

12

HOLY BLUE BULLET

86

[EIGHTY-
SIX]

ASATO ASATO

ILLUSTRATION:
Shirabii

MECHANICAL DESIGN:
I-IV

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

86

EIGHTY-
SIX

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Our ladies, pray for the miserable ones
at the moment of their death.



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ASATO ASATO

ILLUSTRATION:

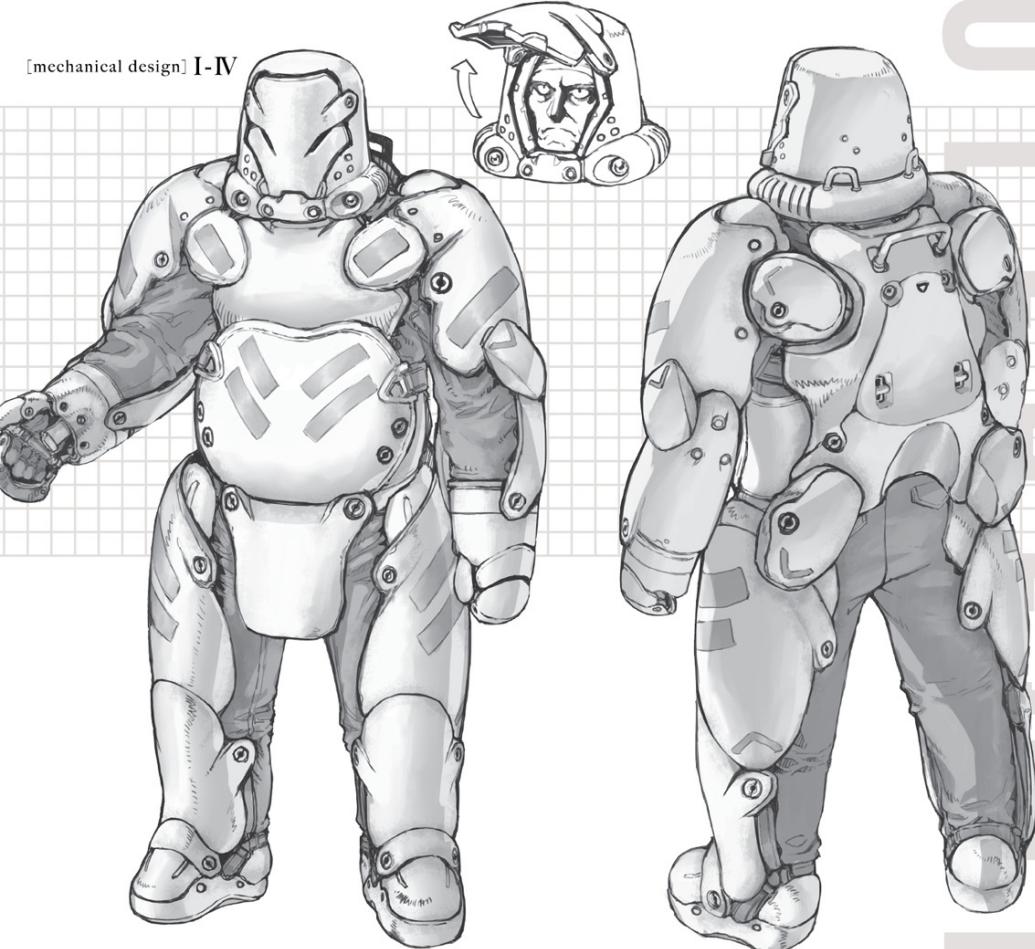
Shirabii

MECHANICAL DESIGN:

I-IV



[mechanical design] I-IV



[Giadian Federacy Military Armored Skeleton]

Úlfhéðnar

Singular: Úlfheðinn

[S P E C S]

Manufacturer: Vifosacri Ground Forces Arsenal

Total Length: Approximately 2m [can be modified to adjust for physique]

Fixed Armament: None

Main Armament: 12.7mm heavy assault rifle

*In addition, fixed autocannons, anti-tank guns, rocket launchers, and impromptu melee weapons [blunt objects such as scrap metal] have been used in ad hoc situations.

Notes: Owing to its specs, the vitals area is made to be resistant to 12.7mm bullets, with the limbs being resistant to direct hits from 7.62mm rounds. [However, the skeleton only prevents the bullets' penetration, and the shock of the impact can still cause severe damage to the human body inside it.]

The armored infantry units have been present since Volume 2.

Since the start of the war, the Giadian Federacy military has been using Vánagandrs to fight the Legion, but the infantry units that accompanied them suffered many casualties. As a result, this armored skeleton was developed and supplied to offer some minimal defense against the enemy's machine-gun fire, improve infantry survival rate, and equip them with stronger firepower that would make them into a fighting force capable of more flexible maneuverability compared with a Vánagandr.

Since they are only infantry units, one is not capable of beating a Legion unit on its own, and so the accepted tactic is to fight using multiple troops to lure the enemy into exposing their weak spots.

[EIGHTY]
SIX

Our ladies, pray for the miserable ones
at the moment of their death.

[IMAGE] [design: I-IV]

HOLY BLUE BULLET



At whom is that bullet aimed...?
If we are to survive, we cannot remain ignorant.

[EIGHTY-SIX]



ASATO ASATO PRESENTS

ILLUSTRATION / SHIRABII

MECHANICAL DESIGN / I-IV

86

— Holy Blue Bullet —

Volume
TWELVE

The second advantage of introducing the Artificial Fairies to the battlefield is as follows:

They do not act outside the scope of their orders. There is no cowardice, no desertion, no impurities that will impede operational activity in the form of their individual will.

In other words, their introduction enables us to lift one of the layers of fog that hangs over the battlefield.

—VIKTOR IDINAROHK, *ARTIFICIAL FAIRY OUTLINE*

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PROLOGUE

THE HOLY LAND OF MARY BLUE

Mele lived in the special municipality of Marylazulia in the north of the Giadian Empire. He spent every day playing from dawn to dusk with children roughly his age who lived in the same block. There was his best friend, Otto, who lived on the same floor as he did. Milha and Yono, from the floor beneath his. Rilé and Hisno from the building next door, as well as Kiahí, who was like a big brother to them all. Each block had either its own park, or a small forest area built over dried rivers in the outskirts.

Marylazulia was in the production territory of Shemno, on the border of the Wolfsland. Compared with other such production territories, which were typical agricultural communities that hadn't changed in appearance over the last century, the city of Marylazulia must have looked like a whole different world. Paved, clean roads without a speck of dust to be seen. Each block of buildings was constructed and colored in a uniform manner, standing side by side to form modern, concrete apartment complexes. Their large stores were always stocked with goods and sundries.

Mele, Otto, and the children of this town had never gone barefoot. They had shoes, fine bread, fresh meat, and pretty clothes. The wealth afforded to the territories was actively and preferentially apportioned to their city. Thanks to the authority of House Mialona, their governors; and the efforts of House Rohi, the city protectors, their wonderful homeland was transformed from a common

agricultural community to a wealthy town that provided an abundance of cutting-edge energy.

The large power plant on the outskirts enriched the special municipality and the territory. This plant, the Rashi Power Plant, was the only remnant of the town's old name after it was rechristened as *Mary the Blue-Mantled* (*Mary Lazulia*), after the governor's wife from two generations ago, who devoted her life to researching and planning the construction of the power plant. It was she who lifted Mele and his friends' grandparents and great-grandparents from a life of plowing fields and tending to pigs. It was she who established this facility, which would go on to promise these children food, hygiene, and employment.

A girl waved from the entrance to the park, her hair a smoky shade of chocolate unique to the Cairns, the noble race of the Ferruginea people who governed this land. The brown strands were tied into two tails, each adorned with a large, fancy, hand-knitted lace ribbon.

"Mele, everyone, so this is where you were."

"Ah, Princess!"

"It's the princess!"

"Princess Noele!"

Mele and his friends cheered and hurried over to the girl. This was Noele, daughter to the head of the Rohi family.

"Princess Niam from House Mialona loaned me a movie. Let's go watch it together."

"Movie! I wanna watch the movie!"

"Yay!"

Mele and the others excitedly followed Noele. Noele was pretty and smart and the city's collective princess, and to Mele and the others, she was also a dependable leader. Everyone in the village listened to whatever she said.

"Princess, what's the movie about?"

"It's about the leviathans—sea monsters that plague our neighbors in the Fleet Countries. They're very big and can easily sink their ships!"

"I've heard about them!" Otto raised his hand enthusiastically. "Back when the Roginia River was still around, the leviathans would swim up its stream!"

"What?! That's so scary!" Yono, one of the smaller girls, shrank in fear. Noele, however, puffed up confidently.

"Don't you worry. If one shows up, Father and Lord Mialona, and the young master and Princess Niam will drive it away! And I'll fight, too, of course, as a proud member of the Imperial nobility!"

The children all looked at her with shining eyes.

“Wow! That’s awesome!”

“Princess, I want to fight, too!” Mele leaned forward excitedly, and Noele nodded. Her beautiful eyes were the color of sweet chocolate—she was his personal little queen.

“Of course, Mele. So long as you follow me, we can do anything!”

Such was the peaceful atmosphere of the Empire’s twilight—six months before the revolution.



On the continent’s north, off the shore of the Regicide Fleet Countries, ice floes drifted in from the open sea beginning in early autumn until the end of winter. The black, sandy, wave-beaten shores were closed off by walls of large ice blocks. White fields spanned as far as the eye could see, with the ice sticking out like the dorsal fins of a sea dragon.

And somewhere along those shores, a shadow crept, looking around like it had lost its way. It shone the color of frozen snow, like moonlight gleaming through a frosty glass window. Its shape was slim and delicate, trailing like a bride’s veil and the train of her dress. It was as beautiful as a mermaid princess gliding through a banquet hall formed by the ice floes.

But it stood higher than any princess—or even the greatest, sturdiest warrior—at over three meters tall. In the shadow of its veil were three eyeballs *in its chest*, their irises diamond-shaped and their metallic luster glistening in peafowl colors.

The Open Sea clans called it a Leuca—a subspecies of the leviathans that governed the open seas. Its veil and dress were a half-transparent overcoat membrane that protected its armored scales. The part that looked like its head was a converging organ unique to this species of leviathan. It produced sonic waves that enabled it to function as an active sonar.

When an adult specimen emitted their ultrasonic waves at maximum output, they could produce a bubble pulse capable of breaking through a combat ship’s bilge armor—and so the Leuca were nicknamed the man-eating sirens of the open seas.

But the Leuca creeping over the ice now was a far cry from such a terrifying creature. It was a small, young specimen. It’d been carried off along with the ice,

separated from the seas to the north, and ended up drifting ashore.

The young Leuca turned its eyes to this unknown world, to the domain of humankind. And like a small brambling, the lost siren raised its voice in a pitiful call.

CHARACTERS

JUDGMENT DAY. THE HATRED RUNS DEEPER.

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 Esper 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

CHAPTER 1

THE KIND, BEAUTIFUL WORLD PROMISED BY BEAUTIFUL, KIND QUEEN MARY

“You’re just a Mascot in the end. Why would you feel responsible for the Eighty-Six? For mere soldiers?”

If she truly was nothing but a Mascot, she wouldn’t need to shoulder this responsibility.

When she was offhandedly asked that question, Frederica thought that the time had finally come. The Imperial house Adel-Adler had been reduced to mere puppet rulers and rarely showed themselves to the low-ranking nobles, to say nothing of the commoners. Since her father, the emperor, died and she was enthroned when she was still an infant, it was only natural a national of another country wouldn’t recognize her for who she truly was.

But the serpent facing her now was the Amethystus of House Idinarohk, his Esper powers blessing him with wisdom and insight that bordered on the supernatural. Frederica wasn’t naive or optimistic enough to believe she could keep her secret from him forever.

So she faced him carefully, maintaining a mask of composure to keep him from noticing.

“I...”

On paper, Frederica’s background held that she was the illegitimate child of a powerful noble. The Empire’s nobility abhorred children of mixed blood, so her family never publicly acknowledged her, but as a noble daughter, she was given a fine education. She was placed under the care of the president, Ernst Zimmerman, by one of the nobles who sponsored him, and at her birth family’s wishes, she was sent to the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package, which doubled as both an elite unit and a propaganda booster.

Frederica prepared to say out loud the answer she’d prepared ahead of time based on this false background. The kind of answer one would expect of the daughter of a militaristic Imperial noble.

“I, Frederica Rosenfort, am the sole Imperial noble in this Strike Package. Even if my ancestors do not acknowledge me, I shall uphold the pride of this country’s nobility and stand upon the field to lead the soldiers into battle. Mascot though I may be, I am still a soldier, and maintaining morale is my sovereign duty.”

Vika blinked once. “I see. So you have circumstances you can’t disclose.”

“...!”

“Letting slip something you weren’t asked is akin to openly admitting to a fabrication... You’re a bad liar.”

This time, it was Frederica’s turn to be left speechless. Vika eyed her coldly as the color drained from her face. She wore her heart on her sleeve. All he had to do was rattle her a bit, and she immediately went pale. Did one really need to steel themselves so much just to tell a single lie?

If she was truly born to nobility, then she would have been properly trained since infancy to control her emotions and expression, but Frederica looked like she’d never received any such lessons. And if her birth family didn’t regard her highly enough to teach her such things, her circumstances were probably not as important as Frederica thought or as Vika had suspected.

“Well,” he began, “I can’t say I care all that much about your situation, so I will leave things at that. However...”

The serpent prince made to continue, but then he cocked his head. Come to think of it, Frederica was awfully close to Shin—a Republic native, perhaps, but still the direct descent of Marquis Nouzen. If she was born as an offshoot of that bloodline, she may have mistakenly assumed the might and duty of House Nouzen were her own. If so...

“...what are you trying to protect? The soldiers, or your own conscience,

which dreads abandoning and hurting them?”

“I... I...”

“You must know to make that distinction. If fear of betraying your conscience leads you to insist on becoming involved when you lack the power to protect them, and your attempts to help fail and only result in you running away, then you’d have been better off abandoning them in the first place.”



<<No Face to Area Network.>>

Just as in the first large-scale offensive, looking at the ruins of his motherland stirred no emotion in him.

As the sight of the burning national army headquarters once again reflected in his optical sensor, this thought crossed the mind of the Dinosauria designated as No Face—the Shepherd once known as Václav Milizé.

His fuselage and turret had their backs to the statue of Saint Magnolia, which crumbled in the flames.

<<All areas of the Republic of San Magnolia successfully seized. All phases of Operation Passionis are now complete.>>

Seemingly content with this outcome, the surrounding commander units turned their optical sensors toward No Face. All of them were Dinosauria possessed by the hateful conviction of child soldiers, converted into vengeful Legion.

Once, they were known as Eighty-Six. But their new name was—

<<No Face to all commander units in Area Network—addressing all Agnus.>>

Using data gathered from the prototype High Mobility type developed by Zelene Birkenbaum—Codename Mistress—and the experiments involving the offensive amphibious battleship type, Schwertwal, and the surface battleship type, Ferdinand, the commander units were able to achieve immortality. They had ascended to become Agnus, unkillable by the blades of humankind and capable of rising after death.

<<For the sake of annihilating the remaining bastions of human influence, the next operation will now commence. First Area Network is tasked with working toward the conquest of the Federal Republic of Giad by gathering information from surviving Republic forces.>>



Despite it being well after bedtime, Lena wasn't able to sleep. She sat in front of the desk in her room, dressed in a shawl and negligee, her mind buzzing with thought after incessant thought.

The Strike Package's home base, Rüstkammer, was no longer safe. At this time of night, all the curtains had to be completely closed, and with a blackout in effect, the office was quite dark. Now that everyone was fast asleep, the base's atmosphere was somehow suffocating, and TP sat sleepily under the desk lamp's light, clearly irritated. Lena regarded the cat with a strained smile.

"...You could just go to sleep, you know."

The cat meowed at her, likely in denial, as if to say it didn't wish to sleep without her, or would be too anxious to get any rest, or something to that effect. The spoiled black cat blinked its green eyes at her. Patting it lovingly on the head, Lena sank back into her winding thoughts.

A burning train. Screaming and yelling and the color of flames. Her homeland, the Republic of San Magnolia, sealed off and converted into a decadent banquet of vengeance. Republic citizens fleeing into the Gran Mur for safety. Gunshots roaring in applause. Embers billowing up like campfire. The crumbled fortress walls she couldn't save, that she abandoned, that she left for dead. The colors of fire and blood. The voices of hatred and resentment. Flocks of Liquid Micromachine butterflies, soaring up to the sky like they were ascending to the heavens.

The ghosts of the Eighty-Six, who, in choosing hatred and lust for revenge, became Shepherds and joined the ranks of the killing machines. Their voices, chanting and barking and demanding one thing: *slaughter*.

We will have our revenge.

A degree of hatred and resentment that simply didn't overlap with her image of Lieutenant Lev Aldrecht. The man who, out of a desire to save his wife and child, chose to hide his identity as an Alba and travel to the Eighty-Sixth Sector to fight. The same man who, in the Spearhead squadron's barracks at their final disposal site, fretted over those children and their Juggernauts. Who saw them walk to their deaths once every six months.

Did he manage to satisfy his grudge?

He was willing to let the children he looked after kill him. He saw himself as guilty merely for being a Republic citizen. Was dying at Rito's hand the atonement he desired?

If even Aldrecht was guilty, were the other Republic citizens who died to the Eighty-Six's rage back there allowed to atone through their deaths?

Was that vision of hell, that inferno of death and resentment, what those countless fallen Eighty-Six, what that old head of maintenance wished for at the end of their hatred? At the end of their fury? If so...

Those thoughts haunted Lena, robbing her of precious sleep. Whenever she closed her eyes, she heard the screams of Republic citizens and the loathing of the Eighty-Six. How could anyone rest in that state?

But suddenly, a soft, reserved knocking on the door cut through the silence of the night. TP perked up his ears and beat Lena to the door.

“Lena? Are you still up?”

It was Shin.

Lena got to her feet, wondering what brought him here. The moment she heard his voice, her dampened spirits lifted somewhat, and she immediately felt guilty for the moment of unfettered excitement.

“Yes,” she said. “Is something the matter?”

She opened the door, finding Shin standing there with a sour expression. Despite it being nighttime, he was in full service attire, his tie straightened perfectly. Behind him was Lena’s adjutant, Second Lieutenant Isabella Perschmann.

“The second lieutenant did say as much, but...I see it’s true.”

“Huh?”



It had been nearly a month since Zelene was left in her shielded container, cut off from all contact with the outside world. After the second large-scale offensive began, Shin hadn’t come to visit her once. Vika, too, only saw her a single time after the offensive and hadn’t visited since. The intelligence personnel who had managed her so far were nowhere to be seen anymore, either.

If she was human, this long period of confinement in absolute silence and darkness would have been unbearable, but Zelene was Legion, so her isolation was a trifling matter. The Federacy military knew this, so it must not have been intended as interrogation or torture.

They were either reviewing the information she provided them or had otherwise given up on her as a reliable source of intelligence.

...She could only hope the latter was not true.

So Zelene thought in a voiceless sigh, sitting within the silent darkness of her

confines. She allowed herself to be captured by the Federacy so that the Legion wouldn't destroy humankind and to stop the Shepherds, which were now driven not by the Empire's final order, but by their own thirst for vengeance. But now all the information she'd told them was cast into doubt, and they would likely dismiss the information about the Legion shutdown procedure as fake intel, too. She couldn't allow that.

But then the cameras and microphones wired to the container were turned on from the outside.

"You're not dead— Well, no, I suppose you are technically dead. But you haven't broken down, have you, Zelene Birkenbaum?"

Within the cheap camera's pixelated footage stood an unfamiliar young officer. He looked to be roughly twenty. A pureblood Onyx with pitch-black eyes and hair, reminiscent of a starless night sky. He had the pale features typical of Imperial nobility, his expression as cold and cruel as a spear and his oblong eyes glinting sternly. He was like a deadly sharp blade—one that would soundlessly and effortlessly cut any who dared touch it.

His armband had the unit insignia of a skeletal hand gripping a longsword burning with spectral flame. Zelene was overcome with icy hostility. Even her electronic voice, as artificial as it sounded, had a touch of resentment in it.

<<...The Nouzen clan.>>

The insignia belonged to an elite unit under the service of the family that ruled over the Empire and the Imperial military. They were issued personally customized Feldreß and made up of only those who possessed Nouzen blood—they were the Onyxes' strongest trump card.

"Yatrai Nouzen. The Nouzen heir in command of the Crazy Bones Division."

His deep voice echoed around the room, matching the dignified way he carried himself and the cold, collected glint of his eyes. The sharpness of his tone would have intimidated most people, but Zelene was unfazed.

<<I have nothing to say to any Nouzen save for Shinei, descendant of the conquerors.>>

Someone coming here again meant the Federacy was intent on drawing more information out of her. They may not have trusted Zelene since she was a Legion unit, but, as she shrewdly concluded, they eventually came to accept that the information she could provide was accurate.

In that case, there was still leeway for this kind of negotiation. Even if it

meant allowing the Legion to continue and leaving her sins unatoned for, she would refuse to speak to *them* of all people.

Yatrai smiled thinly, as if he saw through her intentions. It was a smile of cold calculation. The grin of a ruler who showed no mercy to those he trampled underfoot.

“Come to think of it, you came from a lowly Pyrope family, didn’t you, Birkenbaum? Indeed, it would make sense for you to bear a grudge against an Onyx.”

<<...>>

Her hatred toward the Onxes. Toward conquerors like him. An indignation built up over a thousand years of repeated disgraces—the feeling was much too intense to be written off as a “grudge.”

“But you’re in no position to say any of that, you scrap-metal monster.”

Even though they were of the same bloodline, that kindhearted boy would never do what this Nouzen man did—carelessly calling her the common derogatory term humans used for the Legion. He reminded her that she was no longer human, only a lump of scrap metal to be discarded and destroyed.

“If you refuse to share what you know, it’s all the same to us. We’ll just dispose of you...and that would be your loss alone. If you refuse to speak, it’ll be *your* wish that goes ungranted, not ours. It’ll weigh on your conscience, and you’ll have nothing left to hope for. Everything you worked to achieve will crumble away into nothing.”

Her silence wasn’t a tool for negotiation anymore.

“Now that you’re just a lifeless machine, you’re hungry for the chance to do some good and save lives. Isn’t that right, Zelene Birkenbaum? If you’re holding on to any information, spit it out. Right here, right now. And then...”

He probably saw right through Zelene’s silence and into her thoughts. This next-generation Nouzen sneered at her with an arrogant, cruel smile fitting of the bloodline of conquerors.

“...we’ll decide if what you say is worth anything.”

After ordering an intelligence officer to wring every last drop of information out of her, Yatrai left the confinement room. With the western front’s retreat,

Zelene's container had to be moved, too. The information bureau's current headquarters were in an abandoned village, and her container was stored in its church's crypt. Placing a woman who had died ten years ago and was now a mechanical ghost in a resting place for the dead had a touch of irony to it.

Yatrai passed the thick metallic doors installed in the entrance to the crypt, and then quite suddenly, he dropped his shoulders and started grumbling.

“Aaaah, goodness me. Doing this is so stressful.”

He hung his head and frowned, his back hunched forward without a shred of dignity or motivation. His harsh demeanor from just a moment ago, the intimidating air of the next head of the great warrior house of Nouzen, both gone without a trace. The first lieutenant serving as security officer stared at him with open surprise, momentarily forgetting to show him courtesy. Yatrai didn't take offense to the officer's impoliteness, or rather, he didn't seem to register it at all. Like the royalty of the past, commoners weren't worthy of his attention any more than a fly on the wall would be.

“As if the Ehrenfried's nerve-racking third son and the damn president, terrifying as ever, weren't enough, now the blasted Brantolote hag's lost her temper. Everyone's so oppressive. Why do I have to put up with all of it? What did I do to deserve this?”

As Yatrai slumped over despondently, Joschka, who was waiting for him outside, called out to him in a teasing voice.

“So, Nouzen, you finally admitted you're going to be the next head... That's how you introduced yourself to Ms. Zelene, right?”

Yatrai pouted in displeasure.

“That's because my older brother, Mitz, was named the successor. I have no desire to follow him, but his children are all girls, and my other brother, Totsuka, died in battle, making me technically the next in line to succeed the title... I'd rather not, of course.”

He must have hated the idea of succession so much that even after accepting the inevitability of it, he felt pressed to emphasize how much he didn't want the role—not once, but twice. House Nouzen, a family that was old even when the Empire had been young, was prolific, with many members woven into the government, military, and countless corporations. But serving as the head of such a family wasn't as appealing as one might believe.

Although the position promised great power, the responsibilities and decisions one would have to undertake were just as grand, to say nothing of the scheming and greed one would be exposed to...along with a millennium's worth

of history, grudges, and deaths.

“And then there’s the current head’s grandson, who was discovered last year. Ultimately, he abstained from participating in the Nouzen succession race.”

Joschka hummed and crossed his arms. All the sons of the current Nouzen family head, Seiei Nouzen, had either absconded or died from illness or in combat, which posed a succession issue that House Nouzen had been grappling with for many years now. This was something Joschka, a member of the noble Maika family, had heard about. The power struggles within House Nouzen had finally settled down once Mitz—the elder son of Marquis Nouzen’s younger brother—and his younger brother, Yatrai, were tentatively named heirs.

But then the marquis’s grandson, Shinei, was revealed to still be alive, further shaking up the succession issue behind the scenes.

“I mean, Shin has no backing,” said Joschka. “He didn’t get the kind of education Imperial nobles have, so even if you were to forcibly install him as heir, he wouldn’t know what to do.”

“If he were to marry one of Mitz’s daughters, both Mitz and I would willingly back him, of course.”

But the Nouzen branch families had daughters of marriageable age, and Marquis Seiei’s daughters had married into other major noble families. Thinking they had probably suggested something similar, Joschka replied:

“It won’t fly.”

Shin already had a girlfriend, after all. Besides, the idea of a marriage arranged for political purposes, with romantic relationships being reserved for concubines and lovers, was a value of the Federacy. Shin, who was native to the Republic, would find it hard to accept.

“Yes, so it seems.” Yatrai huffed. “The current head doesn’t want to burden his grandson with the Nouzen name. And it’s probably the same with the Maikas.”

“...Well, yes. The marquess wants Shin to remain her precious child and to remain a kind grandmother in his eyes.”

