



86

[EIGHTY-
SIX]

ASATO ASATO

ILLUSTRATION:
Shirabii

MECHANICAL DESIGN:
I-IV

11

DIES PASSIONIS



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

11 DIES PASSIONIS

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[EIGHTY-
SIX]

Judgment Day.
The hatred runs deep.



11

DIES PASSIONIS

**ASATO
ASATO**

ILLUSTRATION:

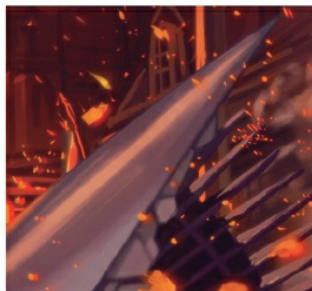
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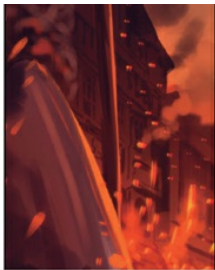
MECHANICAL DESIGN:

I-IV



NEW YORK





OPERATION OVERVIEW

CONFIDENTIAL

Objectives

1. Retreat of the Federacy’s relief expedition [Commander: Major General Richard Altner, four battalions with a total of fifty thousand men].
2. Assisting the evacuation of the Republic of San Magnolia’s entire population.

Outline

To achieve objectives one and two, the Strike Package is to secure and maintain the operation area.

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Judgment Day.
The hatred runs deep.

[Participating Forces]

The Eighty-Sixth Strike Package’s 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Armored Divisions.

[Operation Area]

The high-speed railway terminal running between the western countries along the southern Eaglebloom route [the Republic’s former Ilex city to the Federacy’s Berledephadel city, an estimated four hundred kilometers] and its vicinity.

[Operational Identifiers]

- The operation’s starting position [within the western front’s Saentis-Historics line] will be designated point Zodiacs.
- The thirty-kilometer point off point Zodiacs will be designated phase line Pisces. The points every thirty kilometers onward will be designated phase lines Aquarius, Capricorn, Chiron, Ophiuchus, Antares, Libra, Regulus, Virgo, Cancer, Gemini, Taurus, and Aries.
- The Ilex terminal, where the Federacy relief expedition and the Republic civilians will begin their evacuation, will be designated Point Sacra.

[Collaborating Forces]

- Relief expedition’s armored detachment [in charge of securing and maintaining Point Sacra and its vicinity].
- Relief expedition’s military police platoon [in charge of guiding refugees onto the train in Point Sacra].
- Western front military’s transport detachment [in charge of the transport trains that will ferry the relief expedition’s personnel as well as the Republic civilians].



Annotation

- The United Kingdom of Roa Gracia’s dispatch regiment and the Alliance of Wald’s instruction unit will not be participating in this operation.
- The relief expedition’s retreat is to prioritize officers, vehicles, and combat supplies. Low-priority equipment and facilities are to be discarded.
- Evacuation of the Republic citizens only extends to personnel. Any luggage is not to be transported.
- During the duration of this operation, combat engineers are to demolish the Gran Mur [points 80, 81, and 82].
- All matters of guiding and dealing with the refugees are to be handled by the Republic’s temporary government.

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

OPERATION
OVERVIEW

Calamity on an unprecedented scale descends upon them.
In the heart of a dying republic, the boy and girl...

[EIGHTY-
SIX]

Judgment Day.
The hatred runs deep.



ASATO ASATO PRESENTS

ILLUSTRATION/SHIRABU

MECHANICAL DESIGN/I-IV

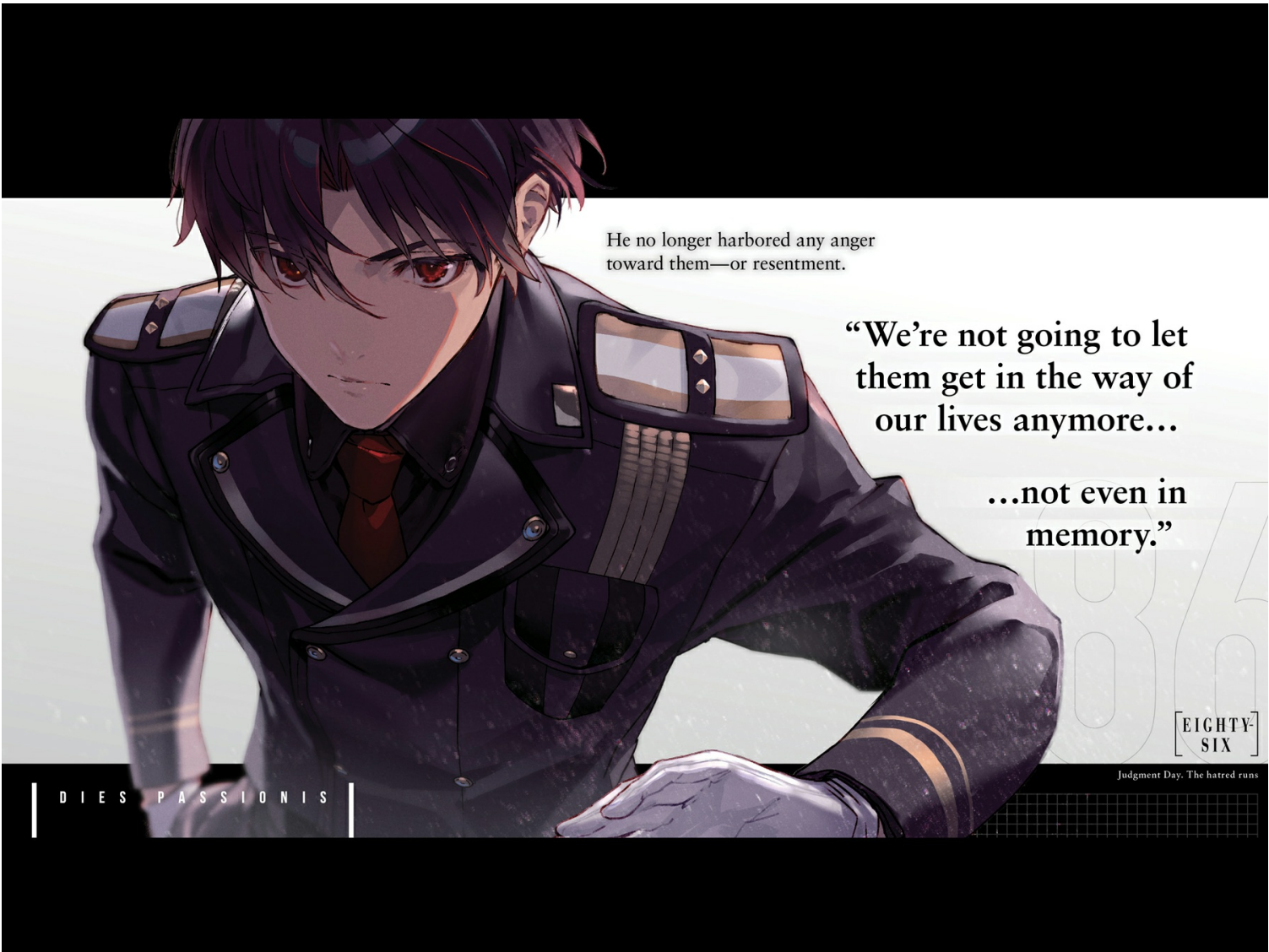
Life, land, and legacy.
All reduced to a number.



86

— Dies Passionis —

Volume
ELEVEN



He no longer harbored any anger
toward them—or resentment.

“We’re not going to let
them get in the way of
our lives anymore...

...not even in
memory.”

[EIGHTY-
SIX]

Judgment Day. The hatred runs

| D I E S P A S S I O N I S |

In honor of Lieutenant Colonel Shinei Nouzen.

—VLADILENA MILIZÉ, *MEMOIRS*

86—EIGHTY-SIX

Vol. 11

ASATO ASATO

Translation by Roman Lempert

Cover art by Shirabii

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

86—Eighty-Six—Ep. 11

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D - DAY MINUS TWO.

Stellar Calendar: September 29, 2050

DIES PASSIONIS



Judgment Day.
The hatred runs deep.

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86
EIGHTY-SIX

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

D-DAY MINUS TWO

“Oh, and about the Legion command positions’ counteroffensive operation. For the moment, they’ve only decided on the date and name of the operation, but they’ll be naming it after a historical one. It’ll be Operation Overlord.”

The person speaking while pouring a cup of tea was a distant relative of Shin’s. A young man from Marquess Maika’s family who was ten years older than him. He was also an Esper specialist officer of the Federacy military.

None of his subordinates or assistants were nearby; it was just him and Shin in one of the offices of the western front’s integrated headquarters. Lieutenant Colonel Joschka Maika returned his hands to the tea set. For some time now, this man had been meeting Shin periodically to help him work on controlling his ability.

“That’s a very...hackneyed name.”

“Isn’t it, though? They could have picked an easier operation that had more of a sweeping victory. That operation may have been a triumphant one, but many soldiers died in the landing, and a mention of overlords is rather inappropriate for a democratic republic, wouldn’t you say?”

He was a tall man, his hair cut short as was often the case for soldiers. He was quite robust, with wide shoulders and a chiseled chest, but by contrast, he had quite the baby face, and his crimson eyes were constantly downcast.

Joschka silently sipped his tea. As if following his lead, Shin brought his own teacup to his lips. The delicate porcelain was accented with red and gold paintings both on the inside and outside of the cup. As he looked into the transparent red liquid, he could see the drawing within it sparkle in a mystical fashion.

“As for the date, well, this’ll be a major offensive for the Federacy military, and it’ll also probably be a joint operation with the United Kingdom and the Alliance. At the earliest, it’ll be four months from now, around the Atonement Festival in February. And if they’ll want to make doubly sure they’re ready, it’ll be six months from now, around Easter.”

The operation’s date reminded Shin of the Strike Package’s—namely the 1st Armored Division’s, cycle of operations and leaves. This September, they’d been deployed to the Theocracy, which concluded their operation time. So if all went according to schedule, they would finish their two-month period of rest and training at around December or January of the following year.

That meant that they would be there in time if the operation occurred in April, during Easter. But if it took place around the Atonement Festival, in February, it would clash with their leave.

“The entire Strike Package will be participating either day,” said Shin.

“I didn’t think otherwise,” Joschka said with a strained smile. “These kinds of operations are what the Strike Package was made for, and the top brass knew you’d say that. So for the time being, the Strike Package as a whole will be taken off operational activity for a while. They’ll tell you to rest up this month and use the remaining time to thoroughly prepare yourselves for the upcoming operation.”

But after saying that, Joschka suddenly smirked.

“I’ve heard the complaints. Is it true that your group neglected your schoolwork during the last operation?”

Shin gulped audibly. The 3rd and 4th Armored Divisions had wrapped up their leave period—which was also their designated schooling period—early. In other words, the complaint wasn’t directed at Shin’s 1st Armored Division, but Grethe ended up scolding all four division commanders for it.

She warned them she wouldn’t stand for this next time, which was of course a justified complaint, and Shin knew joint liability was a fundamental tenet of the military, but...it did strike him as a bit unreasonable.

“That’s no good, you know?” Joschka grinned at him. “You might be out of the

special officer academy, but right now the primary responsibility of you kids is to get your education. Spend the next month going to school, listening to lectures, catching up on your schoolwork, and so on. Read silly books in the library, hang out with your friends, and worry about things like romance and heartbreak.”

“I’m not so sure about that last sentence, Lieutenant Colonel.”

That last point hit especially close to home.

“Not at all. All those are the kind of studying you kids need to catch up on.”

This relative of his, who was around ten years his senior, leaned against the lounge-suite sofa with his teacup in one hand and smiled at him in a truly elegant gesture, but the glint in his eyes was remarkably undignified.

“And if heartache and romance ever trouble you too much, feel free to consult me, your reliable older brother of sorts... And once you’ve managed that, I’ll be able to teach you how to control your ability.”

“...”

Joschka had told him that same thing during their meeting three months ago. At the time, there were several other Espers from the Maika line present, and they all treated him much the same.

“Every generation has a few children who can’t properly turn their abilities on and off. And kids like that usually learn how to do it from their parents or older relatives.”

Shin met them in House Maika’s estate in the capital, in Marquess Maika’s prized orangery filled with yew flowers. Sitting on the opposite side of the table were a few relatives of his, close to him in age and clad in Federacy uniforms.

Their representative, Joschka, had his crimson hair cut short.

“In terms of difficulty, controlling your ability in and of itself is, well, not much different from learning how to ride a bicycle or do a cartwheel. It’s easy once you get the hang of it. You just haven’t learned the trick yet. So if you Resonate with those who do know how to do it, they’ll be able to help you turn it on and off. And most people get the hang of it after a few attempts, assuming they’re

not terribly poor learners. Honestly, one can't really call this training."

The other relatives remained silent or smiled as they gestured for Joschka to move things along. They were a mix of men and women, all of them with crimson hair and eyes.

Like southern flowers, Shin thought.

They drank from teacups adorned with lovely southern colors, meant to contrast the yew flowers brought from afar. The snacks that accompanied the tea smelled of vanilla and were also fashioned after a type of yew flower—or so a woman had told him. She was twenty-two years old—and also his cousin, apparently.

"As for why it's so limited to the family, it's because Resonating with those who can control their ability requires a deeper state of Resonance. More specifically, it's because they're— Hmm... They're a bit deeper in from the *voices* you usually hear. Do you get my meaning?"

"Yes."

As Joschka spoke, Shin could only vaguely follow along.

Seeing Shin nod made Joschka crack a visibly happy smile, like he was relieved to see Shin pick up on what he meant from such a hazy explanation.

You really are of one of us.

It was a smile bursting with warmth and affection, yet one that still had some distance to it—one directed at an outsider and spread across his features.

"That's not to say they'd be able to tell what you're thinking, peer into your memories, or see any scars you want to hide. But to put it simply, it would be unpleasant, right? Having someone you don't know and trust intrude that deep... I'd hate it. I'd even go as far as to say I'd be terrified."

And so—

"For the time being, we'll just have these pleasant little tea parties. We'll chat, and if there's anything you want advice for, feel free to ask us. Even things that have nothing to do with your power, anything you might want to ask... And then—"

With that said, Joschka and the other Maika youths all regarded him with carefree smiles.

“—when you feel comfortable enough to tell us, even just one of us, about the girl you like, you’d be able to practice controlling your ability without much resistance.”

Following that conversation, in the three months that passed, when he was in between his studies and training or had an operational reason to show up in the western front’s headquarters, Shin would take time to meet one of the Maikas.

He ended up asking Joschka to handle his training, mostly because he was the one who reminded him *least* of his brother.

His hair was the same red shade as his brother’s, and given their blood relation, Joschka’s features were somewhat similar to his. Whenever Shin interacted with the younger Maika family members, he always found himself looking for Rei’s face among them. He felt that he should not have found comfort in their presence solely due to their resemblance to his brother. He worried that admitting such a truth would be rude.

Joschka had a soldier’s haircut and physique, and his voice had a low bass to it that fit a commanding officer’s intimidating presence. These traits were far removed from Rei, who had the slender physique of a scholar and a gentle voice as well.

The most significant difference between the two would have to be their speech styles. Shin couldn’t imagine, much less recall Rei ever being as crass, or even violent, with his words as Joschka sometimes was.

But even so, talking to Joschka occasionally gave Shin an odd feeling. If Rei was still alive, he would have been about Joschka’s age. Had the war never happened, had they never been taken to the Eighty-Sixth Sector, would he, as an eighteen-year-old, interact with a twenty-eight-year-old Rei like this? That thought filled his heart with an oddly wistful feeling.

“I heard an interesting nugget, by the way. They say you have a girlfriend now? And a beauty, at that. I’m looking forward to hearing about all the juicy details and tales of heartache!”

...And would Rei pester him like this if he was still alive? A part of Shin hoped that wouldn't have been the case, but another part of him vaguely felt that Rei would've been even nosier about his love life *because* he was his big brother.

And then the realization set in that, at some point, he'd begun thinking of his brother in a carefree manner.

As Joschka snickered at him, Shin feigned calmness and sipped his tea as he attempted a riposte. Pretending all the while he didn't notice the gulf that still hung between them.

"Maybe you should tell me about your love life first, Joschka."

"Wow, look at you. Already learned how to strike back, have you? All right, you asked for it. Here comes a tale about your big brother Joschka and his tender romance with his lovely bride—"

"Go ahead, Big Brother."

"Oof, another direct hit! But nope, sorry, that wasn't cute enough."

"The 'big brother' thing was your idea."

"I know, I know. But when you say it with that monotone, I just can't get into it. Besides, you *really* wanna know about *my* love life? Like, seriously?"

He looked utterly surprised but leaned in with excitement all the same. Shin couldn't resist cutting him down mercilessly.

"No, not really. But the way your expression softened before you even started talking about it was priceless, so I figured I'd feign interest while enjoying my tea."

"Oh, so that's your game....," Joschka began to grumble.

But then he turned his eyes to the window. Like a cat catching notice of a butterfly, or a dog distracted by a bird, the rapid movement caused Joschka's hunter's instincts to react faster than his thoughts.

And at first, Shin did indeed assume he had caught sight of a butterfly or something similar, but Joschka's eyes were fixed on something much farther away. It was also night, which made it that much more unlikely that he would've seen an active animal, save an owl or a moth. And any creature that

was that small wouldn't be visible from the brightly lit room they were in.

"Joschka?" said Shin with a faint curiosity.

"Oh, I just thought I saw something flash in the sky—," Joschka said, still staring at the spot where he'd first noticed the flash.

Shin followed his line of sight, and once again, something flickered brightly like a star. It soon died down, and Shin looked away from the fiery-red glint and cocked his head, confused. He had little interest in astrology or the stars and only knew what was necessary to interpret cardinal directions and the weather. Shin's pensive expression was dripping with curiosity as to the identity of the light.

"Was that a shooting star?"

The light only seemed to flicker and then go out, and it didn't seem to be moving.

"There shouldn't be any stars in that part of the sky at this time of night. I don't think so anyway...," Joschka whispered with a frown.

In that same moment...

...a white-gloved hand smacked against an ebony desk with a loud *thud*. Willem Ehrenfried, the western front's chief of staff didn't seem to realize he'd just performed this action, unconsciously driven by an explosion of emotion. Even during last year's large-scale offensive, when he stood in a frontline base that could have well been blown away by railgun fire in the middle of the Morpho subjugation operation, his chiseled features never once lost their composure.

But now the face of this man who never once wavered, even before a harrowing operation that put his country at risk of total annihilation, contorted in alarm.

As scion to the great nobles who once ruled over the Empire, and as a commander charged with the duty to protect and sacrifice the lives of his soldiers, he wasn't allowed to display his emotions. He'd been raised this way since infancy and comported himself with the utmost discipline.

But now something more instinctual than habit and discipline stained his conduct.

It was alarm and unease intense enough to make him momentarily lose sight of the values and behavior that had been etched into his heart.

This is unprecedented.

Displayed on the holo-windows around him were the analysis results of a certain structure: the naval artillery point built three hundred kilometers north off the shores of the Regicide Fleet Countries, also known as the Mirage Spire.

This was a three-dimensional schematic, partially re-created using the data from the mission recorders of the Reginleifs that had infiltrated this base. The missing information made up using visual footage of the tower base hidden in the Holy Theocracy of Noiryannaruse, despite the Legion's attempts to distract from its presence by using the Halcyon.

Projected in the holo-window was a re-creation of those steel towers made up of lines of light, but it included a structure that none of the Processors' reports, nor the final report submitted by the operation's commander, mentioned existing within the Mirage Spire.

And none of them reported it because it simply hadn't caught their eye. Neither the Eighty-Six nor the girl who commanded their operation... Even the United Kingdom's Esper prince would not have known to pay it any mind.

Because for as long as they could remember, *that arena* did not serve as a battlefield anymore.

...And perhaps the fact that they wouldn't be caught entirely unaware when they were attacked from *that direction*—the fact that he'd noticed it ahead of time—perhaps just that would've been good enough. The Federacy had obtained the control cores of Legion commander units—the Halcyon and the Weisel—from deep within the territories and were focusing their efforts on analyzing them. And in the midst of that, Willem pushed for the Mirage Spire's structural analysis to be expedited. His caution was what earned them this success.

But even knowing this, Willem couldn't shake a sense of shame.

The holographic, three-dimensional map displayed the Mirage Spire's vast interior space, and highlighted within was a massive cylindrical structure that ran diagonally through the tower.

It went from the bottommost level of the Spire all the way to its peak, drawing an acute angle. And at the top of the tower, it formed a tube made of eight rails, pointing perpendicularly up at the heavens. The cylinder was wide in diameter, so large that, according to their calculations, an entire locomotive could fit inside it.

But of course, what sat within that cylinder, what was *fired* from it, wasn't a train. It wasn't even a Morpho.

How did this escape my notice...?

He knew of it, but the possibility didn't so much as occur to him.

Ten years ago, soon after the beginning of the Legion War, in the midst of the revolution... As the tides turned in favor of the revolutionary army, the Imperialist faction had their command centers transmit a self-destruct order to all their artificial satellites, which subsequently went offline.

At the time, the satellites broke apart into large debris—which was likely intended—and hit any other countries' satellites that were in close proximity to the planet. And artificial satellites flew within their set orbits at the high speed of several thousand meters per second. If it was a small piece of dislodged equipment or debris, it would have no effect. But chunks of metal weighing several tonnes and moving at that speed would result in serious damage.

And so the other satellites were also ruined, some of them breaking into debris themselves, causing a destructive chain reaction across the planet's orbit. As a result, the orbit paths used by the satellites became littered with great amounts of debris. And since large masses did not easily lose altitude, they remained in orbit.

The satellites' orbit had been littered with debris to begin with, but now it was even worse, meaning it required thorough cleaning and removal if more satellites were to be relaunched. And during wartime, even the Federacy, the largest nation on the continent, struggled to find the large amounts of budget and fuel required to do so.

In fact, some of the lower-flying debris got in the way of deploying ballistic missiles, which traveled in those altitudes.

But the same conditions should have applied to the Legion, too.

For starters, the Legion were developed to fill the roles of rank-and-file soldiers and up to low-ranking officers at best. Their developer likely never intended for them to deploy tactical weaponry like ballistic missiles and applied a firm protection setting to prevent them from doing so. And indeed, the Legion had never used that kind of ordnance. The same held true for nuclear weaponry, which was essential to ballistic missiles due to their low accuracy.

And so neither Willem, nor the joint chiefs of staff above him, nor the Federacy military in general considered the possibility...

...that the Legion was using satellite orbit to launch man-made satellites or similar weapons by some other means that were accessible to them.

The hexagram-shaped towers discovered on the vast blue expanse of the Fleet Countries and the ash-laden battlefields of the Theocracy were structures meant for launching satellites into orbit—

“Mass Drivers...!”



As their name implied, man-made satellites orbited the planet. These veritable reconnaissance units were used as communications relays for global positioning and predicting the weather.

Their roles influenced the height and speed at which they moved, but as a rule of thumb, they maintained the altitude and velocity they were launched in for the entirety of their life span.

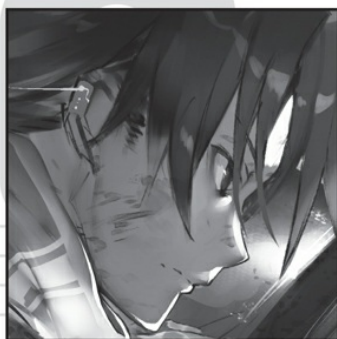
Some low-flying satellites appeared to be in motion, while those flying over ten thousand kilometers above the ground seemed to be stationary due to their distance, but in reality, both were actually moving along the planet's orbit.

Yes, strictly speaking, man-made satellites didn't actually float in orbit.

They were launched from the surface at high velocities approaching eight thousand meters per second and altitudes between several hundreds to several

thousands of kilometers. And from those several hundred meters of height, they fell beyond the horizon with a speed of eight thousand meters per second.

Federal Republic of Giad Military Eighty-Sixth Strike Package



Shin

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



Lena

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



Frederica

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



Raiden

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



Kurena

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



Theo

A young man of the Eighty-Six. A coolheaded cynic with a sharp tongue. A combat injury resulted in his hand being severed, forcing him to step down from the Spearhead squadron.



Anju

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



Grethe

Ranked colonel. She is the commanding officer for Shin and his group and the unit commander for the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package.



Annette

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



Shiden

One of the Eighty-Six and a subordinate of Lena's following the departure of Shin and his group. She heads Lena's personal guard.



Shana

A young woman of the Eighty-Six who had served as Shiden's lieutenant since their days in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. She had a calm and collected personality that both contrasted and complemented Shiden's.



Rito

A young man of the Eighty-Six who joined the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package. He was once a member of a squadron Shin belonged to.



Michihi

A young woman of the Eighty-Six who joined the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package, like Rito. She is quiet and sincere.



Dustin

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



Marcel

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



Yuuto

A young man of the Eighty-Six who joined the fold alongside Rito and Michihi. Though he is a person of few words, he possesses exemplary command and piloting skills.



Olivia

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



Vika

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



Lerche

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

EIGHTY-SIX



D-DAY MINUS ONE.

Stellar Calendar: September 30, 2050

DIES PASSIONIS

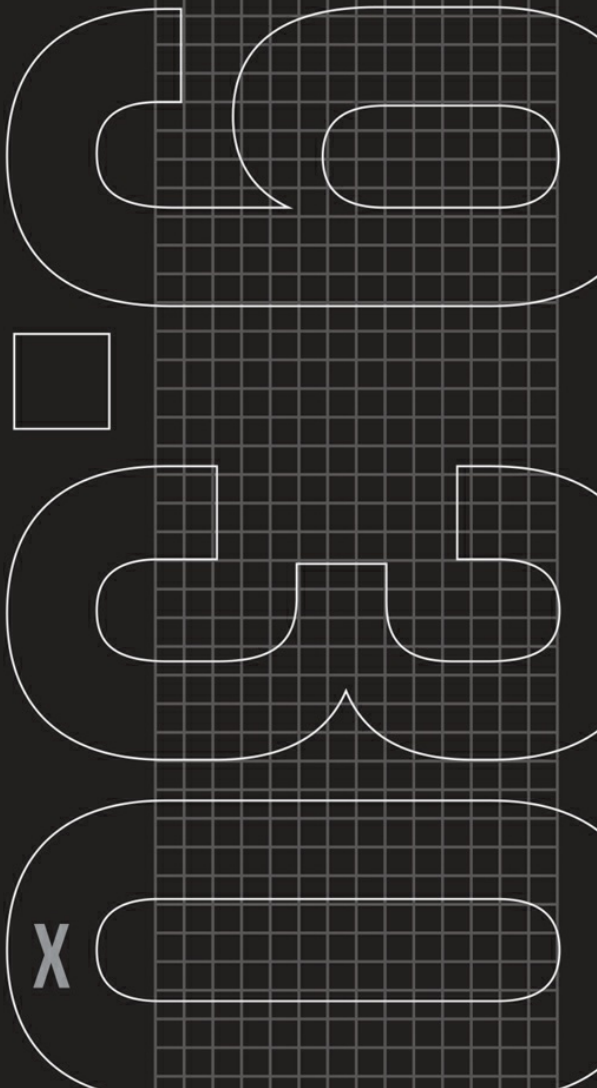


Judgment Day.
The hatred runs deep.

86

EIGHTY-SIX

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



D-DAY MINUS ONE

<<No Face to all integrated-network commander units.>>

He stood to the west of the Federacy, his former enemy nation, and to the east of his homeland, the Republic of San Magnolia. Standing in what was now Legion territory, the Legion Shepherd, designation: No Face, spoke.

He called out to the core of the integrated network—the most high-ranking and largest of the Legion’s leadership, the section-leader-tier commander units that governed over every and all Legion units sweeping across the continent. The commanders of the murder machines, who handled operations on a continent-wide scale.

<<All phases of intelligence-masking operation, codenamed Operation Neville, concluded.>>

He had his misgivings when *she* was captured, but it did not influence their efforts to temporarily mask their tactics toward the Federacy.

With his quasi-nervous system made up of Liquid Micromachines, No Face coldly made his decision. The commander unit of the anti-United Kingdom front, identifier: Mistress. Original name: Zelene Birkenbaum. It was clear that she’d been made into a source of intelligence after being captured. Mistress being taken prisoner was without a doubt the reason the Federacy and its allies had grown warier in their investigations.

It was like they were searching for something. Or perhaps dreading something.

And so the Legion presented them with visible, palpable threats they would be forced to dispose of. Like the Schwertwal that appeared on the Fleet Countries’ coasts. Or the mass-produced High-Mobility types. Or Ferdinand, which was built on the blank region to the far west.

They made it seem as if those were all trump cards for their next large-scale offensive. In truth, every one of them is a red herring.

<<No Face to all integrated-network commander units, as well as all units under the first wide-area network.>> He called out to the integrated network—to the commander units who controlled every Legion unit across the continent, who handled operations on a continent-wide scale. In other words... During the large-scale offensive No Face kicked off last summer, hundreds of thousands of Legion units were deployed to exterminate humankind. And this operation exceeded it in scale.

<<Operation Dies Irae will now commence.>>



D - DAY.

Stellar Calendar: October 1, 2050

DIES PASSIONIS

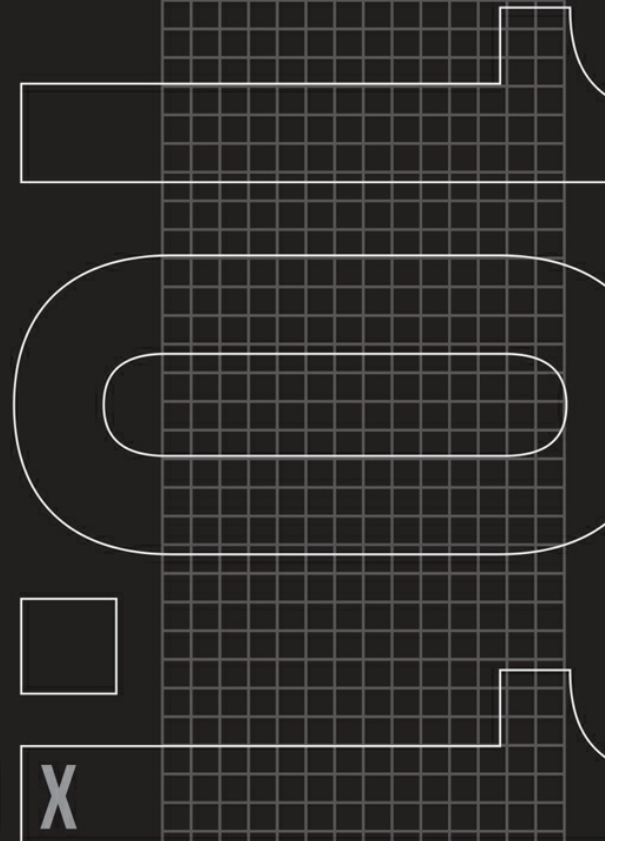


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10.1

D-DAY

00:17 (Federacy standard time)

Multiple projectiles impact the Federal Republic of Giad's second southern front, in areas under the deployment of the 18th Armored Corps. Contact with the 18th Corps' HQ cut off. Counter-artillery and counterbattery radar recalculate the trajectory of the attack as having arrived from *directly above* the combat area.

00:22 (Federacy standard time)

Multiple projectiles from directly above the combat area impact the Regicide Fleet Countries' defensive lines.

00:25 (Federacy standard time)

Multiple projectiles from directly above the combat area impact the Federal Republic of Giad's first and second northern lines, as well as the first southern line.

00:29 (Federacy standard time)

Multiple projectiles from directly above the combat area impact the Alliance of Wald's eastern front.

00:31 (Federacy standard time)

Multiple projectiles from directly above the combat area impact the United Kingdom of Roa Gracia's southern front.

00:34 (Federacy standard time)

Reports of bombardment from directly above the combat area arrive from the continent's south, ranging from the Grand Duchy of Qitira to the Alliance of Wald.

00:51 (Federacy standard time)

The Federacy's western front headquarters issues a retreat order to all fronts. All reserve forces are instructed to deploy at reserve formations. Likewise, the eastern front headquarters, as well as the first, second, and third northern and the first, second, third, and fourth southern front headquarters issue retreat orders to their respective units and emergency deployment orders to their reserves.

04:45 (Federacy standard time)

Multiple projectiles from directly above the combat area impact the Holy Theocracy of Noiryaruse's northern front.

11:08 (Federacy standard time)

Multiple projectiles from directly above the combat area impact the Federacy's eastern front.

11:55 (Federacy standard time)

Multiple projectiles from directly above the combat area impact the Federacy's third and fourth northern fronts as well as the third and fourth southern fronts.

12:11 (Federacy standard time)

Legion forces across the Federacy's second southern front are observed to begin offensive maneuvers. In the fifteen minutes that follow, reports of Legion aggression across all fronts and countries begin to come in.

12:24 (Federacy standard time)

Federacy military opens combat. Bombardment from directly above the battlefield continues. Present units begin prolonged fighting while reserve units commence interdiction fire. The main force continues its retreat.

15:06 (Federacy standard time)

Last confirmed bombardment from above the battlefield. No similar bombardments are reported or observed following this point. Legion offensive continues.

16:11 (Federacy standard time)

The Regicide Fleet Countries' final defensive line falls.

18:47 (Federacy standard time)

Communications severed with the Holy Theocracy of Noiryannaruse and far-western countries.

18:59 (Federacy standard time)

The Alliance of Wald abandons its first defensive line and retreats to its second defensive line.

19:26 (Federacy standard time)

Communications severed with the Grand Duchy of Qitira and the southern coast countries.

21:33 (Federacy standard time)

The United Kingdom of Roa Gracia abandons the Dragon Corpse mountain range, falls back to reserve formation on the foot of the mountain, and commences construction of its defensive line along the southern plains.

21:49 (Federacy standard time)

The Federal Republic of Giad's third northern front successfully retreats to a reserve defensive line's area.

22:54 (Federacy standard time)

All Federacy fronts successfully halt Legion advance.

23:49 (Federacy standard time)

All Federacy fronts bring fighting to a stalemate in reserve defensive lines.



D-DAY PLUS ONE.

Stellar Calendar: October 2, 2050

DIES PASSIONIS

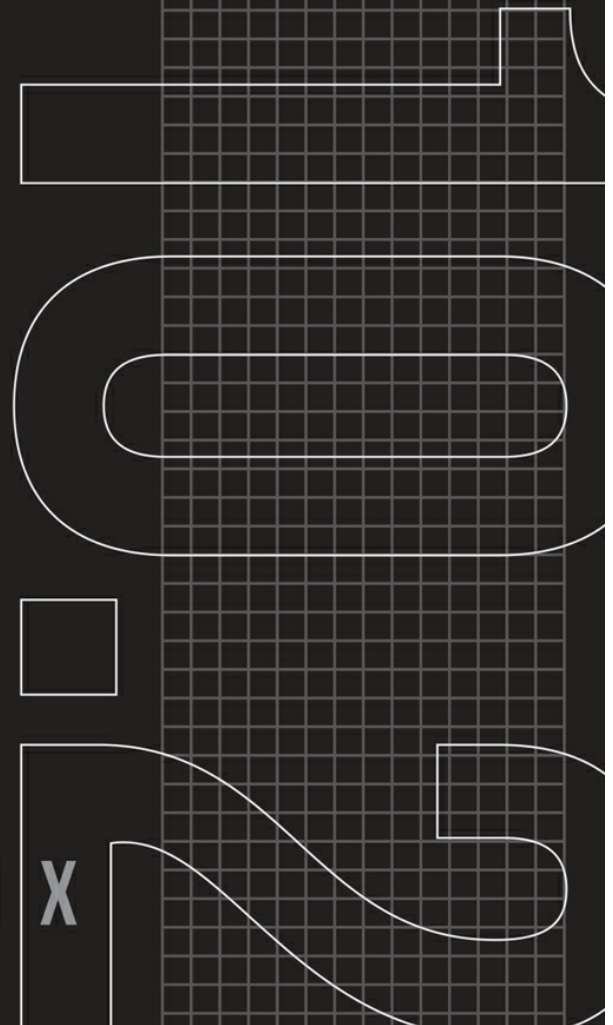


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86

EIGHTY-SIX

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10.2

D-DAY PLUS ONE

“Due to the all-out Legion attack that began yesterday—which is hereby dubbed the second large-scale offensive—all confirmed human military fronts have fallen into retreat.”

The Strike Package’s headquarters at the Rüstkammer base. The largest conference room was full with the long shadows of the officers in attendance.

The brigade commander, Grethe, sat at the head of the table. Also present were all armored-division captains starting with Shin, all four tactical commanders including Lena, and all staff officers in addition to the heads of research and maintenance.

Vika and Zashya of the United Kingdom and Olivia of the Alliance were absent from headquarters at this time, as they’d returned to the western front headquarters to confirm the war situation in their respective countries.

Shin looked around the room for a moment and returned his gaze to Grethe. The Eighty-Six had been given time off in preparation for the upcoming counteroffensive, Operation Overlord, but were called back before they could even spend a full day at school. They were just getting used to “peace,” only to be called back so suddenly.

The state of the war was changing so rapidly and so radically, even battle-hardened soldiers like them couldn’t keep up with it.

What was happening? And how did it happen?

With all eyes on her, Grethe continued speaking to the countless holowindows.

“The five Legion army corps that attacked are currently being held in check by the second reserve formation along the Saentis-Historics line. There are

sporadic, small-scale conflicts—a few skirmishes, but as a whole, the front is in a state of stalemate. The eastern, northern, and southern lines have likewise managed to bring the fighting to a standstill.”

Grethe deployed her main hologram window to display a map of the entire Federacy’s combat areas. The Federacy had long western and eastern borders. As such, its north and south borders were each divided into four front lines, which were marked on the map alongside the western and eastern fronts with a blue line.

With the exception of the western front, the Federacy was graced with large mountains and rivers that served as natural defenses, allowing it to hold on to those front lines with relatively small forces.

Every single front had their defenses destroyed, forcing the Federacy to move their defensive lines back to the flatlands and marshlands behind them. And while marshlands were difficult terrain for bulky armored weapons to traverse, flat plains were where Löwe and Dinosauria reigned supreme. So while the Federacy was able to reach a stalemate for the time being, defending these lines would prove difficult.

“Communications with the Holy Theocracy of Noiryannaruse, the far-west countries, and the Grand Duchy of Qitira are still offline. The Regicide Fleet Countries have had their final defensive line breached and have their remaining forces deployed in the Stellia Fleet Country territory, holding the Legion back with stall tactics. They requested that their civilians be evacuated to the United Kingdom and the Federacy, and preparations to accept them are underway. Realistically speaking, their nation is considered to have been destroyed.”

More holo-windows deployed, showing maps of the far west, the southern shores beyond the Alliance, the Fleet Countries in the north of the continent, and lastly, a map of the Alliance of Wald’s and the United Kingdom’s combat zones.

Every single front line on that map was in a state of defeat.

“The Alliance abandoned their second defensive line and moved back to their final, absolute defensive line. The United Kingdom abandoned the Dragon Corpse mountain range and, after blowing up their entrance to a tunnel leading

across the mountain's base, retreated to the foot of the mountain. They're fighting defensive battles while rushing to set up fortifications in the plains behind them. We can't contact those two countries directly, but we are tapping into their wireless transmissions. They're still fighting as we speak."

Shin looked up at the map. The area between the Federacy, the United Kingdom, and the Alliance was dotted with countless red blips signifying hostiles—the Legion—which filled up areas that had been occupied by existing roads just a few days ago. All three countries had their front lines pushed back, making it so their spheres of influence were much smaller compared with the previous large-scale offensive.

As things stood, a mouse couldn't move between the countries—to say nothing of the possibility of international cooperation.

With so much distance between them, being able to tap into the other countries' wireless was almost a miracle. It seemed the Eintagsfliege couldn't keep up with the increase in the Legion's sphere of influence.

The situation was that unprecedented.

He turned to the map of the Federacy's western front. To the east of the Neuedaphne and Neuegardenia combat territories, pincerred between the Saentis River and Historics River, were where five army corps of both the Legion and the western front army were locked in a stalemate.

This was the reserve defensive formation—formed between two major rivers that divided four Wolfsland combat territories between north and south and between midwest and east. A line set with a large number of dissemination mines, with even more of them planted after the previous day.

The Saentis-Historics line.

It was right before the line where the combat territories that safeguarded the former Empire's borders and the lands defended by them met. If the Legion was to push even a few kilometers ahead, the fires of war would spread into Federacy farmlands, making this effectively the last defensive line for preserving the Federacy's current production prowess.

The Rüstkammer base, too, was built on the western edge of a territory called

Silvas, near the border with a combat territory called Blan Ross. The distant rumbling of cannons could be heard every now and then, and the nearby town's civilians were preparing for a hasty evacuation.

Having seen this much, Shin turned to Grethe. Countless bombardments had driven every human-held front to the brink of collapse, and yet when the western front was bombarded, Shin couldn't hear the voice of the Legion firing at them.

"What happened...? How did the Legion launch the initial bombardments that destroyed all the front lines...? Could they have kept several other Morpho a secret from us and spread them out?"

"No." Grethe shook her head and called up another holo-window.

It showed footage of the night sky at such altitude that no building was visible. Within the darkness of this rough footage, grainy and crackling with static, was a group of what looked like red comets, blitzing down diagonally across the night sky.

A feeling of déjà vu filled Shin's heart. He'd seen something like this just two days ago, when the fighting began to intensify, with a relative of his in one of the western front-integrated HQ's rooms.

Was that a shooting star?

There shouldn't be any stars in that part of the sky at this time of night. I don't think so anyway...

It'd sparkled and then disappeared. A star that shouldn't have been there, shining red like a flame.

And that...star was what had bombarded the front lines...

"The truth behind the attacks is estimated to be satellites that were used as makeshift ballistic missiles."

A dubious, suspicious silence hung among the commanders.

"Before I explain further, I need to ask," Grethe said. "Do you know what a ballistic missile is?"

The staff officers and chiefs of maintenance and research, who had been in

service since before the Legion War, all nodded like it was obvious. Lena nodded, too, as she had some fundamental knowledge of what ballistic missiles were. But Shin and the other Eighty-Six looked puzzled.

Grethe nodded. It only made sense they wouldn't know.

"Yes, that's what I thought. The Legion don't normally use ballistic or even cruise missiles. Eintagsfliege disturbance makes it impossible to direct missiles, and all the debris in orbit gets in the way. So both the Federacy and the United Kingdom treat those missiles as dead stock."

"They're long-distance missiles that use rocket boosters to propel themselves outside the atmosphere, and then they typically use gravity to fall in an arc toward a land target," the chief of research appended.

They were tall and slender, and they'd grown out their hair, which was tied up in a speckled knot for some reason. Their original hair color was reddish-brown, and their eyes were green.

"And since they're fired outside the atmosphere, that naturally means there's no air, meaning no energy loss from air resistance. So it can aim from greater distances than it can within the atmosphere. Missiles with maximal range can reach from the western tip of the continent all the way to the eastern tip. But since you can't control them during their descent, their accuracy is low. That was mostly compensated for by equipping them with nuclear warheads, which have a wide effective range. As Grethe—excuse me—Colonel Wenzel said, at present, all countries that possess ballistic missiles don't use them. Even if they could, firing them blindly could end up polluting your own territory with radiation.

"And if you set the missile's arc to the horizon instead of a point on the ground, the centrifugal force and gravity can cause it to rotate around the planet's orbit. That's called a man-made satellite. Putting it another way, ballistic missiles and man-made satellites are the same in the sense that they're launched out of the atmosphere and set to fall; the difference is in whether they're dropped down to the surface or into the sky."

In other words.

"The Legion fired a large number of man-made satellites into orbit and

intentionally dropped them onto the surface so they would function as ballistic missiles. Satellites utilize propellant to maintain their altitude, but they instead used it to produce the thrust necessary to send them falling. They were launched from a Legion base you raided during the Fleet Countries operation, aka the Mirage Spire. That was actually a launching facility. A similar structure was observed in the Theocracy, and there are probably several others scattered across the Legion territories.”

“...There’s just one problem, Grethe. There’s no way we wouldn’t have been able to detect them,” the chief of research said, cocking their head and leaning forward.

