaining jointed legs missed the tracks and stomped into the ground, sinking into the quagmire beneath as it was incapable of supporting its weight of over one thousand tons.

Unlike humans, who burned to death after being exposed to flames of a few hundred degrees Celsius, the Legion’s body consisted of metal capable of withstanding even this inferno of 1,300 degrees. The thick armor prevented the heat from penetrating the machine’s internal mechanisms, and it didn’t have pilots who would choke from the oxygen burning away.

And still, the human instincts that remained within the metallic dragon made it tremble in fear of the fire. As it burned within the combustible fluid’s flames, the electricity running through the wires petered out. Its circuitry went into emergency shutdown due to exposure to high temperatures, and the sudden exposure to the heat lowered the metal wires’ conductivity. Having lost their

ability to conduct electricity, the wires were reduced to nothing but thin cords.

Retracted as the dragon writhed and roared soundlessly, the wires were ejected from the ground one after another, flicking into the air. The flames hungrily lapped at the bluish-purple dawn, reducing everything to chaos. And as that happened, Shin pushed his control sticks forward.

The Morpho's blue optical sensor swerved in Undertaker's direction as it leaped toward it as if being launched. Focusing on it, all the wires bore down on it at once, their talon-like tips curved toward their prey as they bore down on it with an arc. Shin looked up to the heavens for a single moment before the wires swung down. They were the same wires that had cut down a guided missile like butter a moment ago.

He could hear someone call for him from the wireless:

"It's still moving...?! That's no good! Please! Dodge it!"

...No.

Shin's crimson eyes perceived each wire as the storm of slashes crashed down on him, each from a different angle and launched at a slightly different time. His concentration reached its peak in a moment that seemed to last forever. He was aware of which wires would stand in the route he would make toward the Morpho—and how to avoid or cut through them. The wires were still burning, their conductivity still lost. And that made them nothing more than a slightly agile enemy.

He took a low, sharp leap forward. The first slash bore down on the silvery Feldreß. They intersected, and the blade it swung at the last second cut through the wire horizontally. The momentum of his landing kept him flying straight forward, allowing him to evade the second slash and cut through it as he did. The third and fourth came at him diagonally from both sides, and he intercepted both from their opposite directions and went on to clear away the remaining spears in quick succession as he rushed forward.

Small-caliber projectiles slipped through the deluge of spear-like wires one after another, forming parabolas as they soared through the sky, their timed fuses bursting in midair. The shock waves generated by the countless blasts occurring below the slashing wires formed an invisible shield that deflected

them away from Undertaker.

Undertaker rushed onward under their protection, dodging another slash by using one of the artillery turrets thrust into the ground like grave markers as a foothold to jump into the air. But forcing him into the foolish act of jumping into the air, where he didn't have the freedom of movement to dodge, was the Morpho's plan, and it brought down a splitting blow on him.

Yeah... He really is the type I'd never be able to stand.

So Shin thought, recalling an exchange he once had with Frederica.

Such a fundamentally straightforward person is someone I could never put up with. He seems so fixated on flaunting the part of him that's inherently and irreparably broken, as if to say I'm just as distorted as he is.

It makes me sick.

He fired a wire anchor. As the anchor dug into the Morpho's burnt armor, Shin coiled it back, descending in what wasn't a free fall, but a speed that was closer to crashing. With the slash grazing his right blade's fixture, blowing it clean off, making it the sole sacrifice, he landed on the massive dragon's back.

"Frederica... Where is your knight?"

He asked her this unnecessary question, because shooting down her knight was her wish and desire. Even if he would be the one pulling the trigger in practice, it was up to Frederica to work up the resolve to commit the deed.

He could feel her shivering beyond the Resonance.

".....Kiri...is..."

For a moment, Frederica saw a vision.

At the front garden of the Adler Holst—the palace of the old Imperial throne, which she lacked the experience to feel nostalgic for—clad in the empire's black-and-red uniform, stood Kiriya, scolding someone in his usual straitlaced manner.

The subject of his scolding was a red-eyed boy of mixed blood with a similar physique to his own, albeit several years younger, who was ignoring his elder's prattling with a disinterested expression. That only made Kiriya's shouting grow

even louder, and an intellectual young man in glasses—the boy’s older brother—stepped in to mediate between the two.

It was a sight that had never transpired in reality.

Frederica’s ability allowed her to gaze only at the past and present. Which meant this was nothing but a construct of her wishes, an illusion. But if...if only this war had never happened. If only the joining of the Nouzens’ heir and a Pyrope woman, the mixing of their races, hadn’t been forbidden, leading them to flee to the Republic. If only that tradition hadn’t existed.

If only the Empire had been a bit kinder to its own people, to other countries, to their fellow citizens...

...perhaps this sight would have been possible. And she was the final descendant to the line that could make that happen.

The young empress bit her pink lips.

If that’s the case...I know what I must do from here on.

“Kiriya is...”

Her hesitation lasted for only a moment. Frederica chose not to flee from the resolve needed to kill someone precious to her.

“Behind the main turret. In the gap between the first pair of wings.”

Looking around the back of the massive Legion he had clung to, his gaze fell on a maintenance hatch sticking out of the point she’d designated. Cutting even more wires extending from the root of the wings, he ran past pillars of napalm fire. The Morpho roared, its legs kicking wildly like a centipede that had vinegar poured on it. As it jolted its heavy one-thousand-ton body, its writhing nearly sent the lightweight Juggernaut flying.

“Tch...!”

Spreading out his four legs, he also activated his pile drivers. The piles dug into the Morpho’s armor forcefully, and in exchange for a powerful jolt that made even Shin—accustomed as he was to high-mobility maneuvering—clench his teeth in agony, Undertaker was fixed and stabilized to the machine’s back.

Meanwhile, the Morpho writhed and raged, swerving and turning its turret

upward like an animal challenging the gods. It had charged its railgun with more electricity than ever before—enough to be on the verge of rampaging. The shock wave tore through the air as lightning ran through the barrel. Shin's eyes opened wide as he realized what it intended to do.

Mutually assured destruction.

It was going to take Shin down with it...!

The emotion that rushed through him at that moment was...oddly enough, neither terror nor regret, but overwhelming relief.

So this.

This is the end.

A gentle, far-too-weak *bang* echoed across the battlefield, silencing all else.

The source of that sound was a pistol's gunfire. It was far outside its effective range, and even if it had hit, it lacked the power to penetrate the Legion's armor—a final weapon meant for no other purpose than to end one's own life.

The Legion instincts that ordered Kiriya to exterminate all possible elements spurred his cracked optical sensor to swerve her way. Likewise, the Juggernaut's system recognized it as an undefined armed target and zoomed in on it automatically.

Frederica stood there, surrounded by the flock of blue butterflies, with pistol in hand. Her pale lips parted:

"Kiri..."

And at that moment, the metallic dragon undoubtedly gazed at his mistress, his empress.

"Princess."

His voice was thick with deep, profound relief.

Frederica then lowered the muzzle of the gun slowly and pointed it at her temple.

Why...? Art you not coming to stop me, dear knight of mine? I will die if you do not. I stand here, where the fires of your suicide will claim me. I will

extinguish your flames with my own flesh and blood...

“Princess!”

The Morpho’s murderous impulses faded away like mist for a single moment. The thunder running through the barrel subsided.

And in that moment, Shin pulled the trigger.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Fido rushing in and skillfully grabbing Frederica with its crane arm. Not even sparing a moment to throw her into the container, it turned around and sped away with all its might.