Joschka could understand—both how Marquess Gelda Maika felt, and how Marquis Nouzen felt. Shin was a child who possessed their blood, but one whom they wouldn’t have to act like family heads around. A grandchild they could raise without having to look at him as a pawn for the clan’s survival or a soldier to bolster their might—a grandchild they could simply love unconditionally.

A child like that was something they, as former Imperial nobles, had never been allowed to hope for.

Yatrai, however, made a slightly peculiar expression.

“…No, both the family head and Marquess Maika might feel that way, but that’s not all there is to it.”

Joschka stared back at Yatrai curiously, but the look was not returned. His black eyes—that merciless gaze was engulfed by the darkness of the Nouzen bloodline.

“The Strike Package’s Headless Reaper. The ace and commander of the Federacy’s elite, trump-card unit… The warrior king of the Eighty-Six. Both Marquis Nouzen and Marquess Maika aren’t so foolish as to pester him with shouldering the family name, not with the war situation being as poor as it is. That’s what it really comes down to.”



Only half a month had passed since the operation in the Republic. The front lines had been pushed back dozens of kilometers, and by now, the distant rumbling of artillery had become everyday background noise for the Rüstkammer base. And likewise, the daily lives of the captains and their vice lieutenants also changed, with the addition of regular high-level command training.

As he listened to a lecture from the 2nd Armored Division’s supply staff, Raiden pondered on the army’s current shortage of staff officers. Many soldiers, noncommissioned officers, and staff officers died during the second large-scale offensive, and many more lost their lives in its aftermath in an attempt to maintain the stalemate on each front.

On the other hand, the Strike Package had a higher-than-regulated number of staff officers, meant to assist company officers like Raiden and the other captains and vice captains who lacked authority. Those staff officers could be reassigned to help units on other fronts at any time. So to ensure the young soldiers wouldn’t be left incapable of handling situations in their absence, the staff officers volunteered to take turns offering them special lectures like this one.

But in the meantime, the Strike Package still had not received its next orders.

In truth, the site they would be deployed to next was already decided, but the orders about their next mission, or any background information about it, hadn’t yet reached Raiden. Were they having trouble pinning down the exact destination, or were they wary of the information leaking out?

“...Not that they’ve stopped trusting us or anything.”

The thought quietly spilled from his lips. All their achievements had been reduced to nothing, and two weeks ago, they’d failed in the Republic rescue operation. They had technically succeeded in their top-priority objective—namely, aiding the relief expedition retreat—but their commander Richard Altner had died in the line of duty, and the Republic had fallen.

To Raiden, these were objective failures, and he had to ask himself if such failings had influenced the Federacy military’s approach.

For the time being, he counted this as the Federacy providing them the time off they were promised during the month of October. Thankfully, unlike in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, their legal guardians sent them an abundance of distractions, such as movies, cartoons, and comic books, so there was no shortage of things to do. The war swinging against them hadn’t started influencing the amount or quality of their food yet, either.

Even the neighboring city of Fortrapide, which had evacuated most of its citizens, still had some of its coffee shops, stores, and pubs open for business in order to cater to the Vargus and Strike Package members.

But even so.

“I feel like we should get moving at some point...”

The bitter sense of futility left in the wake of the operation in the Republic—the retreat that had forced them to leave behind Republic citizens... He didn’t want that to be the note they went out on.

“Busywork helps keep your mind distracted, doesn’t it?”

In addition to the captains and vice captains who were the primary recipients of this special lecture, all Eighty-Six who were ranked platoon captain and above were also required to attend, as they could end up filling in for their superiors if the need arose. This meant that Kurena and Anju had to go, too.

But since there were so many of them, out of consideration for the Processors’ usual daily duties, they were split into several classes. At present was the morning class, for the vice captains, and the two girls’ lesson was later that day after lunch. The two of them were poring over the text they were given to read in preparation for the lecture. They were in Anju’s room, which she’d furnished elegantly with dried flowers and assorted decorations, though Kurena had to bring a chair from her own room.

...Up until now, Kurena had often shirked doing her homework, and so she

struggled to prepare for the lecture. Kurena pouted—if only she’d taken the time to study and do her lessons a month ago. To think she’d wind up scrambling to make up for it now, with the war going badly and no time to spare.

As Kurena spun the pen in her hand in time with her whirling thoughts, Anju could only smile wryly.

“I really think it’d do you good to go back over the basics.”

“Mm... I guess. I thought there wasn’t enough time for that, but you’re probably right...”

She closed the preparation text and called up the file for the foundations manual. It had the kind of bulky, inaccessible-looking cover that was typical of military texts. The design immediately put her off, but Kurena swallowed her displeasure and opened the file.

As Kurena flipped to the appropriate chapter and started going through it with her brow furrowed, Anju returned to the topic at hand.

“Maybe they arranged these special lectures to keep us too busy to brood over the situation. But...”

“Yeah. We can’t simply stop thinking about it, but at the same time we don’t want to overdo it distracting ourselves.” Kurena finished her sentence.

They both sighed, thinking of the same person.

“...Lena,” said Kurena.

“Is she going to be all right?”

Lena was currently in uniform, but the trunk beside her was full of plain clothes. It also included her personal necessities and a few poetry anthologies she was reading—but nothing work-related. And next to it was TP’s carrier.

Beside her luggage Lena stood dejected, her shoulders drooping.

“...I’m sorry,” she said.

They were in the Rüstkammer base’s airfield, awaiting a transport plane. With one hand, Shin held TP’s carrier and shook his head in denial. The cat had been meowing repeatedly like it was begging for something.

“Don’t be. I’m just glad I picked up on it before you pushed yourself too hard.”

He peered into Lena’s face—which, besides her frown, did look a little pale—before gently continuing:

“I know that it might be difficult to suddenly shift gears and go on leave, but just think of it like this: Knowing when to rest is part of work, too.”

"She saw her homeland destroyed before her eyes, and on top of that, she had to witness so many people shot and burned to death. It must have been hard on her. Even we weren't unfazed, so imagine how it must have felt for her."

"...Yeah. Just remembering it makes me sick." Kurena nodded, pursing her lips.

The way the Legion mercilessly slaughtered so many innocents... The way the Republic ruthlessly gunned down her mother and father. When she was fighting in the Republic, and later on, when they retreated, Kurena was able to maintain her composure. At the time, she didn't even think of it.

There was no time for her to dwell on the death of her parents in the midst of battle, with all her focus on the march and the safety of her surroundings.

But when they came back to the Rüstkammer base—back to the comfort of a kind of home—when she entered her room and could finally wind down, the memories came rushing back to her, stabbing at her old wounds.

She saw her parents murdered in a dream and woke up screaming. Only when the girl in the room next to hers—a girl from her platoon—hurried over to ask her what was wrong did Kurena finally realize it was just a dream.

Kurena, are you all right?!

When the girl said that, Kurena was too frozen up to respond. The concerned girl made her some hot cocoa—each room came equipped with an electric kettle—and Kurena finally settled down only after she drank it.

That kept happening for a few nights. She became scared of going to sleep, and a few days later, right as she started considering consulting the medical staff if she became unable to get any rest, the nightmares stopped. She was fine for now, but...

"I don't like seeing people die... And the thought that Lieutenant Aldrecht and all those Eighty-Six we don't know suffered enough to wish their plight onto others hurts, too..."

"...Yeah."

Seeing Eighty-Six, just like them, overcome by so much hatred, and witnessing people die such gruesome, terrible deaths was a painful experience, even if they weren't on either side of the exchange. It truly was painful—even to the Eighty-Six, who were used to seeing mangled corpses...who were used to seeing people caught in the awful balance of being too wounded to survive but not wounded enough to die quickly. Some of them had to go to counseling following the operation and were ordered to take time off to recuperate.

And while Lena may have been the Eighty-Six's Queen, the Republic was

her homeland, and its people were her countrymen.

“At least Shin was nearby and caught that Lena had stopped eating.”

Realizing that something was wrong, he asked Second Lieutenant Perschmann, who confirmed Lena hadn’t been sleeping, either. He realized that Lena, her personality being what it was, would push herself to the brink, and so he reported to Grethe, who scheduled a meeting with the mental-health team.

Their prescribed treatment was for Lena to be removed from her duties for a month and put on leave—and she was being sent to recuperate on the transport flight later that day.

Lena was shocked to hear the doctor’s orders and soon became dispirited and apologetic. She spent the few days between the medical visit and the flight in a funk.

“...Dustin and Annette were fine, apparently. How come I’m the only one being ordered to rest...?”

“I heard that Dustin was told to refrain from participating in active combat, too, so we can’t take him to the next operation. And Rita wasn’t on the battlefield to begin with.”

Lena puffed up her cheeks grumpily. “...Her name is Annette, Shin.”

“Come on, you can let that slide.” Shin chuckled.

“No. Call her Annette.”

“Okay, okay, Annette... Take care of yourself, Lena.”

Hearing this, Lena finally managed a small smile. “I’ll try.”

She then brought her hands together and leaned forward, trying to rouse herself.

“Apparently, the military medical facility I’m going to has its own ranch, and they teach you how to interact with the animals. I think I’ll pay it a visit. Maybe I’ll learn how to ride a horse! Do you know how to ride one, Shin?”

“I’ve never ridden a horse... I do know how to ride a bike, and I had to get a driver’s license as part of my training.”

Bikes were used for recon, and automobiles were used for transportation, so despite Shin being a Feldreß operator, he was given classroom time and basic training on how to operate other vehicles. He couldn’t handle large trailers and the like, and at present, only the honor guard and reconnaissance units in select regions used horses, so he didn’t know how to ride those, either.

Shin regarded her with a teasing smile.

“Before you do that, though, you should learn how to crack an egg.”

“I can crack eggs just fine, and you know it! We both took cooking as an elective!”

There was a time when they studied at a school built in Fortrapide during their scheduled leave. More students had been attending than when the Strike Package was first established, and it was there that Lena learned that she didn’t need a hammer to crack an egg open, and Shin discovered that as long as he followed the recipe, he could produce decent tasting food.

As long as he followed the recipe.....

Second Lieutenant Perschmann approached her. She had green eyes and red hair that was pulled back into a bun. Her figure was delicate, and she wore silver-rimmed glasses and stood with her back very straight.

“I told them to pick a docile horse for you,” she said, matter-of-fact. “Also, I hear the head of the medical facility makes very good omelets, so you ought to have them teach you... You might end up becoming better at it than a certain captain whose name shall be omitted, who keeps neglecting such simple steps as beating the egg.”

Shin raised his hands in the air, as if to ask her to stop teasing him so much.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself,” Lena said, managing a smile, although it still came across as a little forced.

“Yes, well... You’re on vacation, Colonel. Try to have some fun.”

“Okay...”

“I’m honestly kind of jealous of Lena... Vacation must be nice,” Rito mused, leaning his chair diagonally back and looking up at the ceiling.

“Do you really feel that way?” asked Mika, who sat across from him with her cheek resting against her hand.

“Of course not,” Rito replied indifferently.

He’d never leave his comrades behind to take a trip in the country, and Lena probably wasn’t any more comfortable with the idea than he was. More than anything, the idea of leaving Shin behind on the battlefield and going somewhere far away likely didn’t sit well with her at all.

“I mean, look at us now. We’re resting because they told us we should, but... we’re all kind of on edge.”

They felt like they had to do something...like they couldn’t bear to sit still. But there was nothing to be done in this situation, leaving them at a loss.

"It's because we're panicked and confused...that we have to rest properly," Michihi said.

They were told to take time off to dispel their conflicted, fretful emotions or else to swallow and suppress them.

"So they want us to lie in bed, like we're injured?"

"I guess it's pretty nice that they're giving us time to rest."

With each squadron in the Eighty-Sixth Sector having a set number of members, even the injured and the sick couldn't be excluded from the fighting. It was hard to believe they were being allowed time for mental or emotional damage.

"I guess it's good for Claude, too." Shiden glanced at one side of the table. "Gave him the chance to find his brother and dad."

"Claude was seriously pissed off at them, though."

"Anyone would be, all things considered..."

His half brother from his father's side had served as a Handler for Claude's unit without telling him and fought alongside him before the first large-scale offensive. Then, afterward, Claude lost contact with him. His brother was too ashamed to reveal his name, but now that the Republic had completely fallen, he'd stepped up to become a volunteer soldier out of concern for the situation.

Needless to say, the possibility that his brother had died during the large-scale offensive hung heavily over Claude's mind, so the shock of this discovery made his anger swell. During the first meeting the Federacy military arranged for them, Claude became so incensed that it had to be postponed.

Tohru, Grethe, the old lady, and the priest all had to step in to calm him down and convince him to agree to another try. But even then, Claude had shouted at his brother, asking him what right he had to show his shitty face after all this time.

As the others glanced at him, Claude's mood seemed to plummet. Just having his brother mentioned irritated him.

"...Well, I guess having to deal with that asshole does make for a good distraction."

"Same here..." Tohru said languidly from the seat next to him.

Despite being his closest, oldest comrade, Tohru had never seen Claude react with such rage—not to anyone. So having to hang around him while he was in such a mood was exhausting. Despite that, as Claude said, it did help keep their mind off things like the slaughter of the Republic citizens, the hatred of the Shepherds, which now housed the minds of their fallen comrades, and the

unreasonable antipathy of the Republic citizens.

Those were all unnecessary concerns that Claude and Tohru were too busy for. And perhaps, in fretting over Claude, this also applied to the old woman and the priest, who had just experienced the irreversible loss of their country.

“But, Claude, it’s about time you forgave your brother. If you reject him too hard, he might just back off, and if anything happens to either of you, whoever’s left would regret it forever.”

“Shut up... I know that.” Claude squinted bitterly behind his glasses. “I’ll talk to him next time.”

He then turned his snow-white eyes to Rito.

“Speaking of distractions, you must have it the hardest, Rito. Shouldn’t you try to do something to keep your mind off things?”

Rito jolted upright upon being called out. Claude was probably referring to how he’d had to kill Aldrecht.

“Oh, me...? I’m fine...”

“““Don’t force yourself.””” Shiden, Mika, and Michihi spoke in unison.

“That Shepherd you defeated was someone you used to know, right?”

“The more you brood over something, the heavier the emotional burden becomes. Even Lena had to take time off.”

“If it’s weighing on you, make sure you get some rest. Either that or do what Claude said and find a distraction.”

“Mm...,” Rito said after a moment’s pause. “Fine. I’ll ask for permission to take time off and leave the base tomorrow. Maybe I can go on a walk or look up weird books in the library and eat lots of cake at a coffee shop.”

“Wait, the library’s open?”

“It’s just the head librarian and his wife now. They still check out books, and they’re projecting film media in place of a theater and do storytelling for the Vargus’s children.”

“The dining hall and PX in the base are planning some events, too. If you need a change of pace, you can check those out,” said Shin as he entered the room.

If he was here, that meant Lena’s flight had departed. Afterward, Raiden returned from his lecture, followed by an oddly exhausted Kurena and a calm Anju.

“It might be a bit late to suggest this, but let’s hold a party before our next mission. To celebrate Halloween and boost morale.”

Most of the staff from the dining hall and PX weren’t actually soldiers but

rather civilians who had entered military service. With the front lines having fallen back and this base being closer to the fighting than ever before, they were undoubtedly afraid, but they still did what they could to keep spirits high. Throwing a party would be a nice way to show appreciation for all they had done, as well.

"That sounds like fun—I'm in!" Rito said, leaning forward. "And, Cap'n, you can wear a Reaper costume!"

"No, costumes aren't mandatory, so I won't be dressing up." Shin shook his head.

"Nah, Shin, you should. Gotta liven things up, y'know?" Raiden cut him off.

"The moment you stop smiling, you lose, right?" Anju chuckled. "Let's take this chance to do a moon viewing, like Kujo wanted." She smiled.

"Huh? What's a 'moon viewing'?" Claude reacted to the unfamiliar word.

"You're making mooncakes?" Michihi, who knew the term, asked quizzically.

Everyone repeated the word, confused. "Mooncakes?"

"Dustin, do you have a minute? I got the requests for the next screening session."

"Oh, thanks."

As they crossed paths on the way to the dining hall, Marcel called out to Dustin and handed him a notepad, which he accepted gratefully. After a stern warning from the mental-health team's counselor, it was decided Dustin would not participate in the upcoming operation. He was also told not to attend training for now, so while his mind might have been occupied, he had plenty of time to burn. That was why he'd started organizing movie nights.

Every day, they'd switch genres—one day action, the next romance—and he'd set up folding chairs in empty meeting rooms and dim the lights to simulate the atmosphere of a cinema. Once they heard about Dustin's idea, Olivia and the Alliance's expedition members asked the PX's staff to set up stalls that sold popcorn and carbonated drinks.

The screenings were always a success. Some of the Processors requested a splatter-film marathon, and Dustin had to wonder if that was a good idea after their last operation. He hadn't been there to watch in person, but he had Vika supervise in his place. Vika himself watched the thing, and contrary to Dustin's concerns, the Processors laughed enthusiastically as gore flew all over the screen

like bits of ripe tomato.

Dustin could only conclude that this, too, was a way to relieve stress.

The Federacy's western front had been pushed back farther than it had at the founding of the Strike Package—even farther than two years ago, when they rescued Shin and his group. After the Republic aid operation, which was essentially a rout, most of the Eighty-Six were detained in this base, where they remained.

Vika's homeland, the United Kingdom, also had to continue its retreat over the last month. Communications were still ongoing, so he knew his father, the king; and his brother, the crown prince, were still alive. The southern farmlands had become a battlefield, but they had still managed to bring in the harvest. Despite that, there was no telling what they would do after the coming winter.

Dustin himself was able to keep his mind off things thanks to this idea of his. And as a perk of being the planner, he could always secure the best seats for whatever romance movies Anju wanted to watch and maybe see them with her if given the chance.

Zashya and Annette looked at him like he was human trash for doing it, though. Which reminded him...

“Hey, Marcel... I haven’t seen Annette around for the last few days. Have you spotted her anywhere?”

Marcel paused to think.

“I haven’t seen her, either, come to think of it. I wonder where she is.”

Theo was currently stationed in a base on the outskirts of the Giadian capital of Sankt Jeder. Compared with last month, the corridors were full of reserve soldiers gathered for practice drills. As he walked through the halls with his new colleagues, carrying training materials, Theo spotted a familiar flash of silvery white and stopped in his tracks.

“What’s wrong, Theo?” one of his colleagues asked.

“Oh, nothing, I just thought I saw someone I know...”

Was he imagining things? No, upon looking again, it really was someone he recognized. Her Prussian-blue uniform stood out among the sea of steel-colored Federacy uniforms, along with her slender form, unbefitting a soldier. She walked off, her expression sterner and grimmer than he’d ever seen it...

“Annette...?”

What was she doing here?

Just before lunch, Dustin and Marcel entered the first dining hall. Even after the boisterous meal started, however, Annette was still nowhere to be seen. As the room grew crowded, Grethe and her adjutant joined, having reached a stopping point in their work. Shin raised a hand, signaling two empty seats for them. Raiden pulled the chairs out, and Tohru and Claude went to get them trays, since they both looked exhausted.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it... Colonel, do you know where Annette is? She didn’t come see Lena off.”

Shin asked the question casually, but Grethe and her adjutant briefly fell quiet.

“She went to Sankt Jeder on business... She’s off to meet the Eighty-Six children. The little ones, who were too young to take to the battlefield.”



An odd silence hung in the air. Raiden, Anju, Kurena, Shiden, and Rito all stared at Grethe, confused. Shin leveled a puzzled look at her, too.

“...But there weren’t any children that young left in the Eighty-Sixth Sector.”

He’d spoken about this with Lena once, a long time ago, before they had even met face-to-face.

But what about the Eighty-Six? How many of us are left?

I think that in two to three years, we’ll all be gone. The people in the internment camps aren’t allowed to reproduce, and most of those who were infants when the internment happened have died by now.

The Eighty-Sixth Sector had no proper medicine or sanitation, and with their parents and guardians dead, most infants didn’t survive the first winter. The few who had were sold off inside the Gran Mur, never to return.

The ones three years Shin’s junior—Rito’s cohort—were the youngest surviving generation of Eighty-Six. In the Eighty-Sixth Sector, where children had been sent out to fight in their early teens, there’d been no such thing as being “too young” to be put on the battlefield.

No such children should be left in the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

“I see... I suppose that’s what it must have looked like to you.” Grethe sighed softly. “But as a matter of fact, there *were*. Yes, the Processors we rescued along with them were shocked. They didn’t think any young children were left, and they told us how harsh life in the internment camps was—that none should have made it. Yet even so, the Federacy held out hope that some children must have survived.”

The Federacy simply didn’t understand how harsh life in the internment camps was. They didn’t realize it had been so difficult that those inside couldn’t believe an infant would have survived it.

Children were removed, you see. Children who couldn’t fight, or who lost the ability or the will to do so.

Among the Eighty-Six sheltered by the Federacy, there were children too young to fight, those who’d experienced crippling injuries in battle, and those who refused to enlist in the military. Such children were sent to facilities or were adopted by foster families in the Federacy.

The Federacy had welcomed these children who should not have existed.

Grethe’s violet eyes filled with hatred and disgust.

“The little ones who endured the sickness and the cold were sold off, right? And sent back within the Republic’s walls...”

The house owned by his “new mommy and daddy” in Sankt Jeder was large and pretty. So large that it made him ill at ease after growing used to the cramped untidiness of the internment camp’s barracks he’d known when he was little.

Before he was returned to the internment camp, he’d been kept in another large, pretty estate as far back as he could remember, and this house reminded him of it. This, too, scared and unsettled him.

He was terribly afraid, but he knew that if he let that feeling show, he’d be yelled at. So he faked a smile, and that seemed to satisfy his new mommy and daddy.

His *master*, too, had always demanded that he smile. And then, too, he had desperately faked a smile to please him.

He felt the back of his neck tingle with heat.

Filthy little piglet.

Someone’s voice—the voice of a person who couldn’t possibly be in this house—echoed inside his ears. He froze up. Once again, he was dragged back to that large, pretty mansion, to the confines of his master’s cramped, cold cage.

Filthy piglet. My adorable, dirty little piglet. What are you? Speak it. Say it with your own voice.

That curse had been burned into his mind back then.

“I am a filthy piglet who should be happy he’s being kept by Master.”

He had to say this. Whenever he was asked, he had to answer right away. If he didn’t, horrible things would happen. He’d be whipped, dunked into freezing water, or even killed like his little sisters had been.

...Although, even when he gave the correct answer, Master would still do horrible things to him. His younger sisters all died in the meantime, and he alone survived. After a while, Master said he had no need of him anymore and sent him back to the internment camp.

Then the Republic had fallen to the Legion’s attack, and, still a young child, he’d moved to the Federacy’s internment camp, from which he had been adopted into this home.

However...

Good. Now for your next order.

...Master issued another command. Ever since he was adopted a second time, Master had started giving out orders again. Unlike back in the estate, now he only used his voice. Master didn’t show himself anymore, but he kept issuing his commands, unseen.

Ask your father for this information. Pester your father and tell him you want to know where that unit is going. Go to the injured Eighty-Six, say you're there to wish them well, and milk them for information.

It was only his master's voice. He never saw the man anymore when he received his orders. But he'd been sold into the Republic from the internment camps when he was still a baby. The terror had been instilled in him, controlling him for as long as he could remember.

The fear of disobedience had been imprinted into his very bones, so even to this day, he was under his master's control. So much so that he couldn't comprehend that now, when he was under the Federacy's protection, his master couldn't touch him anymore.

He was ordered, and so he had to obey. This was the only thought he was allowed to have, so even in the present day, he was incapable of anything else.

"With pleasure. I'll do anything you tell me."

This was the only answer he was allowed to give.

Good boy. Now—

Master spoke, with a voice different from the master who had owned him and his sisters. It was a different voice—a different person. But he gave him orders and demanded obedience, so this person, too, was his master.

I must obey.

Must obey.

Must obey.

Must obey.

Every single order, even the scary ones and the painful ones. Anything they tell me, I must obey.

Just like always, have your father tell you—which battlefield will the Eighty-Six go to next?

Thoma Hatis was a supply and communications officer serving in the Sankt Jeder military headquarters. Since the second large-scale offensive and the resulting fallback of all the front lines, his days had been quite busy and hectic. But that day, he was finally given time off. He took his time waking up, had a leisurely late breakfast, and sipped on coffee his wife had just brewed as he started over on a book he'd stopped in the middle of.

He intended to go to the department store that afternoon to do some early shopping with his wife and young son for the upcoming Holy Birthday. Thoma had two biological daughters, who had both married by now, but his son was an

adopted child he'd taken in a year or so ago.

Since the day he'd been adopted, the boy always had a fake smile plastered on his face. Thoma got the impression he was constantly afraid of something. He could tell something terrible had happened in the boy's past, but he didn't want to ask. Reminding the child of those events might reopen old wounds, after all, and he didn't want to force a scared, frightened child through that pain.

Suddenly, Thoma heard a loud knock at the front door.

"Who's that?" he said.

"Are we expecting guests?" asked his wife.

House Hatis was a family of low-ranking nobility, a hereditary house of knights, and when the Empire became the Federacy, they were stripped of their title and domain. They were allowed to keep a modest fortune, which included this small mansion in the capital. Thoma walked through the halls of the estate, far too large for a family of three, and approached the front door.

"You're Colonel Thoma Hatis, yes?"

Upon opening the door, Thoma was greeted by the sight of the Federacy's familiar steel-colored uniform, but the people standing on his doorstep were an unfamiliar group. Their armbands had the letters *MP* etched onto them. What were the military police doing at Thoma's doorstep when he was off duty?

"I am. Can I ask wha—?"

"Excuse us."

The officer leading the unit gently but firmly pushed past Thoma and entered the house. His wife peeked her head out to look, but the soldiers who followed him inside held her back. Upon entering the living room, the officer knelt silently. In front of him on the sofa was Thoma's little boy, visibly tense at the unusual event.

"Ren Hatis, before you were adopted into this home, your name was Ren Kayo, correct?"

"...Yes."

"Check him."

He instructed one of the military police officers escorting him to face the boy, who was turned around with movements that, while not violent, allowed no resistance. Their repeated offenses, directed at a small child, made Thoma's anger bubble over.

"What are you doing?!"