Their green eyes made it clear that this wasn’t a rebuttal, but an honest question.

“Be it firing a satellite or a missile, burning that much propellant produces massive amounts of heat,” the chief of research continued. “There are still early-warning satellites up there, and we would’ve definitely been able to detect the missile launches. The United Kingdom still has some satellites, and they didn’t warn us, either. Firing even a single satellite requires an absurd amount of fuel. Where would the Legion even get enough fuel to launch multiple—?”

To exit the atmosphere, one could not rely on a jet engine, which used the surrounding air to achieve thrust. So rocket engines were used instead, but doing so was very cost inefficient. A speed of eight thousand meters per second was required to launch a satellite into orbit, and the ratio of weight to fuel required to reach that speed was one to ten. Firing a one-tonne satellite required ten tonnes of fuel. And needless to say, consuming that much fuel produced so much heat that early-warning satellites located in geostationary orbit were bound to detect it.

“That’s right. They need a velocity of eight thousand meters per second. So rather than relying on rocket engines, railguns were utilized as Mass Drivers. That’s what the general staff headquarters speculates. It’s a much more cost-effective way of launching a satellite into orbit.”

“Ah...!” the chief of research exclaimed.

Railguns were capable of firing at an estimated eight thousand meters per second. The Morpho already proved to be capable of firing 800 mm–caliber projectiles weighing several tonnes at that very velocity. And the Legion also showed that they were capable of producing railguns in large numbers and even increasing them in size. The Noctiluca and the Halcyon demonstrated that they were capable of equipping them with multiple barrels and setting them up to produce the required energy internally, though the size of their barrels was never expanded.

But if they were able to increase their energy output, who's to say they didn't attempt to increase the projectiles' weight, too? It was possible the Morpho itself was only a prototype for the Mass Drivers, a mere step in the way to achieving the blistering velocity of eight thousand meters per second.

“Ballistic missiles have high velocity and a shell hard enough to withstand the strain of leaving the atmosphere, so once they're fired, intercepting them becomes difficult. The western front military's general staff headquarters performed an analysis, but it only came up with results just before the attack began. We had no way of stopping the bombardment. If anything, it's impressive the chiefs of staff of each front and the joint chiefs of staff were able to come up with a retreat plan for every single front in the space of a day.”

As Grethe thought the western front military's general staff headquarters' commander, the Killer Mantis, likely didn't think his own achievement was impressive at all, she moved the conversation along. Once launched, a satellite could not change its trajectory. Likewise, once a ballistic missile begins its descent, there's no changing its course. So with that in mind, since the Legion set their sights on the front lines, where most of the Federacy's forces would be concentrated, he made the retreat plan to move the majority of their forces back to safety.

This wasn't a plan one could come up with in a day. With hundreds of thousands of soldiers, having them retreat in an orderly fashion required discipline, and facilities would have to be set up to accommodate them in the reserve positions, too. On top of that, for the formation to effectively stop the Legion, forces would need to be placed there, and they'd need a sufficient supply of howitzer ammunition. And as soon as the soldiers evacuated, new

mines would need to be set with the enemy in sight while being wary of the missiles' descent.

To achieve all that, one would need to keep a close eye on a truly massive amount of information. Willem had no way of knowing when the satellite missiles would come down. At the same time, he couldn't have the front lines evacuated until they did. Once the descent began, there was no stopping the missiles, so for the time being, he drafted a minimal retreat plan using what little information he did have, with the intention of examining and revising the plan once the attack began and more details surfaced.

When it comes to commanding an army, one must be swift rather than thorough. And true to that rule, the minimal retreat plan drafted in just a day effectively bore fruit. In that regard, one could only say the chief of staff did very well. And of course, the fact that the officers and men of the Federacy military pulled off the plan with no preparation reflected greatly on how disciplined they were.

This result had been weaved together by steadily gathering intelligence and carefully scrutinizing it—and by relying on the soldiers' constant discipline and training.

“Also, if there is a silver lining here, it's that they only used a kinetic projectile and not a nuclear warhead. It did blow away all the defensive facilities in the impact zone, but unlike a nuclear warhead, it didn't produce any heat or a blast, so for as long as there weren't people on the impact site itself, there'd be minimal loss of life. And as a matter of fact, the military retreated from the southern front after the first bombardment, so relative to the scale of the damage, we lost very few lives.”

Except...

“We did warn the other countries, of course, but...we still lost the Fleet Countries.”

On top of that, communications were severed from the far-west and southern-shore nations. The Alliance was forced back to their final defensive line despite not having a lot of territory to begin with, and the United Kingdom had to rebuild its defensive line on the grain-producing regions, which

accounted for most of their food production. All those countries were in terrible shape.

“But now that we know they’re using satellites, detecting them shouldn’t be that hard. It’s difficult to optimize them for stealth, and they can’t veer off their orbit. By comparing the inventory to the situation before the war, we can confirm if any satellites are added or go missing, so if nothing else, they won’t catch us by surprise again. If possible, we’d like to destroy their Mass Drivers, but first, we need to focus on holding our lines.”

As Grethe spoke, she added footage of the Mass Drivers—or rather, the Mirage Spire base. She then added an image of the steel pylon detected in the blank region and then brought up another image.

Shin gasped. It was a record of the Charité Underground Labyrinth operation from six months ago. To be more exact, it was an image of the main shaft Kaie’s Black Sheep had sent him tumbling into, which funneled sunlight into the structure. The place where he’d first encountered and battled the Phönix.

The footage showed the large hall, its walls and floors covered in Prussian-blue mirrored surfaces. A passage made of glass and metal had collapsed in, now resting diagonally on the floor. And standing solemnly at its center was a flywheel, its cogs still alive and clicking like the interior of a clock tower. This was a facility for producing electricity.

And emerging from somewhere in the building was a raillike structure that stretched through the entire area, extending to the heavens.

Shin thought that what “Kaie” had been trying to alert him about was the Phönix. But was it possible that this was what “she” had really been trying to tell him...?

Grethe continued her explanation coldly.

“A structure resembling the other Mass Drivers was discovered in the Republic city of Charité.”

Meaning that the Legion had been planning to attack using satellite missiles as long ago as back then. Which meant...

“This means the information the Merciless Queen—Zelene Birkenbaum—has

been providing us was a red herring meant to distract us from the Legion's true objective..."

<<It can't be.>>

The Legion had no emotions, and yet perhaps there really was surprise in her voice.

Vika stood before Zelene's sealed container. Hearing her artificial, mechanical voice moan in disbelief, Vika pondered to himself coldly.

"—The Federacy seems to suspect that your surrender to us was nothing but a ruse to deceive us. And indeed, we got played. We became too desperate to gather intelligence, so as to prevent a second large-scale offensive."

And indeed, the second large-scale offensive she'd told them about was true. But Zelene had warned them about mass production of Morphos—that the Legion would increase in mass and number, and that wasn't what happened in the second large-scale offensive at all.

The mass production of the Phönix was a clearly unnatural development, as were the production of the Noctiluca and the Halcyon.

"If one was to simply look at the outcome, it seems all the information you divulged to us was a distraction to mask the ballistic missiles. And it worked."

<<...>>

"However..."

Yes, however.

"...I'm personally of the opinion that you, too, were played by the Legion."

When told of the Noctiluca, Zelene said it was *baffling*. And her reply didn't seem to be a lie. In order to protect against information leaks, militaries only divulged intelligence to those who needed to know it. That applied to the Legion, too. With that in mind, hiding the truth from Zelene wouldn't have been difficult for them. And having Zelene believe her fake information was true would be an easy way of making it seem more credible.

That way, she wouldn't be able to speculate and reach the truth.

It wasn't clear if the Legion had been planning this ever since the Strike

Package was established, since a small group of Reginleifs destroyed the first Morpho deep in the Legion territories. But when the Federacy started pinpointing Legion bases and commander units, the Legion handed Zelene over willingly, allowing her capture.

The Legion weren't human, they were heartless killing machines. They were immune to all manner of interrogation techniques. To gain confidential information, humankind would need to either crack the heavy encryption on their transmissions or target bases holding important information.

When they find a way out, humans always flock toward it—making it the most efficient location to place a trap. They planted the pitfall at the target they knew the humans would go after.

Zelene was made into a sacrificial pawn to deliver fake information to the humans. Or maybe humankind capturing her was a coincidence, and other commander units were used as sacrificial pawns, too.

The combat machines were coldhearted and emotionless—they would even cast aside their own commander units to wipe out their enemies. It wasn't unlike ants or bees killing an old queen to protect the whole swarm. It might have seemed cruel to humans, but they acted under a different sort of logic.

“To protect your homeland, you gave the Legion their lack of mercy, only for them to use that logic to cut you out. Ironical, isn't it, Merciless Queen?”

<<—>>

Zelene met Vika's ridicule with silence, and Vika raised an eyebrow dubiously. Surely, this murder machine wasn't offended by him.

“What's wrong?”

Zelene's response was indifferent and cold, but it was clear.

<<No.>>



“I can't believe everything we and the Strike Package achieved turned to nothing in the space of a day,” said Theo.

Yuuto, who was severely injured during last month's operation in the Fleet

Countries, was currently staying in a military hospital facility for patients requiring prolonged hospitalization and rehabilitation. He was beyond the period that required him to stay bedridden, but he still needed to rely on crutches to walk, and one of his hands remained in a sling.

Theo placed a paper cup full of coffee by Yuuto's left hand, which had healed, and took a seat in one of the lounge's chairs. He picked up his own cup of coffee from the tray he'd placed on the table earlier.

He'd closed his empty left-hand sleeve with a safety pin. A nearby nurse glanced at him when he was picking up the two cups of coffee, but upon seeing him use a tray to carry them over, she didn't say anything. This made him oddly satisfied.

As he picked up a sugar stick with his hand, using his teeth to tear the paper packet open and pour it into his coffee, Yuuto replied:

"Forget our achievements; all the progress the Federacy made for nearly two years got pushed back in one go. Looking at the news, it was a pretty severe blow. What's it like outside?"

"My new officer told me discreetly that for the time being, they called back the Strike Package, even the 1st Armored Division, who were supposed to be on leave. The base I'm in right now is in an uproar. They're so short on soldiers they're considering adjusting the age for enlistment."

Having been transferred from the armored branch to a logistical support unit, Theo was currently stationed in a base on the outskirts of Sankt Jeder for his training period. And since it was a base charged with the training and retraining of cadets and reserve soldiers, the deaths of the front lines weren't inconsequential to them.

"Anyway, compared to what I heard from the base, the news doesn't show the bodies or the wreckage of the front lines—pardon, former front lines. But other than that, they're not hiding anything. The Federacy was like that before you guys came here, too, back during the first Morpho attack."

Theo was told about the news from Teresa when he stopped by Ernst's estate before coming here. Freedom of the press was a basic condition of modern democracy. They didn't want to make the public anxious, but at the same time,

they had no intent of withholding information from the people.

“And because of that policy—and thanks to the army and government sticking to that policy for so long, the people in the city seem to believe the news and are trying to stay composed. But everyone’s still pretty jittery.”

The main newscaster, with their uniquely calm voice, had a slightly sharper tone than the previous day. The soldiers bickering in the base’s dining hall wasn’t an unusual sight, but they did seem rougher than usual, and weird groups of people were demonstrating in the capital plaza, speaking in unison. The young people parading through the main street held up placards with morose expressions, criticizing Ernst and his administration as useless dictators.

“Not that I can’t relate to them,” Theo added with a mumble.

The attire of the young demonstrators walking between the roadway was very light. Sankt Jeder was near the continent’s north, and one needed a coat to stave off the cold at this time of year. And yet they were dressed lightly, like it was the height of summer.

Like they hadn’t prepared their coats even this late into autumn. Like they were in the south, where it was warm even during October, up until just the previous day.

“With the front lines pushed back in a day, people had to evacuate all of a sudden. I can see why they’d be outraged.”

The outer-province citizens had their lands become the new front lines overnight and were progressively being evacuated into more inner cities. A sudden need arose to accommodate this vast number of refugees, so some of them were sent as far as Sankt Jeder in the distance. They were given preferential spots on the transport trains and provided temporary residence in hotels, motels, and empty apartments. However, due to the urgency of the evacuation, they weren’t allowed to bring any luggage.

“They were forced to leave because they’d be in danger in the defensive battles...or more like in the way. And there were some older citizens who insisted they’ll ‘never abandon the farms passed down by our fathers!’ and soldiers had to hold up guns to them and drag them away to evacuate. I heard about it back in the base.”

It was the army's duty to protect its citizens, even if it meant being resented for it. Leaving unarmed civilians on the battlefield would not only mean the loss of their lives, but they would also get in the way of operational activity.

So the soldiers shouted at them, dragged them out of their domiciles, picked up their children, and forced them to walk to safety at gunpoint. But of course, the citizens being driven away from their homes were outraged by that. Both at what was done for them, and at this city for being so peaceful by comparison.

"And then there's the civilians from the combat territories. They call them Wulfsrin, I think? They evacuated into the country on their own, and they're worried if their homes and cities weren't ransacked."

The Wulfsrin gave up their land in the Empire days when they had to fall back, and they had to emigrate into new land whenever the Empire's land expanded, meaning they were used to moving with all their assets and families. They lived in mobile homes, didn't gather more family assets than they needed, and had a custom of carrying their things and precious metals they could liquidate into money. That made things easier for them now, and when the retreat began, they were able to pick up their things and voluntarily evacuate the combat zone.

So they wouldn't get in the way of their parents, brothers, and spouses who fought as Vargus.

"Hmm." Yuuto scoffed. "Demonstrators and citizens who refused to evacuate. Do they really think anyone has the time for this kind of nonsense now?"

"I guess things weren't like that in the Republic back in last year's large-scale offensive?" Theo asked.

"Anyone who refused to evacuate got butchered by the Legion soon after."

"...Oh, right..."

Before their emotional composure was even a factor, they simply didn't have the time to worry about it.

"They had to throw everything away and flee for safety, and only then did they have a chance to survive. I don't know if it was because the situation was just bad enough to make people lose it, but there were even people greeting

the Legion with flowers and placards that said something about their savior. Considering it hasn't come to that, I'd say the Federacy is faring much better."

Of course, this wasn't a matter of faring any better; it just meant that things in the Republic had been that much worse.

"...Well, as a matter of fact, despite falling back so much, the new front is in the combat territories. All the fields and factories are in those territories. Sankt Jeder functions as the capital, and the people living there are fine, so it didn't influence the Federacy's livelihood. Some people are anxious the capital might be next, but I think most people don't know how the attack even happened. I don't, either, to be honest. And when you don't have a good idea of what something is, you can't really be afraid of it."

It's easy to panic in the face of the unknown, except...

"If anything scares me, it's the fact that they're not aiming at Sankt Jeder," Theo whispered.

Yuuto glanced at him. Theo kept his head down, gazing into the coffee swirling in his cup.

"Ballistic missiles, man-made satellites... I heard the explanation, but I can't really wrap my head around it. But if they could attack every front in the Federacy, that means they could just as easily target anywhere else in the country. So they could have just fired at the capital and taken out the Federacy's brain. And still..."

Of course, the Federacy wasn't organized in such a way that destroying the capital would completely topple it as a country. Those metallic shooting stars were inaccurate and didn't have the destructive radius of a nuke, and to compensate for those flaws, they had to be fired in large numbers. So maybe, in the end, they were just too inaccurate to land a hit on the capital. However...

"It's eerie, honestly. They want to kill us, but instead of finishing us off, they pull back and try to crush us bit by bit from the outside in. It's like they're trying to take bites out of us while completely blind to whether they're aiming at our brains or our limbs. They're attacking us like insects, and it's just...creepy."

If you want to kill an enemy, you aim for vitals—like a human's windpipe.

Even animals follow that logic. But a colony of ants chooses to swallow up their prey rather than aim for their vitals. They cover their opponent up, biting into every inch of them before eventually tearing them to bits. Completely deaf to the screams and death throes of their unfortunate prey all the while.

It was an eerie difference from the thought, the judgment, the very way of life of other organisms.

“The Federacy, the United Kingdom, the Alliance, and the Republic. The Legion’s got us split up and surrounded, and they actually can crush us from the outside in. And that makes it all the creepier.”



Shin was the one who saw the electric-generation flywheel in Charité, but it was Annette who personally saw the Mass Driver’s rail structure. That knowledge frustrated her to no end. The center of the office building was open from the bottom floor to the top one, and the silver rails ran through the whole thing, aiming up at the sky.

At the time, she thought the skylight had shattered and fallen in, but thinking back on it, the skylight probably wasn’t there to begin with, and the hole offered the rails a way out into the sky.

“I even saw it with my own eyes...! How did I think it was some kind of decoration?!”

“I know how you feel, but...you weren’t in the state of mind to figure that out then, Annette. It’s not your fault.” Lena shook her head softly, sitting opposite her.

The two of them were in Annette’s office, occupying two sofas. At the time, Annette had been investigating a Para-RAID malfunction. Soon after she started, the Phönix launched a surprise attack that wiped out the Phalanx squadron. And after that, the Sheepdogs were discovered, leading to an urgent retreat... Neither Annette nor Lena could have paid enough attention to those rails to assume they were anything but a useless environmental decoration.

Lena herself couldn’t help but think about what could’ve happened if she’d have noticed it back then, but objectively speaking, with her very rudimentary

knowledge of satellites and ballistic missiles, it was doubtful Lena would have realized it even then. And the same held true for Annette.

“Besides, even if they did fire from those rails, it was the Republic that failed to notice anything,” Lena told her.

“...But the Republic didn’t get bombarded by the satellite missiles.”

“...Yes.”

The Republic was the only one among the countries whose survival was confirmed by the Federacy—and probably even among the nations whose survival was uncertain—that hadn’t been bombarded by the satellites.

There was some time from the strike on the Federacy’s western front to the bombardment in the far-west countries. And then from the strike in the far-west countries to the bombardment of the Federacy’s eastern front.

The Federacy assumed that the Legion used the several-hour gap between those bombardments to attack other human countries. Ironically enough, it was the satellite missiles that exposed the existence of other surviving countries. Though, since they’d been bombarded, it wasn’t clear if those countries still existed.

“Other countries might have been destroyed by this bombardment. And the Republic survived despite having a launch facility standing right in front of them. And then they endured the second large-scale offensive. The Republic never noticed, I never noticed, and that’s going to...!”

“Annette.” Lena silently but firmly cut off Annette’s words of regret.

She thought back to what Shin told her the first day they met.

Please stop making that tragic face.

“It’s not your fault... You can regret it if you want, but you can’t insist that you’re guilty for something you’re not at fault for. You can’t act like some kind of tragic saint.”

Annette gulped...and then breathed out a long sigh.

“Sorry... You’re right. Now...isn’t the time for this anyway.”

“It’s ironic how the flywheel was in the same place where I first fought the Phönix—where I saw Zelene’s ‘message.’ The Phönix’s message completely distracted me.”

The bluntly indifferent way Shin recollected it made Raiden furrow his brow. If Raiden—heck, if anyone was in Shin’s shoes, they’d be distracted by the Phönix’s message. And what happened after that, too.

“...Even if you ended up being fooled, it ain’t your fault, man.”

Nor was he guilty for being cajoled by Zelene’s information after she was captured.

“If anyone’s at fault for fooling you, it’s Zelene, and the higher-ups at the intelligence division didn’t see through her lie, either. You’re not guilty for any of that.”

Shin was a Processor in the middle of combat. This wasn’t a mistake he could be held accountable for.

Seeing Raiden’s earnest attempt to cheer him up, Shin chuckled.

“...The hell’s wrong with you?” Raiden growled at him grumpily.

“Sorry, it’s just...you worry too much. You fuss about me too often,” Shin said, snickering again. “Yeah, I know that. It’s not my fault.”

I’m fine already. I can handle guilt now.

“...Right.”

“If anything, I don’t think I’m the only one who got fooled here. I think Zelene was tricked just the same.”

As Raiden directed a quizzical glance at him, Shin hung his head in concern. Concern for someone who wasn’t present here, for Zelene—for the soul who had turned into a mechanical ghost.

“I don’t think she was lying to me. Maybe this is just wishful thinking, because I want to believe her, but she went as far as allowing herself to get captured to express that desire...”

The desire to end the war. To save humankind.

“...I don’t think she was lying,” Shin concluded.

Raiden took a deep breath. True enough, questioning everything they saw would get them nowhere, and it wasn’t their job to doubt everything, either.

“Even so, the question is...who lied to whom—and how deep the lies go,” he said.

“Yes.”

Was the information she gave them about shutting down all the Legion valid? Was the information about the transmission base and Frederica being the key to doing that well-founded? Would the top brass have to reconsider how credible that information was? Would they even have the time and presence of mind to do so?

Shin suddenly thought back to what Zelene had nearly told him in the Fleet Countries.

The shutdown order is transmitted to each base’s commander units via its own exclusive communications satellite. And if that satellite is shot down, the nearest Rabe would compensate for it.

And Grethe mentioned that it was extremely difficult to apply stealth to man-made satellites.

“Then do you think there’s any chance...we can find that communications satellite?”

When he found out his homeland was isolated on the other side of the Legion territories, even Dustin couldn’t help but go pale at the news.

“...The Republic is fine, at least for now. So...I’ll be all right.”

Upon hearing him repeat those words despite how white in the face he was, Anju furrowed her brow.

“Dustin...”

“I’m all right, really. You guys all lost your families. I haven’t lost anything yet; I can’t let this shake me up—,” he started.

But Anju placed a finger on his lips, silencing him. As if to ask him,

exasperated, if this was the issue weighing on him. At this point, that didn't matter anymore. Anju and the others may have still been scarred, but the wounds of loss had stopped aching long ago.

"Our families are dead, that much is true, but...your mother survived last year's large-scale offensive, and she's still in the Republic, right?"

The offensive did unfortunately claim his father's life, though. But his mother was fortunate enough to survive, thanks to Dustin and the Eighty-Six protecting her. She was still alive.

"She's still fine, so it's only natural you're worried about her. You don't need to force yourself to act like that's not important."

"...Sorry." Dustin hung his head.

"The Republic military and the Federacy's relief expedition are still in the Republic's territory. They're bound to come back, so you can have them take your mother along."

As he returned her gaze with his silver eyes, she shrugged. Anju cocked her head with a smile. Dustin being earnest and fastidious was part of his charm, but...

"You're here, fighting for the Republic, Dustin... You're allowed to have your way a little, right?"

When she came back from the integrated headquarters to Rüstkammer base, Zashya didn't seem too shaken. Lerche called out to her, a bit concerned by her attitude. Zashya was seated on the sofa set in Vika's office. Despite the room's owner being absent, she was there with Olivia sitting opposite her and Lerche standing behind her.

"Lady Deputy..."

"I'm fine, Lerche. I cried my nerves away in bed after hearing the news," Zashya said, her expression stiff and her eyes a slightly lighter shade of Imperial violet than her master's.

Those eyes were the symbol of the Amethysta, rulers of the United Kingdom and royalty of the northern lands.

“I am the deputy commander of His Highness’s regiment. If I let my doubts show, it would sow unrest among my men. And if His Highness’s men were to let doubt make them cause a blunder among the United Kingdom’s army, I wouldn’t be able to look him, or his father and brother, whom we left behind at the homeland, in the eye.”

Hearing this, Olivia couldn’t help but feel an inappropriate thought cross his mind. This prince was known as the United Kingdom’s King of Corpses. Despite this, Olivia had conversed with the serpent prince, but that only made him realize that his name as the Serpent of Shackles and Decay was well-earned. Was that cold, emotionless snake even capable of being shaken up?

Perhaps sensing Olivia’s doubts, Lerche glared at Olivia with dark eyes, to which he raised a hand apologetically.

“Why would I be shaken up? The situation isn’t nearly bad enough to give me pause.”

Vika opened the door right in time to hear their exchange. Returning from negotiations with the Federacy commanders and his meeting with Zelene, Vika entered the room with those indifferent words.

Zashya hurriedly got to her feet, but Vika motioned for her to sit down with a wave of his hand and took a seat on the sofa, too. He then carried on, with a tone that was less wishful thinking and more of an obvious fact he’d conjectured.

“The Dragon Corpse mountain range falling isn’t nearly enough to topple House Idinarohk. I’m sure they’re facing great difficulties, but my brother and father can handle this situation. And as such, I have no reason to be shaken up.”

“Of course, Your Highness... Forgive me if I was discourteous,” Zashya said.

“I used my name to ask that the Federacy disclose any information regarding the war situation as it develops. I asked for information regarding your country, too, Aegis.”

Olivia bowed his head. He used his name—his status as prince of the United Kingdom, which the Federacy couldn’t ignore—to get confidential information for Olivia, a mere instructor for the Strike Package.

“...I am grateful.”

“Don’t worry about it; just think of it as being in my debt. I’ll have you pay it back before long, Anna Maria, heroine of the spear dance.”

Olivia gazed back at him questioningly, to which Vika shrugged without answering.

“Your unit and mine can’t go on operations for a while, but who’s to say how long they’d be able to keep saying that...? Zashya, keep a tight hold on our men. Aegis, you’ll be handling the instruction unit, of course?”

With their impregnable natural fortresses conquered and no other news to speak of their countries’ situation, even seasoned United Kingdom and Alliance soldiers couldn’t stay composed. The Federacy’s operations were another country’s battles to them, after all, and if any of their comrades were to die now, it could spark strife and rebellion. This meant the Federacy couldn’t carelessly send out these two units into battle.

They couldn’t.

Exchanging gazes, Zashya and Olivia each nodded. Even if they couldn’t send their soldiers out into battle given their current mental states—

“By your will, Your Highness.”

“Of course. I’ll have it done right away.”

—whatever may come next—even if their beloved homelands may perish beyond the gray walls of the Legion—they were still here. Trapped in the Federacy’s battlefield. And a time may come when they would have to fight anyway.

Even with all the Federacy’s fronts having greatly fallen back, including the western front, which was adjacent to the Rüstkammer base, there were still cartoons for kids airing on the airwaves just the same. This was, perhaps, how the broadcast stations stuck to their guns. Even though the adults were preparing to flee, there were many kids who didn’t understand the situation, and the stations resolved to give them some semblance of a normal life.

But despite being one such child, Frederica had no time to enjoy those

cartoons. Kurena, Shiden, and the others were all eating in the dining hall, sneaking concerned glances at the girl as her eyes were stuck to the news playing on TV.

Despite the front lines having been pulled back, both the dining hall's menu and the Processors' appetites remained unchanged. They had to make sure they ate, so they'd be ready to fight at any time.

"It only makes sense since the Federacy's surrounded and all its fronts are pushed back," Michihi said as she listened to the news report on the evacuation status. "But they keep moving everyone toward the center."

"I wonder if it was like that back in the Republic, when the Legion War was only just beginning?" Rito wondered.

Shiden exchanged glances with Claude and Tohru, captains of the Spearhead squadron's 4th and 3rd Platoons respectively. The Republic military had fought to stave off the Legion's progress for a mere two weeks, and as they did, they evacuated citizens from around the border.

"Ah... I don't remember," Shiden grumbled.

"Figures. We didn't watch the news at that age."

"Ah, I remember! They evacuated us, yeah. A bus showed up, and I got in it with my ma, pa, and grandpa."

"How am I supposed to be a part of this conversation...?" Marcel asked, his expression guilt-ridden and awkward.

After all, eleven years ago, soon after that evacuation, the Republic started sending the Eighty-Six to internment camps, and everyone save for him and Frederica were Eighty-Six, who knew the pain of that life.

"You can just talk about what the Federacy did at the time, right?" Tohru replied briskly, representing the rest of the Eighty-Six. "Did you evacuate back then?"

"I didn't, but...", Marcel said, and then he appended how someone he knew did. Eugene, his friend from middle school and the special officer academy. "A friend of mine evacuated but ended up getting split up from his family and

never saw them again. His kid sister doesn't even remember their parents anymore..."

"..."

A rather uncomfortable silence descended on the table, as if to say they shouldn't have asked that. Marcel hurriedly continued:

"Still, it doesn't look like things are as chaotic as they were back then, at least for now. So I'm sure we'll manage."

"...Do you truly think so?" Frederica cut him off, her voice low.

Her crimson eyes were contorted, with tears built up. Like she was holding back great anger.

"You, too, believed that the war would soon end. That peace was in sight and within grasp. And though that should have been the case...!"

"Frederica." Kurena interrupted Frederica before her words were about to turn into a shout.

As she did, Claude changed the channel.

"Frederica, don't," Kurena told her.

"Yeah, you can't say that, squirt," Claude said.

The TV had switched over to a random animal show. It was a documentary about wildlife caught on the front lines.

"Not now, at least," he carried on. "If watching the news puts you on edge, just change the channel."

Footage of a wildcat captured on the front lines played on the screen.

Even with all humankind's spheres of influence so greatly diminished, these wild creatures hunted prey and raised their cubs undisturbed.

"This doesn't look too interesting. Can I change the channel to a monster-movie marathon I started watching?" Rito asked nonchalantly.

This caused idle chatter to break out again. Some argued they wanted to watch a zombie film instead or finish the rest of this one magical girl show they saw once. And as the chatter continued around them, Kurena kept her hands

wrapped around a shivering Frederica.

In the midst of the chatter, Tohru asked Claude a question. Tohru had an Aventura's blond hair and green eyes, and he was tall and lanky.

"Claude, are you all right, though?"

His friend answered without turning to look at him. They had been friends for years, as they'd served in the same unit since the first squadron they were assigned to in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, and they were comrades who fought together even now.

He had red hair, passed down from his mother who had mixed noble Imperial blood, and wore glasses without optical lenses to hide his moon-white eyes. Tohru knew that.

"I'm not, and that's why I just want to watch something, be it wildcats or zombies or monsters or magical girls."

"...Right."

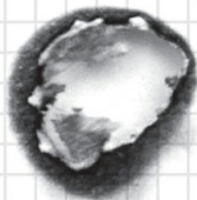
[EIGHTY-
SIX]

Republic Calendar, 358

START OF THE LEGION WAR



Judgment Day.
The hatred runs
deep.



START OF THE LEGION WAR

When the *Empyre* made its *dekleration of war* and the *Leejun* attacked, Father and Uncle Karlstahl went to the *battelfeeld*.

Would Father come home tonight?

Would Uncle Karlstahl be with him?

Standing in her large estate's spacious entrance hall, little Lena stood with her favorite dolly, awaiting her father's return.

"Claude. Do everything your mother and brother tell you, okay? Henry, take care of your mother and Claude."

"Okay."

"Yeah, Dad. I'll handle it."

Claude waved at his father, seeing him off as he left to the *battelfeeld*. His other hand was clasping his mother's hand, and his brother stood at his side, also waving good-bye to their father.

The front was falling back with blistering speed. They sent in more and more soldiers, but there was no stopping the advance of the Empire's autonomous combat drones—the Legion.

"The 1st Armored Division has been wiped out. Those Legion things, they're monsters...!"

"We can't get in touch with the infantry detachment that went out to cover for us—they probably got wiped out. The surviving troops are all Colorata, but

they fought bravely for our country.”

Hearing his comrade say those words between his teeth, Karlstahl had a thought cross his mind.

Aah. Do you not realize it, Václav?

Colorata.

You’ve already classified them as different from the Alba.

His parents and big brother weren’t watching anything but the news. Left without his favorite cartoons, Shin was displeased. His beloved big brother wouldn’t play with him as much, either. But what made him even more anxious were the severe expressions they wore when they watched the news.

He wasn’t sure what was going on, but he could tell it was something bad.

“There was an *evacuashion notiss* to places near the border. That means, hmm... It’s dangerous here, so we have to run. We need to pack, so take only what’s important. A change of clothes and only one toy. The one you like most. Okay, Theo?”

“Okay.”

“Tohru, we’ll be leaving. Say good-bye to the sea and the ship.”

“I will, Grandpa.”

Leaning out of the bus meant for evacuating the border areas, Tohru waved at the familiar sights of the sea and his grandfather’s ship. Thinking, all the while, that he’d probably be back in a day or two.

There were lots of that poster plastered around town. Every day, there was more of them. Her father told her they were for *re-crewting* soldiers.

As she walked through the streets, with her father holding her hand, Anju pondered that there was more of them than there were the other day.

The news reports only reflected a worsening state of the war. Having had his after-breakfast coffee, Aldrecht whispered to himself when he made sure his daughter wasn’t listening.

“The Republic military’s taking one loss after another.”

And his wife replied, with a shaking voice.

“What’s going to happen to us next...? To this country...?”

The fires of war were still distant from the secondary capital, Charité, and its satellite cities, but the Kukumila household was already packing to prepare. As she stood by her sister, who helped their parents pull out their travel trunk and fill it up, Kurena felt like they were going out on a trip. She ran around, dancing, dressed in her prettiest one-piece dress and favorite hat.

The school dorms only had one television in the dining hall. As Raiden anxiously watched the news broadcast that kept playing on it, the old woman running the school stood behind him. Raiden didn’t really know what the news was talking about, but he could tell something bad was happening, and he looked up at the old woman uneasily.

Were his parents, who lived rather far from here, still all right? What about his friends?

“Nan...”

Her wrinkled hands rested on his shoulders. Hands larger than his own, the hands of an adult.

“Don’t worry. Your home, your mother and father, are safe.”

The voice of the lady giving the news was getting grimmer. It became angrier and more provoked, like it was looking for someone to blame for the situation.

Watching it every day, Shiden got carried away by its arguments. Who’s at fault? What’s at fault? She didn’t really know why, but the answer was clear.

“The *Empyre’s* guilty, that’s who!” Shiden said innocently.

“Yeah! The *Empyre’s* at fault!” Her little sister mimicked her simpl-mindedly.

The front lines were continuing to retreat. Refugee trucks arrived at the town Kaie and her family lived in. When the refugees got off the truck, their neighbors eyed them with hostility one wouldn’t expect them to direct at their countrymen. Like they were nuisances. Outsiders.

The eyes of people who were starved for someone to thrust all their anxiety and fear onto—and had just found them.

Traitors.

The rock that smashed their porch's light had that word scribbled onto it. Someone who learned that House Penrose were former Imperial nobles—descendants of the enemy—likely threw it.

Cowering behind the door, Annette watched on as her father cleaned up the glass with a severe expression on his face.

A mound was piled up before Karlstahl. It was made up of corpses of their army's soldiers, staked together like sandbags. They weren't even delivered enough body bags to go around, and it wouldn't be long before they would have to discard the remains of their fallen soldiers.

One surviving soldier, lying as still and powerless as one of the corpses, whispered flatly.

"Why us...?"

Why is it only us?

All those corpses were of argent-haired, silver-eyed Alba. This wasn't to say the Colorata weren't dying, but the ratio of Colorata to Alba in the overall population was too lopsided, so there were more dead Alba. But in terms of their relative populations, there was no real difference in the percent of dead Alba to dead Colorata.

But the only corpses one could see on this mound were those of Alba. And no matter what battlefield one went to, the corpses were always those of Alba and not Colorata.

The soldier whispered. Flatly, but feverishly.

It's their fault. They don't die in battle. They kill us and probably laugh all the while. Descendants of the Empire. Scions of the tyrants. Them—those who are not one of us.

"...Those damn Colorata."

It was oddly loud outside. His mother shifted the curtain, peering outside, and then turned around, her face pale.

"Dustin... You can't look outside today. No matter what," she told him.

Soldiers in the same uniform as his father's forced their way into his home for some reason, pinning Claude and his mother to the floor. Claude's father, who'd returned home gravely injured, watched on, fighting back tears that fell from his red eyes.

"Henry!" Claude reached out desperately.

The pair of eyes he was looking at—his brother's silvery eyes, just like Claude's—averted their gaze.

Upon returning from the battlefield, Karlstahl was ordered to guard convoys of the Colorata. Between those missions, Karlstahl found himself standing stock-still in the military's headquarters, staring up at a statue of Saint Magnolia.

She who led the revolution three hundred years ago, only to be thrown into prison by the Republic's citizens, where she died.

Because she wasn't a commoner.

She'd innocently fought against discrimination, nobly won, but then wasn't even counted among the commoners when she did. They saw her as one of the evil, vulgar oppressors—for no reason other than her being a princess of the hated royal house.

Yes. In the end, to the citizens, Saint Magnolia was nothing more than an *outsider* who was not one of *them*.



D-DAY PLUS THREE.

Stellar Calendar: October 4, 2050

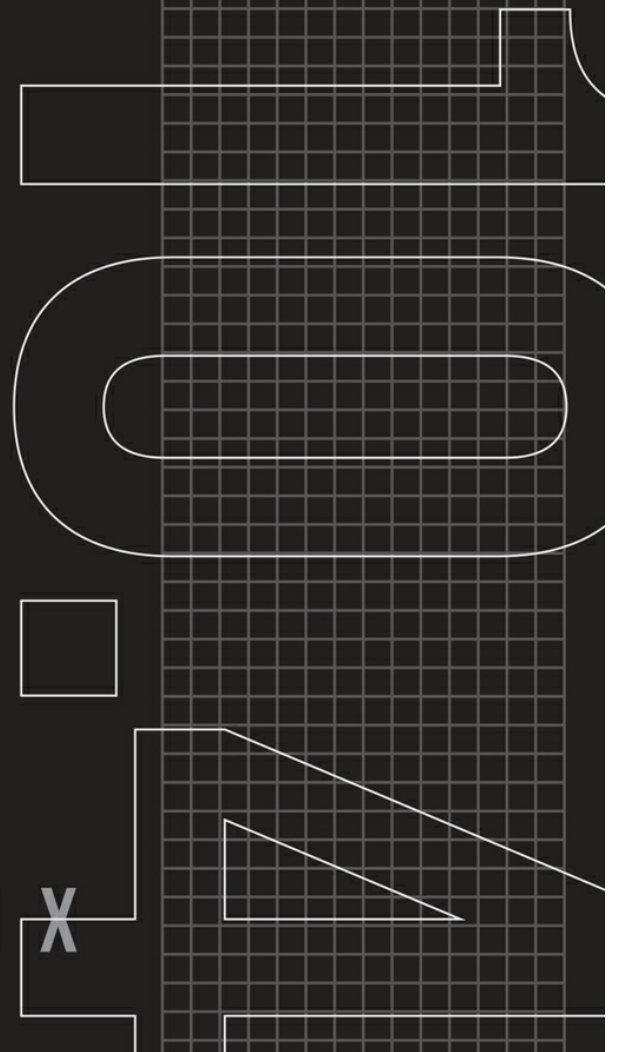
DIES PASSIONIS



Judgment Day.
The hatred runs deep.

86
EIGHTY-SIX

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



10.4

D-DAY PLUS THREE

With the front lines having fallen back to the depths of the combat territories, signs of the fighting reached as far as Rüstkammer base, which sat between the combat and the agricultural territories.

The nearby town was issued an evacuation notice, since it could end up being involved in the coming fighting. At the same time, public facilities like schools, community centers, and theaters were opened to allow the Wulfsrin a place to evacuate to.

And that also applied to the special officer school building and dorms made for Raiden and the other Eighty-Six.

“...Is this really all right, though?”

If this town was in such danger that its citizens had to be evacuated deeper into the country, why have the Wulfsrin take cover there?

“Well, that’s just what life’s like for us.”

Raiden turned around, finding Bernholdt was the one who’d said that.

“...That beastmen thing again?” Raiden snorted out.

The people of the battlefield who spent their lives in war were scorned by the ordinary, peaceful citizens.

“Ah, no, not that... It’s just that they’re going to serve as reserves in case things go south,” Bernholdt said and, upon seeing Raiden’s questioning glance, shrugged. “The Wulfsrin are beastmen cubs, too. Defending the border is our born purpose. Once they unpack and settle down, they’ll start independent training. The women and the kids, even the retired old men and hags.”

With the front lines on the retreat and many soldiers dead, they would

voluntarily step up to fill the void.

Glancing at the nearby town with his cold, golden gaze, Bernholdt spoke.

“The ones coming here are from our village or bloodline. They’ll probably be pretty well-trained by the time we’ll need them, so I’ll introduce ’em to you and the captain later. Assume you’ll be working with them before long.”

Three days had passed since every front on humankind’s sphere of influence was bombarded by the satellite missiles. And as they all expected, the Strike Package was finally ordered to deploy.

Lena and Shin sat with an office desk between them, their expressions stern as neither of them could mask their emotions upon seeing the contents of the mission. They were in Lena’s office in the Rüstkammer’s base’s barracks, and they each had the necessary information, both in their hands and projected as a hologram over the desk.

Lena groaned, her fair brow furrowed. She expected them to be sent deep into the Legion territories to destroy the Mass Drivers, but...

“...It looks like we’re in for even a tougher mission than that.”

“Supporting the Federacy relief expedition’s retreat from the Republic...” Shin read the mission outline. “Maintain a retreat path for four hundred kilometers south along the old high-speed railway until the Strike Package and expedition forces both successfully retreat.”

Since the Charité Underground Labyrinth operation six months ago, the Federacy relief expedition force had been deployed in the Republic. They’d been gradually pulling out as the months went by, but they were still a pretty large force consisting of several brigades.

There were over fifty thousand personnel, with seven hundred combat and transport vehicles, including Vánagandrs. Counting all the equipment, fuel, and raw materials they would be carrying, the sheer mass of the group was tantamount to moving an entire city—across a long distance of four hundred kilometers.

Supporting that kind of endeavor was much easier said than done.

“Even if a number of support personnel, the military police brigade’s personnel, and some of the infantry will be going via train, it’s still going to be difficult. Transport trucks can’t move quickly across unpaved roads, and the armored personnel carriers and Vánagandrs are going to require fuel transport trucks. Feldreß aren’t built to move for as far as four hundred kilometers without maintenance stops, and it’d take us a while just to cross that distance. So if any battle breaks out...”

Vánagandrs were capable of outputting a cruising speed approaching one hundred kilometers per hour, but to compensate for being able to move fifty tonnes of combat weight at such velocities, they were extremely inefficient when it came to fuel. They absolutely needed an escort of fuel transport trucks, which meant they couldn’t move at their maximal speed to cross those four hundred kilometers as quickly as possible. After all, those trucks were both sluggish and unarmed, meaning they needed to be protected.

In addition to that, the transport trucks they’d need to rely on to ferry supplies were weak and slow vehicles by comparison, meaning the Feldreß would need to match their speed, holding up the whole queue. Not just that, but the expedition force also had too many supplies for the trucks to deliver in one trip, which meant that the trucks would need to make multiple round trips at that slow pace.

“The expedition hasn’t sent their retreat plan in yet, but we’re building our current retreat plan while assuming they’ll be discarding low-priority equipment,” Shin said. “Or rather, we’re expecting them to just bring back their personnel and vehicles. I don’t mean to offend, Lena, but I think the most precious resource the Federacy needs right now is people. Both ethically and practically speaking.”

“...Yes.” Lena nodded.

The Federacy was a superpower with vast territory, meaning that they could mine and replenish assorted resources. So while they couldn’t very well discard Vánagandrs, vehicles, armored exoskeletons, or firearms, they could afford leaving behind barracks and the like with all their utensils and fixtures behind.

By contrast, there was no replacing dead people. Even ignoring the moral

implications, humankind was among the slowest mammals when it came to the amount of time it took a newborn reach reproductive age, requiring between one to two decades. The Federacy was already in a situation where they were forced to rely on some child soldiers to keep up their ranks; they couldn't afford to let soldiers die needlessly.

"So if all we have to do is support the expedition force's retreat, it'll be tough, but I think we can manage that much. With the Legion's main force locked in a stalemate with the western front's army, there won't be that many Legion left in the territories. The southern high-speed rail was a spot we captured and restored in the Morpho elimination operation last year, so we have updated maps on hand. So long as the slowest in the group, the infantrymen and the transport trucks, can reach the Federacy, the Reginleifs can quickly escort the Vánagandrs back and return to pick them up.

"At least, so long as nothing as persistent as the Phönix doesn't pop up," Shin appended in something of a joke. The Phönix were opponents Shin had quite the history with, but since they lacked projectile weapons, they were weak in open battlefields where they could be exposed to surface suppression. They were lightweight and thinly armored, meaning that they were perhaps more durable than infantry but still quite frail. Shin made that remark knowing that it wasn't likely they'd be put into use on this battlefield.