Percussion, followed by impact. A high-speed, armor-piercing warhead charged with a massive amount of kinetic energy penetrated the Morpho’s armor and inner mechanisms, frying its central processor with the intensity of heat unique to depleted uranium. The Morpho’s interior burst into flames.

“_____!”

The Morpho roared as its liquid-micromachine brain boiled and seethed. Shin grimaced as the roar rattled his eardrums. Black flames spewed forth from the gigantic beast, reducing its liquid micromachines to silvery ash. The sight of it reminded Shin of his brother’s death all too vividly. His brother, whose final words never truly reached him before he disappeared. His brother’s disappearing hand, his disappearing words, which Shin failed to grasp in time.

Trapped in the Morpho’s confines, Frederica’s knight wailed. His final words, his hatred for all life, were truly a cry out to the person he had always sought.

Princess.

Princess.

Princess.

I’ve finally met you once again, but...!

“...That’s enough.”

Shin whispered, knowing those words would never reach him. Just as he could never grasp his brother’s retreating, burning hand. Just as his brother’s voice had faded away, never to echo in his ears again.

The dead were the past. There was no changing their passing, and the coming of the future washed them away regardless of one's desire. The living could never cross paths with them again.

"Even if you linger, nothing will come of it. You'll get nowhere. So just... disappear."

At that moment, Shin felt black eyes on him. And the gaze was somehow full of pity.

That's...just as true for you. You, who, like me, has nothing. No... It's even truer for you.

After all...didn't you just try to die along with me?

When Shin came to, *that* was standing right in front of him. A chill ran through his body. They had the same face. Maybe it was because Shin had never seen his distant relative's face that he imagined his own in its place, or maybe they truly were that similar. Enough for Frederica to mix the two together as many times as she did.

Or maybe...*that* wasn't Frederica's knight anymore...

Fixing his black eyes—the only thing that set the two apart—on Shin, he sneered cruelly. The color of a new moon. The same color as his brother's eyes on that fateful night long ago.

Right. You have nothing.

Nothing to protect. Nowhere to return to. Nothing to aspire to or live for. No one to call for in your final hour. Not a one. Not a single...

...reason to live.

The phantom extending its hands gripped his neck. They weren't his brother's arms, but they probably weren't Kiriya's, either. Those fingers, which were hard from the use of firearms and piloting an armored weapon, were Shin's own...

The hand gripping his throat stabbed its nails into the scar his brother had carved into it... The only thing he had left of him, the sole proof of his brother's existence.

The black eyes sneered.

Didn't you cheat death just to gun him down? Weren't you kept alive for that sole purpose? So now that you've accomplished that...

...you're unnecessary.

You have no reason to stay alive, no matter where you are.

So why...?

Why are you still alive?

They sneered.

You hoped everything would end once you killed it, didn't you? You were so sure it would. And in the end, once again...

...you're all alone.

"...!"

A vision flashed before his eyes. He saw his brother's retreating back clad in a camouflage uniform, a Juggernaut blown away, and the final expressions of the countless comrades he'd had to shoot dead since there was no saving them anymore.

Why...? Why does everyone...always die...?

And leave me behind...?

The Legion abhorred the idea of secret information leaking in the event of their capture, and so they took many countermeasures to prevent that, such as powerful encryption and blow-off panels. And that held all the more true for the Morpho, their precious ace in the hole. A special sensor detected the fatal damage to its central processor, triggering a self-destruct device via an independent circuit.

It wasn't triggered with the intent of taking anyone else down with it, but it was a blast from a highly explosive charge powerful enough to obliterate an over-one-thousand-ton Goliath and its thirty-meter barrel. It burned down the flock of butterflies fluttering nearby, scorched the top of Fido's container as it leaned over Frederica to shield the girl it carried from the blast, and blew Undertaker—still on top of the machine—away like a leaf playing in the wind.

Apparently, he'd lost consciousness for only a brief moment. When he opened his eyes, he could see the dawn sky displayed over his cracked optical screen. Looking up made an odd sense of claustrophobia wash over him, prompting him to push the canopy's release lever down. He knew there was nothing out there to threaten him, and even if there was, he didn't much care right now.

Perhaps the frame was bent out of shape, because the canopy was stuck a bit before popping open, but the blue sky that spread out before him felt just as oppressive and heavy as the one he saw through the corrected image displayed through the computer. A shining azure that felt like it could come crashing down at any second, crushing everything under its weight. Shin heaved a deep sigh and leaned his head against the headrest, closing his eyes.

For some reason he felt awfully...tired.

To keep moving forward was his pride. To fight on until their dying breath was the Eighty-Six's chosen identity, and that was what had carried him this far. But maybe he was simply wandering the first ward's battlefield, searching for the right place to die after burying his brother. He wished for the mechanical ghosts to put an end to him, a mere ghost who couldn't even die properly, the way his brother couldn't.

If only you weren't around.

That was what his brother had once told him—something countless people had since repeated. But still he lived, because he had the objective of putting his brother's ghost to rest. He could tolerate and forgive the fact that he lived on because he had to free his brother's soul. And once he'd lost that, there was no more reason for him to live.

You still have a long life ahead of you.

Those were the final words, the truly final words he'd heard his brother speak. The words of a posthumous separation that came far too late and truly never should have happened. Words that were a parting gift. His brother sincerely loathed to part with him and prayed his future would be a happy one from the bottom of his heart.

But to Shin, that could not have been anything but a curse.

Such a long time. Such a long future he would have to suffer through. He'd never once wished for that. He had truly looked forward to the moment he would face his brother, and it would all end as they took each other out. And despite that...

Brother... Why did you leave me behind again? Why couldn't you take me with you this time...?!

If only you did that, I wouldn't have to feel this way...

"Nng..."

Something like a feral growl, like weeping, escaped his lips. He covered his eyes with a hand, feeling something hot coalesce behind his eyelids. But nothing came... *Reaper*. He'd never once thought that alias to be detestable. He would carry the memories of his departed comrades with him, and he never regretted making the promise to bring them along.

But why...? Why does everyone leave me behind? Why do they leave me all alone...? Why does everyone...so easily...so arbitrarily...disappear...?

He thought he could hear someone cry out, asking to not be left behind. And if he could only say those words himself...would someone, anyone, stay by his side?

He looked to the flaming wreckage of the Morpho. The final resting place of Frederica's knight. The man he'd never met in his lifetime, who'd been so much like Shin but so unlike him as well. The remains of what had once been a ghost with no blood relations, with no land to call his home, who could exist only on the battlefield.

And at the same time, the ultimate fate of a ghost who, despite having become Legion, always had someone to long for. If Shin were to become Legion, whose name would he call? He had no one to cry out to. And that felt all too...hollow.

Hearing the patter of light footsteps approaching, Shin looked up with annoyance. Running through the scattered fragments of lapis lazuli littering the area, Frederica rested her hands on the edge of his cockpit and peeked inside.

“You look like a cadaver in its casket. It’s incredibly ominous.”

Shin scoffed weakly behind closed eyes. The sealed cockpit truly did feel like a casket, and the scattered remains of lapis lazuli were like burial flowers adorning it.

“...Right.”

“What manner of answer is that, you fool...? When will you stop pushing yourself so hard?”

She tried to smile but made no attempt to hide her red, swollen eyelids or the tear marks that trailed down her porcelain cheeks. Frederica’s shoulders remained perked up for only a moment before she sighed, sagging them again.

“Forgive me... The handgun you entrusted me with...”

Looking down to her small, shivering hands, Shin noticed a large crack running down from the ejection port to the frame ahead of it. It was probably hit with shrapnel. The crack likely extended from the interior of the chamber to the barrel, fatal damage for a gun.