He made to draw closer, but another MP stood in his way. With the sound of clicking heels, a slender girl stepped out from behind the open door and walked

inside. She had short argent hair and eyes of the same color. She wore an unfamiliar, Prussian-blue uniform with a classy bolero skirt.

A classy, Prussian-blue uniform—the Republic.

Seeing that uniform and the color of her hair and eyes, his son contorted his cherubic face with more fear and terror than Thoma had ever seen before.

“Eeeek...!”

Noticing his reaction, Annette grimaced, but she soon shook it off and spoke, pointing a finger at the back of the suppressed Eighty-Six boy’s slender neck.

“Over there. Scan him.”

An MP held up a simple scanner and switched it on. This was a piece of technology employed by combat medics, developed by the Federacy military’s battlefield medical teams over ten years of fighting the Legion. It detected fractures, and quickly found bullets or shell fragments that had entered the body.

The display indicating quasi-biological components lit up, and the device beeped.

In the large meeting room in the western front’s integrated headquarters, the western front military’s chief of staff, Willem Ehrenfried, switched off the Para-RAID upon receiving the report.

“Confirmed... The wiretap in Sankt Jeder has been eliminated.”



“I believe I already reported that the Para-RAID isn’t related to the information leak, Chief of Staff Ehrenfried.”

“Yes, I heard you. But are you really sure that’s true, Henrietta Penrose?”

As Annette made no attempt to mask her suspicion and misgivings, the chief of staff continued.

It was night in Annette’s office, when the Strike Package had deployed to the Fleet Countries and the Rüstkammer base was empty.

As for the series of cases where the Legion seemed to know where the Strike Package would be stationed and were able to accurately prepare and intercept them, Willem had become convinced that intel was leaking out of the Republic when a Republic officer thoughtlessly appeared before the Strike Package in the United Kingdom.

Willem secretly had the officer pursued and his background checked, and they arrived at the answer without having to question the man himself. He wasn't working with the Legion, of course, but his careless wireless communication was likely being intercepted by the enemy.

That just left the question of where the information was leaking from in the Federacy, and how. The Para-RAID communications carried out during operations were indeed not the issue.

"The Republic military were the ones who developed and used the RAID Device," said Willem. "The Federacy only copied it. Sensory Resonance was technology only employed by the army—only by soldiers. Am I correct in assuming this?"

"What do you mean—?"

"Technology that allows one to share their senses with another, unobstructed by distance and physical barriers. It's unimaginable that such an invention would only be used for battlefield communications. There's no end to its applications in other fields."

For example, it could be used to keep an eye on the internment camps with the help of friendly inmates. Or for safe, detailed monitoring of human test sites when experimenting with lethal diseases. Or simply to watch exciting "manhunts" taking place in the internment camps.

"The Republic military could do anything to the Eighty-Six, after all. To Republic soldiers, they were subhuman, without basic rights, cattle in human form—Oh, pardon. I wasn't trying to be sarcastic toward you."

As Willem spoke, his black eyes filled with an icy chill that didn't match the smile on his lips, he noticed the color gradually drain from Annette's face. He wasn't being cynical—he was only stating the facts.

But indeed, despite still being a girl in her teens, Henrietta Penrose was a military major and she had volunteered to come to the Federacy, knowing full well how others would view her. Treating her as a young girl incapable of confronting the cold harshness of reality would have been an insult.

"If there were RAID Devices that the Republic military was, at the very least, not openly aware of—implanted for nonmilitary purposes, likely illegally, would you be able to track them? Or, perhaps you know of some technological limitation which would rule out that possibility?"

Annette remained frozen and pale for only a moment. As Willem watched her, she regained her composure, just as he had expected she would. Her argent eyes soon grew pensive. She was thinking rapidly, shaking off any ethical

considerations or commonsense assumptions which might hinder her judgment. There was no time for guilt now.

“Yes. It’s not impossible. Technologically speaking, it can be done.”

The existence of RAID Devices used outside the battlefield, and their application as wiretaps—both were possible. Annette nodded and looked up at him, her silver eyes glinting with firm light.

“Understood, Chief of Staff Ehrenfried,” she said. “I’ll go check the old documentation in the lab. If I find any records of tuning unidentified RAID Devices, we’ll be able to start tracking them from there.”



“Roger that—it looks like we’ve captured the receiver from the Republic’s side, too. We appreciate your cooperation, Major Penrose.” The military police captain nodded, switched off the RAID Device, and bowed to Annette.

They were back in the base in Sankt Jeder, in a meeting room guarded by MPs who prevented anyone from entering or leaving. The arrested Eighty-Six children all had quasi-nerve crystals implanted in their bodies—each identical to the RAID Devices used in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. This was despite the fact that every one of the child soldiers’ implants, which had been embedded so they could serve as Juggernaut processors, were extracted when they were rescued by the Federacy.

“They were in the internment camps, not on the battlefield, and since we assumed they were too young to fight, we never checked,” said the MP captain. “To think they would plant RAID Devices in children that young and use them as wiretaps...”

For a military group, how and where units and soldiers were stationed and mobilized was sensitive, top secret information. This was especially true of the Strike Package, which went on highly classified, high-profile excursions into the Legion’s territory. Those on a need-to-know basis with regard to their deployment destinations and mission objectives weren’t allowed to disclose this information to anyone, not even their families.

But in the calming atmosphere of their homes, in the presence of their families, some people’s tongues would loosen. And if the inquirer was an innocent child, one would become even less cautious. And if said child was one of the Eighty-Six, saved from the clutches of persecution and abuse, and they

were asking about the achievements and celebrated service of the older Eighty-Six, some people might even feel driven to answer.

“And all the Eighty-Six’s legal guardians are old nobility and government officials,” the captain continued. “They would make for premier sources of information. Whoever is behind this likely predicted such people would agree to become guardians as part of their civic duties, and in the short time before we rescued the Eighty-Six, they implanted the devices in secret. Whoever came up with this is as capable as they are heartless.”

Even though the Eighty-Six children were suspected to be the source of the information leak, it took so long to round them all up because of their guardians’ status. One couldn’t simply arrest the children of high-ranking officials without any evidence.

Annette, however, had a different view. She leveled him with a sober gaze.

“Ah... That’s not exactly right. It wasn’t as brilliant as you make it sound.”

The MP captain looked back at Annette, whose words dripped with venom. To him, she was still a girl, young enough to be his little sister, and by more than a few years. Her pale face contorted in displeasure.

“More than likely, they implanted the children with RAID Devices early on and merely repurposed them for this... They’re basically toys. Once they’ve served their purpose and become used up, they get discarded.”

Her silver gaze, firm and grave, twisted in disgust. The Para-RAID wasn’t only useful for transmitting sound. It could communicate anything picked up by the senses. Only sight and hearing were deemed practical for the military, but just because the other three weren’t seen as beneficial didn’t mean they couldn’t be used. One could configure the Para-RAID to transmit one’s sense of smell, taste, and touch. To share emotions to the same extent one would feel in face-to-face conversation.

And they had abused that.

Annette gritted her teeth. The outrage. How could they commit such an... inhuman atrocity?

“They implanted RAID Devices in children they took from the Eighty-Sixth Sector, and then they toyed with them. They tortured them, raped them... Killed them. And the whole while, they Resonated their sense of touch and emotions to others via the Para-RAID, so they could delight in their agony. And when they got bored with them, they threw the survivors away, back to the internment camps.”

Shin raised his head in surprise. The timing of everything was all too convenient—surely, that didn’t mean...

“Colonel Wenzel... Don’t tell me the reason you sent Colonel Milizé away today was because of this?”

Grethe heaved a fed-up sigh. She realized that was the natural conclusion, and she’d assumed someone would ask.

“No, that’s just coincidence.”

Shin looked at her with suspicion, but Grethe didn’t budge. She continued in a calm, patient tone, like that of a teacher reacting to a model student whose answer had nonetheless failed to consider something basic.

“For starters, Captain Nouzen, it was you who reported to me that Colonel Milizé was unwell. It was only because of that report that I had her see the mental-health team... And besides, Second Lieutenant Jaeger, who’s also from the Republic, is still here, isn’t he?”

Shin blinked once. With all eyes on him, Dustin—who was seated in the corner of the room like the forgotten family dog—nervously raised his hand.

Shin, who had indeed forgotten Dustin until just now, regained his composure. Like Grethe pointed out, it was he who had reported Lena’s poor health to her. And when asked earlier where Annette was, Grethe replied that she had gone to see Eighty-Six children. All this implied that the entire series of events was done in coordination with the Federacy military’s counterintelligence.

“...My apologies, Colonel.” Shin hung his head awkwardly, his face red.

Grethe smiled at him, amused. “Don’t worry. She’ll be back once she’s feeling better. Just wait.”

Sitting across from Chief of Staff Willem, the lieutenant general who served as commander of the western front hummed and nodded.

“Chief of Staff, we can put the wiretaps’ communication network to *good use* ourselves, can’t we?”

“Of course. The Legion will only notice they’ve lost them as an information source when they realize they’re looking at dull news reports without any mention of combat.”

“Good.”

To ensure the Legion didn’t realize the *wiretaps* were seized, the Federacy rounded up all the Republic interceptors operating them. That way, they could

study everything, from the ciphers used to contact the wiretaps to the hierarchy between the interceptors, allowing them to assume their identities and repurpose the communication network to suit their own ends.

From the brief exchange, the lieutenant general realized that even the Federacy's freedom of press, which was supposed to be guaranteed, was being temporarily suppressed.

"Leak false information about the western front, especially concerning the Strike Package's movements. In the two weeks until the unit actually deploys, we can have the Legion waste resources for no reason on locations where the Strike Package won't actually appear. And in the meantime, finish building the defensive perimeter and reorganizing the army, understood?"

"Everything is going according to schedule," Chief of Staff Willem replied in a detached manner. "Including the Kampf Pfau railway gun. We're planning to set the first defensive line using the volunteer soldiers we drew from the Republic refugees. The Republic's betrayal will be repaid, with its citizens risking life and limb to compensate for it."

†

The major general who served as chief of staff of the Federacy's second northern front was a Deseria woman with beautiful skin the color of night and sleek black hair.

"I will now go over our next operation."

The second northern front's army was made up of three armored divisions, meaning it had fewer soldiers and Feldrēß compared with the western front, which had five divisions.

In contrast to the primary battlefield on the plains, the terrain of which was difficult to defend, the second northern front was protected by the large Hiyano River, which divided it from north to south. The river stood in the way of a ground invasion, and since ancient times, river crossings had served as natural fortifications that forced factions to split their armies across the two banks.

The satellite bombardment had forced the second northern front's army to retreat and, as a result, they'd lost their grip over this natural fortification.

Having been pushed back into open terrain, this army's forces, which were built around defending the riverbanks, weren't going to last long against the Legion's armored forces. But with the Federacy military's overall lack of

manpower, they couldn't hope to have their ranks bolstered. The eastern and southern fronts, which likewise used natural impediments such as mountains and rivers to save on manpower, had also been required to fall back, and they, as well as the other three northern fronts, were all in dire need of more soldiers.

And so to overcome this predicament...

The chief of staff spoke. This was a meeting between each front's supreme commanders, chiefs of staff, as well as each armored division's commander and staff officers, but many of them were far too busy to participate. As such, everyone but the chiefs of staff, front commanders, armored division commanders, and operational staff officers participated remotely, with holowindows hovering over their empty seats.

"Our top-priority objective is to move our current defensive line forward and rebuild it along the river. At the same time, we will turn the entire contested area into a mire to impede the advance of the Legion's armored forces. To do so, the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package will serve as our advance unit in an operation to destroy the flood-control dams."

Second Lieutenant Noele Rohi was one of the countless company commanders stationed along the northern front and a descendant of a regional knight—the lowest rank of Imperial nobility. She stood frozen in place, having just received yet another casualty report—informing her that more of her territory's people had died in combat.

Tsutsuri, Nukaf, and Lurei were confirmed to have died during the second large-scale offensive last month. And this month, Kina and Elam joined the dead.

"No one died in my unit. Why did so many people die in the other units?"

She bit her lightly rouged lip as she gripped the letter she had received from the deceased soldiers' families. Sons who'd passed on ahead of their parents, wives bereaved of their husbands, brothers robbed of their older siblings, younger sisters deprived of their older sisters, daughters grieving their fathers.

Through this letter, written by the town headsman, their vivid voices called out to her heart.

Princess, please. Daughter and princess of wise and great House Rohi, which ruled over our town. Do not let our children die anymore. Protect your subjects. Remove the hardships looming over us. Banish the mechanical threat and guide us through this cataclysm. As our ruler, with your wisdom, your courage, your

mercy—save us, your weak and meager subjects.

“...It will be done. I am your ruler, after all.”

Her smoky, cocoa eyes filled with grief as she nodded. Those eyes unique to the Cairns. Her well-kept, soft hair, the same color as her eyes, was tied into braids that slid down the shoulders of her military uniform.

I won’t let anyone else die. I cannot let my precious subjects shoulder this pain. Too many have died already during these eleven years of war with the Legion—in the first large-scale offensive in the summer of last year, and in the second large-scale offensive a month ago, when burning stars rained from the heavens and a tidal wave of steel washed over the land.

Many died. Officers, noncommissioned officers, and more than anything, countless soldiers. At this rate, her remaining subjects would have to enlist, too. The war cost them the power plant that made their town wealthy. They lost their employment, and, unable to return to their former livelihoods, they became impoverished. Now, the second large-scale offensive had forced them to evacuate; they had to enlist to ensure that their families had roofs over their heads.

And this time, even more of them would die. She couldn’t let that happen.

“There must be something, someone who’s wrong here. Something doesn’t add up. How else does so much death make sense?”

Yes. This was wrong. It made no sense for people to die like this. So many people dying was wrong. This country, its government, its president, its nobles—they were all too negligent and made light of the people’s lives. They weren’t doing their jobs, and that was why things ended up like this.

But it wasn’t too late to set things straight. If there was a mistake, then it needed to be corrected. Yes, it wasn’t too late even now—even if she had to do it herself.

“There must be something I can do... Think, Noele.”



News of the “wiretaps” wasn’t made public and wasn’t disclosed even within the Federacy military, but those involved in the case were secretly taken into questioning.

“...Hmm, I think it was Ren Hatis who showed up in my room at the hospital.”

“What did you talk to him about?”

“Nothing. He spoke with my roommate, Kigis, about where he was living and his father, but their conversation didn’t mention the Strike Package.”

As Theo answered the MP officer’s questions, he thought he felt an unpleasant tingling in the back of his neck...where the RAID Device had been implanted in him in the Eighty-Sixth Sector so as to be unremovable.

So the small Eighty-Six boy who’d come to visit him in the hospital had the same thing. He came, holding the hand of his uniformed stepfather, to visit Theo and the others in the hospital despite not knowing any of them. At the time, Theo’s mind was too burdened with his own injury to question it, and his fellow roommates were much the same.

Now he realized it was unnatural—why would a child that age, who couldn’t have survived in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, visit fellow Eighty-Six he didn’t even know? Thinking about it now, it was painfully obvious.

“It happened to you, too, Rikka?” asked Yuuto, in the same meeting room as Theo. “A kid also came to visit us. It was probably the same one.”

“A little girl stopped by my room,” said Amari, who was in the same rehabilitation facility. “She said she was there to see her elder Eighty-Six sisters.”

The MPs inquired about what they were asked and how they answered. Before long, the questioning was over.

“Thank you for your cooperation... Contact us if you remember anything else.”

“Hmm, can we ask something, too? What are you going to do with the captured wiretap children?”

The MPs nodded casually.

“Yes, it makes sense you’d be concerned. We removed their RAID Devices, and we’re questioning them about the Republic citizens who ordered them to gather information.”

Seeing the change in Theo’s expression, the MP raised his brow in a joking manner.

“It’s just questioning, not an interrogation. I know soldiers like you don’t like us MPs, but we’re not going to mistreat children. We have homes to go back to and families to look in the eye after this, you know.”

“What about their homes?” Yuuto asked quietly.

“We’ll return them if we can...but it’s hard to say. Their foster parents will have to be questioned for violating official regulations. Who’s to say if they’ll

want to take in those children again after they were made complicit in an information leak? Well, if nothing else, there are orphanages in the capital we can bring them to, so they won't be thrown out into the streets."

"Can't we take them in?"

"What, you want to play house and raise children while fighting a war?" The MP officer cracked a sarcastic smile. "You're Operators. Your job is to destroy Legion. We can't have you making light of that responsibility."

He said it sharply but casually—like smacking a barking dog on the nose. And it was this casual manner, rather than his sharpness, that made Theo and the others swallow nervously. The cruel lashing of his words was done as naturally as he would discipline a hunting hound.

The MP didn't notice the silent alarm of these young soldiers. Or perhaps he merely paid it no mind.

"And then we'll need to round up and check the other Eighty-Six who aren't confirmed to be wiretaps."

"Round them up...?!" Theo looked up, tense.

"Ah, pardon the expression. We won't round up any Eighty-Six who've enlisted like you. We've already checked you for RAID Devices, and we know of the Strike Package's achievements. You worked hard. We didn't mean you, but rather the Eighty-Six who didn't enlist."

Theo swallowed his words for now and let the MP continue. He didn't seem to notice or care what Theo or the silent Yuuto and Amari were thinking.

"Besides, there's a group that left their family homes and facilities and went missing right when we arrested the wiretaps. And while they're not the source of the intelligence leak, they're clearly suspicious. We want to bring those girls under our protection as soon as possible... The more ammunition we have against the evacuated Republic government, the better."



When shells rained down from the heavens like divine judgment, followed by countless Legion assaults, the second northern front was forced to fall back, leaving behind many dead, injured and missing.

In the end, who was at fault? Who deserved the blame? That question burned inside Mele—one of the northern front's young soldiers.

Mele had no answers, but he did know one thing—ever since the Federacy

took over, nothing had gone their way.

Eleven years ago, when the Federacy was still the Empire, Mele was just a boy. His hometown became wealthy thanks to the cutting-edge power plant built there. When the revolution took place, all the grown-ups said it would make the town a better place.

But nothing good came of it.

The power plant was abandoned because of the revolution and the war. All the children were forced to attend school, something that had never been asked of them before. Their town became impoverished, and their lives became harder.

Until now, they hadn't had to think about their future employment. They would simply inherit their parents' line of work. But now they were required to decide on a future profession, and his own parents' job—cleaning up the power plant—was gone. And they had no way of restarting the agricultural work of their great-grandparents, either.

So, left with no choice, Mele enlisted in the army. But there he was forced to undergo training and education he didn't want.

"...How did it end up like this?" Mele grumbled.

He had an Amber's barley-colored hair. The blue eyes he'd received from his grandmother were something he secretly took great pride in, because the princess of his town told him once when they were little that his eyes were pretty.

These past ten years had been one bad thing after another, so why wouldn't anyone do something about it? President Ernst, who led the revolution, or the nobles, officers, and noncommissioned officers who keep pressuring him to do things he didn't want to—why didn't anyone do something?

So many bad things had happened—everyone knew how awful it was, so why didn't they all resolve this right away? It made no sense.

Someone had to do something. Anyone... They needed to make things right this time.

"I can do this."

Noele suddenly realized...there was a way. A way to end the Legion. A means of delivering her people from death. A silver bullet to grant them swift salvation, and just like the blue bird of happiness, it'd been in her hands the whole time, glinting as it waited to be noticed.

And now that she'd hit upon this wonderful solution, it seemed all too

simple. Why didn't the president and the former nobles and the generals ever think to do this? Were they simply negligent?

On the territory Noele's family formerly owned, they'd built a facility with the aid of House Mialona, the governors, which had turned Marylazulia into a special municipality on the cutting edge of science. All they needed was the town's—

“—Nuclear power.”

†

Ernst was seen as a hero of the revolution, which bought him a great deal of support from the citizens. But the losses and sacrifices that came with the second large-scale offensive, along with the many casualties and war expenditures over the last month, led to a stark decline in his approval rating.

“I have no problem with recruiting volunteer troops from refugees of the Fleet Countries and the Republic, given that they willingly agreed...but I'm opposed to forcing the volunteers onto the front lines. We should focus on building defensive installations instead. We can always rebuild buildings, but there's no taking back lost lives.”

Despite the president's words, he sounded totally unfazed in the face of this predicament. More than anything, he stressed saving a single life over both maintaining the front lines and the survival of the nation itself. Even now, he sat on his leather seat in the president's residence, proclaiming this logically inconsistent idealism.

This was the worthy justice the Federal Republic of Giad was established on, he said. The ideal all must adhere to if humankind was to hold on to its pride and dignity.

The high official sitting across from him made no effort to mask his displeasure. The president was fussing over the lives of foreigners, prioritizing them over the survival of his own country and its people. And that wasn't all.

“Our own men will die as a result of those policies. And if, on top of all those deaths, you raise taxes to expand our defensive facilities, your approval ratings will fall even further.”

“I imagine they will,” Ernst said, his expression unwavering. “What of it?”

His ashen eyes seemed to be smirking behind his glasses. At this point, the high official couldn't restrain himself anymore.

“Sir, you speak of protecting people’s ideals, but you don’t actually care one bit about that, do you?”

Ernst didn’t seem to care an ounce about his approval ratings or self-preservation. Just as he didn’t seem to care about the fate of the front lines or his nation, he didn’t seem to value his own life. Or the very ideals he claimed to uphold.

Ernst’s expression didn’t budge. His ashen eyes were like the inside of a world-weary fire-breathing dragon, whose flames had all burned out. The high official groaned. He’d fought alongside this man as a comrade in the revolution eleven years ago. This man had led the Federacy for over a decade.

He’d once seen him as a friend and someone worthy of his respect. Now all he saw was a monster.

“Sir. I... We are only human. We can’t side with a dragon. If you’re going to insist on acting this way, we will not be able to follow you. And if you continue despite knowing that...you will be betraying us all.”



The company commander sent word for everyone to gather, and so Mele, along with his platoon members—Kiahi, Otto, Milha, Rilé, and Yono—all gathered in their unit’s warehouse. The people from their special municipality had been assigned to combat units or swiftly promoted to noncommissioned officers and were scattered among different units in the armored division. This company, commanded by the princess of their line of regional knights, was the only one comprised solely of those from their special municipality.

Many of the ones who’d gone to other units ended up dying in battle, but everyone in their unit survived, since they had the princess to guide them.

“We have a solution.”

So when the princess passionately spoke to Mele’s company of transport troops, as well as three other such companies, everyone watched her excitedly without doubting a word she said. When the first large-scale offensive struck the Federacy, her graduation from the officer academy was accelerated, and their Princess Noele now stood as a respectable company commander.

Standing next to Noele were younger officers from her same year—the sons and daughters of regional knights from other villages. Just like Mele’s princess, they were young heroes who led companies of soldiers from their domains.

“We have a means of destroying the Legion. A means of ending this war. The military’s higher-ups simply haven’t realized it yet. Or maybe they’re just hiding it, so the high nobles in the congress can keep up their little waltz. After all, they’re so good at stepping on one another’s feet.”

She was mocking the Imperial congress, which had a tendency of being too caught up in factional rivalries to make any decisions, but her metaphor was itself indicative of her upper-class upbringing, and it was lost on Mele and the other soldiers, who had no idea what a waltz was.

“...So what you’re saying is that the military top brass, the president, and the nobles are guilty for everything.”

Kiahí, who was like an older brother to them all, roughly summed up her words, and that was indeed how Mele saw it, too. The army, the president, the major nobles—they were the ones at fault. The generals leading them, Ernst, the government, and the nobles commanding the army were to blame for all the pain brought on by the second large-scale offensive and the Legion War.

Kiahí smiled, his pale-yellow eyes glinting in jubilation.

“That means the revolution ten years ago failed,” Noele said. “But...this time, everything will go well. We’ll beat the bad guys and change the world. This time, for sure. We’ll become heroes.”

She looked at Kiahí, at the soldiers, at Mele, her words seeming to back up their expectations.

“We must correct the Federacy’s mistakes now. And to do that, we must spark a battle for justice that will snap the Federacy out of its slumber. They are lost within the darkness of illusion, so we will light up the blue flames to guide them!”

Noele made her grand declaration, bearing the weight of the world on her shoulders, her expression racked with pain and grief. They all cheered their radiant princess-general, their passionate show of approval filling the warehouse. Kiahí thrust his fist into the air and howled. Otto, Rilé, Milha, and Yono shouted the princess’s name.

Everyone was gripped by the premonition that she—no, *they* were about to do something truly great to save the world in its time of crisis. Mele, too, was driven to cry out like the rest of them.

Up until this point, everything had felt wrong, but from now on, it would all be okay. It wouldn’t be long before things were made right. After all, they had the princess to tell them who was to blame for all the bad things, to make it clear whom they needed to beat. All their anger, anxiety, and discontent was justified,

and the princess had found the ones responsible and proven their crimes.

Everything was going to be fine. It would all go well. Their wise, reliable princess would fix everything. All Mele needed to do was follow her guidance.

“Please join me so that we may defend your homeland, your families, and this country.”

Her words filled Mele with joy and relief.

Under the cover of night, four of the second northern front’s transport companies in the 92nd Support Regiment simultaneously went missing. The units’ noncommissioned officers, subordinates, and officers all disappeared. The report mentioned the possibility of desertion.

In the army, desertion under enemy fire was a grave crime. A military police unit was instantly sent out to search for them and began tracking their movements. The deserting soldiers were apparently headed back to their birthplace, a special municipality in the Shemno region. Perhaps they hoped to hide out in their homeland—the military police officers frowned at the plan’s naivete.

But when they arrived at the special municipality of Marylazulia, the defecting soldiers were nowhere to be found. The town’s citizens were evacuated during the second large-scale offensive, but the facility personnel dispatched by the regional governor and their families still lived here. And when the military police visited those personnel, they received grim news.

The deserters had passed by a facility at the edge of town. They took something kept there, then left.

The facility in question was an abandoned power plant. It was built in the final years of the Empire, then destroyed during the revolution, and when the Legion War broke out, it was deemed too dangerous due to its proximity to the front lines and was decommissioned.

...And that power plant housed a *nuclear reactor*.

CHAPTER 2

MARY SUE'S MARCH

Dropping through the gaps in the ice, the young Leuca traced the sea's surface on its way back to open water, but with thick ice floes blocking its way, it found itself leaving the harbor and wandering into a large river.