"Except..." Shin sighed lightly. "Helping the expedition force retreat is our first priority, but even though it's just our second priority...supporting the entirety of the Republic's population retreat... That one might be hard."

Citing a lack of defensive facilities and an insufficient military force to defend their territory as their reasons, the Republic's new government appealed to the Federacy to accept the evacuation of all its citizens. The Federacy assented to the request, out of humanitarian reasons.

This would be a transport operation of unprecedented scale, using the high-speed railway after the expedition force's personnel retreated. Since this was a railway track, they'd have to rely on freight trains, which would have to make multiple round trips, day and night, in order to deliver all the Republic refugees to their destination.

Even with last year's large-scale offensive whittling the Republic's population to less than a tenth of its size, this was still an entire country with several million people. Even if the expedition force was to discard everything but its most essential supplies and give up most of their train space to accommodate.

"Do you think it's possible?" Lena asked.

"We'll be able to maintain a defensive line for seventy-two hours at best. If everything goes smoothly and according to plan—from the assignment and order of the trains' departure, and assuming everyone boards and disembarks the trains fast enough—we could just barely make it. But if any unexpected setbacks happen, making that seventy-two-hour time limit would be difficult, and we'd be dealing with untrained citizens who'd need to do this right without any preparation. And I'm guessing some people would be opposed to the evacuation either way."

"There have been some weird statements flying around..." Lena nodded, her eyes distant.

People had been claiming that the war was a conspiracy by the Republic military, or the government, or that the Federacy or the United Kingdom were behind it all.

Back in the first large-scale offensive, people were throwing around utterly absurd theories about how this war was all a conspiracy by underground lizard people who controlled the other countries and the Legion behind the scenes. Having people chant those theories like gospel was harmless and did no real damage on its own, but hearing about it after the fact filled Lena with a strange sort of weariness.

Why lizards?

"But, and I might be coming across as a broken record here, figuring that out is the Republic government's job, not the Strike Package's. Our mission is still maintaining the retreat route, and the Republic's retreat shouldn't influence it. Assuming no one's stupid enough to jump off the train, that is."

Of course, jumping off a high-speed train moving at three hundred kilometers per hour was a feat of stupidity that was rare even among the dumbest of humans. That comment was Shin's attempt at humor.

While Lena was wondering if laughing would be appropriate, Shin carried on indifferently.

“That said, this is all just something we’re doing on the side while helping the Federacy forces retreat. Anyone who doesn’t make it in time is out of our hands.”

But after saying that, Shin looked like he realized he’d just misspoken.

“—Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that to you, Lena.”

Shin cared nothing for the Republic, but to Lena, this was her homeland. What he’d just said was something she didn’t need to hear now, when her country was teetering on the brink of destruction. Lena, however, forced herself to smile and shook her head.

“It’s fine. I’ve been prepared for this a long time ago.”

Lena did see the Republic as the homeland she was born and raised in. She didn’t want to see it perish. Being a citizen of the Republic was part of her identity, and the Republic disappearing off the face of the earth was tantamount to losing a part of herself. And yet...

“This actually isn’t the first time the Republic’s been destroyed, after all.”

It had been on the verge of destruction since long ago.

Since she became the Spearhead squadron’s Handler, and Shin, whom she hadn’t met face-to-face at the time, told her about the coming of the large-scale offensive. Her homeland was closing its eyes to reality, shutting itself off in a sweet, shallow dream, refusing to protect itself. The Republic had made no effort to protect itself to begin with.

Even when she warned of the coming calamity, no one heeded her call, and the country clung to the wishful thinking that they could keep on forcing someone else to fight their battles for them until the war resolved itself.

And that belief led to that country’s destruction.

On the night of the large-scale offensive last year, the Morpho shattered the Gran Mur, and in the blink of an eye, the mechanical ghosts ransacked the eighty-five Sectors once touted as humankind’s final paradise.

At the time, Lena never believed they'd be given any aid. Some part of her heart was prepared and resigned to accept the fact that they'd simply be wiped out.

And yet she didn't feel like she was at fault for not saving the Republic.

The same held true now. In the face of a large-scale offensive, the Federacy unexpectedly extended a helping hand. The Eighty-Six had left the Eighty-Sixth Sector, and the reality that the Republic had to fight its own battles was thrust before its eyes.

So if the Republic was to refuse to fight despite that, then let them perish. Lena would be sad to accept such an ending to her homeland, but it would only be a natural conclusion. Lena had decided she would fight to the bitter end and left her homeland behind because she chose to live her life in a way she wouldn't be ashamed of. She chose a new battlefield; she chose the Strike Package.

And when she left, she did so while being prepared for this conclusion—that her country, which refused to move on, would perish in its insistence. She silently told herself that this wouldn't be her fault.

The values upheld by the Republic capital's lofty name, *Liberté et Égalité*—freedom and equality. They chose, as part of their freedom, not to protect themselves, and the only ones responsible for the outcome of that was them. The Republic's citizens prided themselves on the fact that all were equal—and everyone was their own master.

So while she did feel sad to see her country fall, she also knew it would be conceited of her to think the fault for not saving it lay solely with her. This wasn't her cross to bear.

"Besides, right now, we don't have the time to be saying that," she said.

"...Right you are." Shin smiled faintly. "For now, let's put aside all our reservations. Both of us."

"Yes."

Despite being persecuted by the Republic, Shin and the Eighty-Six would save it. Even if Lena felt any kind of guilt or reservation about that, now wasn't the

time or the occasion to show it. Doing so would only be offensive to Shin and the Eighty-Six.

“But still, with all that in mind, I want you to stay on base for this mission—here in the Federacy.”

“I’ll get mad at you, Shin,” Lena said with a frown.

“I knew you’d say that, but...Lena, you’re a Republic officer.”

Shin just said something that was quite obvious. Lena stared at him with round eyes. What was he implying?

“Evacuating all of the Republic’s citizens would, honestly speaking, be very difficult. They don’t even have a consensus on whether they want to evacuate yet. So...consider the situation changing during the operation, like if they decide to hole themselves up and insist on staying in the Republic. Imagine what would happen if Republic soldiers ordered them to do so.”

What if there was an early setback in the evacuation, and all the citizens ended up being left behind? What if patriots or nationalists, who would frown upon relying on a foreign power for help—like the Bleachers—tried to take advantage of the chaos to usurp political power and order a do-or-die resistance?

“It would still be an official military order. And you, Lena—as a Republic soldier, you would have to obey. But if you stay in the Federacy, even if that happened, at worst, you’d be able to say you never got the orders. But...”

Lena wouldn’t be able to say that if she was in the Republic.

Even if she didn’t obey such an order, it would put a fatal blot on her career in the form of insubordination and desertion under enemy fire. And desertion was seen as severe enough a crime to justify gunning a deserter down on the spot.

If that happened, Lena would never be able to return to the Republic again.

But Lena simply regarded him with a bothered smile, like she was admonishing a younger brother throwing a tantrum.

“Shin, you know what they’re like. The Republic, its citizens, its army.”

For ten years, they shut themselves away, pushing their own national defense

onto the Eighty-Six.

“Even after everything that happened, they still have no will to fight. That’s why the Bleachers can order them around. We can bet on it if you want; the military won’t do anything but run away the first chance they get, from the highest officer to the lowliest soldier.”

So I’ll be fine.

The Republic military would never issue orders to resist to the bitter end or hole up.

Shin remained silent for a moment.

“...I can agree to the bet part, but...,” he said, still seeming displeased. “But as for the rest, we need to be prepared for the worst... During the operation, I want you to stay in the unit maintaining the route and outside the Republic’s sphere. We can’t let them know you’re there.”

I won’t let them take you away from me.

Feeling her boyfriend’s possessive...or rather, overly worried response, Lena chuckled. Either way, her armored command vehicle, Vanadis, was too sluggish to be used in this operation, so unless she told them she was there, the Republic wouldn’t be aware of her presence.

“...Fine. I’ll give you that much.”

It felt like if she didn’t compromise, there would be no end to the boy’s sulking.

“As you know, we’ll have to stay behind at the base. So if there’s any work you need doing, pass it on to us. If it’s just office work, you could simply let us know via transmission.”

Hearing this prince from a neighboring country tell her that, Grethe bowed her head thankfully. To him, and the United Kingdom as a whole, the Republic was a diminutive faction not worthy of their attention. In which case, the ones this serpent prince was worrying about were Shin, Lena, and the child soldiers of the Strike Package. And that was something Grethe was infinitely grateful for.

“We greatly appreciate your consideration, Your Highness.”

“Don’t mention it. In exchange, as it were, I’d like for you to get me permission to use the maneuvering grounds while you’re gone. And if possible, lend Aegis to me, too.”

Grethe stared at Vika, and her eyes met those of Olivia, who was also glancing at Vika. The prince shrugged, exposed to both of their stares.

“Since we can’t expect supplies from the United Kingdom, I’ll need to examine the existing Sirins’ combat abilities. If their degree of mastery stops here, they won’t last in a battle that’s almost bound to consume them. Having them practice against someone who uses high-speed combat like they do would be a major help.”

“I see. Roger that, then...” Olivia raised his eyebrows in a joking manner. “Does this settle our debt, Your Highness?”

“Indeed it does. It was a costly one, no?” Vika met his joke with a jest of his own.

“I’m jealous,” Grethe said, picking up on their jiving mood. “If the situation wasn’t what it was, I’d have asked you to coach me, too.”

Olivia and Vika both fell silent for a moment. The person before them was a woman, a colonel, a commanding officer...and when all was said and done, their brigade commander.

Vika, who commanded an entire military front, did the same thing, but his father was the king of the United Kingdom, which valued militarism. It was his duty to stand on the front lines. But someone who was neither royalty nor a former noble—and a colonel in the Federal Republic?

“Colonel Wenzel, I’m only confirming to make sure I understood properly, but...are you really going to pilot a Reginleif in this operation, too?”

“This probably goes without saying, Frederica, but you can’t join us on this operation no matter what,” Kurena said with a stern expression, her hands resting on her waist.

“I’ll make sure to tell Fido to not let you sneak in this time. You stay behind

and watch the fort this time. Understood, Frederica?” Anju only had her hands folded and spoke with a smile, but somehow, she managed to be much scarier than Kurena was.

Frederica was a past offender with a history of sneaking onto do-or-die operations, after all. The girl puffed up her cheeks grumpily. Fido, which was hiding behind her, was quite visibly shaking and let out a small, nervous “*Pi...*” Even Kurena could understand it was trying to say *Of course I wouldn’t!* The shaking was probably its version of how a human would nod nervously.

“You better remember this, Fido!” Kurena pointed an index finger fixedly at Fido’s optical sensor. “If you don’t do what we say, we’ll have Shin scold you a lot. Actually, no, if you do that, we won’t let you join us on any more operations!”

“*Pi...?!*” This time, the Scavenger waved its sensor unit left and right repeatedly.

Anju and Kurena nodded, satisfied.

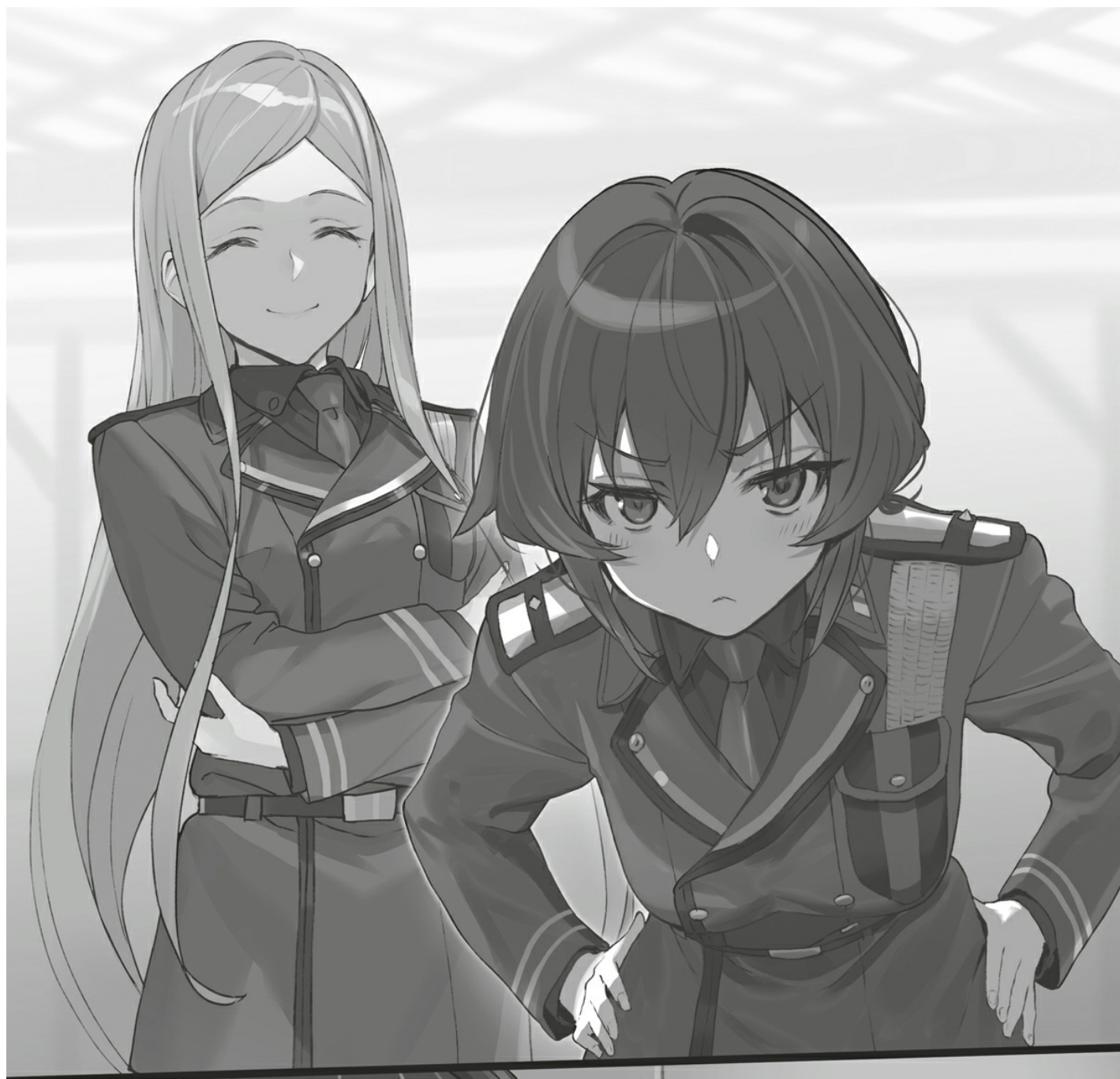
“I will not—”

“Of course, this is because it’s a dangerous battle, too, but...you still have a role to play, Frederica,” Kurena said.

Frederica looked up with a start at Kurena, who nodded back at her. Her role. Frederica’s role was, of course, shutting down the Legion as the Empress Augusta. Up until just a few days ago, this was the counteroffensive Operation Overlord’s secret and greatest objective, as well as Frederica’s, the five of theirs, and indeed all humankind’s greatest wish—to end the war.

In those brief words, Kurena made it clear she hadn’t given up on that chance.

“Kurena...,” Frederica muttered.



“So you can’t come. You’ve got your work cut out for you somewhere else, so you have to stay put this time.”

“We do want to go to the sea this summer, after all,” Anju mused aloud. “I’d like to try swimming.”

A year ago, during the Morpho subjugation operation, Frederica followed them into battle despite the danger, but now they could see she’d done it for lack of a choice. At the time, Shin was wandering in search of a place to die. And the rest of them were likely doing the same, albeit on a more unconscious level. The idea of a future, a future outside the battlefield, was one they couldn’t bear to consider.

Frederica had been worried about them. And it only made sense that the Federacy’s soldiers, who did have families to return to and futures to aspire for, feared them so much. It was only natural they couldn’t trust them.

But now they could tell.

We’ve changed.

“We don’t need a hostage to make sure we return. We’ll come back on our own.”

“So, Frederica, we need you to watch the fort. So that when we return, you’ll be there to greet and tell us we did a good job.”

Lena was the daughter and sole survivor of the House Milizé, a distinguished, former noble family in the Republic, an elite colonel dispatched to the Federacy in the Republic’s name, and a guest officer in the Federacy military.

In other words, she would be the first person whom former nobles or distinguished members of the Republic would turn to when it came to evacuating to the Federacy.

They asked that she use her connections with the Federacy military and the Republic government so that not only they and their families, but their extended families and friends could also get first priority to evacuate. Or that she especially prepare means of transportation for all their household assets. Or that she make sure that they got on board before another household, or else

their family's honor wouldn't stand for it. Or that she get in touch with a former Imperial family they used to have connections with.

Surely, you will take that into consideration, won't you? Please arrange this and that and such and such for me.

She got a constant stream of similar requests from both people whose family she was acquainted with, as well as people she'd never met before. And this was right before the operation, meaning she was so busy she couldn't possibly get around to actually drafting the plan.

All those requests were selfish to an almost refreshing extent. All of them were high-society people, and most of them were influential figures within the Republic. They were important enough that ignoring them could strain future relations between the Republic and the Federacy. And after nine years of severed communications, the Federacy didn't know who was important and necessitated special "consideration," meaning that making those calls of judgment fell to Lena.

To top it off, the Federacy military asked her which groups and influential persons weren't to be placed together when accepting the refugees, which only added to Lena's paperwork and workload.

As such, when Vika spotted Lena wobbling through the corridor, visibly exhausted from lack of sleep, he called out to her.

"Are you all right, Milizé? Do you want me to give you something that's stronger than prescription drugs?"

"You've got something that good on you?!" Lena turned to look at him, her eyes positively sparkling with excitement.

"...I was joking." Vika sighed deeply. "You're doing even worse than you look."

Drugs to temporarily alleviate fatigue were sometimes given to soldiers in cases where fighting for many consecutive hours was unavoidable. However, those were extremely powerful drugs that required a prescription from a military doctor. This meant that any drugs more powerful than that were certainly not something one should happily consume. And Lena would normally know that.

“If you’re too groggy to even realize that, I’d hate to think what it would do to your work efficiency. Get some rest.”

TP the cat chose this opportune moment to peek out, prompting Vika to pick it up and hand it to Lena to serve in place of a heating stone. He then pushed Lena into her room. Waiting inside was Lena’s adjutant, Second Lieutenant Perschmann, who led her to her bed. Vika could hear the sound of her bedroom door closing.

“I did assume she might be tired, but it seems she’s very much past that point,” Lerche, who stood behind him, commented.

“I do understand that there’s no chance to clear any free time, but letting her handle all the Republic’s appeals...? Since the Federacy can’t afford to be considerate of her, it falls to us to do it for them.”

Vika’s regiment and Olivia’s instruction unit would not be participating in the coming operation, meaning they had the time to manage matters. Zashya and Olivia handled the soldiers’ mental health, and their countries’ current situations would become clear as the operation went on.

Lena and the Eighty-Six, however, would be participating in the operation, meaning they didn’t have that kind of time.

“She seems detached enough for now, but it would be for the best if we didn’t give her any extra work. We need to keep her busy enough to stay distracted but give her enough time to rest, too.”

“After all, the Republic’s in the most unnatural position. They weren’t hit by any satellite missiles, and the Legion’s offensive on their territory is lax. It’s like they’re holding back from wiping it out.”

“Yes. They must have a reason for doing so. Nouzen and Milizé surely know this, too.” Vika sighed tiredly.

Surely, the Federacy truly didn’t have any breathing room left. They left saving the dying Republic to child soldiers like the Eighty-Six and a Republic officer like Lena of all people, and they didn’t even give them any time to gather their bearings.

So within all this, they had to make sure they had some leeway.

“We need to maintain enough breathing room to make sure we can deal with contingencies.”

Meanwhile, Annette, the survivor of the Penrose family—who were former Imperial nobles before they migrated to the Republic—was also bombarded with letters requesting that she act as an intermediary with other former Imperial nobles her family knew.

“They can ask all they want; I was born in the Republic.”

Support for their life after the evacuation; introduction into high society; requests for recommendations to Federacy universities; and propositions for arranged marriages. As Annette split such requests between VIPs she knew and VIPs she wasn’t acquainted with, she raised her voice in complaint.

If what they wanted was introductions, Dustin, who was a first-generation immigrant and former Imperial noble (albeit a minor one), would have been the better choice. Or rather, his parents were.

Dustin himself was currently helping Annette. His stated excuse was that he had time on his hands and wanted work as a distraction—though he was probably doing it out of sympathy for Annette, who was stuck with this mountain of letters.

He was currently organizing electronic files into folders marked as *important* and *not important*, per a list made by Annette. Letters from VIPs would receive preferential treatment by the Federacy’s higher-ups. The nonimportant letters would be gathered up at the maneuvering ground, where they’d be used to make a large campfire. For sure. And they’d use that to roast marshmallows and apples.

“Yes, marshmallows and roasted apples... Let’s go get some when we’re finished... And we can pick up some acorns. The way they crackle is really fun...”

Since the Republic was, for many years, a country based on agriculture and stock farming, acorns were traditionally used as fodder for pigs.

Dustin cracked a sardonic smile as he watched Annette—now hunching forward from exhaustion, her eyes hanging heavily—cackle like a witch.

“Yeah, we should. If we add in all the useless letters Lena got, we’d make a

pretty big campfire.”

“That’s right, yeah, Lena... Why are those idiots sending the only commanding officer dispatched to the Strike Package from the Republic all these stupid petitions...? Just burn them all down... Ask Shin to cleave off their necks with a shovel, dammit...”

Realizing that when she suggested to “burn them,” she meant the senders and not the letters, Dustin shuddered for a moment.

“Well... If you ask Shin, he’d probably actually be able to process these requests,” he said. “I mean, his father was the eldest son of House Nouzen, and his grandfather, the marquis, is still alive.”

Not that they really wanted him to handle it, but the odd truth was that the person most suited to take care of this issue in their entire unit was neither Lena nor Annette, but actually Shin.

“No, that wouldn’t happen in a million years,” Annette said, staring at Dustin with a dubious expression.

“Ah, right. The people sending those letters are all bigwigs from the Republic. Even with things this bad, they wouldn’t ask an Eighty-Six for help.”

“That’s not what I meant. From where Marquis Nouzen is standing, the Republic persecuted his son and grandkids, so he’d never help them. It would ruin both his dignity and the family name.”

“...Oh.”

Apparently, for this reason, the Federacy officers who would handle the reception had also been picked carefully. The Federacy made sure that their relatives, friends, or groups and organizations they were involved in weren’t Eighty-Six.

The social life, connections, and honor of high society really are strange, Annette mused to herself bitterly. She then remembered, with a frown, one of the Federacy’s higher officers she’d spoken to a few times. He surely didn’t have the time for this right now, but a man like him was most suited for this kind of annoying work.

“Aaah, I sure could use that chief of staff’s help right about now.”

While Lena was being swamped with work, the task of coming up with the operation plan fell to the three remaining tactical commanders and Grethe. As one of the operations commanders, Shin was also consulted for his opinion.

“They sent an order asking for the colonel to return, after all. We tore it up, though,” Grethe said indifferently.

“You think it was a faction plotting to resist?” Shin frowned.

That kind of faction would get in the evacuation’s way and, more than anything, mean they’d need to increase Lena’s security. Her personal security unit, the Brísingamen squadron, was reorganized, but they might need another unit attached to her, too, if things got any worse. Maybe it’d be for the best to let Spearhead handle it...

“No. They asked for Colonel Milizé to take command over all the citizens’ evacuation.”

“I don’t think that’s a good reason to call a colonel back when they’re dispatched to the Strike Package...” Shin shrugged.

Or rather, the Republic Military ought to handle that much on their own.

“Well, it’s tough work, so no one wants to do it. And they’d probably screw up if they did. Failing this would be terrible and would also be a major spot on their track record. In that regard, the colonel is officially out of the country and detached from the current government. Her being a national hero is probably a thorn in their side.”

Grethe gazed down with cold eyes at a report she received before she carried on.

“Honestly, the Republic’s evacuation plan is a bad joke. A mess. Though, it suits the Federacy just fine.”

You wanna see it? Grethe offered, flicking the plan outline over to Shin with her beautifully colored nails.

It was, indeed, a horrible plan.

“I thought it was a joke, but it’s actually real...”

Grethe gave Shin the scan data of the Republic's evacuation plan so he could show it to Lena and the rest of the squad members, saying they'd hear about it in briefing anyway. The boys and girls of the Strike Package sat opposite each other at one of the dining hall's long tables. The platoon commanders for Spearhead—Shin, Raiden, Anju, Kurena, Claude, and Tohru—were there, along with a tired, wobbling Lena. Each of them was gazing at the plan's holo-screen.

In the Federacy, lunch had the most dishes out of any meal in the day, and so everyone but Lena talked while picking away at their trays, which were lined with plates. The lack of sleep impacted Lena's appetite, so she only had a sandwich she washed down with some soup. Her hand was gripping the projection device and visibly shaking with anger.

"On the first day, the first to evacuate would be government officers and first-ward VIPs, and after that, military generals...and then field and company officers, then noncommissioned officers and soldiers. And only then, on the night of the first day, they're going to start evacuating citizens...?! How could they come up with such a shameless plan...?!"

Kurena, on the other hand, spoke as if none of this had anything to do with her.

"If all the important military people are leaving on the first day, who's going to take command over the evacuation? Or protect the Republic?"

"While they're waiting to evacuate, the Republic's citizens are to gather at the high-speed railway terminal in the Eighty-Third Sector, and it was decided the Federacy would protect them," Shin, who heard Grethe's explanation and had skimmed over the operation outline on his way there, answered. "The Juggernauts aren't reliable in battle, so they can't have the Republic military handle it."

Republic Juggernauts were still useful for the purpose of towing equipment—despite being too weak and fragile to serve as actual armored weapons, they did have enough horsepower to move their heavy 57 mm cannons, after all—so they would be traveling along with the transport trucks.

"But what about guiding the evacuation? Don't tell me they're dropping that on us, too?" Tohru asked, holding on to a sandwich.

“Can’t we just leave them behind and run?” Claude narrowed his moon-colored eyes behind his glasses.

“Nah, the Republic’s going to manage that much,” Raiden said, a mug of substitute coffee in hand.

“Based on the plan, it looks like Republic administrative workers will be the ones to do it,” Anju said, peering into Lena’s device from the side. “But the military police will be the ones managing the boarding and disembarking process, since it’s still a Federacy train... But once people find out about the evacuation priorities, they’re not going to be happy. I wonder if they have anything in mind to prevent riots from breaking out.”

“The evacuation priorities are blatantly lopsided...” Lena looked like she was listening, but she wasn’t. She gripped the device so hard it started creaking in her hand, and she was glaring at the operation plan with intense hatred. “People living in low-numbered sectors go first, and the high numbers go last... I did think the Celena would end up getting prioritized, but they’re even changing the order based on whether people are Adularia or Alabaster...! What are they thinking...?! ”

Lena got to her feet and shouted out of sheer outrage, but then she sank back into her seat like she’d run out of batteries. Getting worked up like that while she was still lacking sufficient sleep seemed to have made her anemic.

As Shin pulled her by the arm and led her out of the dining hall, Kurena and Tohru glanced at them leaving and whispered.

“What’s the problem?”

“What’s Lena so worked up about?”

Raiden, who’d been sheltered within the Republic until he was twelve and knew what things were like within the Republic during the Legion War, answered their question.

“She means the rich get to go first and the poor get to go last. Celenas are the former noble class, so they’re the top priority... But I don’t know what the difference between Adularia and Alabaster is.”

“Really, you don’t know?” Claude asked curtly, his moon-colored Adularia

eyes glinting behind his glasses. “Well, I’m not sure who’s the one behind it, but I think they’re trying to drive a wedge between those who get to go first and those who have to go last. Like they did with the Eighty-Six.”

A cold silence settled over the table. Claude carried on, not looking at any of them. His somber Adularia eyes were hidden behind glasses that had no optical correction to them.

“And then the Celena can side with one of the sides that had to go last, acting like they feel bad for them. That’ll make it so it’s two against one. The Alba are split into three ethnic groups, so they’ll be able to set the power balance that way when they get to the Federacy.”

The Republic’s Alba were split into Celena, Alabaster, and Adularia. If two of those groups were to join forces, the remaining ethnic group would become the minority. And they could do anything they wanted to that minority and face no consequences.

Just like they did to the Eighty-Six eleven years ago.

“Like forcing them to volunteer in the army...,” Tohru said, exhaling heavily. “That’s probably the idea here.”

The Federacy wasn’t going to accept millions of refugees out of sheer philanthropy, after all. They may have fallen back to their secondary defensive lines after the second large-scale offensive began, but that came at the cost of many casualties. They needed soldiers to rebuild the ranks. At this point, the working age across the Federacy had begun calling in women and young boys. This meant they needed to find people from *outside the Federacy*, even if only in terms of appearances and without ever crossing the line into cruelty.

The Republic’s citizens were a mixture of women, children, and elderly who never knew true war. However, everyone but the truly young and most infirm of elderly could at least hold a gun or an explosive.

Just as they had once forced the Eighty-Six, who’d never known war before.

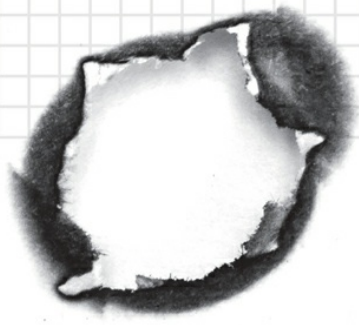
“I always thought that without the Eighty-Six, the Republic would just die where it stands,” Kurena whispered.

Shin once made a prediction on what would happen if the Eighty-Six were to

go extinct. That prediction was wrong, as it turned out; the Republic wouldn't just fall to ruin without ever fighting. They'd have just fought the same way they always did—by forcing the burdens of war on the Alabaster or the Adularia. They'd probably reduce them to subhumans, just like they did to the Eighty-Six.

They'd already stripped people of their humanity once before. And if they did it once, they could just as well do it again.

“They'd have done the same to their fellow Alba... I guess that proves it didn't have to happen to us. It didn't have to be the Eighty-Six.”



8.27

[EIGHTY-SIX]

Republic Calendar, August 27, 368
Two Days into the First Large-Scale Offensive

THE FALL OF
LIBERTÉ ET ÉGALITÉ



Judgment Day.
The hatred runs
deep.

86

THE FALL OF LIBERTÉ ET ÉGALITÉ

Rows of headless, four-legged skeletons crossed the gate into the Gran Mur. This sight made the Republic citizens watching from afar wail aloud. They cried out in despair and resentment. With regret and hatred.

That night, the Legion invaded the eighty-five Sectors when the northern walls of the Gran Mur fell, and they destroyed the final defensive line drawn in the capital, Liberté et Égalité. All the people who ran for dear life and took cover here in the eastern part of the Eighty-Second Sector were filthy and haggard. And yet despite the fate of their country and their own encroaching deaths, the hatred and despair they uttered now was even greater at this moment.

Lena stood in front of the citizens, who came there uninvited, right when the first row of Juggernauts stopped before her. As the Processors disembarked, the murmurs of hatred picked up in volume.

They stood there, their different colors a contrast to the homogenous silver of the Alba. They were boys and girls of different ethnicities and skin colors. Eighty-Six. Subhumans and failures of evolution who'd been cast out of the Republic's eighty-five Sectors—a paradise only allowed for human beings. Pigs in human form who occupied the no-man's-land of the Eighty-Sixth Sector, from which they were never meant to return.

Seeing these despicable creatures once again tread on Republic soil—on the holy ground of the single most superior and ideal of lands across all humankind—the citizens raised their voices in terrors of hatred and distress.

Standing near one Juggernaut with black armor and the Personal Mark of an eyeball emblazoned on it was a Processor. She smirked at Lena, her red unkempt hair cut short and the zipper of her field uniform pulled all the way down to her navel.

“It’s our first time meeting face-to-face. A pleasure to finally see you, Handler One.”

Lena nodded with a jerk of her chin, and then Lena’s pale features, mired with dust and rubble, softened into a smile.

“...You really were a woman,” she said.

Shiden cackled pleasantly, her voice a husky alto that made it difficult to discern her gender.

“Ah-ha-ha, I get that a lot. Yer exactly how I imagined ya, though. A beautiful, cold, and bloodstained queen of silver.”

As Shiden continued her inappropriate cackle, one of the civilians stepped up from the crowd and shouted:

“You...you filthy Eighty-Six! You were so busy trying to save your own sorry hides you wouldn’t even die with the Legion! You’re what got us into this mess!”

His howl disappeared into the clear, new moon sky like the flaring of a flame. After a moment’s silence, the crowd, spurred on by his shout, all erupted in anger.

“““That’s right, it’s your fault, Eighty-Six! You didn’t fight hard enough! You didn’t put your lives into it and win the war for us! You didn’t throw your worthless lives away to beat the Legion!

“““You cared more about your survival, when you’re defiling this sacred country just by breathing its air! And despite how worthless you pigs are, we were merciful and kind enough to keep you!

“““You useless ingrates...

“““Your incompetent thanklessness is why innocent people like us have to go through this!”””

Their accusations were absurdly selfish and blind to the fact that they were suffering the consequences of their own mistakes. They were the ones who didn't fight and didn't beat the Legion, after all.

It was so offensive that Lena was struck speechless for a moment. Shiden, however, shook her head in exasperation and raised her right hand. She held it up with the casualness of pointing at someone...except gripped in her hand was a large, imposing 12-gauge shotgun, its muzzle like gaping holes.

A sawed-off lever-action shotgun.

It was a shotgun with a shorter muzzle, and in exchange for decreased initial velocity and recoil reduction, its scatter shot was much more destructive in closed spaces.

"...Huh?" The first man to step up let out a stupefied voice as he gazed into the muzzle.

She casually fired the shotgun. The chokeless, sawed-off shotgun launched scattered shots that spread over a wide area in front of the muzzle, making it an exceptionally lethal short-range antipersonnel weapon. The 9 mm buckshot was fired off at high speeds, effortlessly slaying deer that were much larger than a human.

But since she averted the muzzle at the last second, the shot only gouged at the ground near the man's feet. Thankfully, there was no ricochet effect. And still, seeing this show of violence displayed before their eyes after a decade of peace snapped the crowd's frenzy like a twig.

As the crowd froze up, Shiden calmly reloaded her shotgun. With her finger still on the loading lever, she swung the weapon, twirling it along the lever in a spin load. By the time her right hand settled back on the grip, the shotgun was locked, loaded, and aimed. And this time, she pointed it straight at the man's face.

The Republic man went pale and wordlessly stared into Shiden's striking odd-colored eyes. Shiden opened her mouth, revealing a row of sharpened teeth that would suit a demon or a beast, and laughed out loud.

"Stop oinking in my face, ya white pig. If yer gonna act like a pig, at least do us

all a favor and stay inside your pigsty when you squeal. If ya do, us Eighty-Six...”

Each of the Processors standing by their Juggernauts silently stared at the citizens. Their hair and eyes were an assortment of colors, but their gazes betrayed no emotion, glinting as artificially as the deepest darkness.

And with them as their backdrop, the cyclops witch cackled. A cackle full of genuine malice and scorn at these white pigs who still thought they could boss them around.

“...might decide to protect yer sorry lives along the way, too.”

Someone running off with a petty cry of “Those damn painted swine...!” was the signal. The other citizens scattered, darting off in all directions.

“I’m sorry, Captain Iida...,” Lena said, directing a sidelong glance at the fleeing citizens. “Thank you for your patience and restraint.”

“Of course I’d show restraint here.” Shiden’s reply came colder than she expected. “If I’d have shot them dead at that point, things would snowball in no time.”

The situation only settled down because the Eighty-Six went from being weaklings they could freely abuse to a “threat” the Republic’s people couldn’t contend with. But if Shiden had shot someone dead, they wouldn’t have been a threat—they would have been enemies. And then the citizens wouldn’t just run away. At worst, the Republic’s people and the Eighty-Six would have clashed there.

Of course, the Eighty-Six were armed and used to handling guns. They wouldn’t lose to unarmed civilians. No matter how many of these powerless masses gathered, modern firearms would be able to mercilessly crush and mow them down. It would be the start of not a battle, but a one-sided massacre.

And honestly, no one could tell the Eighty-Six to stop. The only reason they were restraining themselves was because they knew that wasting bullets here would just lead to them losing to the Legion.

“We know the white pigs are that stupid. We’re used to it. ‘Sides, we don’t have time for infighting with the Legion closing in on us... But I guess that part didn’t click for the white pigs yet. If they’re gonna keep acting like that, we’re

gonna snap sooner rather than later.”

Even at this point, the Republic’s people still wouldn’t face reality. Even with the Legion invading within their walls, they still believed they wouldn’t be the ones to die. They thought everything happening now was all the result of someone’s carelessness or incompetence, and they thought they were still allowed to vent out that indignation at the inferior Eighty-Six.

They thought they could sit back and do nothing while someone else fought to protect them. They still honestly believed they were the most superior, finest race of all ethnicities in this world.

Even though that foolish dream had already crumbled to nothing along with the Gran Mur.

“We don’t give one shit about whether the white pigs live or die. If ya wanna keep them safe—ya better keep them on a tight leash, Your Majesty.”



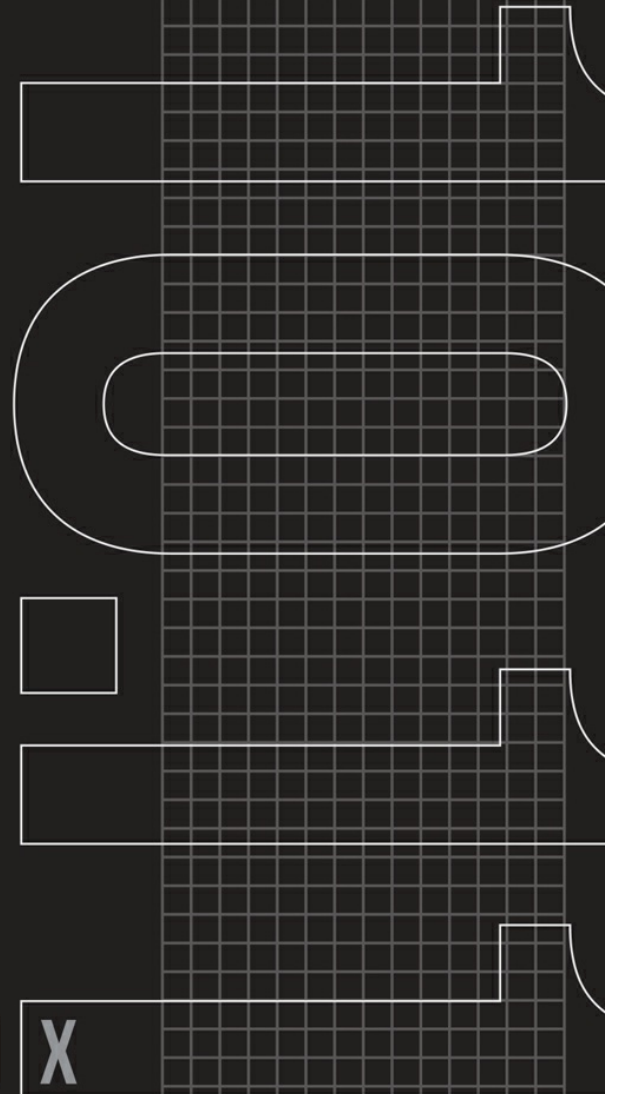
D-DAY PLUS TEN.

Stellar Calendar: October 11, 2050

DIES PASSIONIS



Judgment Day.
The hatred runs deep.



86

EIGHTY-SIX

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

[D-DAY PLUS TEN](#)

“Never imagined we’d end up going back to the Republic.”

“Pretty crappy as triumphant homecomings go, right?”

It was dawn. As the battlefield’s night sky began to melt into cerulean darkness, the Processors shuffled their feet as they finished their pre-sortie briefing. They were in one of the Federacy western front’s FOBs, which was mostly occupied by an armored unit engaged in mobile defense.

Support the evacuation of your own persecutors, the Republic. Despite having been ordered to fight to defend Republic citizens, the child soldiers didn’t betray any displeasure or concern in their expressions. In fact, they were chatting, using it as a reason to crack jokes and laugh out loud as they spoke of the aid mission before them.

“I mean, it’ll be the second time we save the Republic, if you count the large-scale offensive.”

“Whoa, we’re awesome. Imagine saving your own abusers twice. We’re fucking saints, man.”

“For us at the Lycaon squadron, it’ll be our third time, so I guess that makes us angels.”

“Right, that was your first assignment.”

“Good on you.”

“Good job, Archangel Michihi.”

“You think the Republic’s people are gonna actually change this time around? Maybe show a bit of gratitude for once?”

“Wish they’d act a bit more proper, like Lena and Dustin, you know?”

“Nah.”

“Snowball’s chance in hell of that.”

“Man, talk about a crappy trip.”

The child soldiers went on without a single hint of displeasure, concern, or even anxiety at how the war’s tables had been turned against them. They chatted and joked, laughing everything off.

“We meet again, Captain Nouzen! Where’s that cheeky sycophant of yours today?! Come to think of it, I never did ask for her name!”

The very incarnation of the color red, standing there with bloodred hair, a crimson dress, a ruby tiara, and punctuated with a scarlet cape—or as she was otherwise known, the mascot of the Brantolote archduchy’s Myrmecoleo Free Regiment, Svenja Brantolote—spoke to him with animated excitement.

“...”

Looking away from her, Shin directed his attention to the Myrmecoleo Free Regiment’s commander, Major Gilweise Günter. Shin wasn’t lacking in sleeping hours, but it was still early morning. Frederica, he could have dealt with, but he wasn’t in the state of mind to handle a shrill child.

“I hear that despite being a raiding unit, they even had your Free Regiment stationed on the front lines?” he asked, holding up a hand to push away the small girl’s head as she drew on him, shrieking.

Gilweise nodded, moving his princess away with a surprisingly crude hold.

“Thanks to the chief of staff’s efforts, their surprise attack ended with minimal losses, but that’s not to say there were no casualties,” Gilweise replied.

The two of them were currently standing on the western front’s current front lines, the Saentis-Historics line’s third formation. The place originally had pillboxes, concrete anti-tank impediments (dragon’s teeth), and anti-tank gun platforms. With the front lines falling back, these were reinforced with a hastily prepared but thick field of scatterable mines.

In addition, they’d brought in iron scaffoldings, which they fashioned into anti-tank impediments and a row of anti-tank guns. There were more pillboxes

made of reinforced concrete being presently built. They were trying to set up the minimal fortifications that a reserve formation would require as quickly as possible. Such work was in progress across the Saentis-Historics line.

Infantrymen were set up as the primary force across the formation, while the armored units—which included the Myrmecoleo Free Regiment—were setting up the second line. The western front’s primary strategy remained unchanged even after falling back: mobile defense. It stood as a testament to how important the armored forces were to the Federacy.

“The Free Regiments of other fiefdoms have been attached to the other fronts, as well. I think you and your Strike Package are the only force left that’s still functioning as a raiding unit.” Having said that, Gilweise’s smile waned. “Last operation, the Princess discovered that Mass Driver tower. And despite that, we couldn’t intercept it in time. That regret’s been eating away at us. It’s... frustrating.”

“...Yes.”

Shin and his group felt like they’d failed to stop this in time, too. They saw a Mass Driver over a month ahead of Svenja and Gilweise, after all. During the Mirage Spire operation—and during the Strike Package’s very first deployment in the Charité Underground Labyrinth operation. If they could have predicted the satellite missiles, if they could see this cataclysm coming as far back as then...

Shin actively suppressed the emotions surging up in him again, but Gilweise keenly noticed it and furrowed his brow.

“...Are you all right, Captain? With the situation having changed this much, you have to be feeling the strain. Your Queen in particular.”

“Yes... But we’re trying to keep our feelings out of this. We’re in the middle of an operation.”

Shin sighed once. Some of the Processors who had only recently recovered from their injuries were capable of piloting a Reginleif, but not quite well enough to handle combat. So instead of fighting, they served as pilots for control officers and tactical commanders.

From a distance, Shin could see one such unit, Saki's Grimalkin, close its canopy—with Lena inside. Incidentally, the brigade's commander, Grethe, was piloting a Reginleif on her own, with Marcel being her unfortunate partner.