“...Yeah.”

Even after coming as far as the Federacy, this pistol that buried his dying comrades was the one thing he never parted with. But oddly enough, he didn’t feel any particular emotions wash over him now. He took it from her with one hand and chucked it into the distance. The lump of metal and reinforced resin made a dull sound as it landed between the remains of countless blue butterflies. Frederica’s eyes traced its trajectory with surprise.

“...Y-you did not have to throw it away.”

“The cylinder and barrel are cracked, and it’s not a Federacy model, so I can’t have it fixed.”

It was used by the old Republic ground forces, but its model was originally produced by one of the Alliance’s weapon manufacturers. If he was to seriously search, perhaps he could find parts to have it repaired, but he wasn’t that attached to it.

Frederica nervously looked down at where Shin’s pistol had fallen.

“Why...? Was it not the pistol that put your dying comrades to rest? Is it not, then, proof of your bond with them? You needn’t let go of it just because it is broken.”

He couldn’t help but laugh at those hollow words. *Bond?*

“I don’t mind... In the end, I was only using them as an excuse to return to the battlefield.”

Even as he promised to bring them with him...he merely wandered around, seeking a place to die. They wouldn’t want to be taken on such a pitiful, ridiculous journey with him.

“That’s—!”

Frederica’s expression contorted into a pained grimace as she raised her voice.

“That’s wrong...! You did not shoulder that weight for such a reason...”

“...”

“What was it you just let go of? I cannot help but think...that the promise you made with your comrades, what you felt when you made that oath, pains you right now...”

Transparent droplets trickled down her pale cheeks, reflecting the light of dawn.

“Your heart has frozen over so much, the heat of the emotions you feel for your comrades can only come across as pain. It hurts. But if the pain becomes too much to bear, you need only rely on others... You having no one to help shoulder your burdens is a thing of the past...”

He narrowed his eyes, hearing her speak as if she knew things he’d never mentioned to her. Given her ability, having her see into his past to some extent was unavoidable—Shin wasn’t capable of controlling his own power, either, after all—but hearing her speak like she knew everything was unpleasant.

“...Sneaking a peek again?”

“Fool. It’s because you keep thinking of the departed... You may claim to have let go of them, but you carry them with you still, which is why I can see them.

There were so many, but you faced them head-on, never once turning away from any of them... How can you write them off as an excuse, you idiot?"

Wiping her eyes roughly with the knuckles of her clenched fist, she turned to face Fido, which was waiting on them a short distance away.

"Fido, go and retrieve the gun this fool threw away. I'll help you look, so surely the two of us will find it."

"Don't move, Fido. We don't have the time to waste on that."

Fido's optical sensor flickered, as if its eyes were spinning from the conflicting orders. But after giving an inquiring beep, for some reason, it reached out to Frederica, grabbing her by the collar like a kitten and tossing her into the cockpit.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"We're taking you back, obviously. With this much damage, if new enemies show up, we'll be in trouble."

They were still far off, but he could feel Legion who had noticed the disturbance begin moving in their direction. All four of his pile drivers were lost, and warning indicators wouldn't stop flashing, alerting him that the propulsion system was strained by his unreasonable maneuvers. He may not have cared much about dying, but he had to bring Frederica back. He had to check to be sure of it, but the Federacy military's main force should be advancing on their position. If he could just avoid combat long enough to regroup with them...

...And then what? It took him only a moment to realize how foolish a question that was. The war with the Legion wasn't over. It would continue after this. And he would fight on in that war...until the day he eventually lost and died. And as for why he fought... What he had to fight for... That was a question he could never answer. A question he had always subconsciously avoided answering.

What would Eugene say if, at the time, he had answered his question by telling him he was fighting to die? If that was what he was fighting for, it wasn't Eugene who should have died back then... It was him.

He was pulled out of his brooding when he felt Frederica's small body hugging him.

“...What is it now?”

“Do not speak to me like that, fool... When we regroup with the main force, take a leave of absence and rest. Or else, soon enough, you will...”

Against his own body—cold from the chill of early morning in the northern climate—Frederica’s had the kind of warmth unique to a child, and that was even more irritating to him. But somehow, he couldn’t bring himself to tear her away from him, and he looked up into the sky. A part of him wished from the bottom of his heart that it would fall on him.

The sun rose, and a flock of butterflies flew away, fluttering their wings as if banished by the morning light. The lapis lazuli wind surged for a moment. A nacre glow filled his field of vision and then scattered upward, as if inhaled by the heavens.

It was said that butterflies, regardless of culture, region, or age, are the symbol of the souls of the departed, returning home—

He’d extended his hand subconsciously, but his fingers naturally caught nothing but air. He could only look up in vain at the blue glimmer fading into the sky...

Sighing once, he activated the cockpit’s sealing system. The canopy closed down. An indicator lit up, signifying the cockpit was airtight. Unlike the Republic’s Juggernaut, the Federacy model’s cockpit was set to protect its pilot from biological/chemical weapons. He reactivated the main system, which had gone into standby mode. The information holo-windows were finally restored and turned on, and the blackened optical screen lit up.

As his optical screen flickered on, it was suddenly filled with crimson light.

Red petals fluttered through the wind. It was as if the lycoris flowers, which had been almost trampled by the flock of blue butterflies, had extended their petals and stamens in a radial pattern, all raising their unique crimson stems at once.

The entire field was filled with the flowers. It was a sea of lycoris growing en masse, dyed in a shade of red characteristic to these flowers, which, depending on the season, were sometimes completely free of petals. As the wind blew

through them, they rustled like some kind of inaudible monster. Petals that were torn apart by robotic legs fluttered about ephemerally in the red world that spread as far as the eye could see.

And at some point, she appeared, gasping for air. There stood a girl clad in a blue military uniform, her eyes and hair a brilliant shade of silver.



The white flash tearing through the moonless dawn could be seen in the Gran Mur's interception cannon's control room monitor.

Lena walked across the crimson carpet of lycoris, stopping before the unidentified Feldreß sitting with its legs buried beneath the flowers. It was a type that was probably conceptually different from the Republic's Feldreß. It had four jointed, nimble legs, and its streamlined, aerodynamic frame was in the color of polished bone.

It was equipped with an 88 mm cannon on its gun-mount arm and had high-frequency blades on both sides—one of them currently broken. It had a functional beauty distinctive of a highly efficient weapon. The cold, ferocious beauty of a sword or a spear forged and tempered for the sake of true combat.

And yet...why? For some reason, it reminded her of the Juggernaut. It gave the ominous impression of a skeleton prowling the battlefield, searching for its lost head.

There was no telling if it was friend or foe. For all she knew, it could be a new type of Legion. But if nothing else, it was an enemy of that Long-Range Artillery type—the Legion that had shattered the Gran Mur.

That was why she'd given it covering fire. Whoever it was, they'd offered no response, but they'd fought together to defeat their common enemy, and when she'd seen the Long-Range Artillery type self-destruct in an attempt to take the Feldreß with it, she'd rushed out to confirm its status.

The pilot—if there indeed was someone piloting this craft—could've been seriously injured. And even if not, she wanted to extend a word of thanks for their aid. Even though the minefields on the path to the Gran Mur had been broken through, they were still a dangerous zone in terms of military safety standards, with only 80 percent of the mines removed. She had been picked up by Cyclops's Juggernaut and carried all the way here.

Staring at the unknown Feldreß standing there silently through the Juggernaut's optical sensor, Cyclops's Processor, Captain Shiden Iida, parted her lips to speak.

“You should bail in case anything happens, Your Majesty. If you run around the battlefield unprotected like this, you’ll only get in the way.”