The several-meter-long Leuca calmly drifted across the several-hundred-meter-wide body of water. Swimming against its gentle stream, the snow-white mermaid regarded the river fish with merciless eyes as it passed them by.

Surfacing, the Leuca examined its surroundings. Late autumn had come to the north with a cold, thick mist, and translucent foliage littered the riverside. Each leaf formed a mosaic of crimson, bitter orange, and yellow, and the fog hung over everything like a curtain of gauze. All across the hazy northern shore were the contours of large arachnoid autonomous machines—a swarm of multilegged tanks, walking like stacks of gray bricks.

And drifting out from deeper in the fog came a boat, floating silently along the newly opened canal.



The commander of the second northern front was quickly informed of the four transport companies' desertion.

“What did the usurpers pillage from the Rashi Power Plant?”

“As feared, they stole radioactive waste. The facility manager testified that they took one unit of used fuel that was in the process of cooling.”

“Nuclear fuel... I know the supply network collapsed during the large-scale offensive, but did we really leave something like that so close to the front lines?”

The chief of staff cocked her head elegantly, like a swan. Her hair, long even after being done up, rustled like silk against the back of her uniform.

“The Rashi Power Plant was decommissioned eleven years ago. We couldn’t transport the fuel before it finished cooling.”

“I know.” The commander sighed. “The Rashi Power Plant was established by my grandmother. And the deserters are all originally from that region.”

“The 2nd Company of the 92nd Support Regiment’s 3rd Transport Battalion. A unit made up of Marylazulian citizens.”

Countless holo-windows opened around the chief of staff, including some displaying the deserters’ mug shots and personnel files, a few of which she magnified with a flick of her hand. Four junior officers, who still looked very much like children.

“The company commander is believed to be the ringleader: Noele Rohi, a regional knight from Marylazulia. In addition, there’s the commander of the same battalion’s 4th Company, Ninha Lekaf, regional knight of the Lukh village; and two commanders from the 2nd Transport Battalion—Rex Soas, son of the Kowa region’s regional knight, and Chilm Rewa, of the Sul village’s regional knights. Each of them is followed by the soldiers of their respective transport companies.”

“In other words, the manor lords and their people. A bunch of *roosters and hens*.”

The armored division commander spat out this insult through the radio. *Roosters and hens*—derogatory terms for the serf class, implying they bowed their heads to the ground to peck for their daily bread. As on the other fronts, the generals of the second northern front were descended from the governors of Wolfsland and its surrounding territories. They saw both the serf roosters and the manor lords managing them—whom they called watchdogs—as nothing but cattle.

The infantry corps commander spoke next.

“So they’re not combat units, only support units, and have no noncommissioned officers... Oh, that’s because the noncommissioned officers assigned to them were from another region, and they refused to join in and reported the defection... Why didn’t they have any combat units under them or any noncommissioned officers from their region?”

“Both those questions have the same answer—they weren’t capable enough

to reach those ranks or roles. They couldn't keep up with their curriculum after they enlisted, so they weren't stationed in combat units or promoted to become noncommissioned officers."

The equipment and tactics employed in modern warfare required even the simplest of rank-and-file soldiers to at least complete their secondary education. Operators had to pilot fifty-tonne Vánagandrs at one hundred kmh; artillery soldiers had to blow away targets hiding beyond the horizon; armored infantry had to put on armored exoskeletons that had enough force and output to crush a car. All those required not only developed stamina but also basic groundings in physics and math.

Support units included roles that required even more comprehensive education and knowledge, but with the war lasting for so long, the constant lack of personnel posed a major problem. Stacking supplies according to exact specifications or following a battalion commander's vehicle in round trips along safe roads firmly within friendly lines were tasks that only required stamina and no particular expertise.

However, the blame for these soldiers' desertion couldn't be placed squarely on the deserters themselves. In the Empire, education had been monopolized by the nobles, their retainers, and the research institutes under their wings. The villagers in their domains weren't entitled to education. Generations of serfs spent their entire lives without even being able to write their own names, and never seeing so much as a letter. This instilled certain values in the lower classes —values that the mere ten years since the Federacy's formation weren't enough to overwrite.

To these former serfs, learning how to read and write was pointless, an idler's hobby. They looked down on education as a painful waste of time.

"And their commander had to 'skip grades' in the officer academy—she's a disposable dog leading a unit of roosters and hens. I imagine the noncommissioned officers stuck in that unit must have had a hard time of it."

"I see. So this Noele Rohi and the others were kept out of the main house's unit. The Lady Bluebird Regiment is House Mialona's treasured unit, so they wouldn't let a dropout officer cadet —someone who barely passes for a noble—lead it."

Much like the youth officers from the special officer academy, to compensate for the many casualties among the junior officers, some of the existing cadets in the officer academy were allowed to "skip grades" and participate in the war.

However, they were not the most accomplished students, but rather the biggest underperformers. They were sent out as pawns to buy time for the academy to properly train up the more promising students.

Many officers in the Federacy military were the children of nobles, a class that prided themselves as warriors and put heavy emphasis on militarism. Any nobles who dropped out of the officer academy, the first phase of their military service, were not seen as having the same blue blood running through their veins.

The chief of staff sneered with arrogance and pride befitting a Deseria whose family had ascended to the status of major noble, despite the extreme rarity of their race within the Empire.

“House Rohi’s princess made a grand proclamation earlier. Everyone, I must ask you to brace yourselves so you don’t die from sheer anger, and listen to what she had to say.”

An armored infantryman glanced at his radio suspiciously when it crackled with a sharp noise. He was stationed in a trench located in the contested area of the second northern front.

“Hmm? Was that the RAID Device? Did someone try to Resonate?”

Everyone else in the ditch replied with a hand sign that stood for denial. While wearing the Úlfhéðnar exoskeleton, the helmet’s shape and positioning made it difficult to nod. What’s more, their gloves were mitten-shaped, limiting the variety of hand gestures they could use to communicate.

During the previous year’s large-scale offensive, the Federacy couldn’t mass-produce enough RAID Devices to go around, but with a production line now established, their use became common across the front lines. The radio, which couldn’t receive Para-RAID transmissions, was now mostly relegated to a backup tool. Any transmission being relayed through it couldn’t have been a formal one.

But as the armored infantryman looked down at the radio with suspicion, the fair voice of a young woman suddenly began issuing from the speaker.

“To our beloved comrades across the second northern front.”

This was a declaration directed to all the units across the second northern front, aiming to reach as far as the president’s residence in the capital. As her voice

was blasted on all frequencies at maximum output, Noele clenched her manuscript with stiff, nervous fingers.

This was a speech meant to snap the military, the president, and the nobles in the capital out of their lull. A speech that would likely leave its mark on the history books. That thought made her throat clench up.

“To our beloved comrades across the second northern front. I am Second Lieutenant Noele Rohi, commander of the Hail Mary Salvation Free Regiment.”

Thankfully, her voice didn’t tremble. She was surprised and relieved at how clear and composed it remained. Her comrades looked over, and her best friend, Ninha, grinned proudly at her. Her precious subjects watched with expectant eyes, and seeing that filled her with strength and confidence.

Mele, her childhood friend of the same age, gazed at her with his faint-blue eyes. They were the color of the sky, a color she’d liked ever since she was little. Most of Shemno’s people were Ferruginea, and Marylazulia was occupied by Ambers, so someone with Celesta blood and blue eyes was an unusual sight.

The color of their homeland’s sky; of the sea spanning past the northern mountains; of the blue, flickering light of the nuclear reactor. It was the prettiest color in the world.

“The Hail Mary Regiment are not foul deserters, nor are we cowardly defectors. We are messengers of justice, rising up to save the second northern front, the Federacy, and all humankind.”

Justice—yes, justice. The Legion was a threat to the Federacy, and they rose up to deliver justice to that enemy. And since they were just, it meant that they were right, and since they were right, they couldn’t possibly lose.

Noele raised her face resolutely. Without realizing it, she puffed up her chest as she glared at the audience she couldn’t see.

Listen, one and all.

“We have a trump card. A sacred flame that will eradicate the mechanical foe. A hammer of justice, formed from the most cutting-edge technology.”

As a daughter of House Rohi from the Marylazulia special municipality, the holy land of technological progress, Noele knew things. She knew about the atomic reactor, capable of extracting inexhaustible energy from fuel—and of the weapon capable of converting that boundless energy into destructive power.

“In other words, the holy relic we have taken from the Rashi Power Plant—atomic fuel. The miraculous fuel that wonderful reactor consumes to produce infinite energy can be used to create a bolt of holy lightning. We will do just that. First, we will use it to win an overwhelming victory here at the second

northern front. A victory that will open the high nobility's eyes to the truth.”

And then everyone will rise up and follow in my—in our footsteps. May our brilliant victory return hope to your hearts.

“We will burn the Legion away with humankind’s most powerful blue flame—nuclear weaponry!”

The Hail Mary Regiment’s wireless transmission could not possibly extend far enough to reach the Federacy capital. Ernst paused the recording he’d received there and sighed, unable to mask his disgust.

“...She wants to use nuclear weaponry?”

It might have been seized by the Legion, but she was talking about *their own land*.

“The fools.”

Upon hearing the Hail Mary Regiment’s transmission, the armored infantrymen grew excited. They didn’t know what nuclear weaponry was—they were from villages in the Federacy’s frontier territories, and they only learned how to read and write and acquired the knowledge necessary for their roles in the army after enlisting. They didn’t have time to take in information not relevant to their studies, so they were clueless about the subject at hand.

But a weapon that could simply burn away the Legion?

“We have an amazing weapon like that? Is it something new they developed in the research institutes?”

“If it can beat the Legion that easily...maybe the war will end before the Holy Birthday?”

Their voices filled with expectation, while the highly experienced and reliable master sergeant and the young but educated company commander fell into bitter silence. One could almost see them grimace behind their visors.

“...Master Sergeant?”

“Company Commander, sir?”

Both of them replied as one.

““...Of course we don’t have a weapon like that.””

After the recording of that same transmission finished playing, a long, heavy

silence hung over the officers of the second northern front's army.

“...Of all things, she wants to ‘open our eyes to the truth’? I’m surprised the ignorant little girl has the gall to say that.”

There was no terror in those words, nor was there any expectation. Only exasperation.

“Even a Dinosauria wouldn’t be able to withstand a nuke, but...supposing you defeat every Legion unit in this area, that won’t bring us any closer to defeating the Legion as a whole. That’s exactly why we haven’t used nukes so far.”

Indeed, nuclear power was the strongest source of energy humankind had acquired, but that didn’t make it or the weapons it powered a silver bullet capable of solving every problem.

“Even if we wanted to use it to eliminate the Weisel, we can’t pinpoint their positions in the Legion territories. And we can’t afford to blindly fire nukes all over the place, either. Even assuming this somehow succeeded, the Legion combat units on the front lines would remain at large. It wouldn’t end the war.”

It was for this same reason that the idea of tactical bombardment, so prized at the dawn of the airplane revolution, was instantly discarded against the Legion. Even if an army bombed distant strategic bases to cripple the enemy’s production abilities, it wouldn’t immediately affect the front lines, since it did nothing to impact the supplies already delivered. And when fighting the fearless Legion, there was no hope of lowering morale.

To begin with, any guided missile or airplane platform that could possibly carry a nuclear warhead into the Legion territories would be inoperable due to the Eintagsfliege’s jamming. And since there was no way of knowing if there were surviving human countries within the Legion territories, firing a nuke ran the risk of catching any such groups in the cross fire.

And worse yet, the Legion’s metallic bodies were resistant to both heat and impact, making a nuke’s effective range much smaller against them than it was against humans. And before a nuclear weapon could burn away the Legion, the radioactive fallout would block out the sunlight, which would place the Federacy at risk.

“And to begin with...they’re going to *make* nuclear weapons? From the spent nuclear fuel they stole?” an infantry armored division staff officer asked dubiously. Doing something like that wasn’t technically impossible, but...

“Do they even have the means to do that? There was no reprocessing facility attached to the Rashi Power Plant, but...was there something else in the area? Or signs of one being built in

secret?"

"No such facility exists, and there are no funds or time to build one, nor any staff or personnel with the necessary knowledge."

"In other words, they don't even know that while nuclear fuel and nuclear weaponry both use uranium, they require different enrichment rates?"

Both nuclear weaponry and nuclear fuel were made by enriching the same uranium isotope called uranium-235. At the lower enrichment rate of nuclear fuel, the rapid nuclear fission chain reaction necessary to create a weapon would not occur. Raising the enrichment rate of uranium mandates a large-scale designated facility, and reprocessing used-up nuclear fuel necessitates constant countermeasures against the decay heat and intense radiation produced.

If these soldiers were speaking of "making nuclear weapons" while lacking the means to enrich the nuclear fuel, that...

"...That just makes things even worse," the commander grumbled lowly. "The fact that they're so ignorant means we can't predict what they'll do. If their commander doesn't know what's necessary to make a nuclear weapon, at worst, her soldiers might not even know how dangerous the radiation is."

"And we can't write off the possibility of the Legion seizing the nuclear matter. We know they have a prohibition on using atomic weaponry, but... radioactive waste could be a gray area. We know some Admiral and Rabe use nuclear reactors, and the Legion have been confirmed to use depleted-uranium rounds. This means they're capable of enriching uranium."

Depleted uranium was a by-product produced during uranium enrichment, and if they were using it to make projectiles and armor...

"Even if they're forbidden from making nuclear weapons, it's not clear how much they're allowed to use lesser nuclear matter. And while it may be ineffective against them, it is effective against humans."

That was true whether the nuclear material was made into a full-blown weapon or not.

The commander nodded and gave the order. Before the situation became any worse—

"Continue gathering information—we must swiftly seize them and retrieve what they stole."



The details of the Strike Package's next sortie weren't disclosed to them for counterintelligence reasons. Soon after the "wiretaps" were exposed and recovered, they were ordered to move to the second northern front.

This second defensive line spanned the center and western areas of the Federacy's northern regions, with its front lines at what had once been the Empire's border with the Fleet Countries before the war.

The bases of the armored division in this area were built with hills in front of them so as to shield them from bombardment; the enemy line of fire hit not the peaks, but the foot of the hills. Standing atop one such hill, Shin looked down on the battlefield.

He looked down on it.

"...Is the whole battlefield a basin?"

The southern end of it sloped down along the Neikuwa hills, and the area's entire surface was wilderness, covered in mud and short grass and dotted with virgin forests. Between the southern and northern hills spanned the Reginia line, the front's defensive fortification.

The Shihano mountains, which cut off Shin's field of vision and marked the western side of the battlefield, ran from north to south. And though they were too far away to be visible from where he was standing, the eastern mountain district and the northern mountainous zone behind the Legion territories also surrounded the battlefield.

"The Shihano mountains cut through the adjacent first northern front and connect with the Dragon Corpse mountain range, which forms the United Kingdom's border. The Fleet Countries are past the northern mountainous zone. And incidentally..."

Siri, who'd participated in a nearby operation in the Fleet Countries and heard about the state of combat in the northern front, continued his explanation.

"...during the second large-scale offensive, this basin was dotted with barracks and bases. It was an agricultural area before the war, which made it useful for logistical units, but a poor battlefield."

Open areas were the preferred terrain of the Legion's heavy-armored units—the Tank-type Löwe and the Heavy Tank-type Dinosauria. The satellite-missile bombardment forced all the front lines to abandon their defensive positions and fall back, but in this case, they had to retreat to open, agricultural land of all things, which was extremely difficult to defend.

"That's why we were deployed here. They want to change the direction of an abandoned river to use it as a defensive line again. It sounds pretty crazy."

The Federacy was so lacking in troops that they had to use foreign refugees as volunteers.

In much the same vein, they couldn't afford to let a foreign armored unit remain idle, even if it was under the direct command of royalty, and Vika had no intention of standing by, either. Likewise, Olivia and the instruction unit dispatched by the Alliance were to once again join the Strike Package as an active combat force from this mission onward.

Vika looked down upon the Reginia line, the dried-up basin that was once occupied by a river. It ran from west to east parallel to the Hiyano River—the position of the second northern front prior to their retreat.

As Vika stood there, Lerche, who was always by his side, tilted her head curiously.

"It's hard to believe the Reginia line and the Hiyano River both occupy such convenient positions."

This vast river had enabled the Federacy to fend off the Legion on this border for a decade, and it cleanly divided the Legion and the Federacy's spheres of influence along its eastern and western banks.

"It's no coincidence; they were put here. They changed the currents of existing rivers of varying sizes during land reclamation, forming the Hiyano River to create a national border they could easily defend. See? There are many traces of the old riverbanks."

Lerche followed Vika's gaze as prompted, but the simple banks only looked like tiny, raised footpaths to her. Many of them ran across the basin, interrupted by trenches and the aftermath of bombardment.

"...So those are the traces of countless rivers, big and small, brought together like a mesh. To dig so many of them... It must have taken considerable time and labor."

"This area was a wetland originally, since water flowed into it from all directions. Over the course of a century, the land was reclaimed for agricultural use. The Reginia line, too, was originally a river used for defense, which dried up due to the same land-reclamation process. It's regrettable that we must undo the work of those who came before us, but..." Vika sighed softly. "This war doesn't allow for sentimentality, it seems."

Hearing the clamor of familiar footsteps, Shin turned his eyes to look. Walking down along the slopes of the Neikuwa hills and into the basin were Feldreß the

color of dried bone—models he knew all too well from the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

The M1A4 Juggernaut. The Republic's prided shambling aluminum coffins were, for whatever reason, here on the Federacy's battlefield.

After a moment of silence, Shin asked, "...Are those from before, too?"

"No," Siri replied with a dubious expression. "It's my first time seeing them here."

They were not, however, being deployed as armored weapons like they usually were. They were being escorted by armored infantry as they towed heavy mortars and portable anti-tank missile systems. Some of them pulled 155 mm howitzers or 88 mm anti-tank guns toward the artillery camps.

Juggernauts were, at least on paper, armored weapons. Their armor might be pathetically thin, and their tank turrets ineffective, but they still packed considerable horsepower. This certainly put that strength to good use.

"So they're being treated like the armored infantry..." said Siri.

"Come to think of it, I remember some were recovered from the Republic during the evacuation operation to help with carrying supplies..."

But to Shin and the others, who'd used these Juggernauts as their mounts and partners when fighting the Legion, this came across as a rather pathetic—if not downright pitiful—conclusion for the machines.

They were finally reduced to pack mules.

"—Like you said, the Juggernauts we seized are being used as four-legged, nonhumanoid armored exoskeletons," said a woman with a sweet, slightly high-pitched voice.

They turned around to find themselves faced with a female officer dressed in a panzer jacket. She had the smoky, coffee-colored hair of a Cairn. Her flowing locks were tied into a ponytail, and her attractive facial features were adorned with light makeup. As with all officers on the field, she had her rank insignia removed, but her branch insignia was the same as Shin's—an unruly horse, the symbol of the armored division.

"They make for useful exoskeletons. They're tougher and pack more firepower than an Úlfheðinn, and their capacity for pulling weight is off the charts. Using them as Feldreß in the first place was a mistake, if you ask me."

She approached them, stomping over the wilting autumn grass, and extended her hand in a friendly manner. The tall beauty, standing slightly higher than Shin, flashed a confident smile.

"A pleasure to meet you, ladies and gentlemen of the Strike Package. I'm Lieutenant Colonel Niam Mialona, commander of the Lady Bluebird Regiment,

the 1st Regiment of the 37th Armored Division in the second northern front.”

“—The Strike Package’s objective in this mission is located on the western edge of the front line—destroying the dams in the Shihano mountains.”

The Strike Package was stationed in the 37th Armored Division’s base, set up only a month ago. Since the child soldiers mostly fought in foreign countries, the uniform shelter modules that formed the base were a novel sight.

The modules were collapsible, which made them easy to transport in bulk and simple to dismantle in case a speedy evacuation was in order. There were basic modules that could be linked together to accommodate specific numbers of troops, as well as unique modules that could be added for structures with special purposes, like meeting rooms, barracks, dining halls, hangars, and even medical facilities. These constituted the Federacy military’s multipurpose residential facilities.

In a well-used meeting-room module, Lieutenant Colonel Mialona moved between the Processors and the holo-screen projecting the map of the combat zone.

“To be exact, you’re to help seize and maintain control over the flood-control dams up the Kadunan floodway in the Shihano mountains while the combat engineers demolish them. This will revert the entirety of the Womisam basin to its former marshland state from before the land reclamation, rendering it a quagmire that the Legion will have trouble crossing.”

The Kadunan floodway and the dams were highlighted on the map. The artificial river and its tributaries flowed from the south, moving northward through the Shihano mountains with twenty-two dams along the way. With the dams completely stopping the flow of these rivers, only their dry traces extended east into the Womisam basin.

If these rivers were to be fully restored, the basin would indeed become a wetland that would impede the passage of armored weapons. Dinosauria would be hindered by their own weight and wouldn’t be able to move properly over such terrain.

“At the same time, the northern front army’s main force will destroy the Reginia dam at the source of the Kadunan floodway, then blockade the Tataswa floodgate at the base of the new Tataswa floodway. This will restore the Reginia line as a river, which will stand in the scrap monsters’ way in place of the Hiyano River, now under Legion control.”

Next, the path of the restored Reginia River was highlighted on the map, cutting across the battlefield from east to west. Incidentally, the old Tataswa floodway would have its stream redirected to south of the Neikuwa hills, spilling into the Reginia River, which would extend and connect into the Hiyano River via the new Tataswa floodway.

“Your operation area will span sixty kilometers from north to south, from the Reginia dam to the Recannac dam at the end of the Kadunan floodway. The fifteen kilometers from the Yosa dam to the Recannac dam is under Legion control, but the majority of the operation will take place within the contested area. Seeing how many incursions you’ve already made into the Legion’s territories, I’m afraid this operation will be a little unsatisfying.”

She wrapped up her explanation with a joke.

“However—this piece-of-cake operation has to be put off for the time being, sadly.”

Shin raised his head curiously. It wasn’t unheard of for the tides of a battle to change while on the move, but when it delayed an operation, things were usually serious.

Lieutenant Colonel Mialona’s gaze took on a distant, desperate cast.

“It’s honestly so stupid that I’ll spare you the details, but...while you were in transit, a cavalcade of idiots calling themselves the Hail Mary Regiment defected from the second northern front’s army. They stole spent nuclear fuel from a reactor with the stated intent of making atomic weapons, and they are currently lying in wait in the contested areas, their exact position unknown.”

“...Huh?” Shin said, baffled.

Raiden, who sat next to him, and some of the Processors and maintenance crew all reacted the same way. Most of the Eighty-Six simply looked dubious, and while Grethe, Vika, and Olivia didn’t raise their voices, they did look up in exasperation or cradle their foreheads as if suppressing a headache.

Lieutenant Colonel Mialona nodded in agreement.

“That was a wonderful response, Captain, much appreciated. I can now brag about how I managed to get a ‘Huh?’ out of Shinei Nouzen, the Reaper of the Strike Package and the Eighty-Six’s ace.”

Even though Shin had never visited the northern front before, unwelcome rumors seemed to have preceded him. And with embellishments, at that. Shin ruminated on the bombastic title of *ace*, which he’d heard here for the first time. Apparently, there were even absurd stories about him beating Legion down with a shovel and swallowing them headfirst.

I'm not the priest, you know.

"The Hail Mary Regiment is a small force and not much of a threat on its own, but we can't ignore the nuclear fuel they possess. Especially if we intend to restore the river. In other words, we can't go about destroying the dams until the nuclear fuel is safely recovered. Until that happens, we'll have you all remain on mobile defense."

The radiation from spent nuclear fuel wouldn't decay for a very long time. If they didn't recover the fuel and it got caught up in the river, it could turn the vast basin into a minefield of nuclear radiation. On the other hand, an attempt to recover it would require manpower. Any personnel wasted on the search might be better used maintaining the front lines. With the northern front's army so short on people, they couldn't possibly let the Strike Package sit idle.

"Since you wouldn't know how to conduct yourself around nuclear fuel, the Strike Package will be left out of the search, as well as any missions to suppress the Hail Mary Regiment. However, on the off chance those dimwits blow up the fuel, we will order you to evacuate, and you are to obey at once... You have a question, mysterious black-eyed beauty? Ask away."

"Second Lieutenant Reki Michihi, ma'am. If they blow up the fuel, would that mean they'd made an atomic bomb? Like...for example, the kind you might see in a monster movie."

Lieutenant Colonel Mialona paused for a moment. "It wouldn't make for an atomic bomb, but... Hmm, let's say it'll be something similar. Its effect on the Legion would be minimal, but it would be as dangerous to you and me as it would be to the monsters in the movie."

"Huh? It would only be dangerous to us...?" asked Reki.

Vika answered her, looking like he had a raging headache. Not because of Michihi's question, but out of exasperation at the defecting unit, which through their efforts to create an atomic weapon were likely to produce something else entirely.

"What you just described is a radiological dispersal device—a dirty bomb, Reki Michihi. It has none of the firepower of an atomic weapon—fictional or real. It's nothing but an ordinary bomb, with the exception that it disperses radioactive matter that would do nothing to the Legion but would be lethal to humans. A Reginleif has some countermeasures in place to resist that kind of radiation, but it can't block all of it, so you would have to evacuate... For the time being, understanding that much should be enough. Explaining it any further would take a long time, and it isn't terribly relevant to our side of the operation."

The more she listened to Vika's explanation, the more Michihi frowned in confusion. Not because she didn't understand the explanation, or because she was displeased at him omitting irrelevant details—but for a much more basic reason.

"If it's just a bomb that does nothing to the Legion and is only dangerous to us...then what are those people hoping to accomplish?"

The Strike Package was relegated to mobile defense and not sent to aid in suppressing the Hail Mary Regiment, likely out of consideration for the fact that they weren't used to fighting human opponents.

"...This is absurd," Raiden said, baffled. "Why're they trying to make atomic weapons? It isn't like making an omelet."

"They think it is, which is why they'll end up making a dirty bomb... They have no idea what the actual principle behind a nuclear weapon is," Shin replied tiredly.

Nuclear weapons used the chain reaction produced by nuclear fission or nuclear fusion to unleash the high amount of energy contained in a nucleus as a destructive force. It wasn't a reaction you could create by mixing any old uranium with explosives, like you're mixing salt into an egg.

And it was because of people with such a fundamental lack of knowledge that the dam-destruction mission was being delayed.