Saki reported preparations were complete. With those words as his switch, Shin shifted gears, looked up, and replied coldly.

"I'm aware of what you're saying... I'm fine."

First light dawned in the sky, and with it, the operation began.

"Commencing launch. Armée Furieuse—fire!"

With the aid of the Mantle of Frigga, the Reginleifs landed behind the lines of the Legion facing off against the western front's forces. A force of the Strike Package's 4th Armored Division touched down first.

"Suiu Tohkanya, Banshee, successfully touched down. Maintaining control of the area."

At the same time, the Federacy's main force launched an offensive. They began eliminating the Legion forces around the high-speed railway, securing the rails all the way up to phase line Aquarius, located sixty kilometers off reference Point Zodiacs on the western front.

And in that gap...

"Here we go! Catoblepas, sallying forth!"

Canaan's 3rd Armored Division passed through the gap. Following after them was the Strike Package's 2nd Armored Division, who were charged with securing the road to the Republic.

"We'll start by clearing the way to the ninety-kilometer point, phase line Capricorn, and escort the 4th Armored Division. Artillery unit, strike at the enemy's face!"

Svenja suddenly cried out in alarm from the gunner seat, prompting Gilweise to jolt in the cockpit. The Myrmecoleo Free Regiments weren't currently in combat, but they were certainly in the middle of an operation.

"Brother! I forgot to ask for that Mascot's name again!"

“...Oh...”

Gilweise shrugged. That was her problem? Besides, her forgetting to ask wasn't relevant here; if she'd asked it like that, Shin wouldn't have answered.

“Princess, please, next time we meet them, be polite and ask her for her name yourself instead of the captain.”

The Federacy military's forces were able to retain up to the thirty-kilometer point, phase line Pisces. Canaan's 3rd Armored Division reached as far as the two-hundred-twenty-one-kilometer line—phase line Libra—and Siri's 2nd Armored Division cleared the way to the three-hundred-kilometer point—phase line Cancer.

Only ninety kilometers remained to the Republic.

“All right, Nouzen, you handle the rest!”

“Right.”

Shin and Lena's 1st Armored Division entered combat. They began cutting a path through the Legion territories, on their way to the edge of the Republic's eighty-five Sectors, to the Gran Mur wall along the Eighty-Third Sector. The phase line close to the four-hundred-kilometer point—Aries.

Their ranks were made up solely of Reginleifs and Scavengers, with no other vehicles following them. At worst, they would have to walk back, so they didn't bring the slow, sluggish Vanadis.

The expedition force worked in tandem with them, going out to the Gran Mur to greet them and opening the way for them from the other side. They secured the three-hundred-sixty-kilometer point, phase line Taurus, and continued their march.

The Gran Mur was coming into view. As Undertaker and the Reginleifs sprinted along, under the glow of the autumn morning, the first train bound to the Republic from the Federacy sped by.



“May I ask something, Major General? All of the Republic's refugees were told beforehand to gather in the Eighty-Third Sector, right? Then where is that

smoke coming from?”

“They lit the document vault in the Twenty-Fourth Sector’s government office on fire.”

As commander of the relief expedition force, Major General Richard Altner was in a command post in Point Sacra, in the Eighty-Third Sector’s former Ilex city high-speed rail terminal. In order to ensure they could be protected by the minimal forces remaining in the Republic, the Republic’s full population had been moved to the Eighty-Third Sector and the three sectors surrounding it in accordance to their departure time.

The Eighty-Third Sector was an industrial area, and those scheduled to leave on the second day were to spend the night in abandoned barracks or in the Eighty-Third Sector’s bunkhouses.

However, like Grethe commented, standing from the city hall, which had been converted into a makeshift command post, one could see a pillar of smoke rising from across the cityscape.

Richard was standing before a large table littered with paper documents and maps, with the rest being projected in holo-windows. Keeping his lone eye fixed on the holograms, which he could switch off at a moment’s notice, Richard spoke with a sarcastic snort.

“They’re doing the same thing in the First Sector. Apparently, there was so much paperwork to dispose of that they couldn’t get rid of it all in time for the evacuation. They said it’ll take them until just before the last train on the third day... Must be hard, being a country that relies on paper documents.”

“They aren’t burning any incriminating documents along the way, are they?” Grethe asked.

“We wouldn’t let them get away with that. We copied all the important things when we saved them last year. The Republic government asked that some essential documents be transported with them, so we let them take the originals for those.”

Richard pointed ahead to a group of transport trucks driving off, loaded with building materials.

It was the first morning in an operation set to continue nonstop for three days. All the high-priority Federacy military noncombatants had left on the first train earlier. They would now be tasked with loading the Republic citizens onto the evacuation trains set to make round trips for the operation's duration.

At this point in time, the evacuation of politicians, high-ranking government officials, and the old nobility living in the First Sector was completed without issue. Celenas living in the Second to Fifth Sector as well as generals and field officers were boarding the train or waiting for the next one.

"And there were documents mixed in with those originals. Like, for example, Eighty-Six personnel files."

"We had those sent back to the Federacy in the name of investigation. Those files are a treasure to us; we wouldn't let the Republic damage them, no matter what."

This was proof that would tell the other countries of the Republic's evil and the Federacy's merciful justice.

One of the Eighty-Six they were discussing, Shin, stood silently behind Grethe, a bit disgusted with the dirty reality these two adults were speaking of. He wished they'd have at least tried to smooth over the truth of what they were saying. And at the same time, he was relieved he didn't come here with Lena.

Averting his gaze from them, he looked out the window, where a train was leaving the departure platform. The rails then switched, allowing the next train to slide into the platform.

Under the guidance of the Federacy military police, soldiers and military officers crammed into the train, washing into the cars like a flood. On the opposite platform, meant for disembarking at the Republic, another train just arrived, empty after unloading its refugees in the other country. It was waiting for the rail to switch over. Towing several dozen cars alone, this train would soon carry off an untold number of refugees later.

Meanwhile, the square in front of the Ilex terminal was lined with parked buses that spewed out countless people who were now waiting for their train. They, too, were Republic officers, dressed in Prussian-blue uniforms. These were the generals and field officers, scheduled for the morning to noon trains—

meaning right now.

Under the guard of Republic soldiers—likely the company officers who would be evacuating in the next afternoon and evening trains—they passed through the empty plaza and silently entered the station.

They were leaving behind the citizens they were meant to defend, not sparing a glance at the quarrels that were breaking out between the abandoned citizens and the guarding soldiers.

By contrast, upon reaching the platform, the aging officers began complaining about the crowded trains, which they'd never experienced before. Shin couldn't help but feel a bit of sympathy for the Federacy's MPs, who were forced to expressionlessly ignore their complaints.

"The Republic soldiers get to evacuate ahead of everyone else," Grethe said, looking in the same direction as Shin. "They shouldn't be allowed to complain about anything."

"I've heard a few complaints in the morning trains," Major General Altner huffed. "They were displeased that they didn't get any luxury trains."

Absurd. Now wasn't the time to act spoiled, and they had no right to raise complaints at another country's army to begin with.

"The most we did was give the politicians their own car. If they have any other demands, we don't care. We're not here to offer them a pleasant, comfortable trip. We let them have trains we could otherwise be using to ferry our personnel and Vánagandrs. If they have complaints about their reception or the order they're leaving, they're welcome to stay here."

"So they've been complaining about the order, too..."

"Yes, they have. The government officials and former nobles ran off on the first trains. They left before the citizens could notice and set the officers so they'd leave when the refugees could see them. They made them into scapegoats—diverting the anger of the citizens, who were pushed down the line, to them... I guess they've gotten used to shifting the blame to others."

Same as how the army once forced all the anger and resentment that should have been directed at them onto the Eighty-Six. The government made the

military officers look like they were “hurrying to abandon and leave the citizens behind.” An obvious enemy...making it so the citizens’ anger would be fixed on them first. That way, the high officials would stay out of sight and away from the public’s anger.

“So I can only hope the high officials find someone they can pin all their anger onto. Like their Patriotic Knights, for instance.”

The pureblood, pure-white San Magnolian Patriotic Knights—a group that advocated for the Federacy to return the Eighty-Six so they could be used for the Republic’s national defense. They demanded that the duty of defending the country, which the Federacy had levied onto the Republic citizens, be returned to the state it was in before the large-scale offensive. Their mantra earned them support from the public.

Shin and his friends called them the Bleachers. Their efforts had all failed, and they lost all support; not only were the Eighty-Six not returned to the Republic, but now another Legion offensive also forced them to abandon their land. And in this evacuation, the Bleachers...

“They ended up evacuating with the high officials, huh?” Grete asked.

“Unlike the Republic’s military, which is incompetent but not powerless, the high officials are both useless and weak. That means it’s easy to blame them, especially when they’re close by and in sight.”

Hearing this, Shin felt terribly dejected. He was disgusted—not by them, but with himself. How could he have once insisted that the world and humankind weren’t beautiful? He thought he’d seen all the ways humans could be unsightly, but there was so much ugliness still hidden from him.

But he was realizing that now no one was going to hide those ugly truths from him—he wasn’t a child anymore.

“As you can see, you were wise not to bring Colonel Milizé along. If the citizens were to see her, who knows what they might say?”

To her, this was her homeland. This city was part of her country, and these Alba were her compatriots. Hearing them throw those insults at her now, when the country was falling apart, would surely carve deep scars into her heart.

With that said, Richard turned his eye to Shin.

“But the same holds true for you Eighty-Six. I didn’t imagine they’d be sending the Strike Package of all people to help the Republic. The motherland must be really pushed against the wall if they resorted to this.”

As Richard then glanced at her with his sole eye, Grethe shrugged casually.

“The Strike Package’s role is only to help support the retreat. Managing the lodgings and guiding the refugees is the Republic administration’s job. And the MPs are in charge of guiding them onto the trains. If anything happens and we have to interact with them, we can have the Nordlicht squadron handle it. They won’t be in contact with the citizens, so there shouldn’t be a problem.”

The Federacy’s army would only have minimal involvement with the Republic’s evacuation. They had neither the duty nor authority to assign, command, or coerce another country’s citizens into anything. The Republic’s citizens weren’t the Federacy’s people. Federacy soldiers could go as far as resorting to force in order to evacuate their own civilians to safety, but they didn’t and couldn’t extend the same treatment to Republic citizens.

But with the situation of the war being what it was, they wanted to prioritize the safety of their noncombatants. The soldiers, the Republic military’s logistics, communications, transports, and military-police divisions all left on the first trains.

“But Colonel Wenzel’s opinion aside, I’d like to hear what you think of this, Captain Nouzen... Feel free to speak your mind with no reservations. I’ll listen to anything you have to say.”

Are the Eighty-Six displeased with having to save the Republic? Shin paused for thought before giving his answer.

“Given we only have seventy-two hours for this operation, we can’t afford to waste time on needless arguments and friction. In that regard, I think positioning us so that we don’t make contact with the Republic’s citizens makes sense.”

“...Hmm?” Richard raised an eyebrow, looking surprised.

Shin carried on indifferently—like he was truly and honestly disinterested, his

voice reflecting how little he cared about the Republic.

“I have nothing more to say. No complaints. This is a mission, and we are soldiers. That’s how we decided to return to the Republic... This is the choice we were allowed to make. So...”

So...

“I never wanted to or would have chosen to take revenge on the Republic’s people in the first place. Ever since I was in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, I cared that little about them, and now I care even less. I don’t want to save them, but I don’t want to see them die, either. So staying as uninvolved with them as possible is good enough for me.”

He no longer harbored any anger toward them—or resentment, or scars.

“We’re not going to let them get in the way of our lives anymore—not even in memory.”

The clock display in the optical screen of Tohru’s Reginleif, Jabberwock, showed that it was past noon. It was time for the Republic’s low-ranking officers—company officers and their families—to board the train.

The Legion didn’t launch any invasions past the Gran Mur. Nor did they invade the Eighty-Third Sector or the three sectors surrounding it. Both Shin’s preliminary scouting of the area and the expedition force’s Vánagandr patrols indicated today was nothing but a peaceful autumn afternoon.

And yet Tohru saw something that disturbed that sight: incessant arguments breaking out in the plaza of the Ilex terminal. Between civilians and soldiers—or between soldiers and the administrative officers guiding the evacuation. Republic citizens turned on their own, arguing nonstop.

The company officers guarding over the plaza began their evacuation, with a makeshift fence built around the white flagstone plaza and the administrative officers taking over for them. The inside of the plaza was full of soldiers in Prussian-blue military uniforms, and the outer rim of the plaza had civilians in casual clothing clinging to the fence and hurling insults.

There was only one gate to the plaza, and both sides of it were lined with mounds of travel bags. One young officer standing there had a thick album he

was carrying, was thrown into the pile, and he angrily started shouting at the gatekeeper who threw it away.

They had a mere seventy-two hours to evacuate millions of people. For three days, trains would be arriving one after another, only to leave packed with people. This meant there was no place for luggage.

The civilians were only allowed to take what was on their person, and they were told ahead of time not to bring any luggage. But the people insisted on bringing their belongings over and were forced to discard them here, hence the mounds of bags.

The album the young man was carrying was callously discarded. And in all likelihood, it was a precious memento. It was possible this album was his only remaining memoir of his family.

The young man lashed out, crying, but the gatekeeper, a youthful administrative officer, also looked so troubled and taken aback that he was on the verge of tears.

Tohru watched on from within Jabberwock. He didn't watch because he wanted to help them evacuate. The Federacy army wouldn't and wasn't even allowed to interfere with the evacuation save for guiding the refugees onto the train. He was simply left with nothing else to do, because the operations commander, Shin, was away at the temporary command post. So he decided to watch the evacuation.

Even still, just having a single Reginleif standing silently nearby was enough to strike some fear into the refugees. In the end, the young officer threw a glance at Jabberwock for no discernible reason and gave up on his album. The administrative officer, on the other hand, bowed his head in thanks.

It'd happened a few times before, and seeing him bow his head to him felt very strange.

"...Besides, why are the white pigs bickering like this when things are this bad? It's pathetic."

He heard another shout, another cuss tear through the autumn sky. This time, it came outside the plaza, where the civilians, who were waiting for their turn to

board the train, were seated. Voices shouted out from there, crying out for reproach and criticism.

“Why do you get to board the train first? Why do the soldiers get to go first? We supported you, and even before the large-scale offensive, you never did anything! You never beat the Legion!

“You never protected us, your citizens!”

A heavy banging sound on the fence silenced the shouting. A hand snaked through the fence’s gaps, grabbing one screaming civilian by the collar and pulling them closer. It was a soldier from inside the fence. He was a soldier who was about to flee first and leave behind the defenseless citizens, but he shouted loftily just the same.

“—You’re the ones who didn’t fight!” he bellowed, his argent eyes burning with unsuppressed rage and hatred. “Not during the large-scale offensive or afterward! You forced all the fighting onto us! You had us protect you while you were running around and screaming like chickens with their heads cut off! While we were dying out there, you just complained, and even when the Federacy showed up, you evaded conscription! You call us useless?! You people never fought or helped anyone! You were just burdens!”

They grappled and cussed. Silver-haired citizens argued with soldiers who shared their same colors. The unsightliness of it all filled Tohru’s heart with a bitter emotion. Before the operation started, Kurena said that the Eighty-Six didn’t have to be the ones put through this.

The white pigs would force any problem onto someone else, even on their fellow white pigs.

If it suited them, the white pigs could make anyone, even their own, into a pariah, stripping them of any camaraderie of fraternity.

They had no intent whatsoever of shouldering the burden of trouble or injury, of combat or death, and they’d happily thrust that burden onto someone or anyone else. And even when they did, they would act like victims, irresponsibly demanding their rights.

It was...unsightly.

Back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, he resented the white pigs and disdained them even more. And he still did. But the way the white pigs were acting right now was simply too unsightly. Too wretched.

They weren't even worth his scorn.

"This is weird. When they get this bad, it feels stupid to even hold a grudge against them."

As they excused themselves from Major General Altner's presence and walked through the noisy command post, Shin suddenly directed a question at the other three operations commanders, who'd been resonating with him via the Para-RAID for the duration of that conversation.

"I know what I said earlier... But shouldn't you have said something, too?"

"Oh, uhh, yeah... I mostly felt the same way," Suiu replied.

"We're good so long as they're out of our sights. We don't want to save them, but that doesn't mean we want them to die, either."

"Besides," Canaan said, **"for us—I mean, the Eighty-Six outside you guys from the Spearhead squadron—this is actually nothing new, Nouzen. When we fought in last year's large-scale offensive, it meant directly protecting the white pigs. And this time, the Republic's people won't have any choice but to fight. With the war getting this bad, if they come crying to the Federacy for mercy, I don't see them getting treated much better than they treated us. And honestly, that's probably punishment enough for them. Serves them right, too."**

"Agreed, but...don't say that when Lena, Annette, or Dustin can hear you."

"Oh, of course. I wouldn't want a certain somebody lopping my head off with a shovel or another certain somebody accidentally shooting a missile at me."

That second "certain somebody" must have been referring to Anju. Come to think of it, Shin never did throw a can of open paint or a cream pie at Dustin. Someone suggested they'd use their leave in October as a chance to throw something at him.

...But then again, remembering it only to say they'd do it later felt like a bad omen, so Shin figured they should at least splash him with a bucket of cold water once they were done with this mission.

“Oh, yeah, that reminds me, Nouzen. Let Raiden and the others splash you with some water. The operation’s already started, but at least let them baptize you before the retreat begins.”

“Yeah...sure. Not doing this feels like a death flag, and with the colonel piloting a Reginleif alongside us, it feels like an extra big death flag. If anything happens, it’ll weigh on my conscience. And the colonel’s, too,” said Shin.

“Shuga and the rest were gonna do it during your leave, but I’ll let them know the schedule’s been moved up,” Siri said. “We’ll splash water on the guys who hooked up on our side, too. Kind of pisses me off.”

Shin fell silent. He didn’t know they’d been planning to do the same thing to him, too. Plus, Siri might have said too much of the truth at the end there.

“...Just leave Lena out of this,” Shin complained, hoping for at least that much.

“Oh, obviously. What are you saying? We know better than that.”

“Scrawny girl like her. What if she catches a cold? The poor thing.”

“Besides, I think the colonel went through enough baptism as it is, like a while back... and during the large-scale offensive,” Suiu said with a sardonic smile, her tone slightly bitter.

“Anyway, let’s get back on track. It actually felt pretty good back then. The white pigs acted like they were the superior species and we were inferior, but with the Gran Mur broken, they were powerless. If we weren’t there to protect them, the Legion would crush them to bits, and they were too stupid to even see that and kept squealing... It felt good. Served them right on the one hand, but on the other hand, knowing their lives were completely in our hands was pretty fun.”

They could abandon them or save them as they fancied. If they insulted them, they could magnanimously overlook it or take offense to it and toss them out to the Legion. It was that kind of...

“...How do I put it? We always had the power to toy with them however we wanted, but we didn’t. It made us feel almighty. It was fun.”

The dark joy of being the strong dominating those around them.

“For two months, we could abuse that privilege as much as we liked. Long enough to get tired of it. So I think we could do without having to feel that way anymore.”

“ ... ”

“So we’ve been wondering if your group is fine with that, since you never had that chance to vent it out.”

“I could actually ask you the same question, Siri. You got sick of protecting the white pigs and went to set up base somewhere else on your own... Are you cool with this?”

As the other two asked him that, Siri seemed to have shrugged. During the large-scale offensive, he hated the idea of being under Lena’s—under the Republic’s command—and set up a position commanded by him in the southern front.

“Well... Like you said, back then, the idea of dying to protect the white pigs didn’t sit well with me. That’s why I refused to work under Colonel Milizé... Hmm, but now—”

“—at this point, it honestly feels like all the anger’s kind of gone.”

Rito and the members of the Claymore squadron didn’t like the idea of fighting under the Republic during the large-scale offensive, preferring to enter Siri’s command rather than Lena’s. So for Rito and his squadron’s members, this would also be their first time fighting to directly protect the Republic’s civilians.

Rito was under the 1st Armored Division’s 2nd Battalion, which was stationed outside the Gran Mur. They were deployed in a narrow, long formation along both sides of the high-speed railway.

The Claymore squadron in particular was deployed near phase line Aries—in other words, the strip directly beside the Gran Mur. They were currently in charge of guarding the strip while the other squadrons finished supplying.

That said, the Legion didn’t show any signs of attacking yet, so for now, they just needed to watch the Republic’s refugees get loaded onto the train like livestock, which wasn’t much of a problem for them.

“I mean, I haven’t forgiven them for what they did to us at all... I probably never will.”

The things they did to us. Families killed, homelands stolen, comrades forced to fight to exhaustion and death.

They’d stripped them of their freedom and rights, scarred their hearts so deeply that they couldn’t look to the future without being filled by paralyzing fear. The truth was that Rito and his comrades, and indeed all the Eighty-Six,

shouldn't have needed to go through so much suffering and anguish to regain their wishes and futures. And the ones who'd forced them into this position were these people.

So Rito would never, ever forgive them—cry and beg though they might, nothing would absolve them of that sin. Even if they changed their ways, Rito would probably never accept the possibility of the Republic regaining some modicum of happiness. Even now, he believed they deserved to be scorned to their last breath, to regret and suffer and live wretched lives.

But he didn't want to push them into that fate with his own hands. After all...

"They already punished themselves on their own. Back in the large-scale offensive."

...the Legion's onslaught had slaughtered their families and taken their homes away. They were all crushed, mercilessly and gruesomely, by that surging metallic tidal wave. And it ended with the Republic vainly falling to ruin once.

After the Gran Mur fell, the Republic's survivors had to wait two months for the Federacy's army to come to their rescue. They spent days trapped inside the walls, being crushed by despair with nowhere to run.

However, the Republic's citizens brought those two months of despair on themselves. This was the outcome of a decade of closing themselves in a small, sweet dream, looking away from the reality of war and losing the ability to defend themselves.

Rito and the Eighty-Six didn't have to deliver any more despair on them.

"We don't even need to take revenge on them ourselves. They paid the price for their own ineptitude—their own stupidity and irresponsibility—for doing nothing for so long in the large-scale offensive. But even after that, they didn't repent at all. So...now they're picking up the tab for that, too."

A train full of refugees passed them by and disappeared into the distance. It was a simple formation that included freight cars meant for livestock, which cared little for the comfort of those boarding them. The refugees had to be packed into those cars like luggage, ignoring the possibility some of them might end up injured in the process.

The memory of his younger self being forced to go through the same experience crackled like noise in Rito's heart.

He felt like he should think it served them right, but he didn't. But at the same time, he couldn't overlap his younger self's pained image with them. Because after all...

"They won't repent even after this. They'll keep saying someone else is guilty for not helping them, just like they always do. They'll keep putting themselves through terrible things, and it'll always be their own fault. So I don't need to take revenge on them."

If they won't show any regret or penance, let them keep driving themselves to sorrow. And they'll never escape that fate.

"And we don't need to force ourselves to remember them, either. We can let go now."

Just like how Tohru watched the argument on the terminal, Kurena was watching it nearby, from inside Gunslinger. She got out of her Reginleif, eyeing the Republic civilians' argument—not out of glee or curiosity, but to come to terms with her emotions.

She watched, listened, and sighed softly.

...Really?

This was what she'd been so scared of for so long? These people looked so weak and insignificant now. Like scared dogs, howling pathetically.

She always thought she was the one trapped by them. But the ones who were really trapped were the white pigs.

They wouldn't even face what they really feared: the Legion menacing them. They only looked away—both from the Legion and their fear of them. And the outcome of that was the Gran Mur. The internment camps. The Eighty-Sixth Sector and the Eighty-Six.

They killed so many people to build those stupid walls, but they only went that far to lie to themselves. In the end, the Republic never really came face-to-face with how terrifying the Legion were. Not even now. And even at the very

end, they wouldn't face them.

They kept on looking away from the threat, and now they had no idea how to handle it. And so they were prisoners to this threat. Even now, they couldn't take a single step on their own.

And they couldn't even see it was their doing that made them like this.

The Republic army's defeat at the start of the war. The Gran Mur's fall. And who was at fault for that? It was the Eighty-Six; it was the army, who wouldn't protect them; it was the civilians, who sat idly by and did nothing.

Every single time, no matter what, someone else, anyone else—everyone but themselves—was at fault.

Living your life that way may have been easy...but living like that also meant they wouldn't ever find a way out of their troubles.

"Yeah," Kurena whispered, watching them. "I'm fine. I'm...all right now."

I'm not afraid anymore. I might hate the Republic's white pigs, and I'll never forget what they did to me, but I'm not afraid of them anymore. What I was really afraid of were my scars—my younger self, who couldn't protect my parents, my sister, and all my comrades. Of my own inability to free myself and my friends from our troubles.

But not these stupid white pigs, who can't defend themselves but won't stop lamenting the injustices done to them.

They didn't have any power she needed to dread. And now that she knew this, she might never forgive them, but she didn't need to care about them ever again.

"I've always fought with Shin and the others to survive so far. I'm strong, and I know it—so you people?"

You insignificant, powerless white pigs.

"I'm not afraid of you anymore."

The walls bordering the Eighty-Sixth Sector were all destroyed during the large-scale offensive, only leaving a few buildings and viewing platforms. Set on one of those was Snow Witch, and Anju was currently resting against its armor

and looking out into the walls.

Trains heading to and from the Federacy passed by. Rows of vehicles in black metal coloring—transport trucks and the Vánagandrs guarding them—drove along both sides of the high-speed rail tracks. They bravely traveled under the tipping sun, guarding the trucks loaded with precious equipment and supplies that had to be returned to the Federacy.

Intermittent explosions could be heard in the distance, coming from the Eightieth Sector's area. This was the sound of plastic explosives set by combat engineers going off. If the Gran Mur's remains were left untouched, a Morpho could take cover within the eighty-five Sectors. To that end, the Federacy had the walls closest to it demolished.

Her clear blue eyes moved along the autumn sky, overlooking the view of the city. She could see rows of production and power plants standing like metallic, artificial mountains. Those weren't there when Anju last saw the place as a young girl. And beyond them was a group of gray, uniform residences, all built densely together.

The square in front of the terminal was apparently being used as a truck yard, though it was once an industrial block before Ilex converted it into this form. The place was likely more chic before the Legion War, but in the decade afterward, the place was neglected, leaving behind only a square of white stone and cracked flagstones.

“...”

Did she want to come back here? Well, not really. It didn't feel like a homecoming, and she didn't feel much nostalgia, either. This was just the country she was born in. It was flat in comparison to the Eighty-Sixth Sector and how overrun it was with greenery, and by now, she was more used to Sankt Jeder in the Federacy and its neighboring cities.

So if she had any home to go back to, by now, it was...

Anju whispered with a smile.

Fare thee well, the land where I was only born.

“Good-bye... The place I live in, I want to be in... The place I call home isn't

here.”

The old lady’s school, where Raiden had hidden in his youth, was in the Ninth Sector—slightly to the north of the administrative wards’ center and quite far from the Eighty-Third Sector, which was on the brink of the southeast.

Since this could be the last time they’d ever see this place, Raiden thought he could take some pictures for the old lady, Lena, and the other Alba. But disembarking his unit and descending onto the wayside of the Eighty-Third Sector now, Raiden could see that going that far would be impossible.

Maybe taking pictures around here would be better than nothing? he thought, aiming his digital camera around the abandoned streets.

It was a distorted cityscape, and looking at it pained the heart. There were still traces of fighting on the streets, likely from during the large-scale offensive. Ruins of buildings lay along the road in terrible condition, with prefabricated buildings lined up together in a cramped, squalid mess in their place.

These facilities had been made to accommodate the Republic’s citizens, who went from having much vaster territory into confined lives within the walls.

The old lady’s school was in the Ninth Sector, which was a relatively affluent residential area that was more spacious than this. And based on what Lena and Annette said, the First Sector prioritized maintaining the scenery over accepting refugees. Its residents forbade the building of high-rises, even during the war. Despite the countless refugees bemoaning their deplorable living conditions.

The way the war warped the Republic didn’t just stop at the Eighty-Six.

Unable to conjure up the motivation to snap a photo of this small, melancholic public park, Raiden lowered his camera, only to find one of his squadron members there.

“Claude?”

It was the captain of the 4th Platoon, Claude Knot. The dusty wind toyed with his red hair, and his argent eyes, hidden behind his glasses, looked up at the way the sun hit a statue that’d originally been a sundial.

Hearing Raiden’s call, Claude glanced at him and blinked.

“Raiden... Oh. You taking photos for the old teacher lady?”

“And Lena and Annette—and the priest. Might be the last time we see this place. What about you?”

“Yeah... Figured I’d give this place one last look.”

Those weren’t words Raiden expected to hear from Eighty-Six discriminated by the Republic. As Raiden stared at him, surprised, Claude looked away.

“My big brother was a Handler.”

“Huh?” Raiden asked, stunned.

“My big brother was born from my father’s first marriage, and unlike me, he was Alba. And he was a Handler. For the squadron Tohru and me were in before the large-scale offensive.”

Those two had been in the same unit since even before the large-scale offensive. Maybe that was why their Personal Names, Jabberwock and Bandersnatch, were based on monsters from the same fairy-tale author.

Either way, Raiden shuddered. An Eighty-Six younger brother, commanded but never supported by his Handler—his unforgivable older brother. A relationship that must have been terrible for both parties.

“He knowingly became your Handler?”

“My big brother, he... I didn’t know it was him at the time. He introduced himself with a different name. I mocked him for it back then. Some crazy Handlers out there actually ask Processors for their real names...”

He mocked him, not knowing that he was looking for his younger brother, who’d become an Eighty-Six. Looking for Claude.

“...Your brother and father, are they—?” Raiden asked.

Claude’s answer came with a sigh. Like all his strength was draining from his body along with the air leaving his lungs.

“I don’t know...”

“...”

“He was connected to the RAID Device during the large-scale offensive, but

when I looked for him, I couldn't find anything, so..."

And so he ended up never meeting his brother and father, who remained within the eighty-five Sectors. Never truly meeting the Republic they were a part of.

He didn't think this country was his home. But still, he wanted to see the land he was born in one last time.

"This could be my last chance to ever look at it, so I figured I should."



The destination of the trains ferrying the Republic refugees was the Berledephadel City terminal, located in the Federacy's southwest. The place was considered the gate to Sankt Jeder, and the tracks coming from the Eaglefrost route and the Kreutzbeck City terminal to the north and the Eaglebloom route and the Kirkes City terminal to the south converged there. Since this was a city where visitors from other countries came in, it was pretty and ostentatious for an old Imperial city.

Another refugee train arrived at the beautiful station building. It was the train for lower-ranking soldiers and was the first one to accommodate captain-class officers. And mingled between the soldiers clad in Prussian-blue uniforms disembarking the train was one twelve-year-old boy.

It was a suggestion made from a humanitarian standpoint, and more practically speaking, it was made to abate the guilt of the soldiers and officers for escaping first. Once every few trains, one car would prioritize war orphans. The officers, of course, prioritized their own children and families, and so there were really only a few such cars—a truly apologetic number.

And one of those cars carried the children from the boy's orphanage. Apparently, a soldier his father used to be colleagues with arranged for orders from above to have them picked up, which is how he ended up here. He also said that because of this, they'd be taking him on that train, too, so he was thankful.

They were on different trains, so that person wasn't around right now. The boy hurried off the train, along with a group of Republic civilians, who were

angry at the uniformed Federacy soldiers telling them to hurry up.

The train was emptied out soon enough, and after a long inspection of the cars, it began moving to the track switch. With only its driver inside, the train switched over to the opposite track and took off toward the Republic again.

As he left the station building, which was fashioned like a cathedral with multiple stained-glass windows, he was greeted by rows of transport trucks parked in front of the terminal. There weren't enough of them, though, and there were still refugees from the train prior sitting on the pavement. Stretching ahead of them was a beautiful plaza that extended into the main street, its sidewalk deserted due to the evacuation and its roadside trees untrimmed.

Or so it seemed at first glance, but the boy realized that all the trees in sight were in fact artificial ones, and he swallowed nervously. The tree standing at the heart of the plaza was a monument, its trunk large, thick, and colored a metallic silver. Its leaves were shards of glass. The light shining down diagonally from the autumn afternoon sun passed through the leaves, casting a different color from each one, producing a light show that shone mystically like a kaleidoscope.

Similar trees were lined up along the main street as roadside trees. Set into the pavement were "fallen leaves" that would never fade in color. What the boy was seeing now were trees without the light hitting them. Polished frosted glass shaped like fruit dimly glittered in the faint sunlight.

This was a town meant to greet foreign visitors, designed by the old Empire to show off its dignity. Overwhelmed by the coercive magnificence before him, the boy stepped down into the plaza, looking around in a fidgety manner.

"Ah, there you are. You come over here for now."

Someone pulled him by the arm, gently dragging him out of the row of refugees. Looking up, he saw a young Republic soldier clad in its steel-colored uniform. He had golden, light-brown hair and jade-colored eyes, and he looked to be a few days older than him.

The boy blinked at him. For some reason, the young man's other hand, which wasn't holding on to him, was missing its wrist. His left sleeve was folded over.

“Hey. It’s been two months, right?”

“...Mister.”

It was the Eighty-Six boy who told him a bit about his father, who’d died in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. The one who told him to believe in his father, because he did the right thing. Those were words no one else but his mother would tell him.



Someone finally believed in Dad.

The boy looked up at him, baffled, and then realized: Was it he who...?

Theo ended up nodding.

“I thought this might count as cheating, but I figured this little wouldn’t be too bad? An officer I used to work under ended up getting a lot of demands, so I had them slot you in as compensation.”

“So you got me on this train...?”

“Yep.” Theo smiled with another nod.

This boy was a memento of the captain who once fought with him and shared his Personal Mark of the laughing fox.

“Welcome to the Federacy... You’re going to be all right now.”



As the 1st Armored Division’s HQ personnel were setting up camp, Lena was in the tent that served as her makeshift command post, mulling over the retreat plan one more time.

She had Shin confirm the position of all the Legion’s units when they embarked, and she had it marked on a map, comparing the data to see if there were any possible problems in the retreat plan.

It was her role as commander to ensure the thousands of Reginleifs spread out widely along the four-hundred-kilometer route would retreat in an orderly, timely, and sequential manner.

Each of the four armored divisions, several dozen battalions, and hundreds of squadrons needed to know the route they would take and stand on alert in their designated combat zones, while also keeping in mind the order in which they’d go through maintenance, resupply, and rest.

Each battalion and squadron had gone over the operation plan before the mission in the Rüstkammer base, but the enemy’s deployment and the progress of the evacuation were constantly changing, and each change had to be included into the operation plan.

Since this was a joint operation between the four armored divisions, Lena—the 1st Armored Division’s tactical commander—also had to keep the information spread among the 2nd to 4th Armored Division’s tactical commanders.

Still, she had it relatively easy because Shin’s ability gave them a general grasp of the enemy’s status. The Legion that were out on the offensive were currently still locked in combat in the other countries’ fronts, leaving few enemies within the Legion territories.

Lena couldn’t quite call this lucky, but for some odd reason, the Republic was only hit very lightly. Even though the Republic had the least soldiers and combat experience of all surviving countries, they took the least damage in the second large-scale offensive.

Vika and Grethe had said this, too, but this was strange and suspicious. If this was a trap and they were lured in, it was odd that the Legion hadn’t pounced on them yet. There must have been some kind of plan here.

We have to be careful...

The tent’s entrance flapped open. Marcel was back, and his expression was, for some reason, very fed up.

“Lena, just letting you know, but...we got a request from some evacuating officers to sneak in some luggage in the Federacy’s supply trucks. Could you check if this isn’t someone we should be pulling strings for?”

He then went out for a second and heaved in a few cardboard boxes. Another mound of requests. No one in the Republic was informed of Lena’s presence here, so they were probably addressed to Richard and his staff officers.

“...Read off the list of senders,” Lena said, moving her gaze back to the map.

Marcel indifferently started reading out the names in monotone. Once he was finished, Lena grinned.

“Second Lieutenant, I’m heartbroken to inform you that the retreat was so hurried that all these letters went missing.”

“That’s what I figured.” Marcel smirked, picking up on what she meant.

“Roger that, ma’am.”

Fido, being the considerate, wise Scavenger that it was, brought a drum over, into which they could dump the letters. They carried the drum outside so they could light a campfire. Seeing Marcel leave, Lena sighed. Geez.

“The Federacy and the United Kingdom don’t have to go through this trouble...”

So why does the Republic need to be like this? I’m tired. I wanna go home.

But as that exhausted thought crossed her mind, she blinked. Go home...? The thought had occurred to her completely naturally, settling into her heart with no resistance.

...Oh. I see.

A smile played on her lips.

“...That’s right. I have to go back.”

She already had a home to return to. Not in the Republic, where she was born and raised, but rather....

The tent’s entrance flapped open again. This time, Shiden peeked into the tent.

“Your Majesty. A train just passed us by. We’re having free Scavengers set up a wall, so make sure you move before the next train comes. It’s almost time for dinner.”

Lena’s hands stopped. This was a three-day operation, so both commanders and soldiers were to alternate in their supply and break times. Lena’s own break time was during this evening, but...

“Is it that time already?”

The operation’s staff officer went into the tent next. He would be taking over Lena’s job while she was resting.

“Yes, it is, Colonel Milizé... It’s my shift. Please transfer command authorities to me.”

The autumn sun set early, and under its golden rays, Shiden’s newly reformed

Brísingamen squadron and part of the Spearhead squadron, who served as Lena's HQ personnel, entered their break time and had an early dinner.

This schedule was set up to accommodate for Shin, who would be serving as recon during nighttime, so as to prevent any raids. There were still no signs of any incoming Legion attacks, giving them the freedom to light a fire. And so rather than relying on the combat rations' heating agent, Shiden and her new squadron all sat around a simple stove.

The 1st Armored Division was in charge of securing the ninety-kilometer range between the Gran Mur and the point three hundred kilometers away from the Federacy, phase line Cancer. They left the protection of the Ilex city terminal, Point Sacra, to the expedition's forces and were in the central camp outside the Gran Mur.

Lena was able to get there by moving while hiding behind the Scavengers' shadow. Feeling the rays of the setting sun and the autumn wind against her, Shiden continued to watch the evacuation trains and transport trucks sail in the distance.

The evacuation of the Republic's company officers had been completed and moved to noncommissioned officers and their families. Soldiers in Prussian-blue uniforms were atop the train, screaming out complaints and probably thinking no one could see their faces.

A few of the Eighty-Six squad members regarded them with obscene hand gestures, though the soldiers probably couldn't see them, either. Tohru, who'd brought a stuffed toy piggy, sentenced it to hanging from his Reginleif's gun barrel.

The Republic's twenty-two varieties of combat rations had some new flavors added recently, and so Shiden's group was dining on dishes they hadn't had before. Fortunately, or perhaps not so much so, Kurena ended up getting one of the new dishes.

"What's tofu and miso soup?"

"...Can you even call this soup? It's more like miso juice."

When it came to combat rations, most main dishes called soup ended up

being closer to juice.

“Soup, juice, I don’t care; what even is this?”

Fido went around, picking up trash like the rations’ laminated packs as Shin and Dustin came back with a fresh set of clothes. They’d had water splashed on them before dinner. They joined the circle, and while Dustin sat next to Anju, who handed him his ration, Raiden was the one to hand Shin his.

Shiden watched it, a bit taken aback.

What are you, his wife? And don’t sulk just because you’re late, Lena. Sit next to him.

Shin got a ration of meatballs with gravy. He was about to add some hot sauce, mistaking it for tomato sauce, only for Raiden to stop him.

Seriously, are you actually his wife?

With Lena finally sitting next to him, Shiden looked at her, flush, and shrugged.

“...It’s all good so long as it keeps her from thinking about the Republic.”

Besides, Shiden got the chance to splash Shin with water, so she was in an extra-good mood.

Michihi’s 3rd Armored Battalion was deployed near phase line Taurus, and from where they were standing, they could only see the very peak of the Gran Mur in the distance. Michihi and the Lycaon squadron were currently resupplying their units, so they’d be ready and on time to change places with the unit currently patrolling.

Sitting around the stove’s fire, they ate an assortment of rations and light pastries, the most popular of which was the fruitcake. As Michihi chewed on it, she asked:

“Speaking of, are all the Bleachers gone now?”



It was the middle of the night.

Despite it being before rising time, Lena got out of the simple bed in her tent

and stepped out into the campsite. The HQ company's camp offered a view of the imposing walls that once separated the Republic's interior from the battlefield. One could also get a glance at the Ilex city terminal's evacuation through the cracks in the walls.

The soldiers' evacuation had ended early into the night, and it was finally the civilians' turn. Even now, right before the date changed, the place was packed with people dressed in assorted outfits, forming a disorderly mass.

Thankfully, as far as Lena could see, there was no real trouble to speak of. The evacuation was proceeding well—according to plan.

"The evacuation's going smoother than expected," Lena said aloud.

"Is it? That's nice," Annette, who stayed behind in Rüstkammer, said through the Para-RAID. "Because they started making trouble as soon as they got off on our side. Both the officers who came early and are basically kicking back now—and angry civilians who just showed up. They're saying their refugee sector is too close to the battlefield and they're scared to stay there."

Lena cocked her head curiously. Annette was waiting in their home base, meaning she was far from the refugee sector. And the army wouldn't just leak information to an unrelated base.

"How did you hear about that?"

"Theo told me. He got sent over because there aren't enough people to handle the clerk work in the refugee sector. Plus, you remember how he wanted to get his comrade's kid over here on an early train. So his commander told him to go pick him up and help them out along the way."

"Oh... But close to the battlefield? Their refugee sector was set up dozens of kilometers away from the fighting."

The Federacy, of course, prioritized defending its own civilians first, so to accept the Republic's refugees, they'd prepared refugee sectors along the border with the combat territories. But even so, they were still farther and safer from the Wulfsrin population's refugee areas, since they were treated as actual reserves.

From a humanitarian standpoint, this wasn't done out of discrimination toward the Vargus and the Wulfsrin. It was simply because, unlike them, the

Republic refugees were civilians without any combat training, and they'd just get in the way if left on the battlefield.

"Yeah, but still. The Federacy's been fighting on the western front day and night, and you can probably see the lights from afar during night combat, right? They're saying it scares them. And if this was before the large-scale offensive, maybe they wouldn't have been that scared."

Scared of battle and the Legion themselves. The possibility of these metallic ghosts killing them or even waging war against them wasn't realistic for the Republic. At least, it hadn't been until the large-scale offensive.

"Are you all right on that front? It's night right now, and your forces are smaller, but the citizens must be scared of the Reginleifs. Plus, all the soldiers ran off on them. They must be panicking."

"Yes, well..." Lena trailed off, gazing at the Ilex terminal, which was visible a few kilometers away from behind the cracks in the Gran Mur.

The night air was crisp and cold, and the autumn skies shone so clearly that it looked like they might fall at any second. But the murmuring heard from the distance did have some anxiety to it, though she couldn't hear any shouting or cursing.

"It looks like that's not really the case. They're very anxious, and there's the occasional argument, but overall, they're evacuating without making a fuss. We thought they might be more opposed to the evacuation itself... Like, if you want us to evacuate, beg for it. You know the citizens always know how to insist on their rights, like they did in the large-scale offensive..."

There were a few lighting stands prepared for the night evacuations, and they lit up the plaza before the terminal brightly. In the distance, one could make out the reliable silhouettes of patrolling Vánagandrs. Plus, there hadn't been any combat with the Legion in this area since the evacuation began.

This was an evacuation from encroaching war, and yet there was no sign of fighting. Only a clear, silent starry night.

"I figured they'd say things like that, but...come to think of it, anyone who might say that probably already died in the large-scale offensive."

Since the Republic had abolished the royalty in an armed revolution, it placed

more restrictions on its military than most other countries. One such restriction limited the authority to declare martial law. No matter what happened, the army wasn't allowed to overturn the constitution, meaning the army couldn't violate the civilians' freedom under any circumstances. And with that law as their crutch, some people refused to evacuate during the first large-scale offensive.

They all died.

On top of that, neither the army nor Lena had the time or presence of mind to go around asking people to evacuate, and the Eighty-Six had no desire to evacuate those people, either. So they had to leave them behind on the battlefield.