“No. Besides, there’s no guarantee something will happen.”

She drew closer just as the unidentified craft rose to its feet. It seemed the pilot, or perhaps the craft itself, hadn’t taken so much damage it couldn’t move. Her gaze fell on the personal mark of a headless skeleton carrying a shovel drawn on the armor’s flank. Shiden gave an unusually surprised “Ah...”

“It can’t be...?! No, but that’s...”

“Captain Iida?”

“Don’t you realize that’s...? Ah, that’s right. You never did actually see it, did you...?”

“...?”

Shiden then fell silent. The unidentified craft’s red optical sensor turned their way.

A silver-haired girl stood in the sea of red flowers. The cuffs of her blue raised-collar uniform were burnt and torn. A large, clumsy assault rifle dangled from her slender shoulder. Her eyes were the same silvery hue as her hair, now matted with soot.

It was the appearance he’d seen plenty of times, despite not wanting to see it then or ever again. Once a month, during air transports. On transfers to new posts. The Republic. The ones who drove the Eighty-Six out into the battlefield, transferred them to more severe battlefields if they survived, and eventually ordered them to die.

That glittering hair fluttering in the gentle breeze. That lustrous appearance. Shin’s breath caught in his throat as the young girl—whose face he couldn’t quite make out—somehow overlapped with the appearance of a boy his age, clad in a steel-blue uniform.

You should have died instead.

Averting his eyes promptly, he held his breath once again when his gaze then fell on a black-armored Juggernaut—the same kind of faulty aluminum coffin he’d once piloted in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. And behind that, he made out the hazy outlines of a gray artificial concrete structure... The Gran Mur.

A faint smile found its way to his lips.

He'd intended to advance as far as he could, but apparently, he'd been going around in circles and ended up back where it all began.

Frederica stiffened as she looked up at him, and Shin pretended he wasn't aware of how pained his expression was when he opened the Feldreß's communications.

"...May I assume you're a commander of the Republic of San Magnolia's military?"

Perhaps because of the damage it had sustained while fighting the Long-Range Artillery type earlier, the audio of its outer speaker was cracked and hard to pick up. The pilot spoke with a curt, blunt, and dry tone.

"That is correct. And you are...?"

"I am a member of the Federal Republic of Giad's 177th Armored Division."

Contrary to its courteous statement, the tone of that voice felt terribly distant. If she was to take this person's affiliation to be truth, it would mean he—she inferred he was male from his voice, as distorted and broken as it was—was from the military personnel of Giad, which was an enemy country of theirs a decade ago.

There was probably some sort of political uprising that led to their changing the name of their country, and it seemed they were common enemies of the Legion. But that in and of itself didn't mean they would see a Republic military officer as an ally. He didn't give away his name or rank, probably to maintain military secrecy... The Eighty-Six didn't tell the Republic citizens their names unless explicitly asked, though, so she'd stopped seeing it as disrespectful.

"I've acted out this operation to eliminate the Morpho—the railgun-equipped Legion—in order to protect the Federacy's defensive line. I am grateful for your assistance in the operation."

"No thanks are necessary... But is it just you? You broke through the Legion's territory all on your own? Why were you ordered on such a terrible operation...?"

"—"

The silence she got in return somehow felt terribly cold. Lena noticed Shiden stifling a chuckle over the Resonance and clicked her tongue. A solo mission, or perhaps a small group, advancing through Legion territories... The survivors of the first defensive wards of each front of the Republic were sent on such Special Reconnaissance missions at the end of their service terms, for the purpose of being exterminated. What right did she have to call something similar “terrible”...?

“...Your concern is appreciated, but the western front’s main force is advancing on this position from behind. I should have no trouble regrouping with them.”

“I...see. That’s goo—”

“Would you like to come with us?”

“Eh?”

“If it’s only a small number of personnel, I believe the main force will be able to offer you protection.”

Contrary to the nature of his offer, the pilot’s voice was extremely detached and businesslike. He spoke as if he could tell how, for over two months, the Republic had been in a state of constant turmoil, with its defensive line pushed back and its sphere of influence and military power diminishing greatly. And he asked them if they were willing to run away on their own. But his tone was a hollow one, without a shred of ridicule or insult.

At the same time, he spoke to her as one would to a puzzled child they found, who had walked so long and so hard that they became exhausted and lost their way. And that annoyed her a little. As if he had arbitrarily decided that they wouldn’t be willing to fight anyway and was mocking them for it.

“No. I cannot abandon this country and the comrades who fight under me. Even if we never win and only defeat awaits us...I will continue to fight.”

The Federacy officer chuckled faintly at Lena’s declaration.

Shin couldn’t hold back a snicker at those excessive words. Fight? The Republic’s military personnel, who shut themselves up behind their walls until their homeland came to ruin? No, there was an even more fundamental question here.

“What for?”

He was surprised there were any survivors, but the Republic was probably ruined all the same. The only things they could scrape together to attack a long-range tactical weapon were a scarce few interception cannons and the Juggernauts' low-range fire, and judging by her rank insignia, this girl was only a lieutenant. A junior on-site commander who wasn't even on a field officer's level. Whatever scarce fighting capability and manpower the Republic's military did have were reduced to almost nothing over these two months.

...If the major survived, would she be here now?

The thought crossed his mind, but he shook his head, telling himself there was no point in asking himself that. Whatever the case, they had neither reason nor need to fight, nor the power to do so. And still, this girl said they would fight? For what?

“Are you rushing to your deaths...? If that's the case, you would've been better off not fighting back at all.”

He couldn't hold back a voiceless laugh of disdain as he spoke. Just *who*, exactly, was he directing those words to?

“If that's the case, you would've been better off not fighting back at all.”

Lena clenched her fists at the sound of that cold, blunt question that teetered between ridicule and self-deprecation.

“Even if we don't have the power to do it...”

Is he implying that the powerless shouldn't fight? That it's meaningless, and they mustn't try to cling to life? Impossible.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Cyclops, the Juggernaut standing all too brittle and weak in comparison to the Federacy's unit. There were people who fought to the bitter end, knowing they could never survive, with only their machines as their sole partners and final resting places. Those words stood as an affront to all they represented—and she would not let that insult go unaddressed!

“We will not give up and sit silently, waiting for death to claim us. We will fight to the very end, until even our final breath abandons us. There were

people who lived by those words, and they believed I could be like them. And that's why we—why I—”

If one day, you make it to our final destination, would you please leave flowers?

To repay those words. To answer those feelings he'd entrusted her with.

We're off, Major.

Shin.

It's because you left me those words that I will definitely catch up to you someday.

“In order to catch up to them, who survived to the very end—so I can take them with me and go further than ever before, I will fight...! I am Lieutenant Vladilena Milizé, commander of the old Republic defense forces, and I will never, ever, turn my back on this war!”

For a long moment, the Federacy craft looked down at her with what felt like stupefied surprise.

“...?! Major...?!”

The dumbfounded voice that crackled from the speaker had, for some reason, referred to her in a rank different from the one she'd identified herself with. The Republic and the Federacy used roughly the same terminology, but sometimes certain words had different meanings. It was especially true for military jargon. The same word might not specify the same rank.

After a long silence, where the Federacy officer seemed to be on the verge of saying something, he eventually spoke:

“...They're no doubt long dead by now. What duty do you have to the departed?”

His tone was terribly unnatural, as if he was trying to keep up appearances, and at the same time, it almost felt like...he was trying to cling to something. Like a lost child, timidly reaching out to a person they longed for. And it was because of that impression that she felt inclined to answer.

“They asked me to never forget them.”