The Hail Mary Regiment claimed they would save the northern front, but in reality, they were the ones putting it in danger. So long as they remained in hiding in the contested area with the nuclear fuel, the army couldn't destroy the dams and restore the defensive line along the river. And in the meantime, soldiers had to fight and risk their lives in the defensive installations fending off the Legion in their most advantageous position—open terrain.

The Hail Mary Regiment stealing that nuclear fuel was going to cost people their lives.

Raiden breathed out his nose, exasperated. They were on their way to the barracks, and the passage connecting that module to the meeting room had a low ceiling. He was tall and the space felt cramped.

"Even if they did make a nuclear weapon, it'd be useless anyway. The humans would die out before it destroyed the Legion, and even if they used it to blow away those on the front lines, we wouldn't be able to occupy that land later."

The ground zero of a nuclear explosion was temporarily exposed to severe radiation pollution. And by the time the radiation died down to levels where soldiers could safely enter the area, the Legion from the back lines would have moved in to reoccupy the territory.

"If you ask me, the defectors aren't even thinking about occupying land," muttered Bernholdt, who was walking behind them.

The two turned to look at him, and he shrugged. These young officers had combat experience that far exceeded their age but were lacking in other fields, as one would expect.

"They probably just think that beating the Legion they can see is a win and aren't planning any further than that. Like monsters in a movie."

"No... Would anyone be so clueless?"

"If nothing else, their leader... Noele Rohi, was it? She's a formal officer, so she must know better."

A modern military didn't simply go around blindly slaying enemies and boasting over how many kills they got. It focused on enemies whose defeat contributed to the achievement of political, tactical, and strategic objectives, and considered any others wasted effort. This was taught as basic knowledge in the special officer academy, and even Shin and Raiden, who were promoted only six months into their training, knew to make that distinction.

"Like I told you before, you shouldn't use yourself as the standard to measure other people. In this case, though, I don't mean the standards in the Republic were shitty... Those people aren't purebred warmongers like my kind, the nobles, or you Eighty-Six prodigies. They're the kind that weren't good enough to be combatants or support personnel and ended up getting sent to fill whatever job needed doing. That's all they were good for. So to them, nukes are just some kind of superweapon, and they figured they could use them."

"But that's stupid... What would make them think that?"

Just then, they heard the sound of combat boots grinding to a halt behind them.

"Well, because they can't stand the war any longer, so they jumped at any way to turn the tables in one fell swoop. I think you kids, of all people, would know what that feels like."

They turned around, only to be greeted by a figure raising their hand to wave hello. Light, faded hair that always smelled like a salty breeze, green eyes, and a firebird tattoo.

"Knowing you could go out to face the Legion tomorrow, fearing you'll die,

and being so desperate to escape that you start clinging to any crazy thought that crosses your mind. Some people are dumb enough to try anything when they get like that.”

Just like how, for ten long years, the Republic shifted all the fear and humiliation they felt because of the Legion to the Eighty-Six and hid everything behind the cover of discrimination.

“Colonel Ishmael... You’re alive.”

“Thanks to you guys.”

He wasn’t clad in the Fleet Countries’ indigo-navy uniform but a Federacy metal-black field uniform. He must be serving in the Federacy army as a volunteer. He smiled and tugged on the collar of his field uniform, as if to address Shin’s doubt.

“Not just me, but all the Open Sea fleet survivors are here to help the ground forces clear evacuation routes. Figured that if the Federacy’s willing to take in all our people, we should offer up our firepower as tribute.”

Rather than stay behind and fight to stall for time during the evacuation, they fought to clear the way and maintain the evacuation route for their refugees, then took cover with them under the Federacy’s protection. And just like he said, they offered up their soldiers as firepower in exchange for every one of the Fleet Countries’ civilians being accepted into the Federacy.

All the while shouldering the shame of having “abandoned” the troops who’d stayed behind to stall the Legion.

“...I’m the captain, so if I died, I wouldn’t be able to look my brethren who died ahead of me in the eye. I have to keep swallowing my shame and live on.”

Those words made Shin realize something. Ishmael’s vice captain, Esther, who had always been by his side in the Fleet Countries, was nowhere to be seen. Seeing Shin gasp in realization, Ishmael smiled.

“Being a kid means you’re allowed to be blindly confident, Captain, but you need to watch yourself. We call that hubris. You can’t assume the things you failed to protect are your fault. That includes Esther, the operation you just finished, and all the operations ahead of you.”

You don’t get to shoulder the blame for my brothers and sister, boy.

Shin jerked his head in a stiff nod. The man before him stood with pride and dignity, the captain who led the Open Sea fleet and its people.

“My apologies, Captain,” said Shin.

“Aye.”

After answering with all the dignity and pride of the Open Sea fleet's captain, Ishmael smiled and asked him a question.

“So, Captain, did you use that ambergris? I remember Esther giving it to that one pretty girl with silver hair from your squad when she heard you and Colonel Milizé got together.”

He meant Anju. Was she the one who gave Lena the ambergris? Either way, Shin paused briefly before responding:

“I invoke my right to remain silent.”

“I mean, we gave it to you, so we’re curious to hear if you put it to use. That thing’s pretty hard to get, you know?”

Shin smiled broadly, which made Raiden and Bernholdt pull away from him in fear.

“Colonel... You’re being insensitive.”

“Aye, I suppose I am.” Ishmael shrugged flippantly. “Sorry.”

To escape the Federacy army’s pursuit, the Hail Mary Regiment split up into several cells that hid across the virgin forests dotting the contested areas.

“—Good. This should be the last of it.”

Concealed in the ruins of a charcoal-making hut that remained in the woods, the soldiers of one of the nuclear weapon production cells placed the nuclear bomb they produced down with a *thud*. Each production cell had been allotted a fuel rod, and they opened the casing of the rod and stuffed the fingernail-sized pellets from inside it into a container along with plastic explosives, producing their handmade “nuclear weapon.”

The soldiers stared fixedly at their constructed bomb, baffled by the strange heat it gave off, a contrast to the chilly climate of autumn in the north. It looked rather slapdash, since they’d merely stuffed all the parts into a metallic bucket, but more than anything...

“I thought nuclear weapons were supposed to be some big-ass bomb, but this is pretty small, and it’s really easy to make.”

The thin covering tube was hot to the touch, but tearing it off was honestly the only challenging part. And since it was about as thick as a child’s finger, using a tool to cut it wasn’t too hard.

The hammer of blue flame that would smite the Legion was completed with almost anticlimactic ease.

“Don’t worry about it—just report in that we’re done. I’m sure Princess

Chilm will be happy if it turns out that our production cell finished its work first.”

Recalling the gentle smile of their commander, Chilm Rewa, the regional knight of Sul village, they reached for the radio. The Hail Mary Regiment didn’t use RAID Devices. They didn’t know how they worked, which made them seem creepy and scary. Besides, sweet Princess Chilm told them they didn’t have to use them, which they were all happy to hear.

They all started feeling a painful tingle in the back of their throats, like they caught a cold, but none of them paid it too much attention.

Come nighttime, Olivia noticed Kurena leaving the base’s shelter modules by herself after dinner, and hurried after her. In the shadow of the Neikuwa hills, which hid the base, she held a bundle of faded leaves, likely since the flowers had already wilted in the fall.

“...Second Lieutenant Kukumila?” he called out to her back.

“I heard someone I knew from the Fleet Countries—Colonel Esther—passed away.”

The Stella Maris had to be scuttled so it wouldn’t be seized by the Legion, and she’d stayed behind in the vessel to command the operation. And with the supercarrier being as large as it was, destroying it took time. So someone had to be there to handle any unexpected developments until it was—and by the time its sinking was certain, the Legion stood in the scuttling team’s way, making it impossible to catch up to evacuees.

“I wanted to let her know that I’m all right now... I wanted her to see it with her own eyes.”

“Cap’n... Are any of the Shepherds around here Eighty-Six?”

Rito asked the question of Shin as they watched over the Reginleifs being towed into the hangar.

“I can’t tell quite yet, but I don’t think so.” Shin shook his head.

The Federacy’s and the Republic’s languages were similar, making it hard to discern which one he was hearing as he listened to the resonant wailings of the commander units in the distance. The phrasing didn’t sound like an Eighty-Six, though—the dialect was more old-fashioned, probably that of a former Imperial noble.

Shin looked down at Rito. During the battle in the Republic, Rito had fought and defeated someone he knew.

“Is this about Lieutenant Aldrecht?”

“If necessary, I’d do it all over again. But I’d rather avoid it if possible.”

If any Eighty-Six were made into Shepherds, he wanted to liberate them, but...even as Shepherds, they were still Eighty-Six, and Rito wished he wouldn’t have to kill them. Rito pursed his lips, pain glinting in his agate eyes.

“I didn’t want to kill Lieutenant Aldrecht, either. He fought his battles and died, so he said it was time he left the Eighty-Sixth Sector and joined his wife and daughter...and I think that would have been the best for him.”

Standing atop a highly visible hill was suicide on the battlefield. And so Vika stood between the slopes, looking over the Shihano mountains from a point of poor visibility, with Lerche standing by his side.

“...Your Highness,” she said.

“Father and Brother Zafar are safe. Brother Boris passed away, though.”

Boris was his half brother from a different mother, and he’d acted as a pawn in the second prince’s succession feud against the crown prince, Zafar. And though Boris was his brother, Vika didn’t grieve much for his death.

“He stayed behind in a fallen battlefield with his consort so that the royal family didn’t have to bear the responsibility of the defeat. In the end, Brother Boris, too, was a child of the house of unicorns.”

Now that the royal house had lost not just the Dragon Corpse mountain range but also the United Kingdom’s agricultural land, which was very much its lifeline, they needed a beautiful tragedy to exonerate themselves—for the Legion to claim the life of one of their own. A way for them to gloss over the anxiety and fear caused by the war with hatred for the mechanical threat.

The Federacy, which was founded only a decade ago, could not do this. But the United Kingdom and the house of unicorns, which had been facing foreign threats for a millennium, would not fail.

“We may have lost in the preliminary stages...but now that the Imperial nobles have crawled out of the woodwork, let’s see what they can do.”

Once the members of the production cells finished their important task of producing the nuclear weapons, they immediately took the chance to start

celebrating. They got drunk on alcohol and consequently started vomiting profusely, so they were left to rest in an abandoned Federacy military warehouse. As such, Kiahí had to leave Noele's main unit to retrieve the nuclear weapon.

"...I never trusted that damn president to begin with," Kiahí said bitterly while he drove the truck with his childhood friends Milha and Rilé in the back seat.

He had pale-blond hair set in an undercut, and his light-yellow eyes gazed into the dark virgin forest as they rode through the night.

Eleven years ago, when Ernst Zimmerman led the revolution, Kiahí had high hopes, too. His parents and the village leaders all spoke of the merits of democracy, of the wonderful freedom and equality it would bring them, and Kiahí was taken in by their enthusiasm.

And where were they now? The revolution succeeded, and the Federacy was formed, but the world around Kiahí only changed for the worse. The freedom and equality he was promised turned out to be a far cry from wonderful. They were nothing but trouble and misery.

All the choices that were handled by the regional knight and the village leaders were now forced onto the citizens. This was their "freedom." They were being forced to study things they had no desire or need for, like how to write, read, and do math. This was their "equality."

And in the end...

"I used to lead all the boys in town; I was the strongest out of everyone...but the army can't find me a proper role. How is that my fault? That's the army being messed up."

Kiahí volunteered for the armored division, believing that a strong man like him would perform well in a Vánagandr. But the army forced him to take academic exams in topics that had nothing to do with operating Feldreß and rejected him.

Even when he applied to become an armored infantryman, he had to take unnecessary academic exams and ended up being relegated to driving a truck for the transportation corps. He drove round trips within Federacy territory like some stupid duck waddling back and forth.

That was no job for a soldier. He was the strongest hero in town. Being a truck driver didn't suit him.

"That's what got Tsutsuri, Nukaf, and Kina killed," Rilé replied. "Hisno passed the academic exam and became an officer just like the princess, and

Ratim became an armored infantryman that way, too. I can't believe it."

Rilé was an Agate girl with striking chestnut-colored hair, quite unusual for a Marylazulian citizen.

"That spindly four-eyes, an armored infantryman. Why don't they see that sending scrawny pukes like him to the front line is why they're losing the war?"

"We've been tricked," Milha spat out in his usual sulking tone. "The revolution, the army, all of it just made our lives worse."

Out of all the younger kids here, he was the smallest and daintiest.

"They take our power plant, don't judge us fairly, and force us to take things we don't want... We're being exploited. All so that the officers and commanders can profit off us."

"Yeah. But now we're going to put an end to all it." Kiahí grinned, flashing his teeth.

Just past these trees, they could see the civilian home where their trump card, their bomb, was hidden. Unfortunately, it wasn't a flashy sword or an impressive Feldrēß, but an unsightly bomb. Still...

"With this, we can go back to how things used to be. We can set things right."

He could go back to being a hero again. To the status he deserved.



At this time of late autumn, thick morning fog would hang over the basin that served as the battlefield of the second northern front. The fog, which blanketed out the dim light of dawn, served as convenient cover for the attack Legion. What's more, just a month ago, this basin served as the base of the second northern front. The barracks and warehouses built here had to be abandoned when the line fell back. And they, too, melted into the white darkness of the fog, obscuring the silently advancing mechanical silhouettes from sight.

And the same held true for the pure-white skeletons lying in wait, all their sensors set to passive.

"—Open fire."

Once the Ameise unit and its attending Grauwolf company entered the kill zone, they attacked from all directions. Predicting the enemy's path with the help of Shin's ability, the Reginleifs lying in ambush sprung out of their hiding places, blocking them from running ahead or falling back.

In human army terms, the enemy group was equivalent to an infantry battalion. The lightweight Grauwolf were escorted by a few Löwe, with the Ameise handling recon and lookout.

First, they destroyed the Ameise to eliminate its sensor capabilities. The Löwe and Grauwolf had weak sensors, and without the Ameise, they lost most of their recon capability, but the Reginleif were just as impeded by the fog as they were. They set their radars to active and switched their optical sensors to infrared mode, probing their surroundings as they sped through the white mist.

On his optical screen, Shin saw a Löwe detect a directional laser and instantly swerve its turret to shoot. As the turret slashed through the fog, Shin's Undertaker lunged at it from behind, holding on to its back.

He worked in tandem with Raiden, who purposely projected Wehrwolf's directional laser, knowing it would be detected. Since Shin could hear the Legion's wails, he didn't need the radar to find his way through the fog. And his radar's inaccuracy meant he didn't transmit any radio waves the Löwe's feeble sensors could detect; he was invisible to his opponent.

It was a perfect surprise attack, and the Löwe was unable to react. Shin grabbed onto the defenseless back of its turret and activated his pile drivers. The electric piles fried the Löwe's central processor, and it crumpled to the ground with a *thud*. Shin hopped off it, changing Undertaker's bearing to pursue his next target.

“—Incredible.”

The armored infantry accompanying Shin's unit looked on in awe.

Just as infantry escorted tanks, armored weapons didn't act alone and were normally accompanied by armored infantry, which served as scouts and eliminated enemy infantry. Since this was the Strike Package's first time fighting in the northern front and their first time deploying Reginleifs here, they were attached to a reliable veteran unit of armored infantry.

But despite coming along, the armored infantry escorting the Strike Package didn't have a chance to contribute to the fighting.

The armored infantrymen's vitals were covered by armor that could withstand machine-gun fire, and their Úlfhéðnar exoskeletons gave them the strength required to carry 12.7 mm heavy machine guns. This allowed them to eliminate Ameise, Grauwolf, and occasionally even Löwe. But in the face of such rapid, high-level combat, they were powerless to help.

“However,” the armored infantry captain whispered under his visor. He’d heard the rumors about the Strike Package’s elites, their achievements, and their background. He, an ordinary man who grew up in a provincial town in the territories with a nuclear power plant as its sole asset, looked up to them like fairy-tale heroes.

But the Strike Package’s child soldiers...

“They’re amazing, but...”

Mobile defense was invoked in cases where an enemy unit broke through the first line of infantry soldiers. An armored unit positioned in the back would move in quickly, using their superior mobility to swiftly eliminate the enemy with overwhelming firepower. If they allowed the Legion to retreat, there was a real chance they would strike the first line of infantry solders from behind.

Looking over the remains of the Legion, which were quite literally wiped out, Shin allowed himself to relax inside Undertaker. The first line was made up of infantry, anti-tank impediments, and anti-tank guns. Even now, the intermittent explosions of anti-tank mines served as a kind of alarm, revealing the positions of unfortunate enemies to the armored infantry and anti-tank guns.

The combat engineers, who had retreated during the battle so as to not get in the Reginleifs’ way, once again progressed and resumed their task of tearing apart the barracks and warehouses. At the edge of his optical screen, Shin could see the engineers peering into the wreckage and crossing themselves. They stopped their heavy machinery and, remaining wary of any enemy traps, approached the debris before pulling something from within. It was the corpses of a man and a woman... No, the man was cradling a child’s body, too.

The Vargus who once lived here evacuated the area years ago, so these were likely the bodies of refugees from the Fleet Countries. They’d probably strayed from the main evacuation force and fled all the way here, their strength failing before they reached safety.

Shin saw that the child’s corpse was hugging a small stuffed toy and averted his gaze. The child had refused to let go of his favored toy even as the family of three ran for their lives. Such an innocent child, at such a tender age, was killed with no one to help or protect them. The truth of the situation made Shin miserable.

The Strike Package, dispatched to save the second northern front and its army, was thankfully under the command of the 37th Armored Division, same as he was. The white armored weapons stood lined up in the hangar, gleaming even through the dust of war.

“—That’s the checklist done. You take care of the rest, Guren.”

“Aye, you got it.”

He was apparently talking to a maintenance crewman. As the commander of the Strike Package spoke to the tall, bespectacled man, Vyov Katou, a newly enlisted armored infantryman, looked on with admiration.

The western front’s Headless Reaper. The Eighty-Six ace, Captain Shinei Nouzen.

He had the pitch-black hair of an Onyx, the crimson eyes of a Pyrope, and the handsome, fair facial features of those with noble blood. This was the living legend who led the elite unit riding the newest Feldreß models, the Reginleifs.

That unit was dispatched to companies teetering on the edge of defeat and it saved them all. It boasted first-class fighters from the Federacy, Alliance, and United Kingdom in its ranks. He’d heard the rumors, but seeing the Strike Package in the flesh, his impression was...

“—They really are amazing. So cool.”

The northern front, too, was being pushed to the brink by the scrap army and teetering on the edge of collapse. But now that the Strike Package was here, they would surely be saved. These were heroes, after all, and they would resolve everything perfectly.

“I have to do my best, too.”

The situation was swinging in the Legion’s favor, and to turn things around, they’d need to launch an operation into the enemy’s domain. To put it another way, pressure from the Legion was forcing their hand, similar to the reckless charge of six months ago to take the Dragon Fang Mountain during that snowy summer in the United Kingdom.

“I can’t hear any Dinosauria. It doesn’t seem like there are any heavy-armored units at the Legion’s front line.”

Just when he was heading back, Shin ran into Vika and Lerche in the corridor leading from the United Kingdom’s hangar block to the barracks. Apparently, they were returning for supplies and a shift change.

In order to break through the human front lines, the Legion used heavy-

armored squadrons with Dinosauria and Löwe as their main force. In the United Kingdom, they hid among the Legion's supply and transport units in the back of the Legion lines to sneak in, eliminate the United Kingdom armored forces, and isolate the Strike Package. As such, both Shin and Vika were wary of this tactic. They had no intention of falling for the same trap a second time.

"But there's too few heavy-armored Legion at the front. There are Vánagandrs handling mobile defense in other sectors, so the ground isn't too brittle for the Löwe to move. We have to assume they're keeping them in the back to conserve forces."

"If you can't hear them, we have no choice. I'll arrange to send out scouts."

Lerche obeyed Vika's words without him so much as glancing at her. Shin, however, did look her way, and she smiled and bowed elegantly, her glasswork eyes seeming to say that she would handle it.

"If they're heavy-armored units, they can't possibly be hidden that well..." said Vika. "Besides, we've fought over a vast battlefield without an Esper like you to scout the enemy for us. We're well aware of all the possible hiding places."

"Thanks... And there's something else I've been meaning to ask."

Vika's Imperial violet eyes turned to look at Shin. This concerned something Shin had no way of knowing on his own.

"Do you know some method, some trick the Dinosauria can use to get to the front lines without moving on their own or having the Tausendfüßler tow them? I've been keeping an eye on their transport units' movements, but it doesn't seem like they're hiding there, either."

Shin's ability didn't allow him to hear the wailings of Legion in shutdown mode, but the Legion couldn't move while shut down, either. Even if the Tausendfüßler could tow them—and Shin didn't know if it was possible for them to pull the hundred-tonne Dinosauria—Shin would hear the voices of the Tausendfüßler. And if they were moving in a group, Shin would surely notice.

Vika blinked once.

"Yes. Or rather, one can't exactly call this a trick. It depends on terrain, but there's a means of transporting things in large numbers that's much older than the airplane or the locomotive."

As a front commander in his home country, he was well aware of supply routes and means of transportation, and as a prince, he was familiar with his country's distribution and its history. To him, the answer was self-evident.

Then, as if realizing something, he scoffed.

“...The Hail Mary Regiment’s foolishness revealed the Strike Package’s presence here to the Legion, despite our original intention to keep it a secret. It was the Legion who forced us into this advance operation, and since we’ve sent out scouts to check the route, they must have seen their targets. So, why don’t we use *that* as bait while we’re at it, then?”

“If it’s worth using, I don’t mind. But answer the question I asked you first,” Shin said, narrowing his eyes tiredly.

“I’ll write you a report later, so read that. More importantly”—Vika met Shin’s glare with an upturned, teasing smirk—“I wasn’t sure how you’d act without Milizé around, but you’re surprisingly calm.”

Shin kept glaring at him, but did nothing else. This serpent wouldn’t listen to anything he said anyway.

“I’m calm *because* she isn’t around. With her gone, I have to take over some of her role. I don’t want to fail and have that weigh on her later, too.”

Normally, in the Strike Package, the tactical commander’s right to command passed to her tactical staff officers, so Shin couldn’t take over those duties. But he could handle her other responsibilities, such as interacting with other units or in social meetings with other officers. Since Lena wasn’t there to draw attention with her appearance or achievements, he could fill in for her. After all, his bloodline was unique in the Federacy, since he was a mixed Onyx and Pyrope, and he was the overall operations commander of the Strike Package.

These duties couldn’t be avoided, and he wanted to be capable of doing at least that much. Just like Lena had done until now... Just like the final words Major General Richard left them.

I won’t tell you to answer that with your entire way of life. Wherever you affiliate yourself, use your wits and victories for them.

He had to learn. As a member of the Federacy army, and despite being an Eighty-Six who could never quite fit in or share its values. Even if he couldn’t answer with his entire way of life, he’d have to learn how to live in the Federacy army and this country. Learn how to avoid needless discord, to put up with the confrontations he couldn’t avoid, and how to negotiate, adjust, and compromise to prevent fatal ruptures and find a path of mutual agreement. He needed to learn how politics worked, both within an organization and society at large.

Besides, he didn’t want Lena to worry when she was recovering, nor did he want his own conduct to impact her reputation, and on top of that, he didn’t want to come across as clumsy or lame.

“I can’t stay a child forever...so I’ll use you as an example, Your Highness.”

“I don’t mind, but don’t lose too much of your innocence, or Milizé might come to me to complain. I have to handle you trying to crack my head open; I don’t need Milizé chasing me around, too.”

“How do you know about—...? And I wasn’t trying to crack your head open. I was going to dispatch you with a shovel and throw you into the sea.”

“...So that chill I felt on the Stella Maris was indeed because of you...”

“That reminds me. About the Cicada...”

It wasn’t just Lena; Vika had Anju and Kurena put it on, too.

“I suppose I shouldn’t have mentioned that... Lerche, handle this!” Vika walked off with quick steps, leaving behind a flustered Lerche.

“Huh?! Your Highness, that’s cruel!” she exclaimed, but then she turned to face Shin, a tragic, brave expression on her face. “Very well... Sir Reaper. Claim my head and dispose of me here!”

“Vika’s at fault, so I’m not going to lash out at you... Besides, your head comes off, so it wouldn’t count as ‘dispatching’ you.”

“...Ooh.” Lerche inhaled in surprise, like she’d just realized some kind of profound truth.

“Don’t act impressed.”

“Your advice is welcome and understood, Colonel Grethe Wenzel.”

Seeing the northern front’s chief of staff—a well-mannered, soft-featured woman—made Grethe ponder how different her own chief of staff was. Only in terms of appearance, of course, but...

“We have also detected the enemy’s lower-than-expected numbers of heavy-armored forces and sent our scouts to investigate. We have autonomous recon devices as well as humans keeping an eye out, so I don’t believe we’ll overlook anything, but your input is appreciated.”

The Federacy military’s unmanned autonomous recon devices were useful for preventing casualties in dangerous scouting missions, but they had major flaws. Since they moved on land, their cameras were limited in range, and there were some types of terrain they couldn’t penetrate. Also, since the data was sent wirelessly, the Eintagsfliege’s jamming often impeded it. And because experienced scouts could rely on their own intuition, the autonomous recon devices were no replacement for them.



But on the other hand, scout excursions deep into contested areas meant heavy losses, and that was a sacrifice that the northern front, which had already lost many troops during the second large-scale offensive, wasn't willing to make.

That meant that most of the scouts sent in would be Fleet Countries volunteers, rather than Federacy soldiers.

Grethe was bitter about this, but she knew better than to put that feeling into words. Criticizing the chief of staff for this decision would amount to nothing, and the Fleet Countries soldiers knew this was the price they had to pay in exchange for their entire nation being taken under the Federacy's wing.

"The Strike Package can send its Alkonost unit as well if required. If it's necessary, you need only give the order."

"Thank you, I'll keep that in mind. If it weren't for the Hail Mary Regiment, we'd have been able to keep the Strike Package's presence here a secret until the operation to destroy the dams..." The chief of staff's dark-colored eyes glinted with a cruel, sharp light. "But as it turns out, there are people out there who are better off doing nothing... It's funny how, despite not being able to do their jobs properly when they were on our side, they cause us so much trouble when they're acting against us."