"That's probably true, come to think of it. Everyone got so scared, they froze up or were so confused that they could only run in circles. They all ended up dying, so the only ones left alive are the ones who are smart enough to run when you tell them to. And someone walked up and told them they'll help them get to safety, so they know to just shut up and take it."

Of course, some people ran and died just the same. That was just what the large-scale offensive was like. Indiscriminate in its death and equal in choosing its victims. What one thought or did in their life made little to no difference.

If nothing else, the Legion didn't care at all for what the victims they crushed to bits thought, did, or said.

"But it really is weird. I'm surprised that those guys who kept causing trouble with their nonsense— What did you call them again? Bleachers? I'm surprised they didn't pull anything."

"Yes. Colonel Wenzel, Shin, and me were worried they might try something."

But in the end, they didn't do anything. It was almost anticlimactic. This time, the Strike Package wasn't greeted by banners full of their bigoted nonsense. According to Grethe, the blame for the catastrophe that was the second large-scale offensive and the subsequent evacuation was pinned entirely on the Bleachers, and as such, they lost their standing within the Republic.

Except that Ms. Primevére, the Bleachers' head figure, was seen evacuating on the first train along with the government officials. And Lena saw, from within

the cockpit of Saki's Grimalkin, how that woman kept directing annoyed, hateful glares at the Reginleifs passing by.

She saw her lips mouth the words *How dare you...*

"...Keep an eye on the people managing the refugee sectors," Lena said.

"Roger that. I'll let Theo know, too, and of course remind the Federacy through the legit channels. I'll start with the head of research first."

"I'm counting on you."

"Yeah. You be careful over there, all right?"

The Para-RAID turned off, and Lena took a deep breath.

"—I thought the official time to wake up was only fifteen minutes ago."

Hearing the faint sound of grass crunching under approaching footsteps, she turned around to find Shin standing there. He looked at his tactical commander—who'd gotten out of bed ahead of time and walked around camp unguarded—with a bothered, blaming sort of look.

"Well, I just woke up early. And it was only thirty minutes, Shin. Besides, what are you doing up now?"

"I went to sleep before everyone else."

For the duration of this three-day mission, Shin was to fundamentally not participate in combat. Instead, he was charged with remaining on recon duty and keeping an eye on the Legion's movements.

In order to guard the relief expedition's retreat route, the Strike Package's combat units had to maintain a certain distance. And to keep the Reginleifs' mobility up, they couldn't afford to simply wait for the Legion to launch attacks.

They'd need to watch for indications of any of the Legion units dotting the territories moving in and crush them as soon they advanced. The Strike Package's basic strategy in this mission was to destroy the enemy as quickly as possible, so as to not allow the Legion a chance to group up and cooperate.

And to that end, Shin would have to be in charge of tracking the enemy across this large area. So out of consideration for the fact that he'd be spending three days deep in the Legion territories, constantly exposed to their screams, Raiden

and the rest had forced him into his bed and told him to get some sleep whenever he could afford it.

“But the time aside, don’t walk around the battlefield alone. There’s no sign of any Legion units in the area moving in on us, but—”

He then trailed off, his sanguine eyes settling on what was behind Lena.

“...You came to see the Gran Mur?” he asked.

“Yes. I thought it might be my last chance to see it.”

Shin paused for thought and then said, “I know we’re in the middle of an operation right now, but...if it gets too hard for you...”

Lena cracked a light, slightly pained smile.

“Thank you... Well, maybe I’ll take you up on that offer. Fawn on you for a bit.”

Fido approached them, turning its flank over to serve as a bench in what was perhaps its show of consideration. Lena sat down and patted the spot next to hers, spurring Shin to take a seat. Feeling his slightly higher body heat next to hers, she reclined against him and placed her head on his shoulder.

Shin said nothing, simply being there for her, and Lena didn’t say anything, either. His body was slightly hot, and it felt like she was slowly melting into him, like the borders between them were blending together.

“—I did want to return to this country,” she suddenly said.

Shin didn’t reply, and she continued, the words leaving her lips. It was like the warmth of the boy next to her temporarily did away with the sentiments and the pain. She spoke like it would help her hold on until the operation ended and they returned to the Federacy.

“I’m not fine with this. I’m sad. I wanted to come back to this country. When I came to the Federacy, I didn’t think it would really just disappear. Mother is dead, and our mansion is gone, but...I thought someday, when the war ended, I’d return here.”

“...Right.” Shin nodded, his crimson eyes fixed on the distant sky. “It might sound like I’m just saying it to comfort you, but...let’s come here again

sometime. All of us, together.”

She looked up, finding Shin’s eyes were fixed on the sky. Like he was gazing at the distant night sky of the First Sector, which she’d wished they could watch together.

“Seeing as we can’t keep that promise to watch the fireworks at Palace Lune.”

They might not know how far into the future that might be. But even so...

“So let’s go see the southern seas. Let’s go watch the noctilucas light up the water in the Fleet Countries. And the diamond dust and aurora in the United Kingdom.”

The magnificent winter of the white-clad goddess. Or the lakes and the glory of the Alliance. Or the cities of the far-west countries, which might still be peaceful. Or the southern countries they’d never seen before that lay past the wyrm’s roost.

The whole world that waited for them beyond the battlefield.

The two of them, together. Or with everyone else.

Lena finally managed a smile.

“...Yes. We did promise.”

Two years ago, before they knew each other’s faces.

“Don’t worry. I haven’t given up yet. Yes, let’s come here again someday. For sure.”

“Then maybe you should say you’ll be coming back. Kaie told me once that putting something into words can make it happen.”

“Right. Then—”

Lena rose to her feet and got off Fido, standing before the Gran Mur. She spoke her oath with her back to the fortress walls, the opposite of how she’d stood *back then*.

“—I’ll come back someday for sure. To this place, where I first met you, Shin.”

There was an odd pause for a moment there. Shin looked up at her, as if to say *Oh, right*.

“—You forgot?!” Lena exclaimed. “I thought you came here because you remembered!”

“No, I didn’t forget. I just didn’t recognize it because the flowers that bloomed here at the time were different—”

“Jerk!”

When Shin saw her sulk, his expression became almost amusingly panicked. It made Lena laugh out loud, at which point Shin realized he was being teased.

“...Isn’t that a little too mean?”

“Nope!”

Fido let out a protesting “*Pi*,” trying to back Shin up.



Based on the report of the 1st Armored Division, the evacuation of the Republic’s civilians was going smoothly. Since Siri’s 2nd Armored Division was deployed around where the Eighty-Sixth Sector used to be, from which they could see neither the Gran Mur nor the Federacy’s front line, they could only guess at the situation.

But they did, of course, know how things were going regardless. They guarded the high-speed railway tracks and had seen dozens of trains pass by on the way to the Republic and just as many on their way back to the Federacy.

Eighteen hours had passed since the evacuation began. Fifty-four hours remained, and a fourth of the operation’s total time had passed. And since the evacuation was going smoothly, the evacuation rate likewise stood at 25 percent or so.

But that aside.

“There’s nowhere else to hide in the area, so we had to come here, but... going in here does feel bad,” Siri griped to himself within Baldanders’s cockpit.

Baldanders and the Razor Edge squadron’s units were all lying in wait in the ruins of an Eighty-Six internment camp. Much like the southern camp Siri had stayed in, it was a row of simple black facilities guarded by a needlessly sturdy wire fence. It’d been long since anyone occupied this place, but the ground was

still empty of any weeds or flowers, just like it was back then. No rabbits or deer would wander in here for fear of being hunted down and devoured.

This desolate, savage sight was one that was all too familiar to him. A sight he wished he could forget.

The only part missing from this camp was the antipersonnel minefield surrounding it. Those alone had been dug up during last year's large-scale offensive and weren't there to impede Siri and the rest anymore. It felt terribly ironic.

Siri's 2nd Armored Division was placed in charge of the strip between phase line Cancer—the three-hundred-kilometer point from the Federacy—and phase line Libra—the two-hundred-ten-kilometer point. The most outer patrol line of the high-speed railway and the retreat route.

Shin's ability could accurately detect the Legion's movements, but depending on conditions, they could possibly outsmart him. They couldn't afford not to have the Reginleifs spread out and patrol. And on top of that, they couldn't rely on Shin's power for the whole three-day operation. It would be too taxing on him.

The 4th Armored Division was in charge of guarding the area between phase line Chiron—the closest one to the Federacy—and Pisces. To that end, he'd remained Resonated with Suiu, who was building her defensive line near his, and she replied to him through the Para-RAID in a teasing manner.

"Scared ghosts might pop out or something? I guess the camps do feel like the kind of place ghosts would haunt."

Siri scoffed at her words.

"Don't say ghosts; Nouzen might laugh at you. And you're hiding in the old Empire's farmland ruins, right? A ghost boar or cow might come floating at you."

"The only one laughing at people here is you, Siri. Besides, even back when I was in one of the old Juggernauts, Banshee could at least handle animals."

The Republic's topography mostly consisted of plains, meaning that outside the cities and forests, much of its land was made up of vast fields and farmland.

As small as a Reginleif was, it was still a Feldreiß and couldn't very well hide in open fields.

Preferring not to stay in the open, where the Legion would easily detect him, Siri decided to hide in the internment camp, where his unit could lay low. Suiu was in the old Empire's border with the Republic, which was of a similar topography, and had the same concerns.

Incidentally, Banshee was Suiu's Personal Name, as well as her Reginleif's call sign.

"The old Juggernauts couldn't beat a Grauwolf, to say nothing of a Löwe."

"It's honestly a miracle we survived. Did the Republic really think they could beat the Legion with those things...?"

They exchanged wry smiles and then both returned to their vigilant gaze. It was a clear, moonless autumn night, with the light of the bright stars casting shadows on the ruins' darkness. They couldn't feel it in the Reginleif's sealed cockpit, but the air of these slumbering fields was probably crisp and pleasant to the touch.

Siri felt an unforgettable bitterness surge up in his heart as his Reginleif, shaped like a skeletal corpse, lay hidden in the shadows of this desolate carcass of a ruin. His eyes were fixed on the starry night sky.

A ghost. Some faint part of him pondered that ghosts really could emerge right now. The ghosts of the untold scores of Eighty-Six who'd died trapped here. And they'd emerge not as friends, but as ghosts who resented the living.

I mean...we never saved them.

Back in the internment camps, those who tried to escape were shot dead or otherwise blown to bits by the mines. Some were thrown into the minefields by the soldiers, their idea of a bad joke or justice. He still remembered the sight of a young girl, trapped, unable to move and sobbing between the corpses of her siblings.

He couldn't save her. Young Siri looked away, fearful he might draw the Republic soldiers' attention. He could only look on, shaking, as the girl was helplessly blown up by the mines next.

He saw children even younger than her snatched by the soldiers only to be sold inside the walls for pocket money. Even when he was eventually cast out into the battlefield, one of his female squad mates drew the soldiers' attention. Rumor had it she was sold off to some rich man in the First Sector.

He heard stories about one internment camp that was altogether abandoned, only for its entire population to starve to death, because its people had developed some kind of nasty infectious disease. There were rumors of another internment camp where people were hunted down for human experimentation.

The human experimentation turned out to be true. Just earlier, his squad mates, who were spread out around the camp, told him about a strange facility full of cages and operating tables. Apparently, it'd still been in use up until just before last year's large-scale offensive. That was what they'd told him, their voices clearly choked up with nausea.

So if any of those countless dead Eighty-Six's souls lingered on here, still abandoned in this internment camp...they'd surely resent Siri and the rest, who still lived, had left them to die here, and were for some reason protecting the Republic's white pigs now...

"...Maybe they should come out," Siri told himself quietly. "Let them."

"**Hmm? Did you say something, Siri?**" Siri keenly picked up on his whisper.

"No...," Siri shook his head and replied.

But just as he was about to say it was nothing—

"Undertaker to all units."

—a new Para-RAID target joined the Resonance. Shin. Siri immediately shifted gears with a snap. He moved from his alert state, where he still remained somewhat calm so as to preserve energy and keep his outlook bright for a prolonged patrol, to the keen state of mind of battle, where all his nerves were primed and ready.

"Legion offensive activity detected from a point one hundred fifty kilometers northwest of our departure point from the Federacy, Point Zodiacs. This isn't a Legion formation but a singular unit presumed to be an unidentified Morpho.

All Strike Package units and squadrons are to spread out and remain wary of enemy artillery fire.”

Considering 800 mm shells weighed several tonnes, the Reginleif’s 88 mm turret couldn’t hope to shoot them down. Shin’s orders prioritized minimizing damage, but even knowing this, Siri withstood the urge to click his tongue.

“...Roger that.”

“We expect it to fire in coordination with enemy armored units in the vicinity. I’ll inform you on any movements I detect, but all units are to remain vigilant. Also, we’ve requested the Federacy to use their special artillery unit to eliminate the Morpho, so there’s no need for us to worry about counterattacking.”



“—Roger that. 8th Special Artillery Regiment, commencing firing sequence.”

On the western front, on a point twenty kilometers away from the Saentis-Historics line. That gigantic bird imposingly crept out of a concrete tunnel and onto the requisitioned railways.

In place of the dainty legs of a fowl, it had countless wheels that screeched and shrieked metallically as they moved its weight. In place of its lustrous turquoise body was an undyed, exposed metal black chassis. Spreading on both its sides were not graceful wings, but two spades meant to serve as recoil absorbers, placed there to compensate for the double track they didn’t have time to complete. The long barrel of the railgun evoked the image of beautiful plumage.

Its overall height was twelve meters tall. Its weight exceeded three thousand tonnes. The same type of weapon as the Morpho that initially threatened all of humankind’s confirmed countries: a railway artillery loaded with a railgun.

This was a high-caliber railgun built as the successor unit to the prototype railgun introduced the month prior, the Trauerschwan. It was created, much like the Trauerschwan itself, as part of the Federacy’s plan to develop a countermeasure to the Morpho. In other words, this gun’s *minimal* requirements were firepower capable of being able to sink a one-thousand-four-hundred-tonne target, as well as a long range exceeding four hundred kilometers.

So inevitably, while it wasn't quite a match for the Morpho yet, it was a gigantic turret capable of propelling very large shells at high speeds, which meant it was so large that moving it between points became a major issue. And since it was a weapon of the Federacy that prioritized defending its land first and foremost, the solution suggested for that problem was to use the railway tracks spread out around the country. They were, after all, meant for mass transportation to begin with.

And so ironically enough, the Federacy came to develop its prototype, the Trauerschwan, as a railway gun, much like the Morpho it was meant to oppose. However, its first battlefield ended up being the distant Theocracy. It was brought to the fold much sooner than expected—and in what was certainly a reckless play. In that battle, it had legs attached to it, forcing it to walk.

But this was its original form, the one it was meant to take: a railway gun. Albeit a hurriedly constructed railway gun, dispatched to accommodate for the front lines having fallen back.

The spades fixed in place. The shells loaded into their chamber. The enemy coordinates, which were transmitted by the Strike Package, were input. Confirming that the artillery crew had completed all preparations to fire and evacuated to a semibasement moat, the regimental commander raised their voice. Ferrying and deploying a weapon as large as this railway gun required an entire regiment of personnel.

The moats were made of reinforced concrete to both withstand the shock waves of their own railgun's fire and offer some minimal degree of defense from the enemy railgun's counterattacks.

The fire-control officer placed their hand on the wired firing device and looked up at the commander with a tense expression. The commander nodded.

"Mk. 2 Trauerschwan—Kampf Pfau, fire!"



The Legion had deprived humankind of aerial superiority through their Eintagsfliege and Stachelschwein, and despite this, they were careful enough to equip their precious Morpho with antiair guns and a wide-area radar system, so as to defend them from cruise missiles and suicide bombing from UAVs.

<<——Radar reading detected.>>

With its thirty-meter-long barrel fixed on its estimated target's coordinates, the Morpho was momentarily distracted by the warning from its radar. This was one Legion unit made intelligent by incorporating a dead human's neural network—a Shepherd, as the humans called them. Much like many of the Shepherds, it was inhabited by the personality of one of the humans who'd died in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, a commander unit of this army of ghosts.

"He"—identifier Nidhogg—perfectly retained its memories and personality, while at the same time, he'd been driven mad by the instincts of a murder machine. By now, there was no trace of the man he used to be.

With the coldness of a mechanical monster, he estimated the threat level of the enemy targeting him. Its estimated firing position was two hundred kilometers southwest, and its shots' velocity was rapid. It seemed to be an enemy railgun.

However...

<<Evasion deemed unnecessary.>>

...its large-area radar perceived the trajectory of the enemy projectiles, and Nidhogg wasn't in their direct path. They would miss without so much as brushing against him. There was no need to evade—to stop firing.

<<Resuming firing sequence.>>



The large-caliber railgun the Federacy developed as a countermeasure to the Morpho was still in its prototype stages. One month ago, they repurposed a prototype meant for lab testing into the Trauerschwan, deploying it in live combat. After analyzing the assorted data obtained from that battle, they immediately used this feedback to spot any crucial flaws that required improvement, implementing them into the next prototype's design, and began production.

However, they couldn't possibly resolve every single flaw that came up in a mere month. Its slow automatic reload mechanism and incomplete fire-control system were still just as slow and incomplete as they were last month.

Still, with the Legion introducing more of the Morpho and its improved versions, as well as the front lines all falling back, the Federacy was left with little means to counterattack. They needed a railgun with a similar range, capable of stopping the enemy railguns. And yet they didn't have nearly enough time to properly develop its automatic reload and fire-control systems.

But one day, during a meeting in a technical research institute, someone came to a realization, despite their mind being addled by sleep deprivation and unease; they only needed to change their perspective.

All they needed to do was render the enemy railgun inoperable. And the Trauerschwan was already capable of the minimal requirement of shooting and destroying a target hundreds of kilometers away. This meant they didn't necessarily need to complete the automatic reload and fire-control systems.

They just needed to make sure they hit their target.

"First shot fired. Proceed to prepare *second and third shots!*"

The Kampf Pfau's automatic firing device was incomplete. These shells couldn't be loaded by hand, and using a crane to do it required a great deal of time and attention. And despite this, the regiment commander continued to order his men to fire in fast succession. And the gunners unquestioningly, without so much as confirming if the first shot hit its mark, continued to fine-tune the sights, changing the guns' angle.

Yes, there was no need to pay any mind to the question of whether they hit their mark. *Not with the Kampf Pfau.* They *never expected* for the first shot to hit.

"Yes, sir. Preparing to fire first, second, and third shots!"

The rails trembled with a thundering rumble. A heat daze hung over the unit—but not over the pair of rails that'd fired the first shot. This improved railgun model, standing on the rails in all its heavy metallic glory, was equipped with twelve sets of elongated barrels, lined up against the sky like dorsal fins.

If its firing accuracy was bad, they needed only compensate for that with sheer numbers. If their loading speed was slow, they needed only load multiple cannons ahead of time.

The Kampf Pfau.

With its barrels lined up like the beautiful tail features of a peacock. And much like a peacock pecking a viper to death, it would defeat the enemy railgun. And this ferocity crowned this unit with the name of this bird, identified with a guardian god of the Federacy said to have once smote an evil dragon from a distant land.

“Second muzzle, followed by the third muzzle—fire!”



Ignoring the approaching enemy shells, the Morpho continued its preparations to fire. Its cooling wings opened, and liquid metal began to seep between its spear-like barrel. It assumed firing position, like a viper raising its head in preparation to bite.

<<Nidhogg to wide-area network. Opening fi——>>

But that moment.

His radar picked up a salvo of shells hurtling toward him with the same velocity of the earlier enemy shot, but each of them with a slightly different trajectory.

<<...!>>

And one of their predicted trajectories triggered an alert. The alert spurred the Morpho to dodge, its Liquid Micromachine nervous system running rapidly, but there was no avoiding the hit—because doing so would expose it to a hit from another shell.

So instead—

<<Nidhogg, resuming firing sequence.>>

Its instincts as a combat machine did not fear death. He coldly, calmly prioritized completing his mission. Blue lightning crackled through his barrel. The first enemy shell he’d detected finally impacted. As predicted, the first shell missed him by a large margin, striking a faraway hill and blasting the trees on it to bits.

But then came the second, third, and fourth shots. It was an unguided, long-distance circular-error-probability barrage, but since the barrage was so wide, it

closed in on the coordinates it had aimed at—on the Morpho's vicinity—scattered like a cage.

The second shot shattered the rails, one of which went flying and impacted one of his antiair autocannons.

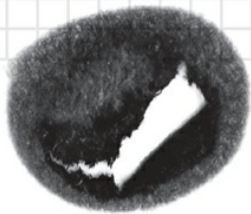
The third shot skirted right past his barrel, crashing right behind him and boring a massive hole into the ground.

The fourth shot missed him entirely, crashing into the crowd of the Edelfalter attending to him.

<<Resuming fi——>>

And then.

The fifth long-distance shell ruthlessly skewered the gigantic dragon's flank, like a spear thrown by a mighty hero.



[EIGHTY-SIX]

Republic Calendar, August 26, 368
One Day into the First Large-Scale Offensive
Eastern Front's First Ward

IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THE FALL
OF THE SPEARHEAD BARRACKS



Judgment Day.
The hatred runs
deep.

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IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THE FALL OF THE SPEARHEAD BARRACKS

He realized that, at some point, everything had gone quiet.

There was nothing more to be heard in the frontline base's hangar. Neither the roars of the Legion's gunshots and blasts nor the sounds of the maintenance crew fighting back against them.

Rito and the others... Those young Processors somehow managed to get away, he pondered to himself through thoughts made hazy from blood loss.

—Are they going to survive, those kids? At least them, if no one else...

The Spearhead squadron, the Eighty-Sixth Sector's eastern front's final disposal site, where after their six-month term, Processors would always be sent to die. May the last Processors of this squad, at least, survive.

Because us at the maintenance crew will die here. Us, who sat back and watched as countless kids were sent by their homeland to be slaughtered by those damn scrap monsters. Our only fate is to die here.

The words once given to him by the Reaper had become his sole salvation.

—There are no Legion calling out for you.

If his dead wife and daughter were, at the very least, not taken away by the Legion, then they were surely waiting for him on the other side. That would be good enough. He would need nothing more.

If his beloved girls weren't still trapped on the battlefield, then if he went over

to the other side... If he finished himself off before these terrible scrap monstrosities took him away, he'd be able to be with them again.

That was all he needed.

Or at least, that's all he *thought* he needed.

He looked up at the Legion standing before him, while he just barely held up the pistol against his temple.

But suddenly, a thought crossed his mind. His beloved wife and daughter had been cast out to the battlefield as Eighty-Six and died, never becoming Legion. And he and the other maintenance crew finally got the end they deserved for sending those child soldiers to their deaths. But to begin with, this wasn't a sin they alone ought to bear.

The ones who'd cast his family to the battlefield were the Republic. And the civilians who'd cast the Eighty-Six onto the battlefield were still living on without a care in the world. And if Rito and the others would survive, those civilians might survive as well by clinging to them like parasites.

Not saving the Eighty-Six was a sin, but sending them out to die was just as much of a crime.

And sins should be punished. In other words, the sins of the Republic civilians should be met with retribution.

He must take revenge for his family.

No—

I want to take revenge for them with my own two hands.

The pistol slid from his numb hands. Looking up at the Legion, he whispered. He could finally die, but he wouldn't go to where his family was. He could finally answer them, but he let it all go to waste.

“—I'm sorry.”

D-DAY PLUS ELEVEN.

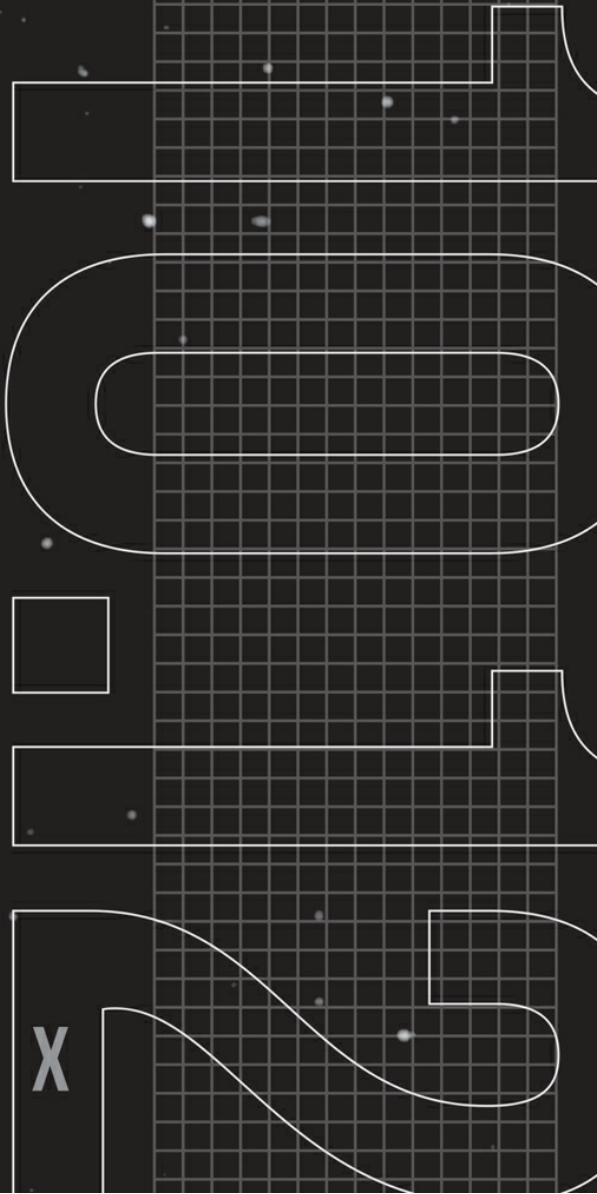
Stellar Calendar: October 12, 2050



DIES PASSIONIS



Judgment Day.
The hatred runs deep.



86

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

EIGHTY-SIX

D-DAY PLUS ELEVEN

With “his” black armor shot through, “his” mechanical viscera were ruthlessly torn apart. But the Legion felt no pain. So his body no longer ached like it had during the final moments of his life.

<<Nidhogg to wide-area network. Nidhogg fatally damaged. Abandoning outer unit.>>

From the gaps in his broken armor and the space between the prongs of his barrel, Liquid Micromachines seeped out in the form of silvery butterflies. The micromachines that formed his central processor unraveled into a kaleidoscope of butterflies that attempted to flee to safety. This was the immortality feature, tested by the Phönix and then added to the Shepherds.

His fabricated central nervous system was melted and dripping, dissipating and growing vague, but the ghost known as Nidhogg felt no terror. Between being turned into a machine and integrated into the Legion and the madness he’d lapsed into when he was still alive, this feature, which effectively cut up and divided his brain to pieces, was no longer frightening at all.

But more than anything, it was nothing compared with the end he’d once experienced. Compared with how he’d died behind the front lines when countless Legion rushed through the crumbled Gran Mur.

Compared with the pain of being dissected alive, the agony of his still-thinking brain boiling over. The feeling of his central processor divided and then reunited was nothing at all in comparison.

And it was no match for the sheer euphoria of having the wish he’d gone so far to see granted come to fruition.

He wished for it with every fiber of his being. To see the despicable Gran Mur and the Republic—the hellish Eighty-Sixth Sector, which had held him captive—crumble away. On the northern front’s battlefield, faced with the ghosts of his

comrades, now turned into metallic monsters.

The end has come. So...now's the time, right? We've endured so far, so now it's our turn.

The silvery butterflies soared up into the starry autumn night sky.

<<Firing schedule completed regardless. Operation Passionis shifting to phase two.>>

Be it in the form of a dark dragon or of countless butterflies, he continued to call out time and again, with words only the Reaper in the distance could hear.

It's our turn now.



Shin clicked his tongue bitterly. The Kampf Pfau seemed to have done its duty. His ability could clearly hear the Morpho's wailing cease.

However.

"Enemy unit silenced. But all units, stay on your guard! The enemy railgun successfully fired one volley!"

At Shin's warning, the Para-RAID's resonance filled with tension at once. The Morpho was defeated, this much was true, but Shin's ability did pick up on the Morpho's howling intensifying in volume the moment before it did—the kind of howling that was unique to when it attacked.

The mechanical ghost's artificial bloodlust, the unknown ghost occupying the Morpho, had not neglected to pull the trigger at the end.

"Are there any signs of the Morpho recovering—?" Lena asked.

"None. We can assume it's destroyed."

Through the battles with the Noctiluca and the Halcyon, they'd observed that they were capable of turning their central processors into butterflies to escape and revive. Shin anticipated the possibility, but there was no sign of that happening. Or to be exact, it was possible that Morpho had turned to butterflies and escaped, but there was no sign of it reconverging. It had likely decided to abandon the battlefield.

"Roger that. I'll report it to the Special Artillery Regiment along with your warning."

Lena's presence temporarily disappeared from the Resonance. True to her words, it was possible the Morpho's final shot was aimed at the Kampf Pfau and the Special Artillery Regiment.

In fact, it was highly likely this would be the case. The Morpho was meant to fire large shells at high velocity, aiming for fixed targets like enemy heavy artillery, bases, or fortresses. It was a weapon meant for blasting the battlefield itself, and it showed its worth as a tactical weapon when attacking fortified strongholds and fortifications.

Its original target had likely been the Federacy's or United Kingdom's reserve formations. Even if its plans had changed, it would be to fire a counterattack on the Kampf Pfau instead. The possibility of it firing on the Strike Package's battlefield was highly unlikely.

It wasn't a cannon meant for attacking mere Feldreß. Their armored division was spread out across hundreds of kilometers; even if it aimed at their entire battlefield, even if it shot shrapnel shells, it wouldn't deal much damage.

And this was why, when the Strike Package's howitzer unit's counterartillery and counterbattery radars brought up their report, everyone couldn't help but be seized by momentary doubt.

"We have a reading on radar! High-velocity shells—the railgun fired on us!"

"It aimed at the Strike Package...?! Now?! Why would it aim at us?!"

One of the squadron members called out, speaking Shin's doubt out loud. But even as they spoke, the demonic shot traveled at eight thousand meters per second, approaching them from the night sky. The artillery battalion's warning made a few squadrons and a Vánagandr company evacuate their position, which was within the shells' predicted impact point. An evacuation train that was just about to depart slowed down to a stop behind them, bracing for the impact of the shell's shock waves. The Reginleifs scattered in all directions, seeking cover. The sturdy Vánagandrs jumped in front of the more thinly armored spiders, blocking them from the touchdown point.

"Brace for impact!"

A moment's flash.

And then the 800 mm shells reached them and exploded. The Reginleifs, Vánagandrs, and the high-speed railway they guarded were enveloped in intense waves of fire and kinetic energy.



A certain Eighty-Six once said:

If we have to pick between fighting the Legion and dying or giving up and dying, we may as well fight and survive for as long as we can. We'll never give up or lose our way. That's why we fight—that's all the proof we need to know we existed.

They would not tarnish their pride in the name of vengeance. Not taking revenge on the Republic was their part of their identity as Eighty-Six.

But it was also because they knew there was no point in taking revenge. Risking their lives to do so wouldn't make the white pigs reflect on their faults. They'd remain blind to how useless, unprepared, and foolish they were and die while thinking they were tragic heroes. And the Eighty-Six wouldn't really get the revenge they wanted in the truest sense.

And on top of that, exacting revenge on them wasn't realistically possible. The Gran Mur stood shut, and their path to it was blocked by interception cannons and minefields. The Republic was the one who controlled how many and what supplies they got anyway, and most of all, the Legion attacked in waves, day and night.

All they had were their Juggernauts, which were as good as coffins, so attacking the eighty-five Sectors was an impossibility.

That was why the Eighty-Six never chose revenge. They chose to protect what small modicum of pride they still had over clinging to a wish bound to end in vain.

But this did beg the question.

They chose to protect their pride, even at the cost of their lives. But if they could do that, if they could give up their lives in the name of something, would it not stand to reason that they could choose to give them up in the name of revenge?

It wouldn't be odd if one might wish for that. If one valued their dignity and justice over survival, then pride and revenge would surely weigh the same when placed on the proverbial scales.

Would it not make sense, then, that some Eighty-Six might choose revenge over their pride? Indeed, as stated earlier, revenge would not have been possible. The Eighty-Six lacked the power necessary to exact revenge on the Republic's people.

But what if they weren't Eighty-Six anymore?

What of the very army of mechanical ghosts that threatened to crush both the Republic and the Eighty-Six and always sought to bolster its ranks with the war dead?

This begged yet another question.

If one wished for revenge enough to risk their life for it, surely they wouldn't fear their own death anymore. Then would they not willingly desire to become a Legion? To become a Shepherd, with the memories of the dead copied onto them and re-created in their Liquid Micromachine central processor?

Could one say for certain that there were no Eighty-Six who willingly joined the ranks of those powerful, menacing metallic ghosts—even if it came at the cost of their life and their very humanity?



For some reason, the 800 mm shells didn't even contain any shrapnel. They were specially made shells, with a minimal outer crust packed with high explosives. It was not a heavy shrapnel shell that would have been extremely effective against armored units spread out over a large area and especially fatal against the lightly armored Reginleifs.

For both antipersonnel and anti-tank projectiles, adding shrapnel and fragments made them more lethal compared with relying solely on the explosives and the shock waves.

These shells were specially made ones that only produced a blast. And while several tonnes worth of high explosives did produce a very strong explosion, Reginleifs were still armored weapons, even if they were relatively fragile. An

unarmored, one-tonne or so civilian vehicle would be sent flying by such a shock wave, but a ten-tonne tank would not be blown back. These were, after all, units piloted by experienced Eighty-Six.

Undertaker and the Reginleifs crouched so as to avoid being propelled back, and the blast's shock wave bore down on them from above. Their powerful shock absorbers and actuators withstood the intense pressure pinning them down, and for less than a second, the headless Valkyries remained locked in place as they evaded the evil dragon's flaming breath.

That moment of immobility was what the Morpho sought in making this illogical attack. It was what the Legion wanted, and it was so inconceivable that the Eighty-Six never would have predicted it.

The ghosts' howls rose up in the distance. It was the screams the ghosts inhabiting the Legion would make when attacking. The voices were far, but not as far as a long-distance cannon like the Morpho—it was the range unique to the Legion's howitzer troops, the Long-Range Gunner type, Skorpion.

The artillery-equipped Reginleifs were stalled in place, unable to detect and attack them ahead of time. And all the shock waves around them made it so they couldn't even escape if they did.

A shower of shells rained down on them, blotting out the stars. As the Reginleifs recovered and went on guard, the shells soared far above them, leaving a trail of flames in their wake.

“...!”

Shin realized what they were aiming for and turned around to look at the direction they were going—as the incendiary shells hit the refugee train that had stood still to brace for the impact of the blast.

“What...?!” Shin swallowed in shock.

He remained breathless—the sight before his eyes was hellish enough to make even him freeze up.

Slightly before impact, the outer crust of the shells broke apart, spilling countless incendiary pellets, which easily penetrated the unarmored aluminum-alloy body of the train. They tore into the locomotive's interior, mercilessly

unleashing the hellfire they contained within.

Incendiary bombs had combustible fluid within the shell, which sprayed over obstacles to light them on fire. The temperature of their flames exceeded one thousand three hundred degrees Celsius. Even live trees, which were considered difficult to burn, would be helpless in the face of this much heat.

Which meant that the human body—which was covered with cloth and hair and, despite containing a high percentage of water, also contained oil and fat—would naturally be defenseless in the face of such an inferno.

The aluminum-alloy train caught fire at once, burning along with the thousands of refugees within it.

“_____!”

Underneath the cover of the dark, starry night, red flames surged up. Like a magnificent campfire, the flames shone brightly in front of the Reginleifs. The one thing it seemed they couldn't hear were the howls of the victims inside. Some were gouged into by the pellets; others had their clothes or body catch fire. Any attempt to scream only made them suck in hot air and flames, burning their throats and lungs and rendering them unable to emit any sound at all.

Instead of their wails, countless hands extended out of the ruptured body of the train and the broken windows. They writhed madly, seeking help, the transparent flames coiling around them describing their agony more clearly and keenly than words ever could.

With them packed tightly into the train, the refugees had no chance of escaping the flames and pandemonium. The panic that rained on them along with the fire robbed them of the intellect required to manually undo the doors' locks.

On top of that, napalm was made by mixing in thickener with fuel, making it highly viscous. It clung to its victims, spreading the flames. Victims turned into human torches, and the sticky fluid forbade them from even writhing about, meaning they could only stand still as they burned.

It was a strange, hellish scene.

“Wh...what?!”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Fire! We’re on fire!”

“We’re under attack!”

“The rear car is...!”

The passengers in both the front and rear cars understood the situation as the flames lit up the dark. Before long, panic and speculation spread like a plague. Passengers tried to move away, running to escape the fire, which only spread more confusion to the adjacent cars. There was no sign of anyone trying to help the victims—their own countrymen—as they burned alive.

And honestly, with the flames having expanded so much, an amateur couldn’t help to extinguish the fire without a water supply. And napalm fires couldn’t be put out with water in the first place.

It was too late. All too late.

And it’s because they knew this that the Eighty-Six and the Federacy soldiers stopped in their tracks. The impact of the 800 mm shells exploding stalled the troublesome Federacy weapons with its shock waves. On top of that, they had to spread out to avoid the Morpho’s attack. All that gave the Legion ample time to approach.

And so in perfect coordination with the Morpho’s bombardment, the Legion’s blips rapidly filled up their radar screens. A proximity alert blared loudly in Shin’s cockpit.

“Tch...!”

The most fatal error they’d made was prioritizing dealing with the Morpho, which let the enemy unit draw close, but thankfully, Shin’s ability allowed the squadron under his command to sense the enemy’s approach. The data was shared to all the other squadrons and the Vánagandrs.

Tearing their eyes away from the inferno that was consuming human lives right beside them, the Reginleifs and Vánagandrs rapidly switched gears and turned to face the approaching Legion.

“All units, fire at will, but don’t destroy the rails or the train. Defeat any enemy you

reasonably can!”

The burning train was beginning to move, while still on fire. It probably assumed that staying there would just get in the way of the battle—but while that was a factor, they had another reason.

If they stayed here, there would be no medical aid or rescue to offer the injured. There was no way of turning off napalm fire here, and all the noncombatants—including the highly valuable military doctors—had been among the first to evacuate.

But if they could get to the Federacy, if they could finish the four-hundred-kilometer journey to the Federacy’s domain, they could possibly save some of the dying, severely injured victims.

The evacuation train’s wheels spun with the desperation of an animal dragging its feet, eventually building up enough speed to escape into the night. As they pulled away from the raging inferno, as well as the victims burning within, they acted with the cold understanding that they couldn’t save everyone.

Shin saw it off with a glance and then narrowed his eyes, focusing on the howling and dying screams that filled his ears.

Dying screams.

These were Sheepdogs that had their personalities removed. These were Shepherds, and there were many of them. Just over the radar screen, he could see dozens of Dinosauria, otherwise accompanied by lightweight Legion, approaching them at maximal speed.

A report came in from the squadron ahead of them that served as their safety net.

“They’re in our range. Engaging the enemy—”

The next moment, the Legion descended on them.

True to the radar display, it was an odd formation. Dinosauria led the charge followed by nothing but Ameise. The top of the Dinosauria’s frame, their turret, was swarming with self-propelled mines seated on it like a tank desant—enough of them to make their silhouette visibly different.

Even their presence didn't make the formation any less strange. Especially considering that they were up against Vánagandr, which were far too armored and heavily armed for lightweight Legion to handle—and Reginleifs, which were far too agile for a Dinosauria to keep up with.

And then there were their voices.

"Slaughter you all"

It was the clear voice of a girl, like the chiming of a crystal ball. The girl's voice sung, frozen and yet at the same time burning with an infernal grudge and bloodlust. Her last words, the final desire she ever felt before she died.

She was a child soldier. And in all likelihood, an Eighty-Six.

Following her voice, the howls of the other Dinosauria—the other Shepherds—rose up like a cacophonous gale, in low grumbling growls and high-pitched shrieks that shook the night air.

"Slaughter you all"

"Kill them all"

"Take vengeance"

"The white pigs"

"Revenge on the Republic"

"You'll learn" "I'll trample you"

"Tear you apart" "Scream and die" "You deserve it"

"Beg for your lives" "Burn to death" "Shoot them dead" "Crush them" "I'll make you hurt"
"I'll never forgive you" "Put you through the same hell" "Punish you even harder" "Pain"
"Until I'm satisfied" "Break you" "Damn Republic" "Kill the Republic" "Kill the white pigs"
"How dare you" "Fall to ruin" "Tear you to bits" "Crush you" "Feel my grudge" "Taste my
revenge" "Die" "Burn to death" "You will pay" "Revenge" "Tear them apart" "The white
pigs" "Let them all die" "All of them" "You killed my friends" "My family" "Give them back"
"All their fault" "They're the ones who should die" "You'll learn your lesson" "Kill the white
pigs" "My grudge" "Fall" "Republic" "White pigs" "You'll pay" "Kill" "Slaughter" "Them"
"Vengeance" "Everything" "Grudge" "Let them all die" "Die" "Destroy" "Kill" "Everyone"
"Everyone" "Kill" "Kill" "Kill" "Kill" "Kill" "Kill" "Kill" "Kill" "Kill" "Kill" "Kill" "Kill"
"Slaughter" "Slaughter" "Slaughter" "Slaughter" "Slaughter" "Slaughter" "Slaughter"
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“Slaughter” “Slaughter” “Slaughter” “Slaughter” “Slaughter” “Slaughter”

Everything and everyone.

“SLAUGHTER!”

Like a storm, like a blazing fire, the mechanical ghosts’ voices echoed resonantly with screaming, with howling, with anguish, with lamentation, with fury, with anger, with hatred, with bloodlust, with curses. Even when their heads were torn off and taken from them, at their final moments, it was these emotions that burned through their minds: intense hatred for the Alba and the Republic, for the Eighty-Sixth Sector and the battlefield, for all who had oppressed them.

And with their brain structure copied at that moment of death, even years later, that hatred never healed, festering in all its striking intensity.

Each and every one of these Shepherds was an Eighty-Six—a ghost who loathed and raged even unto death.

“...!”

Shin reflexively had to plug his ears. It was a meaningless gesture, but he felt like if he didn’t do this, this intense maelstrom of howls would drag him down under and consume him. The Eighty-Six decided they would not abandon battle in the name of their grudges. That they would not let hatred tarnish their pride.

But even so, none of them could say they never once felt hatred or indignation toward the way the Republic treated them. And so he couldn’t help but relate at least somewhat with the hatred these Shepherds harbored. And it felt like the longer he had to listen to it, the closer he came to being dragged down into that hatred.

“Ah...”

One Reginleif fell back, as if its pilot unintentionally did so. They fell back, neither ignoring nor deflecting the voices lashing out at them.

“...All units. If you feel it’s too much for you, switch off communications. At

this point, recon is meaningless, anyway,” Shin said, squinting with one eye open.

He could relate to them—understand how they felt—and that was what made everything fall into place. The Morpho’s and the Shepherds’ illogical actions had a reason to them.

A Dinosauria approached from straight ahead, a deep, familiar voice of a man moaning from within it.

“Take revenge for you”

Shin felt his breath catch. This voice. Shin still had the same Personal Mark he had *back then*. Shin doubted that this was why he’d gone to the trouble to appear before him, but...

This voice.

This voice.

—Shin! Shinei Nouzen! Ya fucked it all up again, ya little shit!

—I ain’t telling you to apologize—I’m telling you to change yer ways! That crazy fightin’ style of yours is gonna get ya killed one day!

That voice would shout at him after every sortie. The Republic Juggernaut’s suspension system was weak as it was, so the head of the maintenance crew was always worried about how Shin’s piloting strained and damaged it.

Shin remembered him. In the first ward’s Spearhead barracks. How the lead chief of the maintenance team, his voice as low and thick as a Löwe, had taken off his glasses to reveal the silver eyes he hid behind them.

“Lieutenant Aldrecht...”

Hearing Shin utter that name over the Resonance, Raiden, Anju, Kurena, Rito, and Lena all reacted with shock.

“Aldrecht...?!”

“No! But why...?!”

As everyone’s voice tangled together in a bundle of shock and sorrow, Rito let out a dumbfounded moan.