It was a wish she was entrusted with on a night where they stood under the

same sky, looking up at flowers of different colors. When they exchanged an impossible promise to someday watch fireworks together.

I may not be able to act on that promise, but... No, that's wrong. That's not all. It's because I don't want to forget about him. He, who, for how indifferent he was, left so much behind. I don't want the last traces of him to disappear from this world... So long as I remember him, he will wait for me at his final destination.

"It was because they warned me about this catastrophe—that this large-scale offensive was coming—that I've been able to survive this long. It was because they wished for me to survive, because they told me that we would meet again someday, that I continue to fight. I'm alive, here and now, *because he was there.*"

"..."

"And that's why I want to answer those feelings. They may be gone, but I still wish to reach their final destination. To reach where they ended up while they still lived, and this time... Together..."

Since I can no longer hope to live alongside them...

"...I wish to fight together with them—to take them with me. Beyond this battlefield."

That answer made Shin let go of a long-held breath. Those words weren't directed at him the way he was now. She was only answering those unbearably embarrassing, saccharine words he'd spouted a year ago, when he didn't know what he truly wished for and what lay beyond that wish. And yet...

Because he was there.

I wish to fight together with them.

Those words made him happy.

His smile was faint. But there was no point in revealing his name now. After she spent a year fighting alone, following in their footsteps, the sight that greeted her shouldn't be on this battlefield, where he sat, paralyzed and defeated...

“...You’re the same.”

“...Huh?”

“It’s as true for you as it was for him. It’s because you fought to the bitter end, because you survived this far, that you’re able to stand here today.”

The sun rose, and fresh sunlight illuminated her features from the front.

“And I think that’s something you can take pride in.”

And in his first-ever sight of her, through the cracked optical screen, she wore a gentle smile...

The Federacy craft’s red optical sensor looked down at Lena in silence. It seemed somehow a little more sober to her, as if something that had possessed it until now was absent from its artificial gaze. Something that had hung over it like a shadow, like the dust of battle or exhaustion, was gone now.

“...Major.”

He parted his lips to speak with a hesitant awkwardness, wishing to say something but unsure of what. The external speaker’s sound was thick with static, making it hard to discern his age, but Lena somehow felt he was the same age as she was.

“Major, I...”

A pause. Suddenly, the person behind the armored machine tensed up. The machine’s optical sensor turned to the far north, where the Eintagsfliege’s silvery clouds brewed ominously. After a brief moment, Shiden’s voice moaned at her from inside Cyclops, standing next to her.

“Bad news, Your Majesty. I just got a report from Milan, up on the Gran Mur... There’s Legion heading our way!”

“Oh no! You, from the Federacy, evacuate with us...”

“...No.”

The voice that prickled her ears, mixed with heavy static, belonged to neither Shiden nor the Federacy officer. A flock of air-to-air missiles rushed from the east into the northern skies, penetrating the silver clouds and blooming into flowers of flames. A second volley drew an arc and fell into the ground beneath the Eintagsfliege—into the Legion swarming there.

The angular silhouette of a combat helicopter flew in from over the ridgeline, its rotor thundering around them, accompanied by a formation of low-altitude-flight utility helicopters and transport choppers. The voice of its pilot crackled from the helicopter's outer speaker, disturbing the crisp morning air.

"A job well done, First Lieutenant. Leave the rest to us."

The utility helicopters filled with armored infantry, as well as the larger transport helicopters, touched down on the red battlefield. The petals were torn away and blown off by their intense downburst, drawing red patterns over the azure sky. Armored infantry equipped with heavy assault rifles ran around, deploying over the area.

Shin watched through his cracked optical screen as a squadron rushed over to Lena and the Juggernaut. Lena, at first, seemed rather taken aback as the armored infantry, clad in black metal, approached her. But she was filled with relief when one of them raised his helmet and revealed his face.

The way she simply handed over her assault rifle when asked made him think she truly hadn't changed. He watched absentmindedly as they seemed to have trouble adapting to how the situation had changed rapidly and, after some discussion, opened the black Juggernaut's canopy, when his RAID Device activated.

"...Are you all right, Shin?"

The voice of the man who spoke to him wasn't that of the chief of staff or the division commander.

"I see the cavalry arrived on time. We had to pull emergency forces from the other fronts to accommodate the change in plans, though."

Shin sighed at the annoyingly prideful voice of the man on the other side of the Resonance. He was saved. He was really, truly saved.

"Ernst. When we get back, I'll have to throw something at you."

Maybe a can of paint would suffice. With the lid off, of course.

"What—? Why all of a sudden?! Why do I deserve this treatment when I'm just worried for my adorable children?!"

Shin cut out the call. A few moments later, Frederica grimaced at him,

pressing a hand on her own RAID Device.

“I sympathize with your feelings on the matter, Shinei, truly I do, but answer him. That foolish paper pusher started weeping crocodile tears in my ears, and it is ever so irritating.”

He’d tossed his RAID Device away when he shut out the call, so he reluctantly accepted Frederica’s RAID Device and reconnected it.

“You’re still on the front lines, Ernst?”

“Come now, I’m the Federacy military’s supreme commander. How could I not be on the front lines at times like this?”

“If the president, even a temporary one, takes a stray bullet while running around the battlefield, it’ll be a crisis.”

“Even a temporary one... If that happens, it happens, and the vice president will take over for me. Why do you think we even have that role anyway?”

It may have made sense, but it was still crazy to hear, especially coming so pleasantly and easily from the temporary president of a country.

“According to the report from the advance forces, you’ve already made contact with them... After this operation is concluded, the Federacy military will begin carrying out a rescue operation in the Republic of San Magnolia. Deployed United Kingdom drones intercepted their wireless transmissions. The three countries held a conference, and we decided that abandoning them after we acknowledged them as survivors would be inhumane. And we’ve also recognized that if they build a second Morpho and encamp it in fortified Republic territory, it would be far too grave of a threat.”

“ ... ”

“From the Federacy’s perspective, this is also a rescue operation for our brethren... Eighty-Six, like you. But I suppose that isn’t a homeland you wish to return to, is it? If you say you don’t want to fight to save your oppressors, we can send you back after the main force advances...”

“No.”

He shook his head.

“I’ll stay here. I don’t really want to save the Republic... But there are people there I don’t want to leave to their fates.”

“...I see.”

On the other side of the Resonance, he felt the person who was technically his adoptive father smile faintly.

“Yes. In addition...if you’ve completed the mission objective, please report it properly, First Lieutenant Nouzen. It’s fine that you didn’t this time, since the others gave their report on your behalf.”

Shin looked up in surprise.

“There are survivors?”

“...That should be the first thing you ask, asshole.”

He looked up nonchalantly as another voice cut into the conversation. Raiden.

“Believe it or not, the whole squad, the lieutenant colonel included, survived. If anything, with the way you ragdolled off the Morpho after that explosion, I was worried you might’ve been the one to kick the bucket... Only a little worried, though.”

“Kurena cried like a baby again. It was hell. Apparently, her RAID Device got wrecked when she got attacked, and she only tried to Resonate with you.”

“I did not cry!”

“It wasn’t only your fault this time, but this is the second time you made poor Kurena cry, you know? Could you please stop pulling crazy stunts like that?”

His comrades, who had apparently regrouped, kept clamoring over the Resonance. He didn’t know if it was heaven or hell, but whatever the afterlife was, it seemed to hate these guys as much as it hated him. Looking up, he saw a small group clad in flight suits leaning out of the window and waving at him from the utility helicopter flying in midair—and a tall silhouette walking their way from a hill three kilometers away.

It looked like, this time, not a single one of them...went ahead of him.