After finishing his mobile defense shift, Tohru returned to base. But come dinnertime, he didn't have much of an appetite.

"Ah, Rito got an extra serving of meat again," he said, glancing idly at another table.

"Tohru, maybe you should care less about what Rito's eating and focus on finishing what's on your plate," said Claude, who sat across from him.

Shin and Raiden, as well as other squad captains like Michihi and Rito, were invited to sit with the infantry unit that escorted them. From what they could overhear, it sounded like they were discussing plans for future operations. The captain of the infantry unit, a spectacled young man, was enthusiastically asking the Eighty-Six questions—did they have any requests about movements, or suggestions for future strategies, and so on. Meanwhile, the burly armored infantrymen loaded more meat onto their plates, insisting that growing kids needed plenty of protein in their diets.

In truth, Shin and the others were playing along with this to improve relations with the infantrymen, since they'd mostly done as they pleased and ignored them

on the battlefield. Tohru understood that, and yet...

...Does any of this matter?

Tohru couldn't help but ask himself that. After all, they were still losing the war... They were still losing to the Legion. It had become painfully clear to him. After all that had happened, how could it not? This northern front they were dispatched to was already riddled with holes. And right now, their job was to go around and plug those holes wherever they appeared.

This was the first operation since they came to the Federacy where they stood to gain nothing. Here, they were fighting simply to maintain a battle on the verge of falling apart. Even the Strike Package, which was established as an offensive unit meant to encroach deep into enemy territory and strike at important positions, was being sent on defensive missions. That was how bad the situation had gotten, and here, Tohru and the Eighty-Six had come face-to-face with that fact.

It wasn't just the Federacy, either. The United Kingdom lost the Dragon Corpse mountain range, and the Alliance had to fall back to their final defensive line. Communications with the southern countries, Far Eastern countries, and the Theocracy had been cut off, and the Republic, which had fallen for sure this time, was utterly silent. The only Fleet Countries refugees they found now were corpses.

It felt like all his—all the Strike Package's battles up to this point were meaningless. They believed that after surviving the Eighty-Sixth Sector, they had the power to carve out a path to the future. But that was mere hubris—reality was crueler than that.

“...Tohru, you're not eating,” Claude scolded him again.

“Mm.” Tohru hummed a vague reply and brought a spoonful of food to his mouth.

This was a regional dish made by wrapping minced meat in wheat dough and boiling it in soup. He was working through it bit by bit, but he didn't really taste its flavor. He could tell it had a spicy seasoning, but the transparent soup, which had herbs sprinkled into it, didn't have much of a scent. What kind of stock was it made from? Was the meat pork, poultry, or mutton? He tried to consider what he was eating, but he felt like an automaton, merely chewing the food and forcing it down his throat.

He couldn't even get excited for the mission to destroy the dams, which was their original task here. Destroying all the dams along the Kadunan River, built to reclaim the land of the Womisam basin, meant turning all the agricultural land

here back into wetland. Which, in turn, meant...

Frederica, who sat at their table, whispered like she couldn't restrain herself anymore.

"The soldiers here will have to throw away their homes..."

The heavy weight of her words forced the others at the table into silence. Shiden, who sat across from her, reached out a hand and flicked Frederica on the forehead with her middle finger.

"Ow! What for did you do that, Shiden?!"

"Stop making that sour face, squirt. It's like Old Ishmael said, isn't it? Your failing to protect something doesn't mean it's your fault. I think he was right," Shiden said. "The first thing you need to protect is yourself. Then the people around you. The people you can't reach, well, that's out of your control, so you shouldn't blame yourself. It's up to them to keep themselves safe, and if they can't do that, that's on them, not on us."

Some things didn't work out even when everyone tried their hardest. And that was no one's fault. So the only thing one could do was admit it—admit that it was no one's fault, and that it couldn't be helped.

"The people around here tried their damn hardest, too, but they couldn't save their homeland. That's not their fault, and it sure as hell ain't ours or yours, kiddo. So stop frowning, would ya?"

Frederica grimaced, however.

"...Is it so wrong to wish to save everything?" she asked.

Shiden stabbed her fork into a meat wrap and carried it to her lips. It was an old fork, covered in scratches.

"It ain't wrong, but it don't make sense for one person to try and save everyone around them, even people they can't see. Who do ya think ya are, God or something? And you're not a white pig from the Republic, either. They're the ones who ordered us to save everyone."

Frederica fell quiet, but Tohru spoke in her place.

"Still, like she said, this is an abandonment operation. That's why we're here, right?"

Restoring the Reginia River would stop the Legion from crossing it, but it would also keep the Federacy from reaching the northern shore. This operation proved that, in practice, the Federacy had no intention of reclaiming the land north of the Reginia River. And while it was true that making efforts to avoid radiation pollution implied they did intend to return someday, they were still giving up on it in the short term.

"It's kind of like...the Eighty-Sixth Sector, you know? Remember those rooms where the roof kept leaking, and we had to run around placing buckets? We fight and fight, but the Legion never stops attacking. It's always the same. Just like in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, where we had to keep fighting, with no hope for change."

Just barely surviving the day, with no hopes for the future. Battle without a clear, fundamental solution. Conflicts where they could only stave the Legion off but never decisively defeat them, where they could only wait for the day when they were beaten down. Just like in the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

Tohru pursed his lips. He knew he shouldn't say it, but the words came out anyway.

"We really are...losing this war."

Life in the Eighty-Sixth Sector should have made them used to this despair, and yet...

To show off the might of their nuclear weapons, they'd need to blow the Legion up in front of the Federacy military. But given the destructive power of atomic weaponry, they couldn't detonate it too close to the Reginia defensive line. They needed a spot that was relatively far away, but still contested, where Legion forces were deployed and fighting.

Based on those criteria, Noele picked an intersection deep in the contested area. It was a point where paved roads intersected, quite unusual in a former combat territory like the Womisam basin. It was a key point both for the Legion armored forces and for the Federacy military, which would use it as an invasion route when launching counteroffensives.

"We'll start by taking back this spot. Rex, are we ready?" Noele asked.

"Yes, Noele." Her comrade, Second Lieutenant Rex Soas, gave a slight nod.

He had short chocolate-colored hair, and he was the only member of the Hail Mary Regiment who was the descendant of a line of hereditary knights.

Despite his family being more highly ranked than Noele's, he yielded the role of regiment commander to her, believing it was a knight's role to obey a beautiful princess.

Rex's subordinates returned after rigging a car bomb. They loaded one of the nuclear weapons they made into its wagon, then set its steering and accelerator so the car would keep driving on its own, unmanned, through the woods. Upon confirming his men had returned to Rex's truck, Noele boarded her own vehicle.

The two commanders started their engines.

"Keep an eye on the weapon," Noele said. "But maintain a safe distance from it. It's extremely powerful."

"I know, don't worry. We set the timer so we'd have plenty of time to escape."

The two trucks drove off. Opposite them, the car bomb rolled away, heading through the trees toward the Legion unit.

†

<<Bug 239 to Firefly.>> <<Car bomb attack detected.>> <<Presumed to be loaded with a dirty bomb.>>

Upon hearing this report from one of the units in the contested area, the commander unit for the Legion forces opposing the second northern front, a Dinosauria, fell silent for a moment.

<<Firefly, acknowledged. Purpose of the attack unknown.>>

An actual atomic bomb would have been one thing, but this was just a dirty bomb. It would have little effect on the armored, metallic Legion. What's more, the radiation affected friend and foe alike, meaning that a dirty bomb would only serve to restrict humankind's range of operation.

And so the commander unit was at a loss as to what to do. It was unclear what the purpose behind using this dirty bomb was. Was it a diversion? A deception of some sort? An experiment? What was the *Federacy* military hoping to achieve with this?

<<Track the dirty bomb unit and gather information. Attacks against the Federacy military are halted until its purpose can be ascertained.>>

†

The nuclear weapon detonated. The explosion rocked the forest, and the shock waves rattled the treetops. But that was all. There was no blinding fireball, no black pillar of smoke that surged up to the sky. Noele looked at the forest, which should have been reduced to a blasted crater, with stunned eyes.

The roar of the explosion was far too faint. The shock wave that should have uprooted entire trees only shook the treetops.

This can't be.

The amount of uranium one could cup in one's hands could make a nuclear weapon capable of evaporating entire forests and burning away armored weapons. When Noele was little, Princess Niam showed her footage of an experiment conducted between House Mialona and the Imperial army. And since they used explosives to detonate a piece of uranium just as large, it should have produced the same firepower.

"It can't be... Why?!"

Rex had heard from Noele about the might of nuclear weapons, but the explosion wasn't anything like she'd said. Suspecting something had failed, he turned the truck around and went back the way he came. An explosion this weak wouldn't so much as scratch a Legion unit, but for some reason, there weren't any Ameise in the area. Even when they reached the epicenter of the explosion, which was supposedly full of Legion, they didn't run into any enemies.

There weren't too many marks left from the explosion. The truck did detonate, but it wasn't any more damage than the high-powered explosive stuffed into the bucket would have normally caused.

"Hmmm... Something must have failed," he said, cocking his head quizzically and approaching the flickering flames.

The fire had a strange, vivid coloring to it. It danced over the remains of the bucket and the nuclear fuel pellets.

It was pretty. He casually extended his hand toward it.

The gamma-ray monitoring post, originally set up to detect nuclear accidents, noted an increase in radiation. Lieutenant Colonel Mialona's deputy then reported that the Legion had retreated from the supposed nuclear weapon's blast zone. Hearing this, the lieutenant colonel furrowed her fair brow. She was in her office in the division base, set up in a group of shelter modules.

"Would powerful gamma rays actually have an impact on them? No, maybe they're just being wary..."

Ceramics and metals were resistant to radiation, and the Legion's central processor was made of Liquid Micromachines. It would have fewer effects than on cranial nerves or semiconductors, which were weak to it.

"We restricted access to the blast site, but we discovered and captured Rex Soas and three of his subordinates in the area. Judging from how contaminated

they are, they likely entered the blast site, and became unable to move on their way back.”

“You were right to cut off access to the site, Hisno. Decontaminating the Vánagandrs would have been quite a bit of trouble. As for Second Lieutenant Soas and his subordinates...” Lieutenant Colonel Mialona glanced up at her deputy. “Are they well enough to be questioned?”

“Right now, they’re suffering severe radiation sickness and keep throwing up... If they get better, maybe.”

“...I see.”

Exposed spent nuclear fuel had been attached to high-powered explosives, which scattered it in every direction. The “nuclear weapon” filled the detonation point with large amounts of radioactive matter without any shielding, turning it into a highly irradiated area.

The Legion, however, weren’t as affected by the radiation as humans. For that reason, the detonation point became a place the Federacy army couldn’t approach, allowing the Legion armored forces to move in and occupy it. This let them set an advance base right in the middle of the contested area.

Upon receiving the news, the Eighty-Six grew all the more discouraged. They didn’t understand or care much about the “nuclear weapon,” but losing ground to the Legion and allowing them to build a base there, they could understand perfectly well. They were being deployed to hold the defensive line, and someone else’s rash actions had jeopardized the whole area.

To begin with, the dam-destruction operation they had been called to participate in was being delayed because of the Hail Mary Regiment. And because they had triggered their “nuclear weapon,” it was now necessary to revise the operation area and what routes they could take, and the engineers and infantry who would accompany them would need to have radiation precautions in place. This added a slew of new factors that would have to be considered.

They were already demoralized, having to fight to prop up a crumbling defense.

“Why do our fellow Federacy soldiers have to drag us down like this...?” Rito grumbled.

“You’re doing surprisingly well, Shin,” Anju noted.

“...For the time being.”

Shin thought the “surprisingly” part was unnecessary, but he couldn’t deny he had a bad track record with things like this. Anju was observant when it came to other people, and she’d noticed and worried over Shin’s fragile mental state for a long time.

“...I try to find some way to relieve my stress before it gets too bad. If I get depressed first, everyone else will lose their will to fight.”

Shin was one of the commanders of the Strike Package, and especially now, with Lena absent, his conduct influenced everyone else. So even if they had to fight frustrating defensive battles, or if their original operation ended up getting pushed back, he didn’t let his unrest show. If he was distracted, he wouldn’t allow anyone to see, and he’d calmly, firmly handle his duties. He actively tried to maintain that attitude.

“Are you bothered by people calling you the ace? Or what they said during the Republic evacuation?”

“Hmm? Oh...”

They died because of you. Why didn’t you protect them?

Shin shook his head. “No, not really... I’m not obligated to, and I won’t answer other units’ expectations, to say nothing of those of the Republic’s people. I’m not arrogant enough to think I’m that important. I already have my hands full with you guys...”

And Lena.

“I’m a weak reaper who can’t fight on his own.”

Shin said that as a joke, and Anju smiled.

“Right. That’s good, then.”

“That said, you don’t look too shaken by this, either, Anju... You’re not pushing yourself too hard, right?”

They’d left Dustin behind in their home base and witnessed the destruction of the Republic, and now the end of the war and the future beyond it they’d secretly wished for seemed further away than ever. This was true for Shin, but it was also true for Anju.

“Hmm... I can’t say I’m totally fine. But Frederica seems really crushed by all this, so just like you, I feel like I shouldn’t look too glum... Though, I’ll admit not having Dustin around does make me a little lonely.”

She spoke the name of her boyfriend, even though Shin had omitted it. He looked at her, and she returned a casual shrug. Shin really couldn’t match her in this regard. But then she furrowed her brow in concern.

“Yes, Frederica... She’s acting a little strange. Like she’s brooding over something. You have to focus on the operation, so let me, Kurena, and Raiden handle this... But if you could spare her some attention, it would help.”



Upon spotting the unfamiliar life-form, the Legion began pursuing the Leuca. It dived underwater to avoid them, swimming up the Hiyano River into the artificial waterway, and arrived at the entrance to the Kadunan floodway.

Somewhere in the Shihano mountains, which grew lower the farther north they went and eventually converged with the northern Yazim mountainous zone, there was an area surrounded in three directions by steep slopes that were essentially cliffs. There, the Leuca somehow managed to swim up the waterfall where the vast waters of the Kadunan River cascaded down onto the basin of the Hiyano River.

The irritating Legion couldn’t pursue it there. A little farther was a gray, concrete gate the waters flowed toward rapidly, and on the low cliff overhead, something shone brightly.

A gray pillbox. It was the glinting eyes of the creature standing next to it which the Leuca had seen. An oddly thin, bipedal creature, looking down at it with wide eyes.

The Leuca gazed up at it with its peafowl-colored eyes as it continued its journey up the stream of this river battlefield.



Though the Legion built an advance base in the contested area, they still had no idea why the Hail Mary Regiment used a dirty bomb and were accordingly cautious. They temporarily paused their offensive on the 37th Armored Division, which made it easy for the Lady Bluebird Regiment to pursue the renegades. The regiment narrowed down their area of activity based on the detonation point, capturing more prisoners, gaining intelligence from them, and tracking the cells of the Hail Mary Regiment that were still in hiding.

Meanwhile, the Legion didn’t show any signs of launching attacks, leaving the Strike Package, charged with mobile defense, with time to spare. They used that time to hold a more thorough briefing at their barracks. Shin looked around

at the 1st Armored Division's battalion captains and squadron leaders and asked:

“Any other matters that you need confirmed?”

After seeing there were no other questions or reports, Rito raised his hand. Michihi and the others probably didn't intend to bring this up, since it wasn't related to the operation, but as they had free time, Rito thought he would broach the subject.

“Hmm, Cap'n, this isn't related to the operation, but can I ask something?”

“If it has to do with everyone here.”

“Yeah... I think it does.”

On the way back to the barracks, Lieutenant Colonel Mialona had told them to wait in the base and keep their Reginleifs away from the contaminated area, and Raiden and Shin nodded in response like they didn't question her logic at all. And because of this, Rito himself simply went along with it, despite not understanding why that instruction and warning were given.

“What even are nuclear weapons? Or like, what are they made of, and why are they so dangerous?”

Shin passed the question onto Vika, who was also present. Vika then passed the question onto Zashya, whose eyes darted around the room. At that point, Shiden left the briefing room.

Like many of the Eighty-Six, Shiden didn't know much about nuclear weapons, which meant she had ample reason to stay and hear about them. Michihi seemed intent on doing so and stepped outside to call any free members of her squad to listen in.

But...the idea of asking Shin about it pissed her off. She'd have joined if Lena was there to explain, but she wasn't. Grethe and her staff officers knew about it, of course, but it was times like these, in between combat, that they were busiest.

She'd just have Captain Olivia explain it to her later.

But as that thought crossed her mind, she spotted Lieutenant Colonel Mialona, who was on her way back. She had been giving them instructions about how to handle the situation with the nuclear weapon, so she must know all about it. Shiden could ask her.

“Lieutenant Colonel, 'scuse me. Can I ask ya something?”

“Yes, go ahead. What is it, Second Lieutenant Iida?”

Shiden's eyes widened in surprise. Lieutenant Colonel Mialona only ever

communicated with the brigade commander Grethe or her staff officers, or otherwise with armored division commanders like Shin or Siri. She hadn't spoken to platoon captains like Shiden before. The fact that she knew to match Shiden's face with a name came as a considerable surprise.

"Hmm... I wanted to ask about the radiation from the nuclear fuel or weapons or whatever that the Hail Mary Regiment took... How does nuclear power work to begin with?"

But much to Shiden's surprise, Lieutenant Colonel Mialona rapidly turned to face her and closed in excitedly.

"Y-y-y-you want to hear about it?!"

Shiden pulled away from her with a start. Since she was tall, having someone look down at her for once was a little daunting.

"No, hmm, I'm not exactly interested; it's just, I don't know anythin' about it..."

"That's more than good enough—wonderful! You don't know, so you seek to learn and understand! That's the kind of thinking you ought to have!" Lieutenant Colonel Mialona said with clenched fists. Shiden took another startled step back. Maybe she should have asked Shin, after all. Seeing her reaction, however, the woman came back to her senses.

"So, hmm, nuclear power, yes... Well, if I were to explain it, I'd probably go too far and only intimidate you."

Sadly, Shiden was already quite intimidated by her. Lieutenant Colonel Mialona didn't seem to mind, though; apparently, this happened to her often.

"I'll start by getting you a simple animation that explains it. We made it at our lab for study tours. Have anyone else who wants to learn about it watch as well. I'll prepare more detailed materials during the operation, so you can read up on it if you're interested when we return to home base. Oh, and if you have questions about the cartoon, you can direct them to him."

She gestured toward the young officer behind her with a whisper and used the Para-RAID to have someone deliver the cartoon. She then listed few more names, likely books on the subject.

Shiden was baffled by the woman's passion and comprehensiveness. She'd asked only casually and hadn't expected the woman to actually want to teach her.

"Thank you." Shiden bowed her head hurriedly.

"Don't worry about it—nuclear power is House Mialona's field of study. I'm glad to see you're curious about it. You see, nuclear power is a beautiful thing.

It's dangerous but alluring. I hope you learn about it at your own pace." Lieutenant Colonel Mialona grinned. She seemed every bit as delighted as she said, "Like I mentioned earlier, wanting to learn about things you don't understand is a truly important trait. I hope you take that curiosity and use it to dip your toes into other fields and technologies. I'm sure you'll find something you're truly drawn to in the process. And"—she smiled with the brilliance of a fragrant rose—"if that happens to be our wonderful nuclear power, nothing would make me happier."

After Shiden walked away, Lieutenant Colonel Mialona remained in high spirits.

"What a delight. She's a smart girl, that one. I'm sure the other Eighty-Six are the same. I should plan a study tour for our new nuclear fusion reactor and maybe have one of them intern in our lab after the war..."

Her subordinate gave a strained smile. He was older than her and served as a Vánagandr operator. He was descended from a line of regional knights in House Mialona's domain in Shemno, and it was because of his intellect and talent that her brother found interest in him. The two became schoolmates and bosom friends, with him eventually serving as her brother's deputy.

When she went to serve on the front lines, her brother had sent him to protect his little sister, and so he was now by her side. He was the same age as her beloved brother, and in her youth, she had similarly admired him.

"You seem happy, Princess."

"Of course I am. What could bring me greater joy than giving those who seek to broaden their horizons a chance to learn?"

If they didn't have that quality, the Eighty-Six wouldn't have survived the hell that was the Eighty-Sixth Sector, Lieutenant Colonel Mialona thought bitterly. They were expected to learn and think, to make their own decisions, and to take responsibility for their choices. And it was only because they had done all of that that they managed to survive...as those who failed to do so died all around them.

Those who didn't learn how to fight the Legion, who didn't come up with new strategies for each battle. Those who weren't cognizant of how to choose their armaments, of where to hide, or of how to pick which targets to take down. Those who entrusted their choices to other people, who couldn't bear the weight of battle and lacked the resolve necessary to survive.

Of course, there were those who had all those things and died anyway. But

the fact that the Strike Package's members were able to survive and emerge from such a battlefield meant they must have had those qualities.

To learn, to think, to decide and take responsibility. They possessed the qualities of rulers, were the kings of their own kingdoms, even if they had no one and nothing to rule or govern over.

Her smoky, coffee-colored eyes narrowed in disgust.

“...It really is a delight. Especially after seeing those pathetic *roosters* who wouldn’t learn, think, decide, or take responsibility for anything.”

When the Lady Bluebird Regiment stormed one of the renegade’s positions to arrest them, they were met with no resistance.

Apparently, the site had been used to produce a “nuclear weapon,” and as suspected, they’d unsealed the nuclear fuel rods, completely ignorant of the risks of radiation. The area had been polluted by a lethally high radiation dose.

Since the Lady Bluebird Regiment was aware of this possibility, they only had the thickly armored Vánagandrs enter the area. The Úlfhéðnar exoskeletons and Reginleifs were thinly armored and couldn’t block gamma rays from reaching the humans inside. House Mialona, which had researched nuclear power for the Empire, and the regiments under its command knew these facts well.

By contrast, the Hail Mary Regiment’s soldiers saw nuclear power only as some dreamlike, miraculous energy and had exposed their bodies to large amounts of radiation without any protection. Radiation was invisible to the eye, after all, and didn’t cause any immediate heat or pain. And so they were contaminated by fatal doses, remaining none the wiser.

The renegades were all lying face down, helpless. One of the Vánagandrs turned its optical sensors to look at one of them, who had an officer’s rank insignia. She was one of the Hail Mary Regiment’s commanders, Chilm Rewa.

“This one’s down with radiation sickness, too. To think even one of Shemno’s regional knights ended up exposed.”

As reports of more and more of the renegades’ cells reached her, Lieutenant Colonel Mialona couldn’t even bring herself to sigh anymore.

“Not only did they fail to burn away the Legion, but they also got themselves killed by radiation. To the very end, Noele Rohi can’t learn a lesson to save her

skin.”

Noele was the heir of House Rohi, the vassals of House Mialona who had possessed the Rashi Power Plant. She ought to have learned and educated herself about her family’s research and the source of her land’s fortune, and yet she remained painfully ignorant.

As the princess of the grand governor, Lieutenant Colonel Mialona maintained bonds of friendship with the sons and daughters of regional knights and defenders since childhood. She only did this for the express purpose of picking out the most promising children to receive preferential education, and that hadn’t included Noele. Even at that age, she didn’t see Noele as worthy of being a regional defender, to say nothing of a knight.

And true to her impression of the girl, when they recovered the “nuclear weapon” she’d developed, it was nothing but fuel pellets stuffed into a metal bucket and placed onto the back of a truck without any shielding or protection.

“...The president only just started his revolution, and proper education hasn’t spread as far in the country as it should have, but...”

Despite that, the army gave Noele and her subordinates a chance at education, and they squandered it. Many children, serfs from the same territory, were able to gain the minimal education they needed to move up in the army. Some were able to apply themselves enough to become noncommissioned officers, and a few even qualified to become officers.

One such case—her subordinate, a second lieutenant—coldly continued her report. She was from Marylazulia, and Lieutenant Colonel Mialona had asked her if she wanted to be exempted from this mission, but she insisted on staying.

“With these, we’ve seized all the production cells we know of. Capture of the operative cells is still underway. All the soldiers have been disposed of—in place of Rex Soas, we’re now questioning Chilm Rewa for information.”

After he was captured near the “nuclear weapon” detonation spot, Rex seemed to have recovered well enough to be questioned sometime later. But while he initially thought he was recovering, Rex soon passed away, along with all his subordinates.

Radiation sickness—acute radiation syndrome, or ARS. Its initial symptoms include feeling ill, which improves after a while, but the improvement isn’t indicative of recovery. The bone marrow and digestive organs are more susceptible to radiation, and the skin, which receives the most exposure, since it protects tissues from external injury, is also greatly affected. Before long, the damage to these areas begins to manifest.

Given the amount of radiation the renegade soldiers were exposed to, it was unlikely they would survive, and they weren't going to waste the front lines' precious medical resources on deserters. That was the same for the low-ranking soldiers, who weren't worth questioning, and for the newly captured Chilm Rewa.

"Squeeze them for information on Noele Rohi and Ninja Lekaf's whereabouts. And once you do, you may dispose of her."

The nuclear weapon, meant to destroy all the Legion in the area and wake up the second front's military to their cause with its might and glory, was only capable of blowing up a single truck. Rex's report was enough to leave Noele baffled, but when the situation started worsening by the minute, she began to panic.

Rex, who'd stayed behind with his men to confirm the nuclear weapon's effectiveness, never returned after that last report. The production cells' members all collapsed after finishing their work, and every one of them perished. And the operative cells—which had taken said nuclear weapons and spread around the contested area to wait for Noele's orders—were now being pursued and mercilessly suppressed by the Federacy army.

"Why...? This shouldn't have happened; everything was supposed to work out...!"

I've done nothing wrong. I'm right, so everything was supposed to go well!

As Noele panicked, another operative cell was suppressed. Ninja returned, pale in the face, and reported that the final production site was seized, and Chilm was taken captive by her pursuers.

Her subjects, who were listening in tensely, and especially Yono, who was faint of heart ever since childhood, looked like they were about to burst into tears.

"P-Princess, did she just say everyone but us is dead...?!"

"Everything's going to work out, right, Princess?! The nuclear weapons are going to blow up the Legion, and the Federacy military will protect us—they'll save us, right?!"

"I..."

It all should have worked out. It should have—but it didn't. She failed.

No, she wouldn't admit she failed. A proud noble of the Empire wouldn't admit defeat this easily.