“You told us to run.”

Rito was the one Aldrecht had spoken to in the end. In the face of the Legion’s large-scale offensive, he saw Rito and his comrades off with those words.

Run. It doesn’t matter where, just run and live on.

And the last Rito saw of him was how he and the maintenance crew remained in the base, armed with nothing but sidearms. He didn’t flee from the Legion, staying behind like he welcomed death—like he was accepting his due punishment.

“You said you had nowhere to go. That there was no place for you. And you...”

The crew said that they had nowhere left to go after they abandoned so many of the Spearhead squadron’s child soldiers. Like they had been bound in that place by their duty as the grave keepers of the countless soldiers who’d died in this squadron but were never afforded graves.

He swore to serve that duty to his last breath. That was his promise. And yet...

“Why did you go to the Legion’s side...?!”

...in the end, he abandoned the Eighty-Sixth Sector, the massive gravesite for all those dead soldiers.

“Aldrecht” stood haughtily upon the battlefield, lit up by a campfire stoked by human bodies, as if showing himself off. His howls rung nonstop in Shin’s ears due to his ability.

“Revenge for you” “Revenge” “Revenge” “Take revenge” “revenge” “revenge” “take revenge for you” “revenge” “revenge” “revenge” “you” “take revenge” “you” “revenge” “revenge” “revengvenvenvenvenge”

Shin gritted his teeth tightly.

“—Didn’t I tell you there were no Legion looking for you?!”

It felt like the distant past by now, but two years ago, in the Spearhead squadron’s base, he’d told him this in the hangar. This was before Haruto’s death, so at the time, there were six remaining Juggernauts. Standing in the now mostly empty hangar, he’d asked him a question.

Asked if his wife and daughter became Legion who begrudged and sought him

still. And Shin could tell, through his ability, that they hadn't. So he told him as such.

Even if there were ghosts calling out for Aldrecht, Shin wouldn't have kept it a secret. After all, Shin himself had wandered for five years, seeking his brother, who was still held captive on the battlefield. So if Aldrecht had been called—if there was a ghost calling his name—why would Shin hide it?

But Aldrecht's family wasn't on the Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield.

"You could have just gone to the other side, to them—you said so yourself!"

And despite that...

"Revenge"

"Take revenge for you"

...Aldrecht repeated the words, the wish he'd made at the moment of his death. Revenge for his daughter and wife. Revenge on the Republic—his own homeland, his own countrymen—which had thrown the ones he loved onto the field of battle. He would exact vengeance in their name.

If Aldrecht had died, he would have just met them again on the other side. And yet he'd cast aside that wish at the very end.

"Your wife and daughter must be waiting for you. Why? Why didn't you go to them...?!"

Even if it was to take revenge in their names.

After one long moment of gritting his teeth, Shin slammed the switches for the radio and external speaker angrily, switching it to all of the Federacy military's frequencies—including the emergency unencrypted ones.

The Shepherds—the Dinosauria—bent their bodies like animals primed to pounce. Looking up, he saw the turret sitting atop their gigantic four-meter-tall forms, noticing the two gatling guns swerving atop them.

Yes, gatling guns.

And they were within its effective range. With the Shepherds having encroached so close, *all of them* likely wouldn't make it, but...

“Evacuate the refugees! They’re trying to massacre the Republic’s civilians!”

“...!”

...the Dinosauria sprung forward, and the Reginleifs and Vánagandr tried to intercept them as well as they could. They stayed out of its powerful 155 mm turret’s line of fire, slipping behind them so they could aim at the thinly defended top of their armor. They tried to stall them, alternatively mowing down the self-propelled mines that got in their way with machine-gun fire or dispersing shots.

But even the Vánagandrs, with their firm armor, couldn’t risk exposing themselves to the Dinosauria’s main turret to protect the crowd of people from the enemy’s barrage of bullets with their bodies. Likewise, the Reginleifs’ armor could only withstand 12.7 mm bullets, and they couldn’t risk trying to block shots from the Dinosauria’s machine guns. The Dinosauria the Federacy faced were typically equipped with 14 mm machine guns.

Additionally, the Republic’s administrative officers and untrained Republic civilians couldn’t be expected to have the same reaction speed as the Eighty-Six and the Federacy soldiers.

A thundering staccato of gunfire—lighter than a cannon’s roar but infinitely more deafening than a sidearm’s shot—tore through the air. 12.7 mm or perhaps 14 mm heavy machine guns.

These were armaments that were far too weak against armored targets. They were ineffective against tank armor from every angle, and in some situations, it wasn’t even effective on the weakest points in its armor, the treads and turret. Even armored infantry could deflect this ammunition.

But against soft-skinned targets, they were incredibly powerful rounds. They could tear a vehicle’s engine to shreds and reduce concrete bunkers to rubble. So needless to say, they were overwhelmingly lethal against weak, frail humans with nothing but thin skin and brittle bones to protect their brains and circulatory organs.

Heavy-machine-gun rounds had an effective range of roughly two thousand meters. The hostilities opened roughly two kilometers away, a distance that felt far to human eyes, on the terminal square located beyond the Gran Mur, which

seemed protected by the crumbled walls. The other edge of the crowd had gathered there to evacuate. A group that stood between the main street and the plaza popped like pomegranates.

“...!”

Machine-gun and rifle rounds had heavy warheads that traveled at high velocities. When they hit the human body, they didn't just punch bloody holes the size of their diameter through it. No, the impact of the shell and the kinetic energy of the round ruptured the surrounding tissues in a wide area, crushing and tearing muscles, blood vessels, nerves, and internal organs alike in the space of a moment.

These weren't shells made for disposing of humans to begin with, making them far too powerful for use against personnel. They destroyed the human body on much too great of a scale.

Those hit in the head had everything above the neck blown away. Limbs were reduced to a blood mist. Stomachs ruptured, severing bodies in half, which toppled over each other. It was instant death, too quick for the victims to even scream. Even the sound of bits of flesh and bone falling to the ground was blotted out by the tumult of the battlefield.

Republic citizens stood frozen as the blood of their countrymen showered down on them, but the Shepherds continued to swerve their machine guns. As powerful as these rounds were, they didn't penetrate bodies to hit the ones standing behind those unfortunate enough to get hit.

These were tumbling rounds, meant for killing personnel, and upon penetrating the human body, they didn't go through it, instead lingering inside the body with their kinetic energy, further increasing the damage they caused to the victim's insides.

This wasn't the kind of ammunition the Dinosauria, which usually handled heavily armored targets, would load into their machine guns. These mechanical dinosaur-like monstrosities wouldn't aim at anything as fragile as the human body to begin with.

The sheer malice of it all.

“Slaughter”

“Slaughter” “Slaughter” “Slaughter them” “slaughter” “slaughter”
“slaughterslaughterslaughterslaughterslaughterslaughter”

The machine guns revolved and swerved, their lines of fire and howls intersecting. The nearby trees toppled over as if swept away by a tidal wave, at which point the civilians finally realized they had to run.

Civilians fell back and began trying to escape. The voices of the administrative officers, drowning in the deluge of fleeing citizens, was hardly audible. The Dinosauria took off after them. They charged ahead, vainly ignoring the Vánagandr and Reginleif before them.

But at the same time, there was some rage to them—anger at their fellow Eighty-Six for standing in their way and shielding the Republic citizens.

“Dammit...!”

“Shit! Intercept them!”

And at the same time, Aldrecht charged ahead before Shin. His eight legs warped, bending, the metallic monstrosity’s hundred-tonne body jumping from a state of rest to its absurd maximal speed.

“Revenge”

However, his charge was stopped as Rito’s Milan lunged on the Dinosauria from its flank, clinging to its body.

“Rito!” Shin called out.

“I’m the one who was there at Lieutenant Aldrecht’s last moments and saw him off! Not you, Cap’n! So stopping *this* first lieutenant should be my duty, not yours!”

Like a spider lunging on its prey, Milan spread its legs out, clinging to the top of the Dinosauria’s turret. Rito’s reply came as he withstood the force of the Legion swinging its body around rapidly, trying to shake off the pest holding on to it.

Milan’s red optical sensors alone turned to Undertaker.

“So you go ahead, Cap’n! There’s no chance of stopping all of them now, but...they’re Eighty-Six, just like us! Make them stop!”

His earnest shout made Shin purse his lips. He then took a single breath and gave his reply.

“Take care of him.”

“I will!”

But unfortunately, it was like Rito said. The Dinosauria were the Legion’s advance guard, sent in concentrated numbers to break through humankind’s firm defensive lines. They were a unit meant to trample over everything, from mines to anti-tank obstacles to soldiers and even Feldreß.

Pushing their charge back without any defensive facilities or artillery support would be difficult for a group of Feldreß. Especially not the Reginleifs, which stressed mobility over firepower and armor, as they were poorly equipped to stand their ground and block an opponent.

They could handle combat where they anticipated the Legion’s movements and were capable of launching an advance raid in an act of offensive defense. But not a battle where they had to protect units a few kilometers behind them, without any option of falling back.

The frail silvery metal units hurriedly formed a defensive line, but its clash with the Legion’s armored tidal wave only lasted for a few moments; the Dinosauria soon tore through it and began encroaching on the targets behind them. As they passed through, 88 mm shells were shot at the Legion, but their thick armor unflinchingly deflected the rounds. The Dinosauria slipped away from the Feldreß with a speed that went in contrast to their massive weight, avoiding melee engagement.

Their speed and heavy weight became a weapon against their human targets as the Dinosauria plunged headfirst into the crowd of refugees.

By the time Raiden’s Wehrwolf surged ahead, over ten Dinosauria had already invaded the Eighty-Third Sector. They were still a few kilometers away from the Illex city terminal, where a train was waiting to depart at the platform and was currently in the process of taking in refugees. Those inside the train or waiting on the platform remained outside the line of fire, but there was a group of people standing in the plaza and awaiting the next train, as well as groups on the twelve streets extending in a radial from the plaza.

All of them began running for their lives, driving the night view of the Eighty-Third Sector into a whirl of chaos. Fearing the menacing sight and gunfire of the Dinosauria, the people scattered and fled. No, they tried to run but instead kept bumping into and blocking one another.

With thousands of people gathered in the plaza and roads, it was a catastrophe. The civilians kept getting in one another's way, unable to move, and what voices did try to guide them in an orderly fashion were drowned out by screams and the howling of gunfire. There was no orderly evacuation—only a blind, confused mob for the Shepherds to butcher with leisurely ease.

The Reginleifs couldn't jump into the crowd, of course, and Wehrwolf couldn't utilize its autocannon and machine guns with people in the line of fire. Even if he tried to use his external speaker to get them to move away, it was doubtful the panicked mob would listen.

"Shit...!"

The enemy units, this massacre—all of it was beyond his control, and it frustrated him. Raiden couldn't even grit his teeth bitterly in his cockpit.

"Dammit... This is just like the large-scale offensive! Those stupid white pigs! They keep running around and getting in the way!" Claude heard Tohru grumble from within Jabberwock, which sprinted beside him.

"I agree about them getting in the way, but...this isn't anything like the large-scale offensive, Tohru," Claude replied from within Bandersnatch.

It happened one year ago, which by now felt like an eternity away, on the day of the Republic's final fall. The large-scale offensive. Back then, the Legion, among them Dinosauria, did wash over the civilians like an avalanche, too. But...

"They weren't this persistent back then... They didn't kill people like this was some kind of manhunt."

The sound of the Dinosauria's machine guns turned light. Shin realized that, at some point, they'd stopped shooting at the civilians with heavy machine guns, instead switching over to all-purpose guns.

There were two sets of revolving machine guns on the Dinosauria's turret. One of them had apparently been switched out to an all-purpose one: a 7.62

mm-caliber antipersonnel machine gun, which even the Ameise rarely used on the Federacy's front.

Full-size 7.62 mm rifle rounds could effortlessly penetrate and destroy unarmored vehicles and weak construction materials, which meant they were more than good enough for killing people. And unlike the more monstrous heavy-machine-gun rounds, they didn't necessarily instantly kill their targets if they hit.

As the civilians ran, the Dinosauria fired at their exposed backs, mowing them down mercilessly. The rapid rate of fire made the shots' roars link into a single howl like the squealing of a mad boar, but by the time it died down, all that was left was only the appalling sight of torn limbs and the crowd lying down, their stomachs open and leaking. Those who had their skulls ruptured like overripe watermelons or half their heads missing almost looked like the lucky ones.

"Tch..."

He couldn't turn off his optical or audio sensors, so he had no choice but to watch this gruesome scene. The frail screams and voices crying out had to reach his ears. But they strained his nerves so much more than the familiar howling of the ghosts, and one child's cries echoed especially hard, making him unconsciously click his tongue.

Just looking at the dying refugees made it clear. There was no saving them.

And there were too many of them to shoot and euthanize. Besides, this was live combat, so he couldn't waste any bullets. And he'd only use his otherwise-unreliable handgun to either take his comrades out of their misery or to kill himself, which was why he didn't carry any spare cartridges for it.

There was nothing he could do.

Not even crush them, since any *adhesive substances* that might somehow stick to his unit's legs could have an adverse effect on his cruising or evasion. He knew that, and yet their voices still reached his ears.

"Please" "Help me"

A small hand extended toward him, but Shin immediately recognized it was a self-propelled mine and kicked it away.

...Of course there would be self-propelled mines here. They were Legion units meant for taking advantage of these kinds of situations and the mental states they induced. Lena, who had grasped the situation through the data link, immediately ordered the rest of the unit to remain vigilant. And after a moment's hesitation, she issued the same warning to the Republic civilians through the external speaker.

"Do not approach the injured or the dead carelessly. Do not listen to any voices crying for help unless it's someone you distinctly recognize."

Her voice feigned coldness, so much so that it sounded strained and stressed, like glass on the verge of shattering.

The streetlights had long since been destroyed by stray bullets, and with the only source of light in this darkness being fires burning here and there, a person could scarcely distinguish an injured person lying on the ground from a self-propelled mine.

And so Lena, a Republic citizen, had to order other Republic civilians to save themselves, even if it meant abandoning their fellow countrymen to do it.

But then a burst of flame extended through the dark of night, as if to mockingly clarify that this anguish would only add to this campfire. A flamethrower—a weapon used not by land troops but rather by combat engineers—was attached to the strongest of all ground units, the Dinosauria.

Flamethrowers weren't an unheard-of weapon to be used against humans, but compared with the heavy machine guns, to say nothing of its tank turret, their range was far too short. The spout of fuel hardly extended a hundred meters ahead, virtually making it a water gun compared with its other armaments.

And yet the Dinosauria used it.

A flamethrower's nozzle had been added to its muzzle, from which it spat out an elongated, almost comical line of fire. They moved ahead, ignoring all conventions and laws of tank combat, burning and smoking the sluggish humans who tried to flee from them. The napalm flames exceeded one thousand three hundred degrees Celsius, reducing the human body to a crisp.

The Dinosauria's optical sensors likely had antipersonnel sensors appended to

them, but even that was being befuddled by the flames. As their silhouettes strode through the fire, the sensors swerved about manically.

Their gaze almost felt gleeful.

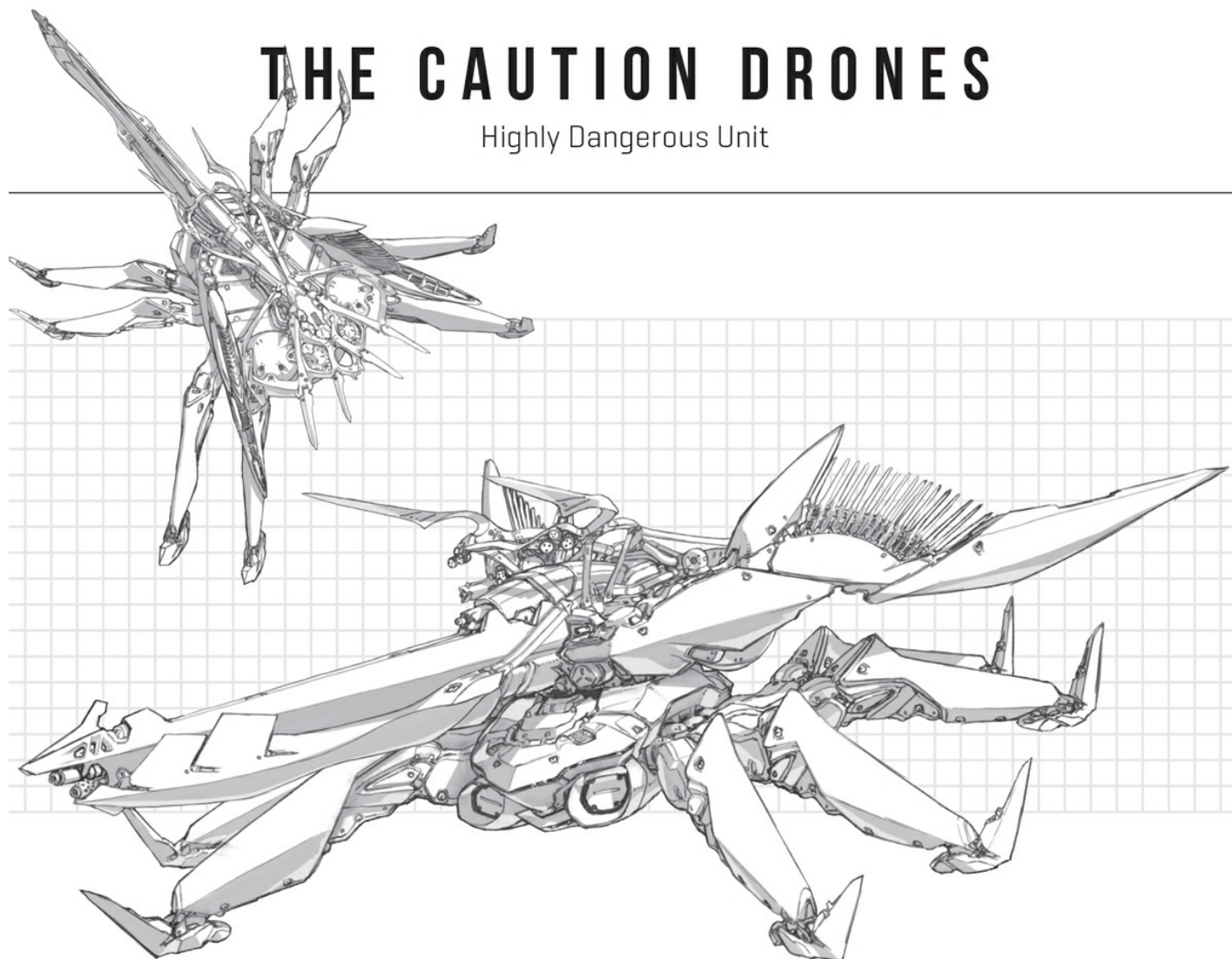
They quite literally danced mad, running about and casting complex shadows among the fires burning about. Light and darkness intersected mystically, and in one blinding moment, a Vánagandr allowed a self-propelled mine to approach one of its legs. The mine exploded a moment before it was kicked aside. Owing to its weight, the Vánagandr's leg fell off instead of being blown away, crushing one unfortunate—or perhaps fortunate—injured civilian.



Illustration: I-IV

THE CAUTION DRONES

Highly Dangerous Unit



Heavy Tank class:

Dinosauria Flamethrower Configuration

[ARMAMENTS]

155 mm Smoothbore Gun [×1]

Flamethrower [×1]

12.7 mm Heavy Machine Gun [×1]

7.62 mm All-Purpose Machine Gun [×1]

Has a flamethrower installed over its main turret (fuel tank is mounted on the back) as well as a wide-area antipersonnel sensor installed on its top. In addition, its secondary armaments were swapped to a 12.7 mm heavy machine gun and a 7.62 mm all-purpose machine gun, resulting in a special configuration that overall weakens them as armored weapons. Their choice of weapons, which do not inflict instant death, seems to deviate from the Legion's usual logic. This is a new form of the Dinosauria, optimized for inflicting as much suffering on their victims—created by the Eighty-Six's hatred and drive for revenge against the Republic.

THE CAUTION DRONES

“Dammit...!”

“Fenrir Twenty-Eight, fall back,” Shin said. “The rest of the Vánagandrs, too. You have too many blind spots, so if you stay in a battlefield where you can’t tell civilians apart from self-propelled mines—”

“Don’t be stupid, Strike Package man!” the Vánagandr pilot snapped back at him. **“You Eighty-Six, you might be trained for handling the Legion, but don’t push yourselves and fall back! You might be used to death, but you’re not trained to protect lives! Especially not when you have to see hundreds of people burning alive!”**

“ ... ”

A cannon roared. The now seven-legged Vánagandr fired a 120 mm shell that gouged a Dinosauria’s flank, stalling it. It likely noticed it was locked on to by the Vánagandr, but it still persistently blew fire at the civilians.

These Shepherds clearly prioritized slaughtering the Republic civilians over their targeting or being wary of the Vánagandrs and Reginleifs. Dinosauria were the strongest of all polypedal tanks and were certainly built to oppose targets of the same class as themselves. Normally, handling Reginleifs and Vánagandrs would be their top priority. But instead, they chased down humans, which were like flies to them.

The Legion’s tactics always mechanically eliminated the enemy’s units, starting with ones that had the highest threat level. But what they were doing now was an illogical subversion of their tactics.

So naturally, this coupled with the Legion being on level ground meant the

Reginleifs eliminated the force of Dinosauria much faster than usual. The Shepherds' central processors turned to silvery butterflies that flew off into the night sky. Like the dead peacefully ascending to the afterlife now that they had no more regrets left.

Frederica once said that the Legion didn't toy with their human victims. And indeed, they never should have done so. But...

"You'll go that far...?!" said Shin.

They were willing to become mechanical ghosts and then even ignore the Legion's own logic.

Shin gritted his teeth tightly. He knew this would eventually happen. Ever since the large-scale offensive, and even as far back as the Eighty-Sixth Sector. He knew this would happen, and this was why he didn't choose revenge.

Even without the Eighty-Six trying to get back at the Republic, the Legion would someday inevitably destroy it. He knew they didn't need to stoop to dirtying their own hands to do it... He even said so to Lena once, with a cruel smile.

—Would you be able to keep fighting after we're gone?

—You wouldn't...

He'd mocked the Republic's people, who wouldn't fight to protect themselves. Like unsightly living things.

But that didn't mean...this gruesome sight was what he, what they all wished for back then.

The Reginleif's 88 mm cannon and the Vánagandr's 120 mm cannon downed the Dinosauria. These were the strongest of all mass-produced Legion types, but since they prioritized butchering the Republic civilians, hunting them down was easy for the experienced Eighty-Six and Federacy soldiers.

But each time they destroyed a Dinosauria, butterflies would flutter away. The Legion's Liquid Micromachine central processors transformed to these butterflies, which dispersed and escaped. This was the immortalization of the Legion, first observed in the Phönix and later seen in the Noctiluca and the

Halcyon.

Cheating death through a feat tantamount to melting one's brain and storing it away in countless small bottles was a terrible act no sane mind could withstand. It stood as proof of the madness gripping these once-human Shepherds.

Shuddering in fear of what had become of their former comrades, the Eighty-Six looked up at the flock of butterflies in silence.

"All units—what are you doing?! Don't let them get away!" their Queen scolded them.

At her admonishment, the Reginleif artillery prepared to fire incendiary rounds. But...

"Colonel, it's no good. They're using human shields!"

"Kuh..."

...the Dinosauria were in the middle of the crowd, and they couldn't afford to fire incendiary rounds in that situation. The Shepherds relishing in slaughter escaped composedly, casting a final glance at the Reginleifs and their Queen, who was gritting her teeth.

Rito tried to impact "Aldrecht" using all four of his 57 mm anti-armor pile drivers, but with how the Dinosauria throttled him about, he ended up hitting the wrong spot, and the sturdy Legion survived.

He shook Rito off, knocking his unit down. When he hopped back up, he began fighting in reckless abandon. He fired 88 mm cannon shells repeatedly, destroying "Aldrecht's" leg joints and blowing off his two revolving machine guns. He destroyed his optical sensor with machine-gun fire and coiled his wire anchor around his main turret, getting in the way of its movements.

Reeling the wire back, Rito once again clung to the top of the turret. But even now, "Aldrecht" remained adamant, aiming not at Milan but at the surrounding Republic civilians. He shot them dead, swept them through with his turret, firing his armaments savagely even with his legs broken and optical sensor blinded.

It was so excessive that Rito had to switch on the external speaker and repeatedly shout until his throat was hoarse, ordering the civilians to run

because they were in the way.

At the end of a long struggle, he finally fixed his main gun against the scarred top of the turret and fired.

“Haah, haah, haah, haah...”

He hopped off the burning, smoking Dinosauria, catching his labored breath as he landed on the flagstones crushed by their death match. Aldrecht was destroyed, but his Liquid Micromachines did not escape as argent butterflies.

The moment the butterflies formed, they were caught by the flickering flames’ lapping tongues and burned away. They couldn’t escape.

It was because the projectile Rito fired at him was an 88 mm HEAT shell. High-temperature and high-velocity metal jet blew up inside “Aldrecht’s” armor, burning him to a crisp.

“Lieutenant...”

Shin had told him he had a wife and daughter. Rito told him the details of Aldrecht’s final moments after the United Kingdom operation, since Shin said he wanted to know his final moments, too. And after that, Shin shared what he knew.

About how he’d come to the Eighty-Sixth Sector to protect his wife and daughter himself but failed, left behind by their passing.

Aldrecht was actually an Alba, so his daughter likely had silver hair or eyes.

...Was that why? It probably was. It must have been.

A young Alba woman who had sunk to the ground shivering near Milan finally looked up. She had silver hair and eyes—one of the Republic citizens Rito loathed so much.

At the very end, “Aldrecht” had tried to crush this young woman, but he couldn’t do it. He’d swung his leg up but froze and couldn’t swing it down. And that opening was what let Rito cling to him.

She looked up at Milan, shaking, as the red light of the flames emerging from “Aldrecht” lit up half of her face. Still unable to get up, she managed to say:



Illustration: I-IV

“Urgh... Thank you for saving m——”

“Forget it, just get away from here!” Rito cut her off.

His voice came across as a severe shout that bordered on a scream. The woman jolted and, with her legs still numb, scrambled away in a crawl. Rito didn’t even follow her with his gaze as his expression contorted.

He couldn’t save Aldrecht in the end. He let him kill so many people. Aldrecht might have willingly become a Shepherd to do just that, but still, Rito ended up letting him get away with it.

He didn’t want Aldrecht to debase himself like that.

He didn’t want to save the Republic’s civilians. He wanted to save Aldrecht.

“Why...?”

Why did he end up saving a Republic civilian over Aldrecht? Why did a Republic civilian survive while Aldrecht had to die? It made him terribly angry, but even more than that, it made him want to cry. But the battle wouldn’t give him the time to do that. And so Rito vented his anger by slamming his fist against one of the optical screens.

One Dinosauria fixed its sights on the back of a boy cradling a girl in his arms, likely his younger sister. Seeing this, Kurena fired. Her 88 mm HEAT round exploded directly above the Dinosauria, blowing away its two machine guns and staggering the Shepherd.

Kurena landed Gunslinger in front of the Shepherd, standing between it and the two children. She stood there, guarding Republic children from a formerly Eighty-Six Shepherd.

“Eighty-Six...,” the boy turned around and whispered.

He looked to be fifteen, maybe sixteen years old...about the same age as her.

“That’s right!” Kurena shouted back through her external speaker, her eyes still fixed on the Dinosauria. “That’s right, I’m an Eighty-Six. But...”

We might be the Eighty-Six you people discriminated against. But fighting on is our source of pride, our identity. Fighting to this very day is what makes us Eighty-Six. And that’s why—

“We’ll save you! We’ll fight, so this place is going to be safe!”

They were like her younger self and her big sister, who tried to protect her. So now she would be the one doing the protecting. She was strong enough to do that now.

“You’re her big brother, right? So take that girl and run! Hurry!”

The boy seemed stunned for a moment, but his expression soon crumbled to tears.

“I’m sorry. Thank you...!”

From the corner of her eye, she saw him run off, cradling his younger sister. She fixed her sights on the Dinosauria, a Shepherd harboring the ghost of what was once a fellow Eighty-Six. It was a Dinosauria with an unusual antipersonnel configuration, having replaced its revolving guns with a 7.62 mm all-purpose machine gun. She could hear the voice of an unfamiliar boy cry out.

“Never forgive you”

“...Yeah.”

She could relate to that. Back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, the same words left her lips countless times. The gloomy flames that burned in her heart lingered on, never to be forgotten. If she didn’t meet Shin... If she never had friends like Raiden, Theo and Daiya, Anju and Kaie and Haruto and Lena... Had even one thing turned out differently, those flames might have gone on to consume her.

Had that Celena officer not tried to save her parents... If her sister wasn’t there to protect her in the internment camp...

But still, that didn’t mean...

“Don’t do the same thing they did.”

Killing a brother trying to protect his little sister? Crushing defenseless children? You were an Eighty-Six. Why are you doing the same thing the white pigs did to us?

So as one Eighty-Six to another, I...

“I won’t let you act the same way they did.”

The Dinosauria lorded over the crowd with their four meters of height, and the Ameise providing recon behind them had mostly been whittled down, but since the self-propelled mines were indistinguishable from humans in the distance, it was hard to tell in the chaos of battle how many of them were left.

Worse yet, there seemed to have been Zentaurs deployed a few dozen kilometers away, because Tohru could make out launched self-propelled mines raining down from the black sky.

“Aaah, dammit, this is annoying! They keep getting in the way...!”

Anti-tank self-propelled mines contained HEAT explosives, allowing them to penetrate even a Vánagandr, assuming they clung to the top of its armor. Letting them approach at a certain distance was dangerous, but there were humanoid silhouettes all around him.

Using their experience from the Charité Underground Labyrinth, they pointed the directional laser at maximum output at any humanoid figures nearby. This helped distinguish humans from nearby self-propelled mines. Humans reacted acutely to pain and heat, while self-propelled mines had no sense of pain and either didn’t react or only reacted after a delay.

Tohru didn’t much mind accidentally pushing or kicking away Republic civilians, but he wasn’t inclined to indiscriminately trample them, either. He could do without having to bear that kind of guilt.

His proximity alert blared. Another self-propelled mine rushed at him, completely ignoring the invisible directional laser beam fired at it.

“Tch.”

Tohru moved his front leg back to kick it off. But just then—

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

—with a wild howl, someone smacked the self-propelled mine with a long, blunt object. And despite the silly scream, it was a blow that had quite a bit of a swing to it, strong enough to dislodge the light self-propelled mine’s head sensor and send it flying in a random direction. Its body staggered and tumbled to the ground.

Tohru hurriedly stopped Jabberwock's leg. As it turned out, the one who'd interfered was a slender Alba man wearing a business suit and glasses. He had a metallic rod he'd found somewhere gripped in his hands, and he shouted while glaring at the self-propelled mine scrambling on the floor in an attempt to get up.

"Y-you're the Reginleif that stared people down this morning, right?!"

Upon hearing this, Tohru realized: This was the official standing at the entrance gate to the terminal square earlier. He'd thrown away luggage they weren't allowed to bring in and was the one the citizens complained to when the soldiers were given priority to board the train. The same one who had to manage their entry, with tears in his eyes.

"I owe you for that! So I'll handle the little ones!"

"Huh?!" Tohru exclaimed despite himself.

A cowardly, weak Republic civilian, all too brittle to face the Legion, was really saying this?

"You can't do that! Get away! And run away, would you?! You're in my way!"

For nine years, the white pigs pushed all the fighting on the Eighty-Six, shutting themselves off in the walls. And now they say this?

His gritted teeth squeaked. And anyway...

"To begin with...I was just watching, not glaring anyone down."

Watching those white pigs squealing and snapping at one another. Watching how pathetic you pigs became, locked up within your walls.

"Still, that saved us today. So...!"

Self-propelled mines were still closing in on them nonstop. As the next self-propelled mine rushed him, the young man swung his rod at it. But at that moment, the first mine, which had been knocked facedown and failed to get up despite its floundering, finally managed to turn around. It directed the front of its torso toward the man.

This was a weapon that grabbed onto its target, exploding in a burst of directional shrapnel that tore the human body apart or a HEAT explosive that

destroyed a tank's armor.

Be it shrapnel or a HEAT, they always clung to their targets—with the explosives concentrated in the front of their chest.

“No! Get away—”

It self-destructed. It wasn't an antipersonnel one, but an anti-tank self-propelled mine that produced a metal jet. Still, no human could survive that explosion from such a close range.

“...That's why I told you,” he whispered under his breath, knowing he couldn't hear him.

The staff member lay on the ground, burned and charred. His lips moved faintly.

“I'm sorry... No, that's not right. We're sorry, Eighty-Six...”

“Stop it.”

Apologies now? He didn't care to hear them, and he didn't need him to say them. They never helped them on the battlefield or in the camps, so what would apologizing now achieve?

“I won't ask you to forgive us, but if you can...”

Please don't hate us.

The young man spoke in a whisper. His eyes knowing that being hated...being scorned, discarded, and eventually forgotten like insects was the sole atonement the Republic could offer the Eighty-Six.

They couldn't not hate them. But at least for now, this one time...

“Won't you please...save my country's people...?”

In honor of the foolish way I died.

Tohru gritted his teeth.

“Like I care,” he spat out bitterly.

A white pig sacrificing himself? To hell with that. That's not my problem. But

—

“We’ll save your people. But not out of any honor to you. I just feel like it, is all.”

The Reginleifs focused on taking out the Dinosauria, meaning that handling the self-propelled mines had to be put off. Some civilians did try to put up a fight. Parents protecting their children and spouse. Young people forming groups with their friends.

This was an entire sector’s worth of evacuation. People had their families and friends nearby. So they picked up blunt weapons, sometimes the detached limbs of exploded self-propelled mines, to protect their loved ones, using them to bash the approaching mines or otherwise pelting them with rocks.

All those who tried to resist got torn apart and killed in the process.

Thanks to the Reginleifs’ ardent fighting, the number of the Dinosauria was thinned down. But on the other hand, the civilians, both those who fled and those who stood and fought, were equally dying.

A single antipersonnel self-propelled mine unleashed a blast of shrapnel that could kill multiple victims. And on top of that, the fires burning here and there lit up the piles of corpses and the injured, dying people.

Seeing this, Lena gritted her teeth.

They had to minimize the victims...and to prevent any further losses...

“We have to do something...”

They need to evacuate this place, but they couldn’t let the civilians scatter aimlessly outside the Eighty-Third Sector. And yet the panic kept spreading. The lit-up battlefield revealed the blood, the charred flesh, the corpses, the brutality of it all, driving the people into a frenzy. The crowd was beginning to disobey what few voices did try to guide them.

“...Nordlicht squadron, move in to guide the civilians. Threaten them a little if you have to, but get them to gather behind plant number three—the point I just sent you.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

But Shin cut into her orders, his voice cold.

“No, Lena. We have more enemies coming. We can’t have the master sergeant leave.”

The last Dinosauria finally crumbled to the ground. Its silver butterflies soared away, and a group of voices approached them, not granting the Processors the time to shoot them down. A metallic tidal wave crept up over the horizon.

And then a flash.

On the other side of the crumbled Gran Mur, a star burned brightly. It grew in number, from one to two, to five, to seven—these were flares fired by Skorpion units. As the parachutes gradually touched down, they lit up the ground like small suns...

...revealing the sheer scale of the murder machines approaching the civilians, who had so far been hidden by the curtain of the night.

“Hi...”

The final bit of reasoning this flock of lambs still had finally gave way. The Dinosauria had all been exterminated from the battlefield, but terror and survival instincts made the people fall back.

One child, who was actually relatively far from the scene of the massacre in the walls, let out a high-pitched scream, which sowed panic among those around them. Their panic spurred others to run, and before long, the entire crowd of refugees dissolved into a terrified mob.

The administrative workers tried to stop them, but their voices fell on deaf ears. Like an avalanche, they rushed back into the eighty-five Sectors, where their homes and peace once were. The Reginleifs couldn’t go after them, since they had to prime themselves for a clash with the Legion’s main force. Lena called out to them through the external speaker, but to no avail.

“Wait, come back! There’s too many of you to take cover inside the walls—!”

But upon saying this, she came to a realization with a shudder. Shin’s ability perceived that this new Legion force was twice the size of the Strike Package and the relief expedition’s combined forces. The situation was critical—it wasn’t just the Republic civilians. The way things were, even the Federacy forces were in a precarious position.

Major General Altner immediately came to a decision. The one who had to

make that decision was neither Lena nor Grethe, but him, as commander of the relief expedition force. And being a seasoned general who had stood upon the battlefield since the dawn of the Legion War, he knew to adhere to his duties even at a time like this.

“Our support of the Republic civilians’ evacuation is concluded effective immediately. I deem further resistance to be impossible. All relief expedition, Strike Package, and defensive forces are to withdraw and retreat.”

“...!”

While she knew that this was the reasonable, correct course of action, Lena couldn’t help but gasp. Sensing this, Richard switched his Para-RAID settings to speak to her alone, and asked:

“Colonel Milizé. Do you think you’d be able to call back at least some of the fleeing citizens?”

“...No, sir.”

She likely couldn’t. And he asked her that question because he knew it was impossible and wanted to make her aware of that. He was telling her subtly that she couldn’t do it because no one could, and so abandoning them here wasn’t her or anyone’s fault.

“—Train 191 is currently on the platform. Train 191, once the remaining refugees board, set out at once. Train 192, which is currently on standby, will be the last train of the operation.”

“Train 191, roger that.”

“All combat engineers, military police, and headquarters personnel within the eighty-five Sectors—your duties are complete. Board train 192...and if there are any Republic civilians nearby, drag them onto the train if you have to. Once all personnel have boarded, set out at once.”

The military police somehow managed to pull some of the fleeing civilians onto the platform and forced them into train 191, which then departed. Half an hour later, at 02:58 Federacy standard time, the last train departing the Republic, train 192, left the Ilex terminal.

The military police guiding the evacuation; headquarters personnel, who’d finished dismantling their temporary HQ; and combat engineers, who’d

returned from demolishing a part of the Gran Mur, all boarded the train. They shoved the last of the civilians, who didn't escape but rather froze up and stayed behind, into what would be the last refugee train.

All the lights in the cars were turned off so as to not alert the Legion to the train's position, and the train fled through the pitch-black night, relying on night-vision devices to look ahead. In the distance, one could see two empty trains that had been heading to the Republic, trains 193 and 194, travel back to the Federacy after receiving word of the news.

Following this, the Strike Package and the remaining units began their retreat. The slow Vánagandrs went ahead first, while the Reginleifs and the Scavengers loaded with supplies served as the rear guard. This formation was set up so that, at worst, they could use their maximal speed to shake off most of the Legion, and while it would mean taking some losses, they could sprint through the Legion territories.

The Reginleif was capable of mobility high enough to damage its Processor's body, but the Morpho pursuit and Dragon Fang Mountain operations proved, through the examples of Frederica and Annette, that even noncombatants could ride in it safely so long as it evaded combat.

Much like in Annette's case, Saki—from the former Thunderbolt squadron, who had recently recovered from injuries—was charged with transporting her superior officer. Lena had sunk in the auxiliary seat of her Reginleif, Grimalkin, bracing herself so as to not bite her tongue from the vibrations of its movements.

She then turned around, glancing back at the battlefield growing distant behind her—knowing she wouldn't be able to see it. Noticing this, Saki, still gripping the control sticks, switched on a sub-window with a fingertip. The hologram window displayed slightly grainy footage of the Gran Mur. It was gun-camera footage, transmitted via data link from the rearmost unit.

"Thank you."

"...Don't mention it."

Even from a distance and a height difference, the Legion were visibly covering the base of the Gran Mur. Like a wave approaching from the distance, they

marched one after another, encircling the place like a cloud of locusts. But they were not divine punishment, nor were they spurred by hunger; this plague of metallic locusts was driven solely by cold, artificial, mechanical bloodlust, consuming cities, countries, the land, all humankind.

Lena felt, through Shin's ability, how the Shepherds that had turned to butterflies to escape converged and appeared again among the other Legion. The hatred of the ghosts possessing their central processors had not been quelled one bit by the massacre they'd enacted earlier. Their maddened howls echoed still.

So the reason they didn't destroy the Republic...

"The reason they didn't do it with the satellite missiles...!"

This was why they allowed the Strike Package to arrive here and stood idly by as the Federacy aided in the Republic civilians' evacuation. So that the relief expedition's noncombatants would evacuate ahead of the Republic civilians and return to the Federacy first. That way, the expedition's main force would be left with only its combatants, forcing it to decide to abandon the Republic civilians and escape by crossing the territories.

After all, if the Federacy forces remained within the walls and staged a do-or-die resistance, the Shepherds wouldn't be able to enjoy slaughtering the Republic civilians.

But now the gates of the hunting grounds had swung shut. Their pure-white prey was trapped inside. And those who had expelled the Colorata and called them animals would be hunted down by those animals' ghosts. In an eerie reproduction of how they'd closed the Eighty-Six in the Eighty-Sixth Sector and forced them to sacrifice themselves in battle in their place.

Like they sacrificed themselves in the name of Saint Magnolia's passion, who'd led the revolution only to be cast into a goal she would die in by the hands of the very civilians she'd liberated.

Lena understood, with a shudder, that the massacre had begun. A massacre drunk on bloodshed, filled with fires kindled with the flesh of the living and screams of agony as its orchestra. A feast of white pigs to be devoured in the name of revenge, where no appetite would ever be sated and no thirst would

ever be quenched.

Not until the last of them was consumed.



<<—No.>>

Within the darkness of her airtight container, Zelene repeated those words. The answer to the question Vika asked her, but her protection prevented her from speaking.

I was expelled from the control network's core—from the collective of the Legion Supreme Commander units.

Because I tried to stop the Legion.

The Legion's current top priority was to search for the lost successor to the right to command them. The Legion were weapons only meant to substitute the role of soldiers, noncommissioned officers, and low-ranking officers. The Legion were originally never meant to fight on for years without someone to command them.

And in accordance with that initial order, Zelene Birkenbaum's ghost had refused to sit back and watch as her homeland and humankind were destroyed—and was discarded for it.

The core of the current Legion control network, the Shepherds, used every logic and action possible to avoid that initial order. To fulfill their wishes—not as Legion, but their own desires.

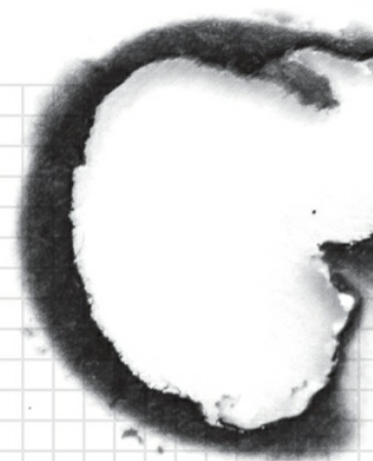
To grant the desires they held on to even after becoming Legion, the wishes they held as humans even into death.

IN THE REPUBLIC CAPITAL
OF LIBERTÉ ET ÉGALITÉ



Judgment Day.
The hatred runs
deep.

[EIGHTY-SIX]
Republic Calendar, August 26, 368
Less than One Hour into the First Large-Scale Offensive



IN THE REPUBLIC CAPITAL OF LIBERTÉ ET ÉGALITÉ

Lena punched in the launch codes for the surrounding interception cannons, which fired a fierce barrage that cleared the minefields. She then input the code to open the Gran Mur's gate.

This was information a mere Handler like Lena had no business having. And so having completed these trivial procedures, she looked down from the army's headquarters into the quiet, dark First Sector as the silence of night hung over it.

It was the night of the Revolution Festival. Many people were exhausted from the celebrations and settled into drunken slumber, but even so, looking over the plazas and streets, she could see some people and vehicles fleeing. Emergency news of the Gran Mur's collapse and the Legion's invasion—of the end of the Republic's peace and prosperity—wasn't even out yet.

The first to fall was the Seventy-Fourth Sector, which was adjacent to the northern outer walls. Its production plant and the industrial sectors built there were hit hard. There were very few residents living in that area, so even if anyone escaped, their slow human legs could at best carry them to the next sector, if they'd even get that far.