The moment he sighed in relief, all strength abandoned him. Several days’ worth of exhaustion—and the strain of his concentration being pushed to the limits in the last battle—hit him in the form of light vertigo. As he closed his eyes, Ernst, apparently understanding perfectly what was happening, spoke.

“You did well, Shin. Leave retaking the beachhead to the advance party and get some rest.”

“—Roger.”

“Also, Frederica. Once you get back, prepare yourself for some serious discipline.”

Frederica gulped audibly, and as she looked up at Shin as if pleading for help, he spoke into the Resonance:

“I’ll pack her up in a container and send her over.”

“Shinei?! You dare betray me?!”

“Ah-ha-ha, I’ll be counting on you, Big Brother.”

Leaving that laughter as his parting remark, Ernst shut down the Resonance. Frederica, on the other hand, turned her face away in a sulking gesture.

“...I cannot return until we regroup with the main force anyway. I shall only come back when you return to the Federacy.”

“It’s not like we need you as a hostage anymore.”

“So it seems.”

Giving a dissatisfied “Hmph,” Frederica craned her neck to look up at him. With how cramped the cockpit was, she was sitting on his knees, making it so her head reached his chest.

“That stupid paper pusher cut into the conversation at the worst possible time and ruined everything. Are you sure you should not have mentioned your name to her, though? Was she not your superior officer in the Republic?”

“...I don’t recall ever telling you about the major.”

Shin realized only as he spoke.

Oh, right.

“Have you forgotten about my power? The ability to see the past and present of those I know runs through my veins.”

...That’s right.

Her red eyes glimmered like a kitten that had cornered a baby mouse, making Shin feel that it would probably be for the best to not ask exactly what she saw.

“The memories I see are whatever the person I’m observing is recalling at the

moment, even if only subconsciously. When that woman named herself, you were uncharacteristically surprised. So I saw the nature of what connection you had...”

Well, this sucks.

“I believe you said something to the effect of ‘We’re off’...? Surely you’re pleased that she came after you, no? Are you sure you’re all right with not giving her your name after she so gallantly followed in your footsteps?”

Looking at Frederica smirking at him, Shin sighed lightly. Something really annoyed him about the way she was freely teasing him like this... But it also felt like the first time she made a face fitting for a girl her age.

“...I can’t give her my name yet.”

Not when he was only seeking a place to die and hadn’t progressed at all since the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

“If she says she’s caught up, I can’t let this be what she sees at the end of that road. What she sees when she catches up to us shouldn’t be...”

Him kneeling down on this crumbled earth.

“...shouldn’t be this battlefield.”

Frederica sighed with astonishment.

“How do I put this...? You truly are a boy after all.”

“...?”

“I am saying you are the kind of creature who puts on airs at the oddest of times.”

Leaving that exasperated remark, Frederica gave him a sidelong glance and cocked an eyebrow.

“Incidentally, did you notice? What you just said was your answer.”

Frederica’s eyes sparkled proudly for some reason at his surprised countenance.

“The final destination that girl reaches must be a grand spectacle that was worth the effort she expended in making it there. And the path she follows is

the one you leave in your wake... Bearing this in mind, where is it that you should be headed?"

You've just found the answer to that question all by yourself...

Those crimson eyes—so much like his own—looked back at him, smiling softly.

EPILOGUE

WE'LL MEET AGAIN

<No Face to first wide area network.>

<All phases of operation concluded.>

<Operation complete. All Legion belonging to first wide area network are to suspend combat.>

<Retreat to Legion-controlled territory.>

It could be concluded that the first multinational joint operation since the outbreak of the war with the Legion was a success. That said, they failed in retaking the entirety of the Legion's territories, but the opinion of the three countries was that the line they captured along the Highway Corridor and to the west of it would be pivotal in expanding their spheres of influence.

The Legion failed in an offensive that took years to prepare for, and having been forced into retreat, they likely wouldn't be able to promptly recommence their invasion.

If the forces of humankind stood together, it was possible to resist the Legion. And that was a faint yet monumental hope.

"That said, this isn't a situation where we can rest on our laurels."

Outside the window was a view of light morning snow falling on the Federacy capital, Sankt Jeder. Standing before the large desk in the president's office, the western front's army's chief of staff and the commander of the 177th Armored Division spoke.

"We've lost well over sixty percent of the western front's army. We don't have enough standard troops to fill in the numbers, so we're talking with every

military academy, special officer academy, and conscription camp to push their curriculums forward, as well as pushing for more reserves. We can't afford to have insufficient training, though. And encouraging more to join the conscription camps will lead to a decline in our national power."

During wartime, the military is the kind of industry that consumes large amounts of resources and manpower despite not producing anything. And so the age groups in charge of production activities and increasing the population are forced to flow into the army's pool of personnel, gradually chipping away at the country's potential national power. The United Kingdom and the Alliance were likely facing similar hardships. Their total population was shrinking, but the situation could very well only be becoming more and more severe.

"By contrast, we may have decreased the Legion's main forces, but the Weisel and the Admiral remain intact. And since they're mass-produced weapons, their reproduction speed is incredibly rapid compared to our own... The war situation is only going to become worse going forward."

"You don't have to beat around the bush, Major General. What you're trying to say is that if we keep with our current strategy of slow, gradual advance, humankind will be stomped out and defeated before we manage to retake the continent... Correct?"

"Yes. And therefore, I think we need to reconsider our approach for this war..."

Even regardless of that, if another attack on the same scale was mounted against them, they would not be able to push them back. Such was the military's perspective after how, despite having achieved all their objectives during the large-scale offensive and the Morpho takedown operation, the Legion still had the initiative and led them by the nose, forcing them to suffer massive losses.

"While keeping with our gradual advance, we will employ limited offensive strategies. While we hold on to our defensive lines as before, we will establish and deploy a special, independent force focused on launching concentrated attacks on important strategic points for the Legion. And while they were the first candidates I nominated out of everyone on the western front, I was

surprised to see you come up with the same suggestion, Your Excellency.”

They—who were without a doubt elites even within a militaristic country like the Federacy.

“The Eighty-Six. The young soldiers we’ve rescued from the former Republic’s borders will make up the mobile strike force... With all due respect, Your Excellency, I never would have expected you to offer up those children as a sacrifice for the country’s peace.”

“Even if I was to speak against it, they wished to enlist—and as frontline soldiers, at that. There’s no point in arguing.”

Ernst responded quietly, looking out the window at the sights of a snowy Sankt Jeder, where tumultuous preparations were underway for the Eve of the Holy Birthday, the very symbol of winter.

“They have their own set of values, and I haven’t the right to disregard them because they don’t align with my own. If they still choose the battlefield, the least I can do is let them stay together, and besides, with regards to Shin...to *Captain Nouzen*, I still feel a need to *keep him out of danger*, you see.”

He looked down at the electronic document deployed in a hologram in midair. The personnel files of espers belonging to the Federacy had a special mark applied to them. This personnel file had the mark emblazoned on it in striking color and was filled with countless columns of text, special mentions regarding the latest sequence of operations.

“In addition to making concentrated strikes on strategic points for the Legion, the strike force is also to be dispatched to our neighboring countries as reinforcements. Said countries will also be placing their own guest officers in the unit, so it will surely draw attention from the outside... As convenient a warning device as he might be, I won’t let you use him as a guinea pig.”

While the major general stiffened at the sidelong glance cast his way, the chief of staff merely scoffed.

“It saddens me to see you suspect our army to be so morally depraved, Your Excellency.”

Contrary to his words, the chief of staff wore a smile that almost seemed to

boast of his faults, and he tilted his head to one side.