"...Of course! Just you wait and see. The blue flames of Marylazulia will

save you all!"

Her subjects' faces filled with relief. But then a platoon of Vánagandrs appeared from between the trees, along a road the Federacy military had previously built. They were coming from the direction of the barely visible tracks left by the trucks when they drove away to each of their stations. The Lady Bluebird Regiment had used them to track down the Hail Mary Regiment's hiding place.

"—Run! Hurry!" Noele shouted as loudly as she could.

Her subjects, who had been too shocked to move, instantly bolted away. They ran into the virgin forest, stomping over the fallen leaves, slipping as they tried to escape. They fled into the dark foliage obscured by the branches, unconsciously heading for the light on the other side of the trees.

"Ah..."

Before they knew it, they were faced with a river. Noele stood frozen in place, her route severed. This was the new Tataswa floodway, an artificial river which ran along the foot of the Shihano mountains and flowed into the Hiyano River. Its current seemed slow, but it was several hundred meters wide. It didn't seem possible to swim across. At this time of autumn, the water temperature was low, and the cold of the river would sap a person's body heat in a matter of seconds.

Metallic shapes emerged from the trees, cornering the rebel soldiers. It wasn't just the platoon of four units that they'd initially seen. A full company of sixteen units appeared, their power packs letting out a high-pitched, menacing screech.

"D-dammit..."

Kiah gripped his assault rifle, like he was ashamed of having run. Milha hid a trembling Yono behind his back. And as Noele remained frozen in place, Mele stood in front of her, as if to shield her.

As out of place as it was in the moment, Mele's gesture made Noele's heart throb sweetly.

"Mele, I... I really..."

The Vánagandr's machine guns began rotating. At this point, they weren't even going to ask them to surrender. And then—

—an azure light swept through the sky.

The Fleet Countries volunteer soldiers, who were called off from their patrol

duties due to the risk of radiation and relegated to helping the combat engineers, witnessed the light.

It wasn't sunlight shining through the fog, nor was it a bolt of lightning. It was a blue light of heat, a beam of focused fire.

The nostalgic—and despicable—flame of their homeland's battlefield.

Ishmael grunted despite himself. It couldn't be. This, on an inland battlefield?

"Are you kidding me...?"

That flame was...

Upon hearing the report, the second northern front's chief of staff went pale.

"The remnants of the Hail Mary Regiment, as well as their leaders Noele Rohi and Ninha Lekaf, escaped. The Lady Bluebird Regiment's 2nd Armored Company was wiped out."

While they were only one company, the Lady Bluebird Regiment's elites wouldn't let a group of mere rooster serfs escape, much less lose to them in battle. That wasn't why the chief of staff went pale. As a noble, she'd been trained to control her emotions since childhood, and that wouldn't have been enough to make her smile falter.

Something had terrified her.

"They were wiped out by an attack...from a leviathan that appeared in the Tataswa floodway."

CHAPTER 3

GRANT OUR WISHES, HAIL MARY

A dozen or so rivers once flowed south of the Reginia River and were eventually unified to form the new Tataswa floodway. Its width reached three hundred kilometers at its widest point, and vast volumes of water ran through it.

This made it sufficient, if a bit cramped, for *that creature*.

It crossed the waters—littered with fallen leaves from the trees on the western and eastern banks, which, along with their delicate ripples, formed a fair twill-brocade pattern along the surface—and raised its head.

It had a long neck and a triangular head akin to a dragon's, a crown-like horn decorating its peak. The ruler of the northern seas—a leviathan.

It gazed about the shores of the lake, indifferent to the humans swarming there. It turned its dragon-like head, its three peacock-colored eyes casting about.

The armored company pursuing the Hail Mary Regiment took in this sovereign's unexpected appearance with stunned eyes. It stood seventy meters tall, which was small for leviathans of its race. But compared with the tiny humans, it was a giant, its appearance striking terror and despair into the hearts of all who saw it.

The remnants of the Hail Mary Regiment, who had been backed into a corner, froze up as their despair won over their fear. Several members of the armored company, who'd repressed their righteous anger and bloodlust through their well-trained strength of will and were awaiting the order to fire, failed to

hide their panic at the sight of this creature.

They each pulled the trigger, and the staccato of heavy-machine-gun fire filled the area. Bullets powerful enough to tear a human in half stabbed into the leviathan's transparent scales, only to be effortlessly deflected by the armored scales beneath them. This sovereign of the seas was capable of fighting supercarriers and high-speed cruisers with their forty-cm depth charge cannons. Mere 12.7 mm rounds were effectively useless against it.

But this was enough to make the creature realize they meant it harm.

The leviathan turned its three eyes to the armored company and parted its gigantic mouth. The next moment, a beam of blue flame swept through and burned the Vánagandrs. The heat ray effortlessly penetrated their turrets and fuselage, their binding ceramic, and the heavy metal that formed their composite armor. It detonated the shells inside the turret, making each of the Vánagandrs burst into flame one by one.

A company of sixteen units, wiped out in one sweeping attack.

The leviathan looked down on the burning metallic vehicles emotionlessly for a moment. Once it saw no one else was moving, it sank back into the brocade-like waters of the new Tataswa floodway.

The only ones left behind were the petrified survivors of the Hail Mary Regiment. After a considerable pause, they finally let out their held breaths.

“It...saved us...?” Noele whispered to herself, dumbfounded.

Her subjects reacted to her words.

“It saved us...?”

“It protected us. That monster, it protected us!”

It was the only way they could interpret what had happened. That large, terrifying creature appeared just as they were cornered. And it saved them by punishing only the Federacy army soldiers who pursued them, like it had come to rescue them.

“It saved us. It did it because we’re not wrong, because we’re right—that’s why it protected us...!”

Mele watched the water the leviathan disappeared into, dumbstruck. The majesty of the dragon tyrant of the deep blue left a shocking impression on his heart that was akin to divine revelation. That terrifying, otherworldly, gigantic creature. That monster arrived...to save the princess.

In that case, the monster wasn’t simply there to protect them. That dragon

was a sword, a weapon for the princess—it was divine will, divine might.



“—Based on the footage we have, the leviathan that appeared is a Fisara, a smaller breed of Musukura.”

As commander of the Open Sea clans, Ishmael was naturally called in to explain the situation. The officers stood in the large meeting room of the second northern front’s integrated headquarters, with Ishmael standing calmly before them. As the fleet commander’s “son,” he’d spent his whole life grappling with the raging seas and leviathans. To him, Imperial nobles weren’t daunting in the slightest.

“Every year, ice floes drift to the Fleet Countries’ shores from the northern sea. Once in a while, leviathan younglings—mostly of the smaller Monokera species or the medium-sized Leuca—wander onto the ice floes and drift with them. When that happens, fleets of leviathans that usually wouldn’t approach our waters swim over in search of their young. It probably appeared in the Federacy through the Zinori port and then swam up the Hiyano River.”

The Hiyano River flowed from west to east along the northern part of the Womisam basin, and then it meandered north and connected with the Empire’s only northern military seaport of Zinori. The port bordered the Fleet Countries’ territorial waters, so a leviathan entering Zinori and swimming upstream along the Hiyano River wasn’t impossible.

“But those things have a sense of territory, too, so they wouldn’t attack humans on their own turf unless provoked. It’ll return home once it finds its youngling, so we can probably just keep an eye on it from a distance until it does.”

“It’s looking for its young...” One field officer leaned forward. “Can’t we use that to our advantage? If we capture the youngling, we could have its parent attack the Legion. Or we could raise the youngling and train it to obey orders.”

Ishmael fell silent for a long moment.

“...Don’t you think we’d have done that by now if it was possible?”

In the eleven years of the Legion War, and even before that.

“If it was possible, we’d have used it against the Empire or the United Kingdom... We’ve tried, but it never worked. That’s why the Fleet Countries were vassals to the Empire and United Kingdom for centuries.”

“...True enough,” the staff officer said and went quiet.

“Right? Besides, even if it is a young one, it’s still a leviathan. Even the younglings of smaller breeds like the Monokera are much larger and stronger than humans. They have sawlike organs capable of cutting through metal plates. And a Musukura youngling would be way too much to handle. The moment anyone approached it, they’d be burnt to a crisp... And to begin with...”

Ishmael cracked a strained smile. The Open Sea clans failed to hunt down the leviathans, but the United Kingdom’s Dragon Fang Mountain and the Alliance’s holy Mount Wyrmnest did derive their name from another creature.

“...The earth wyrms of the land were driven to extinction, weren’t they? And just like we can’t use radars or fighter planes anymore, neither wyrms nor leviathans are as menacing when they’re outside their natural territory.”

In other words, they weren’t adapted to fighting the Legion, the true rulers of land warfare.

The same news reached the Strike Package, who were preparing for an advance operation near the new Tataswa floodway. During one of the scheduled meetings held between the commanders of the Federacy, Alliance, and United Kingdom to ensure there was no friction among the different countries’ soldiers, Vika’s representative, Zashya, said this:

“If that is the case, there might be no need to actively hunt it down, since the leviathan and Legion could end up attacking each other. The Legion don’t distinguish between people and animals, and if the Legion were to attack the Fisara, it would retaliate.”

Just like how the Fisara’s heat ray was able to melt the Vánagandrs, it could just as easily destroy Löwe. And on the other hand, even a leviathan’s thick armor scales couldn’t withstand a direct hit from tank shells capable of penetrating sixty-centimeter-thick iron plates.

“I’m not sure about that...,” Olivia said, frowning. “Would the Legion really recognize the Fisara as a threat? They do indiscriminately attack any warm-blooded creature that exceeds a certain size regardless of if they’re human or animal, but a leviathan is fifty meters tall. It might actually be too large.”

The Legion were made to be weapons for massacre. Their targets were typically enemy soldiers—in other words, humans. They shouldn’t feel driven to kill animals. Still, since they were inflexible machines, the accuracy of their distinction abilities was deliberately lowered so that whenever they were unsure

if they were faced with a human or an animal, they would default to simply killing the target. That said, when faced with a clearly nonhuman animal, with a distinctly different heat signature and size, it would stand to reason they wouldn't recognize it as a target.

"As far as I know, the Legion only kill wolves and wild goats. I've never heard of them killing cats or rabbits. So the opposite should probably be true, too. They wouldn't attack an animal that's too big to be human."

Grethe asked them to wait and turned on her RAID Device. After a short exchange, she turned off the Resonance.

"...I asked Captain Nouzen and a few of the others, and they said that while they've seen the Legion kill wolves, sheep, and pigs, they did not appear to kill large animals like horses or cows."

Much like supplies in cities, abandoned livestock remained around battlefields and were often seen near the Republic's Eighty-Sixth Sector. So the Eighty-Six were familiar with how the Legion reacted to them.

"But...as a matter of fact, when we fought them in the Fleet Countries..." Zashya started saying, but then she stopped herself. "No. It was the leviathan that initiated the attack in the Mirage Spire. And neither the Morpho nor the Noctiluca ever engaged it in combat. Which means..."

Grethe nodded. She had come to the same conclusion. Just as she'd expected, things weren't going to be that easy.

"The leviathan only counterattacks when provoked on land, and the Legion don't seem to attack large animals. We can't expect them to fight each other and make the Strike Package's battle any easier."



After ordering the Ameise and Rabe to carefully investigate the situation in the northern front, the commander unit made its decision.

<<Firefly to all units. The use of the dirty bomb is deemed to be the action of a renegade enemy unit acting on its own.>>

This wasn't some *tactic* of the northern front army, but an *accident* of sorts caused by deserting soldiers. And the nuclear fuel the renegade unit possessed could be utilized based on the commander unit's knowledge from *before it died*. The commander unit considered taking it from them and putting it to use—but their protection prohibited them from both creating and employing nuclear

weapons, which included dirty bombs.

That meant the renegade unit lost any potential value it might have had, and since the Legion were resistant to radiation, they became nothing but another target for elimination. However, for the northern front's army, the renegade unit was a threat. Since the army was human and susceptible to the radiation, they had to go to the trouble of hunting them down, taking them into custody, and recovering the nuclear fuel.

This meant that the renegade unit effectively bought the Legion time to prepare.

<<Recommencing offensive operations. Apply pressure to the northern front, search for the unit possessing the dirty bomb, and interrupt any enemy reconnaissance operations into Legion territory. Warning: Strike Package presence in the second northern front has been confirmed.>>

That was the second boon the renegade unit granted the Legion. Their *intelligence* told them the Strike Package was poised to take part in an operation to seize a production plant in the western front, but the renegade unit had exposed their presence in the second northern front instead. They were to secretly take part in an advance operation here, but they'd been drawn out early, exposing the Federacy's attempt at deception.

No Face's unit had made preparations to intercept the Strike Package, but thankfully, the same was possible here in the second northern front, where they were able to force the Federacy into an advance operation and set a trap accordingly.

<<The unit under Grilse One's command is to remain in shutdown mode. Attempt to capture the Strike Package and high-priority target Báleygr.>>



The Hail Mary Regiment may have destroyed the armored unit pursuing them, but they couldn't go back to the warehouses they'd hid in previously, since their position had been exposed. And so the surviving members sneaked through the forest, avoiding search parties, and arrived at the ruins of a village that still had some intact stone buildings.

SNEENIKEIT—the name of the village was just barely visible on the faded signpost, the letters eroded from exposure to the elements.

When Noele and her unit members finally stopped to rest in the assembly hall, the sole structure with an intact roof, she was unable to contain her

excitement. The only survivors were a single company made up of Noele's subjects and Ninja's subordinates, and the only nuclear weapon they had left was that held by the main force.

But the leviathan defeated their foes and saved them. It acknowledged their justice.

She wasn't wrong. She still wasn't. She didn't have to give in to the terrifying thought that she'd made a mistake.

Mele returned after hiding the truck carrying the nuclear weapon in a warehouse at the edge of town. As he approached her, unable to contain his own excitement, Noele felt herself freeze up. They'd spent over a day fighting the Federacy's pursuit, covered in mud and sweat, and she had no hot water to wash off with. She was now painfully conscious of this fact. But moreover, when she thought they were done for and Mele stepped up to protect her, she nearly blurted out her feelings for him. He didn't realize, did he?

Noele was a noble's daughter, and Mele was a serf. There was a class difference between them. So she resolved to never tell him, to forever keep the secret of her fleeting, sweet first love for him locked away in her heart.

"Mele, er...," Noele stammered, her hands fidgeting.

"You're amazing, Princess!" Mele said, grasping her palms, still ignorant of her feelings. "It saved us. God saved us, because you were right all along!"

His eyes were full of complete trust and genuine worship. Those blue eyes looked straight at her, from nearly point-blank range, with something akin to passion. Noele did everything she could to restrain her discomposure, feeling all the while like she was on cloud nine.

"—Yes!"

Mele acknowledges me. He believes in me! I'm so happy, so happy, so happy...!

And she wanted to answer his trust.

"We'll continue the operation," she said excitedly. "We'll take the nuclear weapon, too. Next time, it'll work—"

"Right, the leviathan is on our side!" Kiah cut in. "We can have it help us kill the Legion, too!"

"Huh?" Noele was dumbstruck by his unexpected words.

I want to use the nuclear weapon... The flame of our hometown that made me and everyone else I love happy... The leviathan proved I was right, so the nuclear weapon should work, too...!

But Mele nodded firmly in agreement.

“You’re right. God chose the Princess. We can have the leviathan beat the Legion for us!”

“This dragon god is more suitable than a stupid bucket.” Rilé nodded a few times in agreement. “It’d be easier to let it fight our battles for us.”

“And when I get near that nuclear stuff, I get the taste of metal in my mouth,” Milha said, grimacing. “And it’s not like I licked anything... It’s creepy.”

“What?! That’s scary!” Yono cowered like always.

“Don’t worry, the leviathan won’t make you feel like that. Right, Princess?!” Otto laughed it off in his usual carefree manner.

They all directed smiles as bright and frank as a clear summer sky at Noele, who began by silently watching the others, then gradually started to feel that maybe they were right.

Yes, perhaps it really was for the best. The leviathan was like some kind of God that had swooped in to save them, so maybe relying on it would be a good idea.

Mele repeated it feverishly, with that same look of trust and worship.

“That’s right, the princess was chosen by God! That leviathan is the princess’s sword!”

I was chosen. Yes, I—I was right the whole time. So I have to be confident. I shouldn’t doubt or worry or think too hard about anything.

Noele tried to tell herself that, but she couldn’t shake off her anxiety. She felt like she should choose the nuclear weapons in the end, because she was more familiar with them. Or rather...she didn’t know anything about the leviathan, except that it saved them.

Could they really rely on something they didn’t understand?



Everything—the stupid renegades getting their mission postponed, seeing the Federacy’s predicament, losing part of the operation area because of the dirty bomb’s radiation, the appearance of a leviathan, and the Hail Mary Regiment getting away.

It had all finally gotten to Shin. He was at his limit.

He sat in the shared office they’d sectioned off in the barracks, leaning his back against a sofa tiredly. Seeing Shin look up at the ceiling, completely still, Raiden told him:

“Well, you know, you tried your hardest.”

“...I can’t take this anymore,” Shin grumbled like a child.

“You want some coffee? I can go brew a fresh pot,” Raiden said, a sardonic smile on his lips.

“I wanna see Lena...” Shin kept going, his voice listless.

“Whoa...”

Shin was so dispirited, he was actually voicing his wants in front of other people. He really had it bad.

“You’re suffering from severe Lena deficiency, aren’t you, Shin?” Anju asked with a strained smile.

“On top of Lena not being here, it’s one idiotic development after another. I can see how you’d run out of batteries... Can’t blame ya. You’re allowed to be down for the count today.”

Shin tried to keep up appearances, be it maintaining the unit’s morale, preventing Lena from worrying, or simply not damaging her good name. But with things this absurd, he could only keep his cool for so long. Raiden was fed up with the situation, too.

But then Kurena asked with a curious tilt of her head:

“Why not use the Para-RAID to Resonate with Lena, then? Maybe talking to her a little will cheer you up.”

“Hey, Kurena, cut that out,” Raiden scolded her.

“Is this your idea of payback, Kurena?” Anju asked.

“Huh?”

“He doesn’t want Lena to see him when he’s at his lowest.” Raiden glared at her. “He’s been staying cool around her until now. Keep his masculine dignity in mind, would ya?”

“...If you care so much about my pride, could you at least not talk about it right in front of me?” Shin said grumpily.

“Shin, that’s on you for sulking in the common room,” Anju noted.

“I see, I see.” Kurena nodded a few times in understanding. “I’ll Resonate with her, then!”

“Huh?” Shin jumped off the sofa in surprise.

“Kurena, what?!?” Anju stared at her in shock.

But Kurena ignored them and turned on the RAID Device. Honestly, what she was doing wasn’t allowed, and for all they knew, Lena didn’t have her RAID Device on to begin with.

“—Ah, Lena.”

But as it turned out, Lena did have it on, because the Resonance connected. Lena replied, her surprised voice like a silver bell. Behind her, Kurena could hear TP, whom Lena had taken along to the medical facility.

“Kurena? Is something the matter?”

“Yeah, actually, Shin is suffering from severe Lena deficiency right now.”

“Eh?”

“Hey, Kurena!” Raiden called out.

But Kurena ignored him and tossed the RAID Device over to Shin with an unconcerned expression. Despite having frozen up in surprise, Shin somehow caught the silver ring.

“...You’ll regret this, Kurena,” he said grimly.

“Not my problem. This is just payback.”

Yes, payback. She was allowed a little payback. The guy who turned her down was moping around and thinking about another girl right in front of her. So she was allowed a little bit of payback against her bully of a big brother.

There was no helping the fact that the Para-RAID was connected or that Kurena had spilled the beans to Lena, so Shin put on the RAID Device as he left the office and walked to the adjacent room. Watching him leave, Kurena proudly puffed up her conspicuous chest.

“I wish he’d pay more attention to me, you know.”

She may have decided to drop out of the running, but she still liked him.

“You’ve gotten strong, Kurena,” Raiden said, looking terrified.

“I can’t stay his baby sister forever, you know!”

“Big Brother looked a bit pitiful back there, so having you act stronger balances things out,” Anju said.

“Right?! He’s pitiful!”

She spoke loudly, despite knowing that the wall they’d used to section the living room off from the office was thin and that Shin could probably hear her. In fact, Raiden suspected she was saying it with that in mind. He couldn’t help but sympathize with Shin. He wished Theo would come back already, because he had a feeling the girls were getting out of hand.

Anju and Kurena’s chuckling filled the room like the chiming of bells.

“Actually, this brings back memories of the Eighty-Sixth Sector.”

“Yes, Lena was far away, and we only heard her voice while we were relaxing, just like that.”

But then Anju's sky-blue eyes wavered in sweet, pained reminiscence. The fate they'd accepted and even, on some level, wished for, was now far away. The comrades they'd fought with for so long, the people who were always by their side, were now gone.

"We've changed a lot since then... I never would have imagined Shin would feel comfortable acting depressed in front of us. And you too, Kurena. Back then, I never would have imagined you'd Resonate with Lena."

Kurena blinked a few times. "You're right, come to think of it."

She chuckled. She felt a wave of nostalgia, mixed with a hint of regret and sadness, but also pride.

"Yeah. I can't stay a baby sister forever, either."

She couldn't let the scars of her childhood haunt her forever. She couldn't keep being afraid to walk forward toward an unknowable future.

They then heard the doorknob click. They turned around, expecting to find Shin, but it was Frederica.

"I could hear you from outside. Did something happen?"

It wasn't that Anju didn't want to tell her, but she felt it was inappropriate to explain to Frederica memories that she didn't share with them.

"Yes, well, let's just say Kurena's maturing," she replied with a chuckle.

"Yeah, that. And Shin being worn out for once."

Raiden expected Frederica to complain about their answers, but instead...

"...So Shinei, too, is weary," she whispered with a heavy expression.

Raiden took a deep breath and asked her a question. His smile waned as he looked straight into the small girl's eyes.

"What about you? Is anything wrong? You look like something's been on your mind since the last operation... What happened?"

Frederica trembled. She tried to restrain her surging emotions, but she couldn't hold them back, and large tears began running down her smooth cheeks. The walls were thin...so she couldn't quite say the words she wanted, for fear of others hearing her.

"Forgive me. For being unable to join you on your last operation. Unable to fight alongside you."

She'd forced all the sacrifices onto Raiden and the others—and that one-eyed general. And in the meantime, she'd simply sat back, safe and sound.

Raiden cracked a bitter smile. "...That's what you're beating yourself up over?"

"No, it is not. I am a Mascot, and yet—"

The empress of this country, and yet—

“I must remain on the defensive. I can do nothing. I’ve done nothing.”

“...I see.”

Raiden didn’t deny it or say she was wrong. Neither did Kurena or Anju, who listened to her in silence. They could tell she was hurting, because being powerless hurt.

“You know you don’t have to be impatient, but you can’t help feeling it anyway, right?” Anju asked.

“...Aye.”

“But that doesn’t mean you should push yourself,” Kurena said.

“Ugh...”

“Stop trying to carry so many burdens all the time. You’re already a Mascot.”
Already an empress.

“If you tried to carry any more weight, we’d lose our place, you know?”

“...Are you...” Frederica hiccuped in between her tears. “Are you telling me to forsake you...?”

Raiden frowned, and Frederica continued, sobbing.

“Viktor told me something. He said that if I lack the power to protect you, I’d be better off forsaking you than trying to protect you for naught.”

“That idiot...”

“Am I not allowed to wish to help you if I’m powerless to do so...?”

Raiden scratched his head, his expression sour. Did that stupid prince have to be so harsh to a kid?

If she was pretending to be a saint and reaching out to save people, even though she lacked the power and resolve to help them, and if she was going to play the victim after failing to become a savior and abandoning the ones she wished to help, she would indeed have been better off never trying at all, but...

“Wanting to save someone isn’t a bad thing. He just meant you shouldn’t try to do things you’re not capable of or take responsibility for things you don’t need to shoulder. That idiot, Vika, he...”

In all likelihood, he didn’t mean anything that admirable, but. “I mean, he’s a prince. He has to save everyone and take responsibility for all those he fails to save. That’s a weight he can carry because he’s a prince and he’s prepared, but it’s not easy. I think he was just trying to tell you to not try to carry it, too.”

“...”

“I know that admitting you’re powerless is hard and painful in its own way, but...don’t force yourself to do things you can’t.”

Otherwise, her attempt to escape her own powerlessness would just lead her to take up responsibilities too heavy for her to bear.

Frederica finally nodded.

“...Yes.”

“And if he said it the way you described it, he went too far, so don’t be afraid to talk back to him. Want me to speak to him for you?”

“N-no, no need for that! I am no child!” Frederica shook her small head.

She then thought over Raiden’s words and nodded again.

“He did speak out of turn, but I will answer him with my own words. I’ve no need of your meddling overprotectiveness, Big Brother.”

“Oh-ho.” Raiden hummed, impressed and amused.

“However, hmm.” Her upturned crimson eyes glanced toward him.

It was the unconscious, natural gesture of a younger sister fawning on her older brother.

“I would be allowed to get back at him by putting a caterpillar plush in his boot, yes?”

“...”

Raiden wasn’t sure if it was her conscience that led her to suggest a plush rather than a real caterpillar, because the bugs were out of season, or simply because she was too afraid to touch one.

“...So long as you won’t cry when he dissects the plush, go ahead.”

Due to the thin partitions in the barracks module, Shin could hear Frederica’s conversation with Raiden and the others from the adjacent room.

Spare her some attention.

Apparently, there was no need for that anymore. As he listened to Lena share all sorts of interesting things that happened to her in the medical facility, Shin took a deep breath of relief.

†

“...That girl.”

The suburban medical center Yuuto was in was used by civilians as well, meaning the entrance wasn’t as restricted as a military hospital’s. As they gazed down through the large window in the lounge overlooking the front yard, which

civilians living nearby used in place of a park, Amari muttered something, her dark-brown eyes narrowing grimly.

“That’s the girl who took away the kid who came to visit us.”

Yuuto walked over and glanced in the same direction. The front yard was surrounded by well-groomed trees, and standing under their leafless branches was a girl with long, flowing beige-colored hair, appearing lost in thought.

“The kid said she was an Eighty-Six, too. She was adopted into the same house and was his big sister now, so she came to pick him up.”

“...What is she doing here?”