But the army had been told of the fall of the final defensive line, which meant the government must have known about it, too. So why hadn't they made the announcement yet? Why hadn't they ordered an evacuation?

She bit her pale lips. The answer was clear... It was so the high officials could evacuate to safety before the roads became congested with refugee traffic. The civilians fleeing right now had been given the warning ahead of everyone else, since they were people with connections in the army or the government. In all likelihood, the other sectors wouldn't be informed of anything until the First Sector and its Celena, former noble population, had finished evacuating.

Leaving noncombatants on the battlefield would complicate any operation. Even for the Eighty-Six. Lena flipped through her mental directory of names, trying to figure out who she could turn to in order to evacuate the citizens as quickly as possible, but without causing needless confusion.

But then she saw something pass the large window by—a blur of colors that ill-fitted a military headquarters but, ironically enough, was perfectly logical for this former palace.

“Mother...?!”

There was no mistaking it. The luxurious car pulled over, and the one emerging from it pinched up the hems of her skirt as she hurried across the garden with its bilateral geometric design. She jogged up the marble staircase in an anachronistic dress—it was none other than Lena's mother.

Lena sped down the stairs and made her way to the entrance hall. She burst into the hall, its floor like a polished mirror, where she ran into her mother.

“Lena, we have to run!”

She looked desperate. She wore a dress, but it was an article to be worn at home, too lax to be appropriate for appearing in public. It was clear she'd run over without doing her hair or makeup. Lena wasn't used to seeing her mother like this.

“I just got a call from Jérôme. The Legion—those terrible machines, they broke through the Gran Mur!”

For a moment, Lena felt tears well up in her eyes. Karlstahl—her former “uncle,” who idly looked by as the Eighty-Six were discriminated, who had given up hope on the Republic and wallowed in despair.

And yet he tried to save her mother. He didn't just buy Lena the time she

needed; he did this, too.

Shaking off those tears of sentimentality, Lena replied, “Yes, I know. Mother, you need to run. Take our employees and leave. Go as far south as you can. I’ll catch up to you later, if I can.”

“Lena, what are you—?”

“I managed to get the Eighty-Six to cooperate with me. I will lead them, and we’ll intercept the Legion. As their Handler, I’ll command them—”

“You can’t!” her mother cut her off with a high-pitched scream.

Lena became speechless from shock. Her mother grabbed Lena’s shoulders with her weak, feeble hands and vehemently implored her, her expression desperate and severe. Like she had just seen her child teetering on the edge of a cliff and grabbed onto her with both hands, trying to pull her back to safety.

“You can’t, Lena! You mustn’t fight. If you go to the battlefield, you’ll just die. If you try to be a soldier, you’ll just get yourself killed. You’ll end up like Václav—if you go to the battlefield, you’ll die like your father!”

Lena peered into her mother’s eyes, stunned. *Quit the army already.* Her mother kept telling her that, over and over again, ad nauseam. And Lena always thought, deep down, that her mother was turning a blind eye to reality. But now for the first time, the truth behind those words dawned on her.

Her mother had been grounded in reality all along. And it was Lena who had been blind—to the reality of her father’s death—all along.

“Lena, please. I told you not to be a soldier. You have more important things to do; you need to be happy. You can’t die like Václav did. Please find happiness; you have to find happiness...!”

“...!”

Lena gritted her teeth tightly. Even still, she would turn her back on this. On her mother’s emotions, on this deep, genuine concern. She gestured with her eyes to her mother’s chauffeur, who had peered outside the car, to come closer. And then she pushed her mother’s shoulders away and entrusted her in his hands.

“Thank you, Mother. But before I can do that, I need to survive—I have to fight. If I don’t, I won’t survive this. This is the situation we’re in now.”

She turned on her heels and, with all the force her will could muster, shook off her mother’s hands, which extended out to her.

The chauffeur resolutely kept her in his arms, keeping her from going after her daughter. Her voice clung to Lena’s back like a scream as Lena gritted her teeth and fought back tears.

“Lena! You can’t; please come back! Lena...!”

And those were the last words Lena ever exchanged with her mother.

Later on, the sole maid who survived the fighting told Lena that the missus died, crushed by a Löwe, as she tried to protect a child who was on the verge of being stomped out.



D-DAY PLUS ELEVEN.

Stellar Calendar: October 12, 2050

DIES PASSIONIS

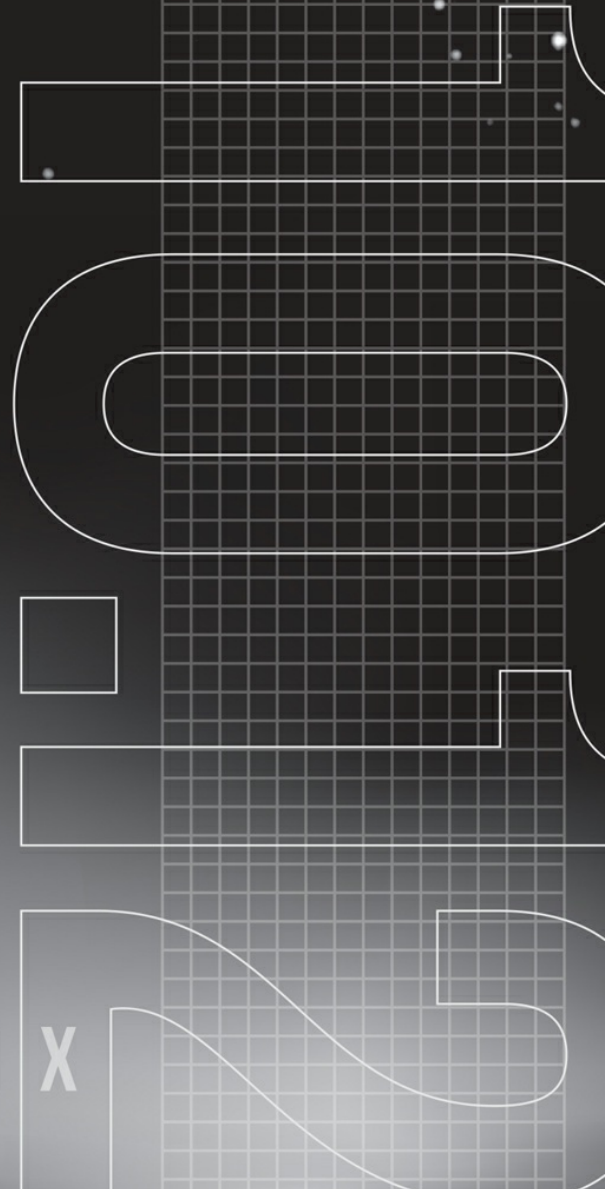


Judgment Day.
The hatred runs deep.

86

EIGHTY-SIX

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



D-DAY PLUS ELEVEN

The Strike Package marched along the four-hundred-kilometer-long high-speed railway extending from Berledephadel City in the Federacy to the former Ilex city terminal, deployed as a long, thin defensive unit. They moved like a thread spread along the high-speed rail's north and south tracks, being reeled back gradually along the Federacy's retreat route.

Alternating between advance and retreat was the basics of military movement. The unit at the back of the line paused to resume combat, and while they stopped, the rest of the units retreated to a certain point.

Once they received word that the rest of their allies had reached their retreat point, the unit left behind fell back, and another unit took their place and stayed behind to stall the Legion and take over the fighting. Once those fell back, they regrouped with the other units forming the defensive line, continuing their retreat that way.

The first to retreat and return to Federacy territory were the logistical support unit and the slow-footed infantry unit. Next were the fast Reginleifs and the Scavengers following them. As they did, they regrouped with the Vánagandr, which stayed behind at important spots as they offered the most defensive capabilities and firepower. They linked up, picked them up, and retreated through the autumn night quickly and smoothly.

This was all thanks to the armored divisions' tactical commanders, Lena included, and the staff officers. They gathered the countless reports coming in from each squadron along the defensive line, putting them in order and of course sharing them among the different divisions, which allowed them to adjust their orders and give further instructions.

Vika and Frederica were informed of the change in plans and had to get out of

bed despite the late hour, the former aiding in the organization and sharing of information and the latter assisting recon along the retreat route. Frederica's role as an Esper was one thing, but when it came to organizing and sharing information, Lena was informed between reports that Zashya and Olivia were on standby, helping take over that front. Vika told her to not worry about their fatigue and work them to the bone if need be.

For armored weapons to travel despite their great weight or otherwise perform combat maneuvers, they needed constant resupplies. So each unit took turns stepping off the defensive line to receive energy packs and ammunition from the Scavengers, as well as give the Processors some minimal time to eat and rest. It fell to Lena and the others to plan the order in which the units stepped off, so there wouldn't be any delays or holes in the defensive line. So the Strike Package as a whole could function like a singular life-form that stretched the vast four-hundred-kilometer line.

Thankfully, the Legion's main force was still stalled in the Federacy's and United Kingdom's main lines, meaning there were very few units they could relegate to get in the way of the Strike Package's retreat. And since the Reginleifs were faster than most Legion types barring the Grauwolf, they were able to shake off a majority of the Legion units around the Republic.

But the biggest achievement was that the last refugee trains were able to go on their way without any interruption. The burning train ahead was able to reach the Republic on time without damaging the rails. The last train ended up losing a little speed since it was loaded with more people than originally planned, but it was still moving fast enough to retreat along with the Reginleifs.

Let her at least save them. Let them all get away, Lena thought as she gazed at the white brightness of the dawning sky.



<<—Did you think—>>

<<—that you would be able to escape us?>>>

As the pitiful white pigs fled, leaving behind their comrades to die, they couldn't flee the vigilant gaze of the Rabe flying in the sky. And the Shepherds, watching over them through its information, whispered such.

As all the Legion under its command clamored in the Eighty-Third Sector, a single lily bloomed between the broken flagstones of the Ilex city terminal plaza. Its seeds must have flown in from somewhere, and it had survived the massacre earlier without being crushed or burned away. It was a wild lily, small and short, different from the taller ones grown in greenhouses. And yet with the bladelike legs of the Dinosauria next to it, it modestly hung its head, leaning against them.

Its snow-colored glossy petals were now stained red with the blood spilled earlier. Like a holy woman once proud of her pure-white colors, now dirtied with the crimson of her true sins and haughtiness and hanging her head in shame.

Did you think we would allow it?

That we would allow you hated sinners, who took pride in your pure-white colors, to escape?

That we'd allow our former comrades—who despite being Eighty-Six like us, despite being the same as us—to protect the white pigs, to live on while forgetting the blood of their spilled comrades crying out from this very ground?

<<Did you think we, the Eighty-Six, would allow this?>>



“...Ugh.” She heaved a sigh.

Lena looked dumbfounded. She'd already gotten the report from the 4th Armored Division's tactical commander, who was guarding this combat zone. So she was prepared for this.

A group of people was blocking the area around the high-speed railway—their retreat route. They were dotted around and along the rails over a distance of some five hundred meters. They all stood there, frozen, unorganized, and looking lost and helpless. These were the Republic civilians who had boarded the last train to the Republic, train 192.

Their train had stopped in place. The rails ahead of it, starting ten odd meters away and stretching far into the horizon, were all blown off. According to the report, all the rails for several dozen meters ahead had been destroyed in a

large range.

Destroyed by bombardment.

“Skorpion units... When we’ve come this far...!”

There were only fifty kilometers left until they exited the Legion territories—so close to making it out. It seemed moving closer to Federacy territories was actually working against them. Since the Legion were fighting the Federacy, their units were all concentrated on the front lines, where they were locked in a stalemate.

When they were traveling in the territories, where the Legion forces were all scattered unevenly across, the Strike Package was capable of detecting signs of Legion aggression and launching preemptive attacks. But now that they were near the front lines, where the Legion were spread thick, the sheer number of Legion made that task significantly difficult.

What’s more, Shin’s ability could perceive the Legion’s position and numbers, but he couldn’t distinguish between different Legion types. So with a corps-size force—swarming with over a hundred thousand Legion units—facing the Federacy, he would have a hard time telling which Legion were armored units trying to break through defensive lines and which were artillery units.

And even if he could tell which units were Skorpion types, he had no way of telling where they were aiming at. And once an unguided explosive shell was fired, there was no shooting it down.

As a tactical commander and a group leader, Suiu was frustrated about missing this, but this wasn’t the 4th Armored Division’s blunder. They were aware the enemy had artillery units and that they were entering a potentially dangerous zone. But the Skorpion types fighting against the Federacy’s artillery units some seventy kilometers away suddenly changed bearing and fired a concentrated barrage at the area the 4th Armored Division was supposed to defend. And so each squadron spread out to minimize damages.

But not only were they unable to move, they were also protecting dozens of kilometers’ worth of railway track, which were easy to aim at and hard to defend. So they failed to protect the high-speed railway.

With their explosion and the shrapnel they scattered, 155 mm shells were lethal weapons with a vast-blast radius of forty-five meters. Their effect on armored units was limited, but they boasted enough force to destroy half-built concrete walls and fortifications. The feeble metallic rails, without any cover to protect them, were helpless before them.

Looking around the ground, which had been plowed in a straight line by the high-caliber bombardment coming from afar, with bent metallic rails thrust into the shrubbery here and there, Shin spoke, unable to mask his bitterness.

“We can probably assume they were waiting for us to come this far... They fired a volley from seventy kilometers away to the rails without any test-firing. They hit the rails without missing a single shot for a few dozen kilometers, but the evacuation train didn’t take any damage.”

“Yes.” Lena nodded, holding back the urge to shudder.

Indeed, all they’d destroyed were the rails. Trains could only move along their tracks and had no way of avoiding incoming attacks save for adjusting their speed. But not only did the Legion’s bombardment not hit them, it also didn’t even derail the train by making it go off the rails because it couldn’t brake.

They attacked the rails accurately, confident that they wouldn’t need to destroy the train. And they didn’t require any test-firing, either—they had gathered the firing data beforehand and used base-bleed shots to extend their range to seventy kilometers away.

They hid among the countless Legion so the Strike Package wouldn’t be able to take precautions against them, and they allowed them to escape unperturbed until they were on the cusp of the Federacy’s territory.

They likely matched their timing with recon from the sky and destroyed the rails near the Federacy’s territory to prevent them from sending another train to rescue the refugees.

They’d gone that far.

“They prepared base-bleed missiles to increase their range by another thirty kilometers and fired at the Federacy until right before they aimed at us so we wouldn’t pick up on their attack. They probably did see the train but intentionally avoided it. If they went to so much trouble just to stall the

Republic civilians without killing them—”

She turned around to look. Shin nodded bitterly.

“—Yes. Some of the Legion in the Republic’s vicinity are starting to move. There’s about ten thousand of them, a little more. Based on their speed, I’d say they’re Grauwolf types, followed by an armored unit of Löwe and Dinosauria. They’re going through the same route we did, directly along the railway.”

“Kuh...” Lena gritted her teeth.

Walking speed by foot would be roughly four kilometers per hour. That would be considered slow for trained soldiers, but the long history of warfare had deemed this to be the most efficient marching speed. Walking any faster caused fatigue to build up, and the force would end up covering less ground in the long run. That would mean roughly thirty kilometers per day. A more forced march could travel as far as forty kilometers per day, but that would be the upper limit for how much soldiers could march in a single day.

Soldiers had to carry dozens of kilograms of weight in equipment, and even trained, disciplined soldiers could only travel four kilometers per hour. So civilians who had no experience in marching and usually traveled by car or train would walk even slower.

The military police and headquarters staff who rode with the civilians tried to organize them as best they could, so for the time being, they remained in one place without running around blindly, but they were still mostly an unorganized crowd. There was no controlling a group of several thousand people. It would take a while before they could be made to form a proper file and march.

What made it worse was that they weren’t just healthy men and women; there were also weaker populations, like the elderly and the children, and they’d all spent ten years only walking on the paved roads of the Republic’s eighty-five Sectors. They had no experience walking on the unpaved wasteland. Even traveling one day for hours could be a tall order for them. And since none of them knew they’d be marching for hours, many of them didn’t have the appropriate footwear for it.

They were being pursued by Grauwolf units, which were second only to the Phönix in terms of speed. They were capable of moving at over two hundred

kilometers per hour. The way things were going, they wouldn't be able to escape. The Legion would catch up to them before long, and then the same panic and chaos they saw at the Ilex terminal would ensue.

On their own, the soldiers could escape. The Reginleifs could outrun the Grauwolf units, and the Vánagandr could defeat a force of them on level ground. But having the refugees scrambling about would get in their way.

For a moment, the thought crossed Lena's mind. And Shin, who'd likely come to the same conclusion, averted his eyes from Lena. A cold silence settled over the commanders of the Strike Package and the relief expedition, connected via the Para-RAID. They all considered the idea. As military commanders charged with the lives of so many subordinates, they had no choice but to consider it.

Should they abandon the Republic civilians, who were nothing more than a hindrance to them, and have their soldiers alone return to the Federacy?

The Federacy commanders and staff officers pondered this.

To begin with, they were only supposed to help the Republic's evacuation as much as they could. They had no duty or obligation to save the Republic's people if it cost them the lives of their own subordinates.

Lena pondered this, too.

She couldn't order Federacy soldiers to go as far as sacrificing their own lives to save Republic citizens. And she certainly couldn't demand the Eighty-Six throw their lives away to save Republic people.

Shin and the Eighty-Six also pondered this.

They didn't want to sacrifice themselves or their comrades to save the Republic's people. And as Federacy soldiers, they had no duty to help them anymore than they already had.

And so eventually, they considered it.

Even if they did end up abandoning the Republic civilians here...

...would it not be *beyond their control at this point?*

A cold, small sigh broke the momentary silence that hung over the Para-RAID.

“—You shouldn't even need to consider it.”

That low, hard voice, as stern as tempered steel. It was the voice of the relief expedition force's commander, Major General Richard Altner. The man who outranked both Lena and the Strike Package's brigade commander, Grethe. The most highest-ranking officer in attendance, and the commander in charge of this operation.

Lena parted her lips despite herself, still unsure if what she needed to hear right now was for him to speak to the resolve needed to abandon them here or say words to the contrary.

"Major General Altner..."

"Vice Commander, I leave command of the relief expedition's retreat in your hands. Colonel Wenzel, as before, you are to maintain supreme command over the Strike Package's retreat. I and the headquarter defense regiment will intercept the Legion. While we do, evacuate the Republic refugees onto Federacy soil."

"...?!"

Lena gasped. Next to her, Shin widened his eyes in disbelief, and they could both feel the rest of the commanders all hold their breaths through the Para-RAID. Grethe, by contrast, was composed as she gave her answer. Like she'd predicted this, was prepared for this, in a silent and yet somehow morose tone.

"A single regiment buying the time the civilians need to march to the Federacy by foot. It would be a do-or-die resistance. That's how you choose to relinquish your life, Major General?"

"A soldier can't abandon civilians to their death for fear of their own life. Our Federacy is, after all, a country of justice."

But that was not just the "justice" the Federacy swore upon as its national policy.

"We have saved child soldiers from their country's persecution. We fought alongside them to save other countries from their plight and even had them extend a helping hand to the Republic that persecuted them, granting it a chance to right their wrongs. We have struggled much to craft this reputation of justice. And that reputation should be our Federacy's eternal treasure. So we cannot tarnish it here. Much less can we afford to give the hated Republic the title of victims abandoned by the Federacy. Granting them that kind of card to leverage against us could endanger our country's future."

"In the name of postwar diplomacy...?" Lena whispered.

Richard snorted.

“That’s right. I’m afraid you were out of luck this time, Colonel Milizé. This would have been a good chance for the Republic.”

The Federacy’s justice wouldn’t be shaken. Having taken in the Eighty-Six as a group of tragic people, they wouldn’t let them lose that title, nor would they let the Republic absolve itself of its deplorable sins.

“ ... ”

“Sadly, we couldn’t save all the civilians, but anyone can see that saving millions of a country’s citizens is too tall an order. But a Federacy regiment sacrificed itself to save a scant few refugees. Such a tragedy is surely enough to offset this blemish.”

And that’s why he relinquished his life...

Richard’s Vánagandr, which served as a leading vehicle for the commanding regiment, turned around. As part of his duty as the expedition force’s commander and to support the Reginleifs, which had inferior firepower compared with the Vánagandr, the commanding regiment remained in the back of the line.

Over a hundred units changed course with the Vánagandr’s heavy, rumbling steps. They spread out to the left and right, so as to not get in the way of the other units’ route, and drove back the way they came. They moved in perfect unison, like a school of fish flipping in the face of an external stimulus.

Having changed direction from west to east, the columns with which they marched with turned horizontally to intercept, further splitting up according to squadron and platoon. They sought the right topography with which to intercept the ten thousand Legion units pursuing them with a single regiment.

“Let me tell you one thing, Colonel Milizé. Colonel Wenzel isn’t proficient enough in politics to tell you herself, after all; the military and its soldiers are but tools for governing. Their meaning does not lie with defeating the enemy. Far be it from me to say if you are the Republic’s tool or the Eighty-Six’s Queen. But wherever you affiliate yourself, use your wit and victories for them.”

“|... ”

“And I can say the same to you, Eighty-Six. You are members of the Federacy military, tools for its politics. I won’t tell you to answer that with your entire way of life. But as

soldiers, you should strive to that end. You are no longer allowed to speak of fighting to the very end and dying for your own sakes. Do not fool yourselves and get wiped out for those notions, because the Federacy will not stand for it. Never again fight like you're rushing to your deaths."

Shin twitched and looked up. As diplomatic tools and a unit for propaganda, they weren't allowed to die. And though those words implied they were only being used, the meaning behind them sank deeply into Shin's heart. This was a man who had once sent them to their deaths, after all.

And now he was telling them not to be wiped out or hurry to their deaths. In other words, he was telling them...

Survive.

"One more thing, Colonel Milizé and the Eighty-Six. So long as you can afford not to do so, do not abandon the Republic civilians."

"That's..."

"You were about to abandon them, weren't you? Claiming that doing so was your responsibility as a soldier, as a commander— Stop it. Stop trying to distract yourself from guilt by weighing lives on scales you know to be skewed. Don't let the Eighty-Six bear the burden of such blame for the Republic's people."

Even if they do not resent the Republic's people, they cannot respect them. For people of the Federacy, the lives of the Republic's citizens have less value than their own. And since they know that—they must not abandon them. So they do not have to bear the guilt of such a sin, the weight of such revenge for the rest of their days.

"Abiding by justice is a Federacy soldier's pride. And to remain human is the Eighty-Six's pride, is it not? Then act accordingly. If you did not choose revenge before, do not choose it going forward, either. Do not let them get in the way of your life. And, Colonel Wenzel —"

Lastly, Richard turned his words to Grethe again.

"Yes." She nodded briefly.

"—if you decided to shelter the Eighty-Six, it's your responsibility to defend their pride. Stick to that duty. From here on out, you must be the one to bear the burden of the cruel, the ruthless, and the callous."

If Richard's guard failed, the Legion would break through, and they'd have no choice but to abandon the Republic civilians. Alternatively, if it became

necessary to sacrifice more of the relief expedition to save the civilians.

The one to make that call would be neither Lena nor the Eighty-Six—but Grethe.

And it would be so in the future, too. When the time came to abandon a comrade to die. Or if they failed to protect civilians. If they must mount an operation that required sacrifices. As the situation of the war worsened, all the cruel, ruthless, and callous choices that must be made would be down to her—as brigade commander.

It was she, after all, who'd insisted that the Federacy had a duty to not abandon the Eighty-Six. So this was her responsibility.

"If you insist that they are still children, then you must protect at least that."

Grethe paused for a moment, closing her eyes, and then answered. They were words without any cheerfulness to them, and they weren't trying to spur her on, either.

"Of course I will, Richard. So—"

She would take care of them. Of the future. Of anything and everything.

"—you've got nothing to worry about."

The commanding regiment set out to intercept the Legion's pursuit forces, but since they were greatly outnumbered, they couldn't hope to wipe the enemy out. Stall tactics would be the most they could hope for. They would fight, then fall back, getting in the way of the enemy's march.

In order to keep retreating, they'd need to gain some distance, and so the rearguard regiment moved as far as they could from the Strike Package and the refugees. Likewise, in order to ensure the rearguard regiment had as much distance to fall back and stall for as much time as possible, the Strike Package and the refugees would need to make their way to the Federacy as quickly as they could.

"—I was able to get the main force to secure the transport trucks we'd need. They'll set out as soon as they're ready, so we need to gain as much distance as possible until then."

Grethe reported the situation to the main force of the Federacy's western front and arranged for transportation to the refugees on foot. Having finished

the arrangements, she gave her orders.

Lena listened to Grethe's voice through the Para-RAID, still seated in the auxiliary seat of Saki's Grimalkin. All the Processors were in their Reginleifs, of course, as were the control officers and commanders in the auxiliary seats. They all silently and tensely awaited the order to set out.

"The 4th Armored Division is to maintain the defensive line as before, and the 3rd Armored Division is to join with the 4th and reinforce the defensive line. The 2nd Armored Division is to remain on lookout in the back."

"Yes, ma'am."

The military police and engineers gathered the scattered civilians into several groups, forming impromptu files. The 4th Armored Division was originally supposed to set up a defensive line in the areas near the Federacy, and they were joined by the 3rd Armored Division and the remaining Vánagandrs.

"1st Armored Division, Colonel Milizé and Captain Nouzen's troops. You're to guard the refugee files. Ensure they don't scatter or go too slow, but make sure they walk to the trucks' rendezvous point."

"Yes. Understood, Colonel Wenzel."

Grethe's unit—which was the only Reginleif actually piloted by the commanding officer occupying it—used the data link to share the estimated arrival time at the rendezvous point. Lena nodded after glancing at the hologram sub-window that popped up. They had seventeen kilometers to march. Their estimated arrival time was five hours.

Another window opened, displaying the number of refugees, which the military police had quickly counted, and the remaining supply reserves of the Scavengers accompanying them. This operation was originally planned for three days, so they had plenty of ammunition, energy packs, food, and water.

Lena quickly worked out how to divide the troops over the holo-window, changed targets over the Para-RAID, and started giving orders.

"Strike Package 1st Armored Division—please resume your retreat."

Upon hearing her order, the Reginleifs relayed the same words to the refugees via the external speakers. The first refugee group began marching,

urged by their words. A few squadrons were scattered around them, both to ensure they kept up the pace and to serve as vanguards.

The sight of Feldreß the color of polished bone crawling through the dim light of early dawn was like that of a flock of monster spiders. The civilians were frightened by them, nestling together as they walked wordlessly, like they were being forced to march under threat. As the back of the group of refugees began walking, a few Reginleifs moved after them to defend them, and the next squadron got to its feet.

“It’s about time, yes? Good. Second group, we’re setting out.”

Still, this was a crowd of a thousand or so civilians. By the time the last group set out, the stars had begun flickering out of the sky, and the dark blue of daybreak gave way to a teal moonless dawn. A transparent, dull blue began carpeting the world.

The Spearhead squadron guarded over the group. As the commander, Lena—and by extension, Grimalkin—moved to the back of the formation, with Shiden’s Brísingamen squadron positioned around her.

The headless skeletons slowly marched under the cold sapphire gloom, their silhouettes the shape of ghosts.

Before long, the thunderous roar of cannons began echoing beyond the western sky. The rear guard had finally made contact with the Legion’s pursuit force, marking the opening of hostilities. Both the rear guard and the refugees were able to make some decent progress, and so there was a good distance between them. But the intense roar of 120 mm cannons crossed that distance, echoing sharply through the air. As if to say that the metallic murderers were just beyond the horizon.

Owing to their long combat history, the Reginleifs were used to the sound of cannon fire and didn’t so much as stir in reaction to it. The refugees’ eyes, however, all froze over in fear as they shifted about to look.

One person, startled by the idea of the Legion’s approach, turned around in preparation to run. But a second later, a headless skeleton stood in their path.

“ E-eeek!”

“Don’t step out of line,” a low voice spoke from its external speaker.

If one person ran, those around them would be driven to do the same. And once the group began rampaging, there would be no stopping it. So they had to nip it in the bud.

“B-but I hear gunshots. There are Legion nearby—”

“They’re still far away. If you want to escape them, keep walking. If any one of you run off, we won’t bother protecting you anymore.”

“Yeah, of course you won’t. You’re Eighty-Six, after all,” one of the people in the group muttered, loud enough so as to be overheard but hidden within the group so as to not be seen.

You’re Eighty-Six, after all. You don’t really want to protect people from the Republic. You hate us, begrudge us anyway. So that’s why.

Their tone was accusatory and indignant, though they knew they were being loathed. And it was clear they didn’t feel like they’d done anything that earned them that resentment, that they thought it was all unjustified.

But the Reginleif didn’t seem agitated by it.

“Oh, is that right? Well, I’ll say it one more time: Don’t step out of line. After all, I’m Eighty-Six, so I’ll only do what I absolutely have to. Anyone who steps out of line is on their own.”

So if you want to stay alive...

“Shut up and keep walking.”

“—I guess it only makes sense there’d be complaints. Both from us and the Republic civilians,” Raiden grumbled within Wehrwolf.

He said that as Claude switched off his external speaker and clicked his tongue loudly. The Eighty-Six weren’t shaken by the resistance, but it certainly wasn’t pleasant.

Shin was both the squad captain and operations commander for the 1st Armored Division, and he had to prioritize recon duties for this operation. This meant he couldn’t take direct command, and Raiden, his deputy, was receiving all sorts of reports, both from the Spearhead squadron and from other squad captains.

Michihi—who was moving with the Lycaon squadron, which was escorting one of the groups ahead—connected via the Para-RAID.

“Vice Captain Shuga, some people have asked if we could empty one of the Scavenger containers and at least let the kids ride inside. The mothers carrying small children really do seem to be suffering...”

“Oh...” Raiden paused for thought and then shook his head in denial. “No, Michihi, we can’t. If we do that, we’ll never hear the end of it. Why are you letting their children in but not mine? If children can ride in it, why can’t the elderly? Dump all your ammo and let everyone ride in the containers. We don’t have time for that kind of bickering.”

“Yeah... You’re right. Roger that, sir. Besides, we can’t have children around when we’re handling ammo.”

“Still, I think it’s about time we have the first group take a breather,” Lena said as she gazed at the clock display on her electronic document projector.

It had been nearly an hour since the first group set out, meaning it was about time for their first break.

She cast a glance at a small child being carried by not their parent, but a boy in his early teens. They were probably siblings split up from their parents. Or maybe they weren’t even siblings. They were very much hurrying to get to their destination, but if they let fatigue build up, it wouldn’t be long before they wouldn’t be able to walk at all.

“Besides, we’ve been on the move since last night, and our rendezvous with the transport team is four hours away. We need to rest, even if only in short intervals. We’ll want to make sure everyone takes turns resting from lookout duty, too. Also, I’ll need a report on Processors who used prescription drugs to stave off fatigue.”

Since this operation had been planned to last three days, they had plenty of supplies. They handed out plastic water bottles and combat rations to the refugees and, after a ten-minute breather, continued their trek.

The refugees, who had finally been allowed to sit, grumbled, “Just ten minutes...?” but couldn’t very much oppose the Reginleifs resting nearby and resumed their march. As soon as they announced that they’d be setting off

again, the Reginleifs got on their way without another word, forcing the civilians to hurry after them, lest they be left behind.

The line of refugees and Reginleifs continued their journey.

They continued farther. The more time and distance they spent walking, the more exhausted the refugees, who weren't accustomed to walking so much, became. They dragged their tired legs, with more and more people gradually tripping over rocks, weeds, and indents in the ground. That applied to the children and the elderly, of course, but the adults were starting to lose strength, too.

The Reginleifs marched, either watching them over from the side or vigilantly standing guard from afar. It was only when they took their hourly breaks at the same time as the refugees, or when they were relieved from guard duty, that they opened the hatches to their coffin-like cockpits.

The child soldiers carried their assault rifles, wary of the possibility of their units being stolen, as they took swigs of water or silently chewed on unheated combat rations. The refugees directed envious looks at them, but the Eighty-Six didn't mind.

Boarding a Feldreiß wasn't as easy as it may have seemed. They had all been piloting for hours—the lucky ones all night long, while the unlucky ones had been handling their unit for a whole day already. And while under such fatigue, they had to march through enemy territory while defending slow noncombatants. Remaining vigilant of the Legion and maintaining a marching speed strained their nerves.

If they didn't rest whenever they could, even if just a little, it would only be a few hours until they wouldn't be able to march at all.

And so they closed their canopies and continued the trek. The Eighty-Six remained silent, and the civilians were too afraid to complain aloud. They could only throw resentful gazes at the Eighty-Six, who gracefully ignored them, and so the moment of silence lingered on, with neither words nor gazes exchanged.

With her power to see the present state of those she was acquainted with, Frederica had the most insight into the current state of the rear guard. And as the Strike Package's Mascot...and the Federacy military's captive Empress

Augusta, she was acquainted with Richard Altner.

Shin, too, was able to guess at the rear guard's status by reverse-calculating the Legion pursuit force's positions. But right now, he had to march while remaining vigilant of a range of several hundred kilometers around him. He shouldn't be forced to keep track of the rear guard's status as well.

And more than anything, Shin had been ordered not to make ruthless calls of judgment. So she didn't want him to see the rear guard get defeated for having to make such a decision.

Quite some time had gone by since the fighting began, but the position where the rear guard was facing off against the Legion's pursuit force had hardly shifted. Even Frederica, who wasn't knowledgeable in tactics or the subtleties of combat, could tell they were putting up a good fight.

Knowing that all they needed was to buy as much time as possible, they fought as such, stubbornly holding their position without recklessly sacrificing any troops. They fought to the bitter end, with true valor and resolve—knowing that inevitable defeat and death awaited them.

"Splendidly fought, Altner. You have my utmost respect...and my deepest apologies."

The march continued. The sun rose.

Newborn rays of golden light shone over the sky as fresh sunlight poured equally over the earth. It was the light that stirred all lives awake.

A morning where the air itself brimmed with a transparent golden glow.

The autumn flowers, kissed by glittering morning dew, spread their petals, filling the cold breeze purified by the stillness of the night with their floral scent. As the forest trees awakened, the morning mist blew against the wild grass, and the birds chirped, their small bodies warmed up, as they greeted a new morning.

In the midst of this blessed joy, the Republic refugees marched on. It was a beautiful autumn morning, with the gentle breeze and the soft sunlight comforting their aching legs.

And that beauty only served to make their flight to the Federacy feel all the more wretched.

They weren't marching at a fast pace at all, but they'd walked quite a distance while pausing for breaks. Wherever they looked, the wild flowers bloomed brilliantly like they were competing over who was the most beautiful, but they also tangled over their tired legs.

And their legs, which certainly weren't used to walking such long distances, were tormented by the uneven soil. They walked and walked, but the scenery never changed, the sky and fields spanning as far as the eye could see.

The boundless blue horizons were a perfect snapshot of the season. And the beautiful scenery was impossibly difficult to leave.

They dragged their legs, moaning tiredly. Parents grumbled in exhaustion as they carried their weeping children and toddlers. And while the civilians walked on sluggishly, the surrounding Reginleifs said nothing to spur them on. They didn't tell them to hurry up, simply surrounding the civilians. They occasionally stopped, looking around, but otherwise moved along silently.

They didn't press them to go on, nor did they rush them ahead. They had neither the presence of mind nor the obligation to do so. The Federacy military was meant to defend the Federacy's territory and its people, and it had no duty to do the same for the Republic's people.

Were these Federacy civilians, they could go as far as holding them at gunpoint to spur them on and escort them to safety, but they didn't have that kind of responsibility toward Republic civilians. And them being Eighty-Six, who should hate and resent the Republic, was all the more reason for them not to do so.

And that made things all the more painful for the Republic civilians. If they had been rushed to keep going, if those threatening gun turrets or machine guns were held against them, their indignation would have been justified. Their tears, the grudge they harbored at being treated cruelly, and their self-pity would all be justified.

If they were held at gunpoint and forced to keep walking, they could feel like they were being discriminated by terrible tyrants, like they were martyrs worthy

of pity. But neither the Federacy soldiers nor the Eighty-Six did anything.

All their bitter tears and pained complaints fell on deaf ears, at best earning them a sidelong glance. The Federacy soldiers and Eighty-Six didn't so much as say a word. Even if these civilians stopped in their tracks and got caught by the Legion, they wouldn't care. But at the same time, it was all the same to them if the civilians came along.

They really didn't care one way or another. The Eighty-Six didn't care about them at all. Whether they lived or died didn't matter much to them. And that indifference—the fact that the Eighty-Six didn't resent them simply because they didn't care—was more unbearable than anything else.

“I can't take it anymore!”

Someone screamed out. A young woman who'd been walking on wobbling feet finally stopped in her tracks. The argent gazes around her finally fixed on one place. A Reginleif walking nearby stopped, its ominous silhouette like a crawling, headless skeleton, terrifying and merciless.

This woman was at her breaking point. Her face was scrunched up like a bawling child's, and she didn't even bother wiping away the tears running down her cheeks.

“I can't take anymore. I can't walk another step! My feet hurt. I can't... I can't walk!”

All the silvery eyes looking on gathered upon the woman and the Reginleif. One unit, apparently a commander, fixed its red optical sensor on the woman. It had a pair of high-frequency blades, shaped like the chelicera of a spider, and the Personal Mark of a headless skeleton shouldering a shovel.

Everyone looked on between the two of them.

A young voice, that of a teenage boy, spoke from the external speaker. The Reginleif's 88 mm gun, set to tracking his line of sight, was fixed straight at the woman.

“If you get separated from the group, we won't have time to look for you.”

With the civilians exhausted and tattered like wandering spirits, Shin spoke

collectedly.

“If you get separated from the group, we won’t have time to look for you.”

He had no obligation to force her to keep walking, and as an Eighty-Six, he had no duty to encourage her, either. So when Shin spoke up, his voice sounded awfully cold and curt. As if to say that whether she lived or died didn’t matter to him.

He really could not care less, and whichever it was didn’t matter.

That emotion dripped from his tone. And hearing it, he could see the woman’s snow-white eyes—and indeed, the eyes of all the civilians watching their exchange with bated breath—waver ever so slightly. But he pretended not to notice it.

“So take a break and then link up with the next group walking nearby.”

The woman and the surrounding Republic civilians were all stunned by his words. They were matter-of-factly lacking any emotion. But he did give her advice, so she wouldn’t be left behind, so she could keep on walking.

An Eighty-Six just gave such advice to a Republic citizen he ought to hate.

“With this many people, it’ll take a while for everyone to walk by and the line to break. You have enough time to rest.”

The woman shook her head. She probably couldn’t believe this. The rest of the civilians, looking on silently, had expected him to act differently, too.

“—I can’t walk.”

“But the more you linger here, the more exhausted you’ll get, and the harder it’ll be to set out again. So only rest ten minutes or so. I think it goes without saying, but if you don’t have a watch, try counting to six hundred.”

“I can’t— Listen to me, I can’t walk! I can’t walk anymore!”

“You don’t have to try to hurry and link up with your original group, either. Stick to the same speed and pace as those around you.”

“No, I can’t walk! Listen to me, I can’t walk! Just leave me behind!” the woman cried out shrilly.

The echoes of her shriek spread into the sky, but the Reginleif didn’t budge.

“You’re Eighty-Six, aren’t you?! You hate us, don’t you?! Then here’s your chance; just leave us here! You can call us a burden if you want! So why...?!”

Why won’t you even abandon us?

We abandoned you, after all, eleven years ago. Then do the same to us—why won’t you stoop to being as wretched as us?

Her voice spread out like a scream. The Reginleif said nothing and simply averted its gaze.

At that moment, Dustin reflexively made to open Sagittarius’s canopy. He was a Republic soldier, after all. Shin was a Federacy soldier with no duty to these civilians, and he couldn’t be made to hold another country’s people at gunpoint. And despite that, an Eighty-Six soldier had to patiently restrain himself and, on top of that, gave them advice when he didn’t have to.

In that case, it was Dustin’s role as a Republic soldier to crack the whip on these civilians and keep them walking. He picked up the rifle issued to him for self-defense and reached for the opening lever.

But just then—

“Grimalkin—please open the canopy.”

At her order, albeit after a pause, one of the Reginleif’s canopies opened. A Reginleif with a Personal Mark of a winged cat—Saki’s Grimalkin.

The Bloodstained Queen’s personal carriage for this operation.

Lena stood up from the cockpit. Her long, satin-like, shining argent hair flowed in the sunlight. Her silent silver eyes glinted under her military cap as she stood on the autumn battlefield.

The other Reginleifs all stopped in their tracks, unsure as to what she was doing. Shiden reacted in surprise as she moved Cyclops to guard her, with Undertaker coming in to protect her from the other side.

“Sagittarius, stay put. I’ll do it.”

“But, Colonel—”

“Stay put, Second Lieutenant. This is my duty, as a colonel. And besides...you can’t do this as well as I can.”

You might be able to stand up before the civilians, but you could never become a bloodstained sovereign for the Eighty-Six. You could never be that coldhearted.

“...Yes, ma’am.” Dustin nodded, however unwillingly.

Waited upon by black and white Reginleifs from both sides, the Queen lorded over the civilians. She wore her military cap like a crown, her silver hair fluttering like her mantle, and in place of a scepter, she had an assault rifle at her side.

The civilians’ gazes were set on her, and little by little, they began to raise their voices. A Prussian-blue blazer that was part of the Republic military’s female uniform. A military cap hanging low over her eyes, and the Republic military’s standard-issue assault rifle.

Why did a Republic soldier step out of a Reginleif instead of an Eighty-Six?

Why was a Republic soldier riding a Reginleif with the Eighty-Six while they had to walk on foot?

Why was a Republic soldier, sworn to protect them, sitting smug and safe in the Eighty-Six’s Reginleifs, protected by them while they were forced to march on aching legs?

“You—,” one person began to accuse her.

“Walk,” Lena silenced him with nothing but her glare, her silvery eyes glinting fiercely under the shadow of her military cap. “The Legion are coming, so walk. Rest if you have to, but stop acting like children and insisting that you can’t walk and they should abandon you here.”

“Tch...”

“If you understand you’re being given aid here, stop talking about them abandoning you so easily. Every single moment you spend throwing tantrums is a moment where Federacy soldiers die. And more than anything, you will die. And since you know that—walk. I won’t tell you to hurt yourselves, but walk as fast as you can.”

Lena carried on, unflinching in the face of the countless glares directed at her. She raised her assault rifle, her queen’s scepter, and made a show out of

loading the first bullet into it.

“I’m a Republic soldier, and I have a duty to protect your lives. So if the alternative is that you fall out of line and die, I’d rather hold you at gunpoint and make you walk by force.”

She didn’t fix the barrel on them, nor did any of the surrounding Reginleifs move. But even so, this dainty teenage officer guarded by the Eighty-Six and their Reginleifs was able to overwhelm the civilians.

“Well, if you’re a Republic soldier!” someone in the crowd just barely called out. “Why do you get to ride in a Reginleif?! If you’re a soldier and you’re supposed to protect us, you should be down here, walking with us!”

Lena directed a preprepared sneer at the crowd, like she’d expected them to say this.

“Me? Why would I? Aren’t I the second coming of Saint Magnolia, who led the revolution? And it’s a saint’s role to guide her lost lambs, to save them. Not to share in their sorrows. And besides...”

She looked over the helpless sheep and spoke, with the Eighty-Six who watched over her silently, with her dependable subordinates and trusted comrades at her back.

“...I’m the Queen who leads the Eighty-Six, Bloody Reina. Isn’t it natural for a queen to ride on horseback with knights at her beck and call?”

“...!” The citizens looked at her with silent but palpable indignation.

“Undertaker. Grant me the honor of riding with you next.” Lena ignored them and turned her eyes to Undertaker. It lowered its nose to open its canopy, but Lena motioned for it to stop and grabbed onto the side of the unit instead. She stood across from the cockpit block, propping her body up by holding onto the 88 mm turret with her hand.

Like a silvery war goddess making her triumphant return atop a pure-white chariot.



“Lena,” Shin told her through the Para-RAID, his tone audibly upset. “There are no Legion nearby, but this is still dangerous. Please move into the cockpit.”

“Move to the head of the group, please. I’ll go into the cockpit then. Don’t worry, they’re not brave enough to throw rocks while I’m riding a Reginleif.”