“Will said Captain Nouzen really consent to the idea of these guest officers, though? Isn’t the officer being chosen for his division, who he will be under the direct command of, one of his former persecutors?”

“He’s already been told the news. He came back yesterday to take a leave of absence.”

Ernst shrugged as the chief of staff raised an eyebrow. The Nordlicht squadron—Shin included—had participated in the battle to retake the former Republic of San Magnolia’s administrative Sectors. They’d managed to retake everything up to the First Sector, after which they were locked in a stalemate, alternated with another force that took over for them, and retreated along with the rest of their main force.

Combatants that fight nonstop for a certain period of time suffer a significant drop in their combat efficiency. Being a former war-oriented country that spent almost all its time dealing in nothing but war even in its current incarnation, the Federacy knew very well the importance of routine alternation of forces and allowing for rest. However brief it was, these children would need time to rest.

“I was also worried about that, but it seems my concerns were unfounded. After all...”

As soldiers only wore their uniforms on official occasions, Shin draped his heavy military coat over his uniform as he walked through the Federacy capital’s streets. The national cemetery, which occupied a large section of Sankt Jeder’s suburbs, was hazy with powdery snow. Under a bright sky blanketed in white, the grove of lilac trees surrounding the graveyard stood with all its leaves blown away, exposing its black bark to the will of the frigid winds. The gauzelike curtain of snow painted a monochrome picture against the black tombstones, and the shadows of other soldiers, of various ages and genders, who had just returned from the western front, stood solemnly between them.

During the winter, they would be decorated with flakes of snow. In spring, they would be decorated with lilac petals; in summer, by the roses blossoming in the shadows of the trees; and during autumn, by a field of scarlet sages. Such

flowers would be an offering for the spirits of fallen heroes.

It came to Shin's mind that he never did see the cemetery during any other season but winter. There was so much he hadn't seen yet. He stopped in a section of the cemetery filled with new graves, in front of a single unassuming tombstone.

"—It's been a while, Eugene."

EUGENE RANTZ

That name was etched into the stone pillar, with only seventeen years between the date of his birth and that of his death. Snow that had fallen through the night and all the way until this morning piled up solemnly and quietly over the graveyard, painting everything with a faint alabaster veneer.

"Sorry. It took me a while to come visit."

Eugene wasn't there. And even if half of his remains were buried down there, his wishes and memories weren't there anymore. To Shin, who could hear the voices of ghosts—of memories and fragmented wills that remained in the world of the living—this wasn't a question of values or of the god he believed in. It was cold, hard fact. There was neither a heaven nor a hell. The dead all equally returned to the darkness in the depths of this world.

And that was why the person he was talking to was none other than the Eugene of his memories. But oddly enough, he still felt like he needed this impersonal stone slate, which had his name carved on it, in order to truly face him.

Once all those who knew him were gone, this hunk of stone, which bore only his name and dates of birth and death, would be nothing but a record. But all those who died and returned to nothingness, be they Federacy soldiers who left behind grave markers, or his 576 comrades from the Eighty-Sixth Sector, who'd entrusted him with their names on aluminum-alloy shards, never truly wished for a tombstone. All they wanted was for someone to remember that they were here.

"The western front's the same as it was when you were there. We held the line, somehow."

He left the bouquet he'd bought at the entrance of the cemetery in front of Eugene's grave. It was a bouquet of white lilies raised in a greenhouse to withstand the Federacy's cold winter. Placing them against the polished black-granite tombstone brought out their gorgeous white in all its splendor.

When the old flower-vendor woman saw he was a soldier—which she probably realized at a glance, given his uniform—she pretty much pushed the bundle of flowers into his arms, insisting he take them for free. An old woman, standing in front of a national graveyard this early in the morning, running a flower stand. As if to say that was her mission, with her lips pursed and her back straightened.

"All the Eighty-Six who survived in the Republic were given shelter by the Federacy, and now a new unit is being organized, with them as the core. A mobile unit specialized in operating Juggernauts. Once my leave ends, I'll be assigned there, too."

The number of its ranks was only slightly under ten thousand troops, making it the size of a large brigade. The majority of surviving Processors enlisted into the Federacy's army, reaching the same decision Shin and his group had come to only a year earlier.

"...You asked me once about what I fight for."

To be exact, he was about to ask, but was cut off halfway through, in what would be the last time they met before it all ended. Neither Shin nor Eugene thought it would be their last conversation. Death came equally to all—and just as suddenly. And that was why, at the very least, one had to live each moment in a way they wouldn't come to regret. They, the Eighty-Six, pledged to live and fight on while embracing that pride. Because they didn't have anything else to cling to yet.

"If I'm being honest, I still don't really know. We... I don't think I have the sort of reason to fight that you were thinking about. I've got nowhere to come back to and nowhere to go. Nothing...and no one to defend."

His family was gone, and he had no culture to draw on, as it was all within the memories of his homeland, which had been destroyed a long time ago. And then, with the voices of the ghosts as his way markers and the countless

memories of his comrades etched into his heart, he'd pressed onward with nothing but the desire to end his brother as his sole motivator. And now that his brother was gone, looking to the future ahead was still too hard for Shin. Both the distant future, which he didn't know if he would live to see, and even the tomorrow that lay directly ahead of him were both so hazy and vague. It was difficult for him to look up at them.

He still had nothing to look forward to and nothing to live for. But...

"But if there's one thing I understood... It's that I don't want the sight I show to them, to everyone I promised to take with me, to be another battlefield."

Or to *her*, the girl he'd told a year ago that he was going on ahead, who'd fought all alone ever since, struggling to survive on the Republic's battlefield. For the girl who tried so hard to catch up to them, showing her a battlefield where he lay beaten and defeated at the end of it all would be far too cruel. He didn't leave her with those words on the final night before the Special Reconnaissance mission, with the possibility that help may come and the imploration to fight on until it did, because he wanted her to see this.

"...And the sea."

When was it that Eugene stood before him, saying he wanted to show his little sister, who had never seen the ocean, that scenery? Something she had never seen and never known?

"I still can't say I want to see it, really. But I do want to show it to others. To show others things they don't know. Things they've never seen before. I think that's all the reason I need to fight for now."

The Legion stood in the way of that wish. It couldn't come true with the world as it currently was. Of course, the tombstone said nothing in reply. Eugene's ghost wasn't there. But he still thought he could hear his amiable, kindhearted friend saying with a smile, "Sounds good enough to me."

"I'll come visit you again... And next time, I'll bring you stories of places you've never seen before."

The tombstone said nothing, and as if in its place, the bustling of the ghosts silently crept into his consciousness. The fragments of his dead comrades'

consciousness that were still trapped on the battlefield, whispering their final moments as they sought release.

I haven't forgotten about you guys, either.

He turned on his heels silently, when he saw a figure raising a hand to him from the distance. It looked like Eugene—and his brother who had long since disappeared—and when he looked at it again, it turned into a silhouette of a long-haired girl who was disappearing into the snowy veil of winter. It looked like Kaie and, at the same time, like the girl who had caught up to him before he knew it. Both the dead who had already passed on and those who still wandered the battlefield. Before Shin knew it, they stood shoulder to shoulder, pursuing the comrades who were not yet there.

The countless heroes who slept there for eternity watched over the Reaper silently as he left the cemetery, covered in powdery snow.

The old lady always standing in front of the *nasshinal grabe yard's* entrance asked if she came to visit her brother again and gave her some flowers for free. Holding a bouquet of lilies that was too large for her small body to carry, Nina walked down the now-familiar path to her brother's grave. Over the past six months or so, Nina finally realized that her brother dying meant he would never come back, and she would never see him again. That her brother was killed by someone and would never return because of that person.