Shin ignored her and seemingly gave Raiden orders. Wehrwolf and Cyclops moved diagonally behind Undertaker, standing between it and the refugees. With this formation, even if the civilians were to see Lena and try to throw stones at her, those two units would shield her. With all of Spearhead’s units spread out to move and the Brísingamen squadron deployed to guard Lena, Undertaker slowly started walking. The refugees were stunned by the sight of a Republic soldier—when the military had all but abandoned the civilians and run off long ago—riding the Eighty-Six’s Reginleif without so much as sparing them a glance.

They were dumbfounded. Before long, their exhausted expressions filled with rage. Like Lena predicted, none of them had the nerve to throw anything at her, but slurs and scornful curses began bubbling up from the crowd.

Traitor. Coward. Like a tyrant. Little girl who curried favor with the Eighty-Six. Like a prostitute.

Maybe they thought those words wouldn’t reach her ears. Or maybe they hoped she’d hear them.

When she reached the head of the group, she decided she’d shown herself off long enough and, as promised, moved into Undertaker’s cockpit. News of what happened would naturally spread to the other refugee groups.

News of the despicable silver witch, waited upon by the Eighty-Six, who “oppressed” them.

Shin opened the canopy, and she hopped inside, settling into his arms as he lowered her into the cockpit. The canopy soon closed and locked. The three optical screens, which went dark when the Reginleif went into standby mode, lit up, and as they illuminated the cockpit, she was greeted by Shin’s clearly displeased frown.

“I understand that they wanted someone to hold them at gunpoint so they

could feel like oppressed victims. But you didn't have to actually give them what they wanted. And besides, Lena, you're—"

"It was necessary. Them being this provoked and angry will give them the strength they need to keep walking a little longer. Major General Altner entrusted me with the task of returning to the Federacy with them alive. I had to do that to ensure that happens."

Shin glanced at his optical screen. The woman who'd stopped earlier was standing still, but a woman roughly the same as her was hurrying over to help her walk. A young man called out to a mother carrying her two children, effectively snatching one of the children out of her arms and going ahead. An elderly man took a weeping infant who'd gotten split up from their parents by the hand, gritting his teeth as he pushed his aching legs forward.

A young man, dragging what looked to be an injured leg, was being supported by a woman who appeared to be his lover.

All of them glared at Undertaker, who led the group, and they walked like they were chasing it—their exhausted bodies driven by anger and hatred for the one within it.

"...That might be true, but you didn't have to do it, Lena. That just made you look like the villain here. You didn't have to—"

"Right," Lena cut into his words. "With this, they won't look up at me as the second coming of Saint Magnolia anymore."

Shin stared at Lena, who regarded him with a smile.

It's like you said once.

"I won't act like a saint with a tragic face. I don't want to play that role...but I did stick to my duties as a Republic soldier. So I don't care if they come to me for help or complaints later."

"..."

Shin wordlessly removed one hand from the control stick and used it to lift Lena's military cap off her head.

"So you put it on because of your position as a soldier. Out of duty and to

intimidate,” he said.

Lena stared at him with blank amazement for a moment.

“Well, that was part of it, but I also figured it could hide my face.”

This time, Shin looked taken aback.

“Hmm, that’s why I hung it over my eyes,” Lena continued. “The sun’s rising in the east right now, and the light shone directly at my face. So with the hat’s brim covering my face, I figured even if I made myself out to be the villain...or, well, since I’d be doing that, I thought it might hide my face. After all, I haven’t given up on the fireworks in the Revolution Festival yet.”

Not coming back here wasn’t something she was willing to accept.

“...Pfft.” Shin couldn’t stop himself and started chuckling. “I see... Well, you’re certainly not putting on a tragic face anymore.”

“Right?” Lena fidgeted inside the cramped cockpit, nestling her face into the chest of her beloved, the boy she promised to watch the fireworks with. “Let’s go home.”

“Yes.”

As if forced to walk by it, the civilians followed Undertaker’s lead. Their expressions and demeanors were a complete polar opposite to the tired way they’d acted just minutes ago. Seeing this, Shin, still cradling Lena in his arms, sighed.

Anger and hate did have the power to support people during times of hardship and despair, temporarily granting them the strength to keep going. It was like that back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, too. At the time, they weren’t aware of it, but hatred did keep them going.

To fight on to the very end, never giving up or wandering off that path. They would never be like *them*, like the despicable Republic, and debase themselves by veering off the rightful path of humanity. Yes.

They refused to stoop to their level.

That anger did burn within them, for sure, like a flame. If their pride was what kept them going, then that anger was the other side of that coin. It gave them

the power to fight.

But Shin didn't want to believe that this was the true, fundamental nature of humanity. His fellow Eighty-Six had cursed him, too. He had Eighty-Six hate him, call him a child of the Empire, a traitor, a god of pestilence, a haunted Reaper. But he didn't want to believe that all the insults and rocks they'd thrown at him—that the hatred with which his brother strangled him when he was small—was humankind's true nature.

And so... And yet...

...some part of him could relate to how the Shepherds felt.

He whispered to himself, without putting it to words. To those comrades of his, consumed by anger and tarnished by hatred to become Legion.

We'll never change. Neither you nor us.

Their choices were different—and yet the same. Back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, they were all like prisoners tied to the stake, waiting for their death sentence. But they all held in their hands the switch to a bomb that could blow apart the Republic, which tried to put them to the flame.

A method of revenge every Eighty-Six knew. All they had to do was stop resisting. And they didn't even have to do that. Eventually, the metallic calamity that was the Legion would come to put the Republic to the flame instead.

They could die either way. The only difference was in their choice: either keep fighting and die while holding on to your pride, or stop resisting and die consumed by hatred. The only difference was in what satisfied them in the moment of their death.

So Shin couldn't fault the Shepherds. Had things gone differently, if he'd have missed even one of the things he had now...

Like, for example, if he hadn't met this Queen of silver, who despite being an Alba, stuck by the Eighty-Six and told him she would never forget them...

...he might have been one of the Shepherds out there right about now.

Meanwhile, the civilians walked on, spurred by the fanned flames of their hatred. Their hatred for that Queen, the pretender saint. For the Eighty-Six who

wouldn't even hate them back.

And hatred for this beautiful world, so blissfully indifferent to their suffering.

They were so hurt, so tortured, so full of self-pity; someone must have been at fault. Someone must have been inflicting all this pain, torture, and self-pity on them.

After all—if they let the thought that them being so hurt, tortured, and full of self-pity was something self-inflicted, that they brought this on themselves, then all this pain, torture, and self-pity would become too much to bear.

Let us hate you. Someone. Anyone.

If only the birds wouldn't chirp. If only the flowers didn't bloom so beautifully, if only the sunshine wasn't so fair, if only this lovely blue sky didn't hang over them.

If only it would rain. If only a storm would break out. If only thunder and mud and darkness would wash over the world, if only all the ways the world could display its contempt of them would come to bear and stand in their way.

The refugees even resented the tall blue sky spanning over them, hated the beauty of this world, which would not draw pause in the face of their anguish.

And even that thought occurred to them.

If only everything fell to ruin with us.

By the time they crossed the sixty-kilometer point from the Federacy, phase line Aquarius, the refugees didn't utter a single hateful word. They advanced silently along the trackless path, which seemed to stretch to infinity, breathing roughly like animals as the morning sun mercilessly bore down on them.

Some of the Reginleifs going ahead suddenly turned their optical screens over the horizon. Clouds of dust brewed in the distance, moving gradually closer. Before long, their squarish contours came into view, forming the silhouettes of large, clumsy trucks.

The Federacy's transport unit.

As soon as they regrouped with the transport unit, Shin sensed it.

“Tch... Lena, get back into Grimalkin.”

“Huh?” Lena turned around to look at him.

Shin shook his head gravely. Major General Altner’s rearguard unit...

“The rear guard’s starting to fall apart... Depending on the situation, we could be entering combat soon. Return to Grimalkin.”

Having guarded the refugees’ route until their limit, their defensive line was beginning to fall apart.

“We’ve boarded all the refugees onto the transport trucks, Major General. We’re beginning to retreat now,” said Grethe.

Receiving a report from the transport unit’s captain, Grethe gave the Strike Package orders to set out. Following that, she switched on the Para-RAID, resonating with Richard, who was leading the rear guard.

With them having bought enough time for the refugees to link up with the transport unit, the rear guard had accomplished its mission. But at this point, there was no means for them to return.

The Strike Package traveled sluggishly along the retreat path, while the rear guard’s metallic steeds had galloped through the battlefield at top speed to intercept the enemy. The distance between them was by now far too great, and their lines were crumbling in the face of the Legion’s merciless assault. Regrouping and retreating at this point would be impossible.

This comrade of hers would never return, and so she wanted to at least relay this much.

“You’ve done your duty, Major General... You have my deepest respect, Major General Richard Altner.”

“Cut it out, Spider-Woman,” Richard said, a hint of a sarcastic smile in his tone. **“This doesn’t suit you.”**

Grethe couldn’t feel his driver’s presence from the Operator’s seat. Did they die...or was the Vánagandr completely demolished? The sound of gunshots and cannon fire alone remained incessant. Of two machine guns rattling out in tandem. The roar of a 120 mm smoothbore gun.

“It seems I’ve lost our bet. Again. Those children who presented themselves as bloody blades tempered on the battlefield had finally returned to being normal children in our Federacy’s embrace.”

And that was what mattered most.

“Richard...”

“Don’t let them be taken away from you again. The Black Widow’s rampage shouldn’t ever happen again. Try putting yourself in my shoes. Having to look as you and Willem, you two bloodied war demons, went mad on the battlefield. Once was enough... Right, and make sure to tell Willem that he doesn’t need to think about taking vengeance tenfold this time. It was one thing when he was a major in the armored infantry corps, but a commodore and chief of staff shouldn’t be swinging around hatchets at those Legion scraps.”

After saying this, Richard cracked a smile despite—or perhaps in spite—of the situation.

“It might be years too late to say this, but if he’s so occupied with cutting up those scrap monsters, maybe calling him the Dismantling Mantis would be more appropriate than Killer Mantis... I guess we ended up using the wrong nickname for him all those years.”

“...”

“So don’t do anything to make him change that name of his, Grethe. He’s a special kind of idiot who’s too stupid to even realize how compassionate he can be at the weirdest of times... Surely, you can see that, given you were the same, but at least you were conscious about it.”

“—Yes.”

Ehrenfried the Killer Hatchet, hunter of the scrap monsters. The Black Widow, killer of Legion.

Back in the early stages of the Legion War, when the battlefield was still chaotic and established tactics for facing the Legion hadn’t been discovered yet, countless died. Bit by bit, they lost all that they held dear. Their contemporaries from the officer academy, comrades who trudged through the muck of the battlefield with them, their subordinates, who were their elders.

Those two young officers set foot on the battlefield during their teens, maturing into their twenties. In an attempt to compensate for all the things they had been denied, they became driven to take savage revenge on the

mechanical army that'd taken everything away from them.

One young man swore, despite cutting down lightweight Legion in melee combat—a feat deemed to be the height of insanity—that he would kill ten Legion for every comrade he lost. He became a demon, single-handedly challenging not just Ameise but even Grauwolf types.

One young woman swore, as she piloted her fiancée's Vánagandr as a gunner and shot down heavyweight Legion, that she would never let anyone else sit in his gunner's seat. She became a witch, single-handedly overwhelming Legion armored units.

Grethe still remembered the way she was back then. Her comrade, who became known as the Killer Hatchet. Their sheer madness.

"...That's why I hate him."

He was like a mirror held up before her, showing rage that bubbled up like molten iron in her heart—a severe, intense part of her she didn't want to acknowledge.

"He loved that earnest, severe part of you. Even when he knew that you would never turn your affections to him."

"I know. That's why I hate him."

She could feel Richard's silent, wry smile on the other side as she continued:

"That's why I never want to have to visit his grave."

I don't want him to die before I do. Just like how you're worried about him.

"Please make sure he doesn't." Richard's smile deepened.

"But"—feeling his attention turn to her, she regarded him with the strongest smile she could muster—"whenever I come to you to share a drink, I'll have him come along. As always."

No help would reach him in time. There was no escape for Richard anymore. Richard and Grethe would never get another chance to share a drink.

But whenever I think of you, I'll act as if you're there with us.

As if to say the trio who survived the terrible war ten years ago were all still there.

“...I see.”

The transport trucks set off. They were by no means comfortable to sit in and were all overloaded with people to an unsafe degree. Any refugees and military police who couldn't fit onto the vehicles had to occupy emptied Scavenger-towed containers.

Civilians wrapped their arms around one another, holding on for stability as the trucks and Scavengers set out, kicking up the wind as they left, protected by the Reginleifs.

With pained silence, Frederica closed her eyes. Her words did not reach the ones they were directed to. There was nothing she could do to help them from there. And yet still...

“You have fought well, Major General Richard Altner. And his brave, valiant soldiers.”

In one corner of the file of Reginleifs, Grethe bit her lip. The roaring of Richard's Vánagandr's cannon had died down a short while ago. In its place, all she could hear was the rattling of machine-gun fire and the footsteps approaching in spite of them, as silent as the rubbing of bones.

And then she heard the whistling of something sharp cutting through the air, followed by the light thumping of a metallic object crushing something soft and skeletal.

A few pained wheezes. The faint sound of a pistol's slide being loaded. The Federacy's standard-issue 9 mm striker-fired automatic pistol—the suicide weapon provided to Feldreß pilots.

Grethe bit down on her lip hard. A whisper calling out to someone, like one's final words. It was the name of his wife; Grethe had met her a few times. And then the name of his infant daughter, who had just recently learned to speak. And then—

—a gunshot.

With his ability, Shin could tell the rear guard had been wiped out. With no one left in their way, the Legion began pursuing the Strike Package and the refugees at top speed.

But it was too late.

Major General Altner and his men had done their job well. Protected by the Valkyries, his transports unit passed the thirty-kilometer point from the Federacy's domain, phase line Pisces. They then traveled through the thick defensive line taken over and maintained by the Federacy military's armored units and finally reached Point Zodiacs—the Federacy's territory.

Following that, the entirety of the strike package crossed phase line Pisces and reached Point Zodiacs as well. Once all the units returning from the Republic were taken in, the Federacy military shut off the retreat route. The artillery corps set behind the Federacy's defensive line fired an offensive bombardment, mercilessly destroying the Legion that were still persistent enough to give chase.

Having returned to Federacy soil, the Strike Package and transport trucks reached the high-speed railway's terminus, the Berledephadel City terminal. They were greeted by the beautiful urban view of the glass-and-metal roadside trees. The pavement strewn with countless, eternal fallen leaves made of quartz, their rich, magnificent beauty lit up in the golden sunlight refracted by the glass leaves.

Seeing this honey-colored sight, Shin breathed out in relief within Undertaker. They'd been moving for over half a day, since late last night. They were worn out, but more than anything, seeing they'd reached safety brought relief—which made the feeling of wasted effort, built up during that time, finally bubble to the surface.

Yes, wasted effort. They failed to evacuate all the Republic refugees, lost Richard and his unit, and couldn't stop Aldrecht and the other Eighty-Six's ghosts.

The transport trucks pulled up in the plaza in front of the terminal, and the civilians spilled out of them and squatted on the ground, exhausted. The trucks were meant for ferrying people to the refugee sectors and only temporarily relegated to helping the retreat, meaning many refugees had been left behind in the plaza in their absence. Those refugees noticed their countrymen's plight and the presence of the Reginleifs and began to murmur anxiously.

Why are the Eighty-Six back already? When is the next refugee train coming? What about all their countrymen who were meant to come later?

“Good work, everyone,” Grethe said, like she was trying to blot out the refugees’ murmuring. “Leave the refugees to the people in charge here and go back home.”

“Come on, everyone, just a little longer, and we’ll get to have warm showers and sleep in beds,” Lena encouraged them brightly.

The Strike Package’s lodgings were farther into the city. At Lena’s words, the Brisingamen squadron set off first as the rest of the 1st Armored Division began moving. Some people had been up for a full day, and even after taking medicine, they were beginning to feel bad. In order to make sure they came back as soon as possible and got to rest, the Spearhead squadron relinquished the path and remained parked in the glass-tree lane’s footpath.

Shin stepped out of his cockpit to stretch his limbs and get some fresh air. The other squad members followed suit, stretching or pouring water over their heads. He let out a long, tired breath.

But then he heard a sharp voice reach his ears. Shin instinctively stopped Undertaker and the refugees, so as to shield his comrades, and he happened to be closest. That was the only reason.

“You’re a man-eating murderer! That’s why your eyes are red, you Eighty-Six! You’re all filthy colored stains, useless and incompetent!”

Kurena’s brow jumped, and Anju got to her feet. Raiden turned to look at the refugees, his eyes squinting dangerously. All the remaining Reginleifs and Processors, Dustin and the Vargus included, turned to look with cold eyes. Even Grethe, who’d intended to remain in her unit until every one of her subordinates returned, turned her head.

The one who’d shouted was a young Alba man who had cut through the crowd of his countrymen to shout at them. Military police hurried over at once, holding the man down before he could leave the plaza, to say nothing of approach Shin. With his arms grabbed from both sides, he leaned in forward uncomfortably.

He thrust out a hand forcibly, showing off a burnt scrap of cloth gripped in his fingers.

“This is all your fault! You didn’t want to protect us, so you cut corners! And now she’s dead because of you! Why...why didn’t you save my sister?!”

Deep in the plaza, crouched on the tracks behind the civilian crowd like it was trying to hide from sight, were the burned, tattered remains of a train. The refugee train that’d gotten hit by the incendiary bombs and caught fire.

Did none of its passengers survive, or did the owner of this cloth just happen to be unlucky enough to be counted among the dead? Shin had no way of knowing. But she’d probably died there in that burning train.

In that locomotive, put to the flame by the Shepherds’ malice. In the hellfire created by the Eighty-Six’s spiteful ghosts.

Shin suddenly felt a lump of rage swell up in his heart. Unable to withstand it, he clenched his teeth and shouted back at the man.

“If that’s how you feel...!”

“If that’s how you feel, why didn’t any of you fight?!”

“What did you just—?” The young man’s expression filled up with anger.

“Why didn’t you even try to fight? You spent nine years, surrounded and boxed in by the Legion. For nine years, you didn’t win, so why did you never think to fight? Why did you discard the will and means to fight and just sit there, satisfied with yourselves? On what basis did you think, did you honestly believe...that someone would always protect you and fight your battles for you?!”

All you ever say is for others to fight in your place. You keep calling out for someone else to protect you. Why did that idea never scare you? Can’t you see how pathetic it is to never protect yourself? Are you really blind to how terrifying it is to leave your lives in someone else’s hands?

And in this decade-long Legion War of all times and places. Even after you saw that your fortress wall couldn’t protect the Republic and its people, after the large-scale offensive exposed how despairingly powerless you all are.

How can you stay so...weak?!

“Why do you never try to protect yourselves? You had years to do it, and after everything that happened! Why—why won’t you try to protect yourselves for once?!”

If they would at least each try to protect themselves, Shin and the Eighty-Six wouldn’t have had to see the gruesome way so many Republic people had to die. They wouldn’t have to live with failing to save them, to leave them in such a terrible, unbelievable way to die. This all could have been avoided.

“How can you live your lives, look yourself in the mirror every day knowing you’re incapable of protecting your own sorry hides...?!”

His tone wasn’t accusatory, but pained, like he was coughing up those words along with his very blood. The voice of a man who had seen death, agonizing death, and suffered for it. The death of those who did not deserve to die.

The young man fell silent, overwhelmed. Unable to stay there, Shin looked away and hurried off.

As he walked through the streets lit up by the prismatic refractions cast by those glass leaves that would never fall, he heard someone come after him. Turning to look who it was, he found it was Marcel. He’d been onboard Grethe’s Reginleif and had apparently disembarked and gone after him.

He stood stock-still behind Shin, too busy trying to catch his breath to be able to say anything. Feeling all the tension drain from his body, Shin spoke up first. Seeing Marcel made regret wash over him.

“...Sorry.”

“What for?” Marcel furrowed his brow.

“I didn’t mean that being weak is wrong or it means you deserve to die.”

Eugene’s memory came to mind. The way he died on the western front. Shin didn’t believe he died for being weak. He wasn’t a coldhearted enough of a man to say that being weak was wrong.

“I know.” Marcel cut him off with a nod. “I know that... He fought, but he still couldn’t make it and died. But...”

But that's exactly why.

"...that's what makes dying without even putting up a fight feel so unbearable..."

"—Yeah."

"How can they be whole with themselves like that? It's not my fault or yours, but it just hurts... Even those people..."

Marcel cast down his slanted, catlike eyes morosely. He'd spent a year on the battlefield, too, watching many of his comrades die. His voice spoke to that grief.

"We'd have been better off if they didn't have to die, either..."

The military police pushed the young man and the refugees back into the station's interior and told them not to start fights with their soldiers, but the cold silence that settled over the glass-tree lane lingered. Even with Shin having said his piece and leaving, Raiden, Anju, Kurena, Tohru, and Claude didn't go after him.

None of them were in the state of mind to go after him.

The Legion War they thought was almost over, that they hoped they could end, whose conclusion seemed to be on the horizon, had been overturned in the space of a single night. Its end no longer seemed so certain.

All the battles they had fought and achievements they'd made over the last six months had been reduced to nothing. All their battles across the last half of a year may well have been meaningless.

Everything, every single thing they did might have been for naught.

The sense of empty futility and exhaustion had burned in their hearts since the day stars of flame rained down on all of humankind's battlefields. The sense of powerlessness, wasted effort, and this emptiness that they had by now grown used to.

Some part of their minds kept on whispering to them that the emptiness had been etched onto them in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, that humankind was utterly unnecessary for this world, and that there was nowhere they belonged.

But at least before this operation, they could keep their minds detached from that resignation and suppress their emotions. But the ones they'd gone to such lengths to save...

"Why did we have to save those people...?" Tohru whispered to himself.

"...Yeah."

Even though the relief expedition did try to rescue the Republic's people, they failed to save them all. Even though their operation failed. Even though the major general and his men risked their lives to stay behind as a rear guard, eventually sacrificing themselves.

Even though their past brethren were already dead and had been reduced to Shepherds. Even though the comrades they'd fought alongside with in the Eighty-Sixth Sector died. And even though over the last few months, they'd lost comrades who survived the large-scale offensive, too...

Claude clenched his teeth, feeling rage rise up within him. Even though Republic civilians died. Like his brother, who'd tried to fight as a Handler and probably died...

Why were these pathetic people the ones they ended up saving—and not all those who died? They never repented, couldn't show a hint of gratitude. All they did was grumble and complain and get nowhere.

Why did they get to survive? Why was it that the only thing the Eighty-Six really ended up achieving was saving these people?

An inexplicable feeling of wasted effort hung over him, crushing his entire body. What did they fight for? What did they achieve in all this time?

"What could I have done to save my brother...?"

The words left Tohru's lips without him even realizing it. Could he have done anything differently to save his brother? To change this operation? To save the major general and his troops—or the countless many of his comrades who died?

And even those pathetic Republic civilians. Up until now, he didn't care one way or the other if they ended up perishing. But still, he didn't think they

deserved to die such gruesome deaths, screaming in pain and agony. Could he have changed that?

“Could I have avoided their deaths...?”

Would he have been able to spare himself from seeing their cruel, terrible deaths...?



The Strike Package’s return to their home base was a transport mission involving thousands of Feldreiß and personnel. Even just unloading all the equipment would take more than a day. Despite everything having been moved up by a day, the transport team was ready and waiting for them, and the soldiers retired to their lodgings in the temporary base for a slightly early rest.

Some of them were completely exhausted and went straight to bed. Those who didn’t instead decided to hit the showers or had a light meal. The Scavengers, who knew no fatigue, ran around according to the transport team’s instructions, helping unload ammunition and energy packs. In the meanwhile, the base’s personnel went around with large trays loaded with coffee in paper cups.

But of course, the commanders couldn’t immediately get to rest. Lena included.

“Roger that. I think that’s enough for today. Good work, Shin.”

Once he finished relaying the necessary reports, Lena informed Shin he’d concluded his duties. They were in her small personal office, which had been allotted to her as a commanding officer.

“Yes, you too, Lena... It’s a bit late, but do you want to get something to eat? If you’re tired, I could bring it over.”

“No, it’s fine. I’d rather see everyone’s faces.”

Everyone had likely already finished eating, though, but they’d surely stick around for coffee.

“But before that... Just for a bit?”

“...Yeah.” Shin realized what she meant and nodded.

Lena had probably been keeping everything bottled up for the duration of the operation. She could take it then, but she was at her limit now. She got to her feet and embraced the man before her. She snaked her arms around him and buried her face against his chest. Tears welled up in her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she managed to say, still hanging her head. “I know you’re in pain, too, and I’m still so...”

The Shepherds that chose revenge. The countless Republic civilians who died. Someone as kind as you must be...

“Yeah... But I got to vent a little earlier, so I’m fine.”

At that, Lena’s eyebrows shot up. Shin realized he’d just put his foot in his mouth, but it was too late already. Lena raised her fair brow, pouted, and frowned, her mood taking a clear and rapid nosedive.

“You got to vent? To who? Raiden? Or was it Fido?” she asked, her silver chime of a voice more pointed and pricklier than usual. And while Shin did feel like he was wrong to blurt out that he’d confided in someone else, he didn’t see why she should be jealous of Raiden, to say nothing of Fido.

“...To Marcel.”

“Is that right? Well, I suppose I’m going to have to thoroughly cross-examine Marcel later.”

“Taking matters into your own hands?”

Shin said this, recalling what he’d said on the supercarrier, which made Lena remember they’d had this exchange once. She lowered her raised brow and giggled.

“Yes, I think I will.”

“Marcel is your subordinate, Lena. You shouldn’t torment him too much.”

“Yes... Not like you’re one to talk.”

They chuckled briefly. But then the tears finally spilled from Lena’s eyes.

“...We had to leave behind so many.”

“—Yes.”

“We failed to save them. They all...died. And Major General Altner died, too, for our sake.”

We let them die. We failed to save them. We let the Republic fall to ruin. The homeland where I was born and raised has finally been ruined. All of them, they all...died.

“I couldn’t save them. I didn’t want to abandon them, to let them die. I wanted to save them, but...I couldn’t do it. I...I...!”

“It’s not your fault, Lena. But...”

She felt his arms wrap around her back. Hard, muscular hands. And through his thick panzer jacket, she could feel his body heat, slightly higher than her own.



“I don’t think anyone can blame you for wanting to cry. You must be sad.”

He embraced her, telling her without words that she was allowed to cry.

And so...Lena raised her voice and sobbed openly. Grieving the loss of her homeland and the countless people who died.



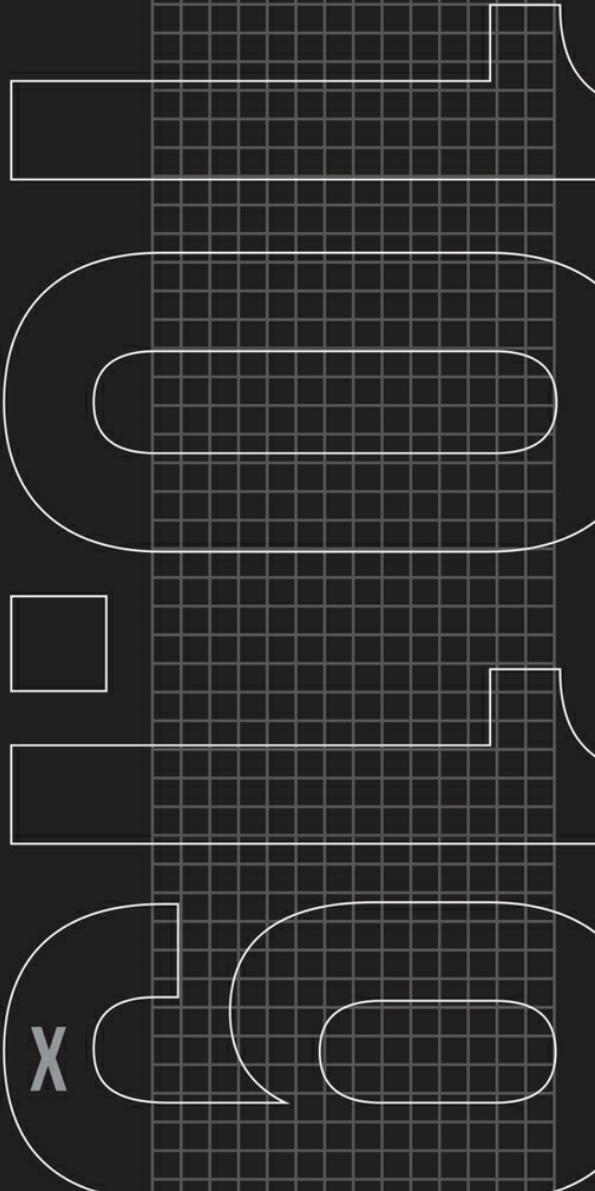
D-DAY PLUS EIGHTEEN.

Stellar Calendar: October 19, 2050

DIES PASSIONIS



Judgment Day.
The hatred runs deep.



86

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

EIGHTY-SIX

D-DAY PLUS EIGHTEEN

They had crossed four hundred kilometers of Legion-controlled territory, feeling like they'd achieved nothing and had to see many gruesome deaths. They must have been exhausted. Upon returning to the base, they finally allowed themselves to relax and returned to their rooms to sleep.

Frederica went around checking on them all. She stood outside their doors, listening in to hear if they were moaning from nightmares or otherwise weeping silent tears. To most of them, she was only an empress they protected without her ever telling them her true identity. This was the least she could do.

The Serpent of Shackles seemed to follow a few steps behind her all the time. Perhaps he was doing this because he was older than her, or maybe because Shin and the others asked him to take care of her. But suddenly, Vika parted his lips.

"Can I ask you something, Rosenfort?"

"What is it?" Frederica replied, not even turning her eyes to him.

Vika spoke to her turned back. Yes, it was possible this girl was some major noble's illegitimate child. And though the Empire abhorred the mixing of bloodlines, she may have been given an education to match a sovereign's bloodline. But despite that, even so...

A hint of doubt—of suspicion—appeared in his Imperial violet eyes.

"You're just a Mascot in the end. Why would you feel responsible for the Eighty-Six, for mere soldiers?"

The chief of staff, Willem, spoke without even regarding the report projected on the holo-window. They were in his office in the western front military's integrated headquarters.

“—We’ve accomplished the initial operation objective of assisting the relief expedition’s retreat with minimal losses. And when it comes to retrieving Vánagandrs, armored vehicles, and Úlfhéðnar exoskeletons, we’ve reached the necessary numbers.”

Even with the tides of the war crashing against them so much and his workload becoming much more packed, Willem didn’t seem any worse for wear. Grethe pondered to herself that this proof, this old comrade of hers was indeed one of the former great nobles who controlled the Empire, a true monster through and through.

He kept his emotions and expressions in check and perfectly guarded, so his heart would not notice these changes. All he ever showed others, and perhaps even to himself, was a facade of common sense and coldheartedness.

He had an almost mechanical inhumanity to him, the kind unique to the ruling class. To them, dehumanization didn’t just stop at seeing the commoners as livestock and the people of the combat territories as hunting dogs. They even saw their own family members, their own children as tools and pawns to be used in the game of politics and dominion.

The only trace of any humanity he had were his pitch-black eyes, which glinted sharper than she remembered them. Glinting with the desolate, gruesome brutality she once saw in him. With the heartlessness of the battlefield that took so many things, of his rage at his own powerlessness. The burning cinders of emotions he left behind as he overcame all that pain.

“As for the secondary objective, evacuating the Republic refugees, you were able to escort over thirty percent of their population. On top of that, you’ve confirmed the immortality of their commander units and a change in their behavioral patterns. You could very well say you’ve achieved much in this operation, Colonel Wenzel. So stop making that face, Grethe.”

“You’re the last person I want to hear that from, *Chief of Staff, sir.*”

Keenly noticing the implication to her words, the chief of staff cocked an eyebrow. His young adjutant frowned. It felt like they were respectively holding in rage for someone who had been lost and concern for someone who was in grief.

Realizing what she meant, he closed his thin eyelids once, clearing them of that bladelike sharpness.

“...Major General Altner’s fate was regrettable. However, I think that does sound like something Richard would do.”

“Yes.”

She knew what she was going to say next wasn’t something she should keep to herself, and she wanted to say it. Not just for Richard’s sake, but for Willem’s sake, too.

“And also...I have a message from Richard.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“Never go back to being the Killer Mantis again... He said seeing that bothered him, and he wants you to never do that again.”

The chief of staff widened his eyes for a moment, like he’d been taken aback, and then he heaved out a long, clearly irritated sigh.

“I wondered what his last words to me would be, and it’s this... Of course I won’t do it again. Didn’t he know how many years have passed or what role I fill now? The position I’m in now lets me slaughter more of those scrap monsters than I ever could on the front lines. Who would ever go back to being a mere armored infantryman now?”

He said it sounding utterly displeased, but then he squinted his eyes with a smile. This was probably the first smile he’d made since the second large-scale offensive started.

“And I knew it’d been troubling him. I knew, but he was ten years my elder. But at the time, he was already the head of a family and had plenty of life experience. He was Lord Altner, a commanding officer, so it only made sense for him to fuss over a green neophyte like me.”

Grethe cracked a soft, wistful smile. For what it was worth, she wasn’t aware of that at the time. But he was.

“You always were the worst, you know that?”

“You think you have the right to say that, Black Widow?”

The killer of Legion who fought in a self-sacrificial manner for her deceased husband, as if she was always clad in her mourning dress.

Grethe smiled. It wasn't a substitute for what'd she lost, but she did gain many things since. Things she had to protect.

"That's not me anymore."

The Federacy prepared facilities to receive war orphans in the Republic citizens' refugee sector. It was managed by the Federacy's military police. Theo entrusted the fox captain's son to the officer running the place, explained the child's situation, and bowed in gratitude.

When the officer graciously agreed to accept custody of the child, Theo went to see the kid off. After that, Theo took a several-day train trip with a connection that took him from the front lines back to Sankt Jeder.

With the weather beginning to snow, the capital was a good bit chillier than it was when he left it. The cold prickled against his skin, but the tense atmosphere that hung over the place before he left had lifted somewhat by now.

Maybe it was because there wasn't another bombardment by satellite missiles, and they did report that the next time it might happen, they would at least be able to predict where they would strike.

Plus, the capital was far from the front lines, so as always, the effects of the war didn't feel quite as pronounced. The Vargus were still holding the fronts, so not much had changed.

Except...

...glancing around, a group of demonstrators was walking the opposite direction from him along a footpath set between the roadway. They held up placards criticizing Ernst and his regime, as well as the military's incompetence. The young men who formed the core of this group had seemingly put on coats to match the season in the ten days since he'd seen them, and their group had greatly increased in number, too.

They occupied the entire footpath, parading around and chanting their slogans and demands. He could see a few people coming this way from the opposite side of this footpath, too.

Looking at them gave Theo a bad feeling.

There was another voice that reminded Theo of the sound of broken glass, this one coming from a holo-screen projected onto the side of a building. It was a news program that reported on the state of the war. The Republic's fall from a few days ago didn't receive much coverage. But after that, they reported that the United Kingdom's reserve formation at the Dragon Corpse mountain range's foot had fallen, which was a shocking blow for the Federacy.

What's more, the Federacy had to abandoned some of its sectors along the second southern front. In the few days Theo spent away from Sankt Jeder, the war had become all the news programs talked about. As if the realization that they were in wartime had finally sunk in.

Indeed, in this state of affairs, everyone knew the situation was getting worse. The young caster lady wasn't smiling anymore, and her expression and tone were strained as she gave a news flash about some front line or another.

Looking up, Theo whispered, his sharp jade eyes marred by tension and a feeling of impending crisis.

"What's going to happen next...? To the war...?"

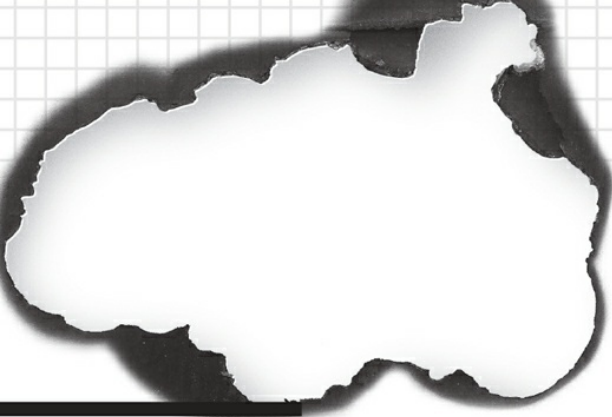
To us...?

As Willem's adjutant let his shoulders relax and slump, Grethe released her held breath as well. Looking up at her—and likely glancing at his adjutant's actions, too—the chief of staff resumed the topic he'd left off on.

"All the Federacy's fronts, the western front included, have been able to bring the fighting into a state of stalemate. Regardless of if we want to preserve this status quo or try to break through them, we'll need to make an analysis. And to do that, we need information."

Grethe gazed back at Willem, who shrugged. He wasn't enthusiastic, but he didn't show any signs of carelessness, either. This was all preparation to fulfill his duties as chief of staff.

"We will resume the Merciless Queen's—Zelene Birkenbaum's—interrogation... We will need to carefully investigate which of her intelligence is true and which is false."



8.27

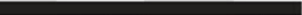
[EIGHTY-SIX]

Republic Calendar, August 27, 368
Two Days into the First Large-Scale Offensive

THE FIRST SECTOR



Judgment Day.
The hatred runs
deep.



800



THE FIRST SECTOR

“Not that I’m one to talk, but...my word, this is pathetic.”

After the Republic’s ground forces were wiped out nine years ago, the Republic’s current soldiers inherited neither its traditions nor its dignity. In the end, those soldiers were just there to fill the ranks.

Karlstahl sneered at how unsightly they were for not even being able to stall the Republic’s fall by a few days as he lay on the ground, organs that were never meant to leave his body spilling from his torn stomach.

They lacked education as soldiers, shirked from training, and only reaped the benefits of military service without learning neither the pride nor duty that came with it. And in the end, it only left them helpless to resist the Legion’s invasion.

There was no one left to respond to radio transmissions, no one left on the Para-RAID. No more shouts or gunshots or adults crying and wailing like children. All that remained was the sound of the chalk townscape burning, of cinders and flames crackling, fanned by the wind as they surged and howled at the sky.

The Eighty-Six—who, despite having received no proper education or training, fought for the last nine years—would likely put up some sort of resistance. This was Karlstahl’s estimate; the Eighty-Sixth Sector did have a force that could retaliate, but it was only the eighty-five Sectors that had the production and power plants that could support it.

With the Gran Mur between them, the Eighty-Six would lose their line of supply. And at that point, regardless of if they were willing to fight, they would eventually grow too weak to do so and be consumed by the Legion.

But that didn't happen—because Lena had broken open the gates of the Gran Mur, which stood between the eighty-five Sectors and the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

“I might not have the right to say it—but it's pathetic. The state you're in... You left your wife and daughter behind to do what? Reduce yourself into an enemy of humankind?”

As Karlstahl lay, by now completely incapable of moving, a single Dinosauria stood silently before him. With a combat weight of a hundred tonnes and a total height of four meters, it lorded over him imposingly, like a battleship on land. Its metal-colored armor shone red as it stood on the flames of the battlefield, unperturbed by the inferno. Its two heavy machine guns and tank turret weren't fixed on Karlstahl.

It stood there, with the arrogance of a supreme tyrant, as if to say it didn't need to do anything. After all, even if it didn't crush him, this heavily injured, fragile human body would soon perish on its own.

Karlstahl looked up at him—his pallid lips, drained of blood, curling up into a smirk.

“Your daughter really takes after you, you know? She's a dreamer who spouts idealistic nonsense all the time...and she doesn't know when to give up. Just like you, she'd fight tooth and nail against this world. She'd fight to the death for it. I'm sure she'll make for your greatest enemy, the way you are now.”

The way you are now—having turned against humankind even though your wife and daughter are still among the living. A pitiful Legion commander who'd watch by as his lackeys tear the family he loves so much to bits.

The Dinosauria stood silently before him, its optical sensor—its blue glow—like that of a will-o'-the-wisp—fixed directly on Karlstahl. Now that *he'd* become a steel monster, he no longer possessed the function to converse with humans. No thoughts that could be expressed to a human being.

And despite that, Karlstahl could somehow tell that he was asking him

something.

—Won't you come over to this side?

Before your life as a human flickers out.

With his face pale from blood loss and his lips going from purple to pale blue, Karlstahl spat out his response. Maybe that question was *his* greatest show of camaraderie and lingering friendship, now that *he'd* become a Legion.

"Never."

Karlstahl may have given up on his homeland a long time ago, but...but he hadn't fallen so far that he'd willingly become a pathetic combat machine that'd lost the masters who commanded it and only wandered the world driven by an impulse for aimless slaughter.

He lifted the pistol in his hands up—which, despite weighting less than a single kilogram, still felt much heavier—and held it up to his temple. The first bullet was already loaded. It was the Republic ground forces' standard-issue automatic pistol; it had no manual safety, and since it was a double-action model, one could fire it without having to cock the hammer.

A weapon optimized for suicide.

The Dinosauria looked down on Karlstahl silently.

—Is that right?

"That's right. I'll go ahead first and see how this plays out...and I won't be wishing for your success, either. You better put up a good fight."

Because you'll be fighting your daughter, who's so much like you but different in the most critical of ways.

A dreamer who spouts idealistic nonsense—and won't ever give up, no matter how much people's ideals are trampled over. Unlike you, who couldn't even give yourself up for your own ideals and turned against humankind despite having a daughter you love, she will probably resist the Legion and human malice to the bitter end.

You'll be fighting your daughter, who matured in ways you never knew.

You better bring your A game.

Because I won't wish for your success. Because I've already left all my wishes with your daughter.

"Václav."

AFTERWORD

I want to watch a meteor shower.

Hello, everyone, this is Asato Asato. There's actually a model the meteor shower from Volume 1 is based on. I wish I could see a meteor shower on that scale someday. And while that wasn't the reason, Volume 11 opens with a continental-tier shower of stars. So yes, thank you very much! This is 86—*Eighty-Six, Vol. 11: Dies Passionis!*

- The Chief of Staff Willem

He's the cast member whose duties deal with information analysis the most, so I decided to drag his name through the mud this time. Actually, a lot of the war crimes he's charged with were actually perpetrated by people who were ranked higher than him. In all likelihood, some bigwig in the central joint chiefs of staff tried to take responsibility for that by committing suicide...only to be stopped by those around them.

- Spin Load

A really cool reload technique that one can do with lever-action firearms. I actually had Shiden's unit be a shotgun configuration specifically so I could write a scene about this, and it finally panned out!

Lastly, some thanks.

To Tabata, the new editor in charge of me starting with this volume. On our very first meeting, you came up with this really devilish proposal that increased how hellish this volume was. I was actually a bit scared...

To the editors in charge of me, Kiyose and Tsuchiya. During the plotting stages, we said that Volume 11 would be a little thinner, but once I got to writing it, it actually turned out to be a bit bulkier than usual...

To Shirabii. Major General Altner got his cover-art debut! And Shin and Lena holding hands against that savage background is simply wonderful!

To I-IV. The Dinosauria's new configuration is as ominous as it is lethal. It's great!

To Yoshihara and Yamasaki. The manga versions of the Republic and Federacy arcs are on sale now. Congratulations!

To Somemiya. Congratulations on *86—Operation High School's* serialization! And thank you for handling the Blu-ray bonus magical-girl spin-off, too!

To Shinjou. The *Fragmental Neoteny* manga finally introduced Fido! It's so cute!

To Director Ishii. By the time this novel comes out, the countdown to the airing of the anime's second part will have begun! I'm so excited for it!

And lastly, to everyone who picked up this book. Ever since Raiden's words in Volume 1, Chapter 4, I was preparing myself to write the contents of Volume 11. Do watch over the choice that the "other" Eighty-Six took and where their rivalry with Shin and the Strike Package will take them.

In any case, I hope that for even a short moment, I could take you all to what lies under that indifferent, beautiful, blue, blue sky.

Music playing while writing this afterword:
"Hotel California" by the Eagles

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