That was sad, painful, wholly unbearable, so she lashed out against that person in her letter, but no answer ever came. Maybe they were simply such an awful person that they wouldn't write back, or maybe they never got the letter at all. The *wor* apparently became worse, and a lot of people died, so maybe that bad person died, too.

Nina thought that if he went to heaven, he should tell Eugene he was really sorry. Eugene was nice, so he would definitely forgive him. And then they could be friends there. Hurting someone made her feel prickly and bad. It probably wasn't a good thing to do.

She approached her brother's grave, only to find a shade of milky white different from the snow. Nina tottered over and picked it up... It was a bouquet of lilies. The snow hadn't piled over them yet, so they had probably just been

placed by the grave. She saw a retreating figure walking quite a distance away in the walkway between the gravestones. It was a boy, a bit taller than Eugene, dressed in the same steel-blue uniform she last saw her brother wear. He looked familiar somehow—as if she'd seen him and Eugene laugh together at one point.

“...Um!”

She gave a faint utterance in spite of herself, which should not have reached beyond the curtain of snow. Was he coming here? For remembering? Or maybe...for not dying like Eugene did and coming back alive? Little Nina didn't know what spurred her to say the next words. And yet, she felt compelled to say them all the same.

“Um... Thank you very much...!”

This little girl's voice, which had scant experience with shouting, could not have penetrated the buffering curtain of white to reach him. And despite that, she thought she saw the hazy figure on the other side of the snow turn to look at her.

It was at that small spring garden where the Juggernauts and their faithful attendant at the end of their journey rested forever. A young Federacy officer, likely her age and clad in a steel-blue Federacy uniform, smiled at her peacefully.

“This isn't the first time we've met. Although, I suppose it is the first time we're meeting face-to-face.”

Lena still had no way of knowing the reason for the flood of emotions contained in that statement.

“It's been a while, *Handler One*. My name is Shinei Nouzen: a captain of the Federacy military and former leader of the Spearhead squadron.”

Her expression turned utterly astonished. Lena's large silvery eyes widening in surprise, she looked up at the young man who presented himself to her. A boy roughly her age, barely old enough to have recently graduated from the special officer academy but already promoted twice to receive the captain's rank

insignia on his collar. His black Onyx hair and crimson Pyrope eyes. His white, handsomely sculpted face.

Lena never did know his face. The quality of the picture she had was too rough and distant to make out anyone's features. But his voice... That serene, gentle voice, which was somehow pleasant despite being so curt...

".....Shin...?"

Sure enough, the boy broke into a wry smile.

"It's the first time you've called me by that name. Yes, it's me, Major Milizé."

"You're...alive..."

"I am. I failed to die again."

That cold tone. That blunt manner of speaking. The tears welled up in her eyes before she even knew it, but she restrained them with all her might. She didn't want to look away because of her tears. She felt that if she looked again—if she so much as blinked—he would disappear again.

So instead, she smiled from the bottom of her heart. Her expression was probably terribly awkward, but she couldn't care less about that right now. She wondered what had happened to him over these two long years while the Republic had stagnated and eventually collapsed. How they crossed the Legion's territories to reach foreign lands and came to wear the uniform of a different military.

But even without asking, she knew they'd probably kept on fighting for these two years. Because it was them, the ones who set out on their road, with the resolve to fight on as their pride.

"...I've always, always chased after you."

The smile in his red eyes deepened.

"I know."

"And I finally caught up to you."

"You did."

For some reason, it didn't feel like it had been that long since she'd heard his

serene voice. She took his extended hand with both of hers. The tears she'd held back until now finally flowed freely, but her earnest smile never wavered. She'd thought she would never get to speak these words aloud, but she could finally say them now.

“From this day forth, I, too, will fight by your side.”

AFTERWORD

Let's hear it for long-distance weapons!

Hello and good day, everyone, this is Asato Asato.

Things like heavy artillery and missiles are often looked down upon in these kinds of robot stories, so I wanted to let them take center stage for once. Don't you just want to see the ace's rig get blown away by suppressive fire without a hint of elegance or coolness left to them? Because I love seeing that. I love seeing that so much.

Which is why this time, the enemy is

a Railgun

on

railway artillery!!!

The modern-day super-long-distance cannon, the railgun, and World War II's super-long-distance cannon, the railway gun, in a duet you can only dream of!

...Yes, forgive me; I just really wanted to do this. Realism be damned.

And I apologize for the long wait, but *86—Eighty-Six, Vol. 3: Run Through the Battlefield (Finish)* is finally here.

When I was only working on the plot, *Run Through the Battlefield* was supposed to be a lighter story. After all, considering how grim Volume 1 was, I thought, let's just go with what the name says and make this a story about the Eighty-Six running through a new battlefield! But somehow, once I got down to it, it turned out to be nowhere near as easy a story as I had thought it'd be.

You'll have to read to find out just how difficult of a story it is, but if you ask for my opinion as the author, it's because of Shin's plot-crushing ways. How in

the world did both the progression and conclusion of the plot end up being so different that the only part that remained unchanged from early drafts ended up just being “The enemy is a Railgun”...?!

Anyway, here’s this time’s commentary:

- The Nachzehrer:

A chimera-like product of Caspian Sea Monster + the specs of the world’s largest transport plane, the AN 225 Mriya + the likeness of the B2 Spirit stealth bomber. It’s worth noting this class of weapon does exist in the real world, but its specs and usage are entirely different.

Yes, I really wanted to do this, so realism be damned (omitted).

- “The hell you all love so much is headed our way!”

This line, spoken in [chapter 7](#), was inspired by something an editor in charge of me, Kiyose, said when the book’s manga adaptation was announced. (Not in the sense of the situation going south, but rather that things were going to become busy going forward. It was said in jest, to be clear.) The moment I heard that, I thought the sergeant absolutely had to say this line! And I’ve been sitting on that idea ever since.

- Fido:

Talking just about Kiyose is a bit unfair, so this one’s about my other editor, Tsuchiya. I-IV’s cute designs were only half the reason Fido got revived after getting trashed at the end of Volume 1. The other reason was Tsuchiya’s overwhelming love for Fido.

I mean, Tsuchiya kept bugging me about whether Fido was coming back or not every time we met...

Lastly, some thanks.

To my editors, Kiyose and Tsuchiya. Thank you so much for always reining me in whenever I got a bit too wild and for reining Shin in whenever he was about to lose his way.

To Shirabii. Almost this entire volume ended up being one huge battle scene! Which means it’s full of cool illustrations. I’m sorry for dropping so much work

on you.

To I-IV. This time, we had two Goliaths, and they were both so impressive...! I've been wanting to include a long-distance artillery cannon ever since we had you for mechanical design, so I'm very excited.

To the manga's author, Yoshihara. Every time I see your detailed character portraits and impressive storyboards, I keep thinking, *I want to read this so much!* I can't wait for the serialization to begin. I want to read it so much...!

And to all you readers, who took up this book. Thank you so, so much. With Volume 3, Shin finally got his time in the spotlight, but I'd be happy if you could hold him dear to your hearts even after this.

Next up, Volume 4 will be a light story! A really light story about how he and Lena and the other Eighty-Six finally come face-to-face and have a little chitchat! I'll meet you again then!

In any case, I hope that, for even a short while, I managed to show you that path leading up to the sunset, to the battlefield he wanders through, where the crimson dusk and lapis lazuli night come together.

Music playing while writing this afterword: "Seirankeppūroku"

by Ali Project

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