Eighty-Six who hadn’t enlisted were rounded up and reexamined by the military. A few of them had supposedly run off and were currently missing, so that girl was likely one of them... But if so, why come to this medical center, where the army might catch her? Needless to say, neither Yuuto nor Amari knew her.

“Say, Yuuto...,” Amari whispered suddenly. “Do you think the Federacy military really just wants to take them under protection?”

“...Yeah.”

Honestly, Yuuto didn’t think the military was all that trustworthy. He might have believed them before the large-scale offensive, but not with the way they were conducting themselves now. To begin with, the Strike Package always had a propaganda aspect to it, established to buy sympathy from civilians and foreign countries. Many in the military saw the Eighty-Six only as very skilled hunting dogs. But now they weren’t even trying to hide it anymore—just like that military police officer.

Soon, the Federacy military would no longer bother hiding its blemishes. It would be in no state to maintain even a facade of composure or humanitarianism.

“I’ll go ask her what she wants...,” said Yuuto. “We can call the military police later, right?”

“Want me to go?”

“No.”

Amari had only recently healed. Besides, Yuuto was a battalion commander, and she was his subordinate. And more than anything, she was a younger girl. Amari would likely get mad if he told her that to her face, but the fact still remained. He didn’t want her to have to brave any dangers if he could avoid it.

“I’ll go.”

When Theo went to the PX to get lunch, he found Annette sunken into one of the cheap-looking table sets. One corner of the PX was a food court with several Federacy fast-food chains. He spotted her lying face down on a table absent of any food, and having seen her, he couldn't leave her alone.

"What is it, Annette? Too hungry to move?" Theo asked jokingly, but Annette ignored him.

She simply kept her face buried in the table and grumbled:

"You can just call me a traitor and be done with it."

"Huh? Why?" Theo asked, honestly baffled.

Annette rested a cheek against the table and answered, despite her posture making it hard to talk.

"The Republic betrayed you again, and I'm one of those Republic traitors."

"We never believed in the Republic, so it can't betray us, and even if what it did was betrayal, that doesn't make you a traitor. You just did— What do you call it? Exposure? Indictment? Yeah, indictment."

Either way, it was a legitimate thing to do. He didn't know the rules of the Republic military, which Annette was a part of, but she did the right, ethical thing.

"...It's too late for an indictment."

For the children who had been turned into wiretaps, this came ten years too late.

"I should have realized it sooner, much sooner... Research into the Para-RAID had only just begun when I joined the army, but there must have been some army documents, something involving the Para-RAID, some old records. If I'd looked at that, I'd have figured it out...!"

Maybe she could have saved them before things got to this point.

"...I see."

She might have been able to do it, but she didn't. She couldn't. And since she couldn't...

"So...won't you? Won't you call me a traitor?"

In place of those young children who weren't allowed to blame anyone.

Theo grimaced.

"Like hell I will. I mean, I know I say some awful things in the heat of the moment, but I do regret them and learn from my mistakes, you know."

From the strength of his tone, Annette could tell there must have been some history she wasn't aware of, but she didn't think asking about it would do either of them any good.

“Right... Sorry.”

“But I do get it. Sometimes, being the one getting blamed feels easier.”

He wasn’t going to fault anyone here, he didn’t want to say these kinds of things, and to begin with, they weren’t close enough for her to ask something like this of him. But then again, he didn’t feel comfortable just pushing her away altogether. Theo paused for thought, and after failing to come up with the right response, he said this instead:

“Remember that fried-bread stand you told me about back in the hospital? I tried it, and it really was good. The minced meat, the onions and the pepper, that fragrance they put on it, and those weird spices... It all seriously came together.”

“...Right.”

“And you know, the café chain over there, they have a delicious nuts-and-chocolate tart.”

With her face still pressed against the table, she raised one eye to wordlessly glance at him through her bangs. A bit daunted by this, Theo carried on.

“Wanna have some? For now, just dedicate today to eating something tasty.”

“...”

“You can have some of their coffee with it, too. The kind with lots of cream and caramel sauce. They can draw something on the paper cup too, like a dog or a cat.”

Annette finally smiled.

“You’re on.”

The girl introduced herself to Yuuto as Citri Oki.

“—On paper, I’m called Citri Myora now. But my stepfather says I don’t have to force myself to use it and that I can call myself by my old name if I want.”

She was originally from the United Kingdom, a Taaffe from their territories. She had long, flax-colored hair and faint-purple eyes. Her face was pretty, like a doll’s, and the classy, long one-piece dress she wore suited her. Her hair was fixed with a light-purple ribbon that matched her eyes.

And that just made the hard, filthy boots she was wearing stand out.

The look wasn’t too unnatural, given the low temperatures of late autumn, and after living on the battlefield for so long, it didn’t much bother Yuuto. Nor would he notice the sweet scent of solidified oil unique to a girl who hadn’t groomed herself in days.

Citri did seem to mind, though, because she sat on the other side of the bench from him. Or maybe she felt awkward next to Yuuto, a fellow Eighty-Six like her, who—unlike her—had fought on the battlefield.

“I didn’t enlist, and you all are recovering in the hospital so I thought my visiting you might just be a bother, but...there’s something I had to ask.”

“The Republic officers who had you gather intelligence on the Federacy army are already in custody. You don’t need to get information out of us anymore.”

Citri tightly gripped her hands, which rested on her lap. Her hands were different from those of any girl in the Strike Package. They were the frail, dainty hands of a girl who never had to grip a gun or a control stick, who never had to fight. For Eighty-Six around Yuuto’s age, that was almost unimaginable.



“Yes, I know. My little sister...Kaniha got arrested for it.”

That must have been the young Eighty-Six wiretap girl whom Amari had mentioned.

“And I think that’s for the best. Kaniha got adopted to the Myora family like me, but she’s different from us...and I knew the Republic was having her help them, too.”

“...Different from you?” Yuuto replied carefully, despite his suspicion.

“I realize this is going to be a bother for you,” Citri said, cutting him off.

Her violet eyes were fixed on her hands, which were clenching the fabric of her skirt, as she intentionally tried not to look at him.

“But we don’t have time—you enlisted, so I’m sure you know. Please tell me.”

Yuuto contemplated this in silence for a moment. Even if Citri hadn’t been wiretapped, he couldn’t leak information about the Strike Package to her. Since he was a Federacy soldier, many of the things he was privy to were considered classified.

However...the words she’d used—*different, us*.

“It depends on what you’re asking.”

If she—if *they* were different from those who’d been wiretapped, if they were something the Federacy army wasn’t aware of, he needed to get her to tell him. And to do that, he’d need to comply with her request first.

“Thank you... You see,” Citri said, with a look that appeared relieved and, at the same time, terribly cornered.

We don’t have time. Her eyes seemed to back up her words.

“You see...”



Shiden received a cartoon that explained nuclear power, likely sent by Lieutenant Colonel Mialona. She played it in the barracks’ common room instantly. Other curious Processors gathered around. Since there was effectively an entire battalion of people who wanted to watch it, they ended up playing the film several times for a few different groups.

The cartoon was well-made and was intended to be comprehensible even for children who didn’t go to school, like the Eighty-Six. It did help them understand most of the basics they wanted to know. However...

“Sorry, Cap’n, but watching that film only confused me more.”

Rito said this as he approached the table with a tray of savory tomato soup full of salted meat and pickles. Seated at the long dining hall table were the Spearhead squadron and Frederica, along with Marcel, who joined them for lunch that day.

Taking the fork out of his mouth, Marcel said, “If it wasn’t covered in the cartoon, I don’t know about it either. I’m from the special officer academy, too, but honestly, I feel like I’m only just figuring it out. Do you know more about it, Nouzen?”

“Depends on the question... You should probably go to Lieutenant Colonel Mialona for anything more in-depth.”

“Oh, I don’t mean anything like that. I’m not asking about what the cartoon explained,” Rito said, his expression conflicted. “We’re taking classes, but we’re not exactly caught up on our studies, right? And yet, even I can tell that nuclear weapons aren’t something you can make that easily.”

“...Yeah.”

“So why doesn’t the Hail Mary Regiment know that, too? And Lieutenant Colonel Mialona said they blew one up earlier and it didn’t work, right? Then why didn’t they realize they made it wrong and surrender?”

Rito had a point. Shin, Raiden, Kurena, Anju, Claude, and Tohru all exchanged looks.

“You’re right, it’s strange that they didn’t look into how to actually make nuclear weapons,” said Claude. “Like, would you try to cook a dish you’ve never prepared before without checking the recipe?”

“Claude,” said Tohru. “You’re practically asking me to bring up how you did just that and thought it would work out only to screw it all up.”

“Shut up.”

“Maybe they just didn’t have a recipe...? But they could have asked Lieutenant Colonel Mialona...”

“As for why they didn’t surrender, that’s because desertion is a serious crime, so even if they submit peacefully, they could still get the maximum punishment.” Shin explained.

“That might be true, Shin, but isn’t that all the more reason to look into how to make a nuclear weapon before they started?” Anju pointed out. “I mean, if they failed, they’d absolutely get sentenced to death for it.”

The baffled child soldiers fell into contemplative silence, unable to come up with an answer.

...The Eighty-Six could be cruel without even meaning to sometimes.

Zashya, who was dining at a table a bit farther away from them with the rest of her regiment, cracked a bitter smile. It was natural the Eighty-Six would fail to understand, since their king was a born leader with the makings of a true ruler. A man with the strength and resolve to live on his own and function as king even if no one followed him.

And that lone king didn't understand the fainthearted weakness of sheep. He didn't need to have sheep obey him, and for that reason, he never needed to understand how they thought, or realize the cruelty of that lack of understanding.

Even the heir and princess of a major governor couldn't normally gain an audience with someone like him.

Lieutenant Colonel Mialona and her brother, Brigadier General Mialona, didn't miss the opportunity to invite Viktor Idinarohk, fifth prince of the United Kingdom of Roa Gracia, to a dinner meeting, to which he replied he would be honored to attend.

Once the officers serving them had managed to nervously return to the wall without tripping over themselves, Brigadier General Mialona spoke up.

"The serfs of my domain have brought shame to me."

Prince Viktor smiled elegantly. As a member of the royal family of the United Kingdom, which still maintained an autocratic monarchy, he directed a cold gaze at the Empire citizens who'd driven their ruler from the throne in the revolution.

"Indeed. The people wished for this freedom, and yet... I suppose this is the outcome of their wishing for something they themselves were too oblivious to understand."

Freedom and *equality*. Words with a beautiful ring to them—and an unimaginable weight. Responsibilities they could have left in the hands of their lords and governors just as their ancestors had done, had they not wished for revolution.

"Yes, it is quite shameful... However." Brigadier General Mialona nodded and carried on.

In exchange for ruling over the sheep, for ordering them and being followed. In exchange for taking away their people's knowledge and freedom to choose, he, as a ruler, had to learn everything he would possibly need to make all their choices for them.

For the sheep, their rulers, who took on the burden of studying and making choices, were also their protectors. Someone they only needed to follow, who promised them a simple life without pressures or the hard work of education.

Brigadier General Mialona spoke, as a descendant of one of the Empire's old rulers, to a member of the United Kingdom's house of unicorns, which still took advantage of the sheep's slothful desire for peace and quiet.

"I do believe that those who forced onto those oblivious sheep a burden they didn't understand and thus weren't prepared to carry, bear a modicum of guilt in all this."

After a moment's thought, Marcel spoke:

"Ah... Actually, I think I might know something about that."

He dropped his eyes to his plate of soup and spoke half in contemplation.

"Not having to think is easy. Reflecting on your actions is a pain. Thinking that all you have to do is follow orders is much easier, and if anything happens, you don't have to reflect on what you did. You just followed orders, so you can shift all the blame onto someone else..."

In fact, you could even shift the blame for things you weren't ordered to do onto someone else, Marcel thought bitterly.

People who refused to carry the burden of failing to protect others. People who couldn't handle the absurdities that befell them.

...Just like me. There was a time when I failed to carry that burden, and I don't want to become like that again. Have I become the kind of person I hoped? He accepted the hatred I threw at him for no reason and survived in spite of it, only to say it didn't bother him. Even if I can't become like him, I wanted to become someone who could at least carry his own pain and fears.

"So...how do I put it...?"

Shin said nothing, sensing the regret in Marcel's words. Marcel knew by now that Shin had his own share of regrets and doubts, moments of weakness and error, so he didn't feel quite as wretched about it anymore. Shin simply kept them hidden and bottled up. He never let it show, never said he was in pain or asked for help. Marcel knew this now.

After chewing this over for a moment, Rito nodded.

"Hmm, so you're saying that the Hail Mary Regiment is like that, too? Their commander—Second Lieutenant Rohi, was it? They're just following her blindly and aren't thinking on their own at all? And that's why they won't study

or learn from their mistakes, or even realize they've done something wrong. You're saying they're all like that?"

"Probably," said Marcel. "Though in that case, I have to wonder why Second Lieutenant Rohi isn't thinking or learning from her mistakes, even though she's their commander."

Frederica furrowed her brow and grumbled unpleasantly.

"Perhaps—that Noele Rohi girl is the kind that doesn't think or learn, either."

"Huh?"

"What?"

"'Tis the only conclusion. She does not face up to her mistakes and doesn't even realize her critical lack of knowledge. She conducts herself as a ruler, but she lacks the qualities to serve as one. She does not even realize such qualities exist."

She didn't learn, didn't think. She simply gave orders like a ruler, while possessing neither the disposition nor the resolve to uphold a leader's responsibilities.

"Oh! I remember now, Princess!"

The Hail Mary Regiment had by then been reduced to below two hundred members, not even enough for a fully staffed company of infantry. As such, they conducted all matters except for sentry duty—even dining and briefings—in the same room.

They used the village's assembly hall as their barracks. Noele was there now, attempting to maintain some semblance of elegance as she ate a ration of soup with a plastic spoon, when Otto suddenly got to his feet and walked over to her.

"Princess, I just remembered! When I was little, my grandma told me something her grandma had told her! When a baby leviathan swims up the Reginia River, its parent leaves the sea to chase after it!"

As Noele sat baffled by this contextless story about baby leviathans, Ninha Lekaf frowned over a serf disturbing a knight's meal. Otto was too excited to notice this.

"So we just have to find the baby!" he continued. "If we do that, it'll return the favor and help us again!"

"Hmm..."

This was probably Otto's attempt at an explanation, but since he already knew what he was thinking, he left out too many words for Noele to

immediately understand him. So the leviathan was searching for its baby, and they needed to help it, or rather, its baby. And in thanks for their help, the parent leviathan would help them in turn. In other words...

Just as Noele had managed to put it all together in her mind, Otto leaned forward impatiently.

“So what I’m saying is, if we find the baby, the leviathan will destroy the Legion for us!”

“Huh?”

Noelle was baffled by this leap in logic, but the surrounding serfs all got excited at once.

“Way to go, Otto!”

“Good on you for remembering that!”

“Eh-heh-heh! I admit I’ve got a pretty good memory.”

“So we just need to find the baby leviathan! Princess! Let’s go look for it right away!”

“We’re a little short on hands, but...if it’s swimming up the river, it’s in the water, right? If we split up, we’ll find it in no time!”

“H-huh? But, er...” As the serfs drew closer, Noele trailed off evasively.

If the baby leviathan was in or near the water, they’d have to search the Hiyano River, which flowed into the sea, and the Kadunan floodway and new Tataswa floodway which flowed into the Hiyano. Even if they could narrow down the area to those, the two floodways alone spanned sixty kilometers from north to south, including territory seized by the Legion. And the Hiyano River’s entire river basin was behind enemy lines.

How were they going to search there?

But since she wasn’t the one who caused this enthusiasm, she had no idea how to silence it. And her people were so full of excitement and hope; she didn’t want to crush it. If she told them it wasn’t possible after they’d followed her all the way here, they would grow disillusioned with her. That scared her, and she couldn’t bring herself to say anything.

After looking around, she spotted Mele a short distance away from Kiah and the others. He smiled at her.

“...Don’t worry, Princess. I know we’ll be fine so long as we’re with you,” he said.

That single sentence filled her with courage. Mele and the serfs were all counting on her. How could she, the noble leading them, not believe in her own people?

Noele got to her feet resolutely. Her face was full of confidence and conviction as she puffed up her chest.

“Yes, of course! Let’s begin the search. This time, we will save the northern front!”

“Yeah, let’s save the northern front! All of us, together!”

“We’ll burn away the Legion and all the Federacy soldiers who would get in our way! We’ll take revenge for our friends!”

At their beloved princess’s declaration, the assembly hall filled with excited revelry. They celebrated like they’d already found the baby leviathan and opened up new rations and bottles of alcohol.

“Yeah. The leviathan sided with us because we’re right. The Federacy army incurred divine punishment. They were wrong, so we’ve gotta take them out!”

“And despite being wrong all along, they kept making fools of us. We need to get back at them! The loud sergeants and the bigheaded battalion commander and the useless nobles, all of them should die!”

“Yeah!”

As Otto and Rilé started talking big, Kiahí nodded, his spirits high. Honestly, it felt good. They had a way of beating the Legion, and they’d get to give the Federacy army, which treated them like filth, their just deserts. They, who had been unfairly judged incapable and scorned for it, would finally reach their rightful place—they would be heroes.

“No, we’ll be more than just that,” Kiahí said. “If this goes well, maybe we can save not just the Federacy, but the whole continent! After all, we have God on our side.”

If we can do that, I...

“We’re the chosen ones. National heroes. Saviors!”

Mele’s and Otto’s eyes widened in disbelief, like it took a moment for their thoughts to fully process what he said.

“Saviors... Us...?”

“Amazing...”

As the realization sank in, they were overcome with excitement and joy. The two’s amber- and chestnut-colored eyes widened even further.

“Wow! We’re gonna be saviors! Wow!”

“They’ll make statues of us! Movies about us!”

“Yeah. The president and even the king of Roa Gracia will thank us.”

They'd kneel before them with tears of gratitude. All humankind would grovel at their feet in thanks. That daydream intoxicated Kiahī much more than the booze in his hands did.

"Are you sure, though? I don't know much about leviathans... It's all kind of scary."

Yono was huddled in the dining hall's corner, frightened by her friends' enthusiasm.

"I mean, I don't really know much about nuclear weapons, either, and it looks like those were really dangerous. So I'm scared of the leviathans, too..."

The group's scaredy-cat little sister was cowering like always. But to Mele, it came across like she was spoiling their fun. Milha felt the same way and spoke up, not even trying to mask his annoyance.

"What, Yono, you want to stop us?"

Yono instantly jolted and made herself as small as possible. Milha looked down on her with explicit contempt.

"It saved us, so I think we can bother it. Or what, you want to get in our way? Are you going to betray us and get punished like those Vánagandrs did?"

"No!" Yono said, her eyes opening wide. "I'm not a traitor...! The Federacy is wrong, and things can't stay this way. I think so, too. So I won't stop you. I won't betray everyone!"

"Hmm..." Milha scoffed at her, but it seemed his temper had gone down.

After Yono shook her head, sending her braids flying back and forth, Milha stopped bullying her.

Mele, in the meantime, realized something thanks to Yono's words.

...Right. So that's what this was about.

"...No. Yono's right."

Yono and Milha both turned to look at Mele, surprised.

"What are you talking about, Mele?"

"Things we don't understand frighten us... Ever since the beginning of the Federacy, we've been facing stuff like that. We couldn't figure out why things were turning out the way they were, or why we were being told what we were told."

There was so much they didn't understand. The danger of the nuclear power that had made their town so happy. Their town's collapse into poverty. The Legion, which arrived out of the blue. Study courses, textbooks. Freedom, rights.

All of it was terrible.

“Not knowing is scary, and scary things are mistakes. For the last ten years, the Federacy has been making mistakes. Yono and us, we all realized it ten years ago... No, even earlier than that.”

No one else had, not ten years ago and probably not now. Only their group had been wise enough to notice.

“You two, and me, and everyone else, we’ve always been right. That’s why
—”

Yono’s face lit up in a smile. Milha nodded proudly. And after nodding back, Mele said firmly:

“That’s why everything’s going to work out. I know it.”

“This is all pointless...”

Like Noele, Ninha was a regional knight of the Shemno province. She was in the same year as her in the officer academy and was likewise subjected to having to “skip a year” to graduate. Noele, in her naivete, believed the army’s excuse that they’d graduated early because they were “talented enough that they didn’t require the established education period.”

After leaving the assembly hall, the two female officers went to the dilapidated one-room house they’d designated as their command post and sat across from each other inside. They both had a Cairn’s chocolate-colored hair and eyes, but their hair texture and styles were different. Noele’s hair was fine, soft, and tied into two pigtails, while Ninha’s straight, coarse hair was done up into a sidetail.

“How are we supposed to find the baby leviathan?” Ninha began. “Is there even a baby leviathan around here to begin with? How are we going to protect it if we do find it? And is the leviathan really going to side with us again? How are we going to tell it to fight the Legion? I can’t answer a single one of those questions, and I can’t act based on speculation.”

“Yes, but...,” Noele muttered.

She had considered those problems, too, and when they were pointed out to her directly, she could only reply in the tiniest of voices:

“...the nuclear weapon didn’t work, so...we need something to replace it.”

“We should have turned back the moment the nuclear weapon didn’t go off the way you said it would. Again, we don’t know if the leviathan *can* fill in for it...”

“...”

“No matter how you look at it, this is pointless. It isn’t going to work.”

Ninha...may be right, but...if we admit that this was all for nothing, if we give up...

“The serfs are there for the sake of their governors, so let them take the blame for the crimes of desertion and treason—anyone will do. We can blame everything on one of the serfs and say we were forced to join in. If we do that, we can still turn back.”

The crimes of desertion and plotting treason—those were Noele’s crimes. To pin them on one of her people...

“—We can’t do that!” Noele said, flaring up at her.

Using their own serfs as a scapegoat? Unthinkable. And if she gave up now, none of them would be saved. If she gave up, everyone else would die. So she couldn’t surrender. If there was any hope of turning this around, no matter how small and distant it might be, they had to reach out and grasp it. Because so long as they didn’t give up, they had a chance to reach that hope.

“If the leviathan can defeat the Legion, if the leviathan can keep us all safe, then we can’t give up. I... I’m going to save everyone.”

Ninha could only heave a soft sigh.



Shin woke up with a start to find himself in his dark room in the barracks. Momentarily struggling to understand the situation, Shin turned on his narrow bed... He couldn’t remember when he came back to his room.

“Was I asleep?”

It was a forced state of sleep, induced to ease the strain of his Esper ability. He took off the wrinkled blanket and held a hand to his groggy head. He had cases where he was overcome by intense drowsiness and slept for half a day, but this was the first time he woke up without any memory of becoming tired or getting in bed.

He’d gotten used to the wailings of the Legion, even that of the Sheepdogs, but being this close to the battlefield did increase the strain. What’s more, their home base, Rüstkammer, went from being far from the battlefield to just a few dozen kilometers away from the fighting. He thought he’d gotten enough rest, but apparently, he hadn’t fully recovered.

His roommate Raiden's bed was currently unoccupied, so apparently, it wasn't bedtime. There was a light meal and a bottle of water sitting on the room's desk along with a note. The handwriting was Raiden's. Apparently, he'd taken over Shin's duties for the day. After skimming through the note, Shin opened the bottle and took a sip of water.

As he did, he focused his consciousness on the Legion's voices, mostly out of habit. His mind was trained for combat, a trait fostered in the Eighty-Sixth Sector and on the Federacy's battlegrounds, and it spurred him to prioritize confirming the enemy's movements.

That was when he noticed something.

"...Mm."

On the other side of the familiar wailing and howling of the clockwork ghosts...he could just barely make out an unfamiliar, feeble cry in the distance. A moaning...

A pitiful whimpering. It sounded like the singing of the sovereign of seas, which he had heard once before.

"Oh, Captain. Feeling better now?"

After checking the time and seeing it was still too soon for dinner, Shin had gratefully eaten the light meal left in his room, changed into his uniform, and gone outside, where he ran into Grethe.

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"It's no problem. If you start feeling unwell, don't hesitate to report it. As brigade commander, my job is to ensure my subordinates aren't under unnecessary strain. You haven't been able to keep up with your training to control your ability, right?"

With the tides of the war swinging against the Federacy, Joschka was stationed in the western front headquarters, and Shin's other relatives from the Maika clan were busy at their own stations. They no longer had time to spare for Shin.

Grethe cracked a mischievous smile.

"We still have a few spare Cicadas. Maybe they can reduce the strain. Why don't we ask the prince about it?"

"No way. I refuse."

"I'm joking. Besides, he already said it probably won't help with your

powers.”

“—To begin with, the biggest obstacle is how you’re going to get Nouzen to put the Cicada on.”

Through the noble sacrifice of the United Kingdom’s fifth prince, of course, Grethe thought.

“But the strain Nouzen is feeling isn’t his ability in and of itself, but the fact that he’s constantly exposed to the Legion’s voices. If you have a broken radio you can’t switch off and it keeps transmitting at high volume, augmenting its reception isn’t going to fix the problem.”

“...That’s what he said, anyway.”

“You actually asked him about it...?!” Shin moaned, shuddering at the mental image.

It was times like this when Grethe’s poker face was truly terrifying.

Shin changed the subject before she could tell him anything else he’d be better off not knowing. He was going to report this to her anyway, so it didn’t count as running away. Probably.

“More importantly...I can hear something. I think it’s the leviathan. The youngling. As far as I can tell, it’s closer than we think.”

Of all places, it was in the Strike Package’s operation area in the Kadunan floodway. The youngling had swum up the Hiyano River, the source of the Kadunan and new Tataswa floodways. Apparently, it had wound up in the Kadunan floodway after leaving the Hiyano.

“Captain... Your ability is evolving in strange ways,” she said, dubious. “First, you can hear the Legion’s voices, and now you can hear leviathans?”

“I’m not sure if it’s evolving... The leviathans are probably just the same as the Legion.”

An army of ghosts, forsaken by something that no longer existed. Though, as the leviathans were even stranger than the Legion, Shin was unable to understand them, and had no way of knowing what exactly they’d been forsaken by.

“Well, anyway... I’m sure I don’t have to tell you this, but if you see the leviathan, don’t try to attack it. And don’t even think of trying to recover it. Ideally, avoid involving it in combat altogether. That said...”

Shin glanced at Grethe.

“That said...?” he repeated.

“...someone from the Hail Mary Regiment finally surrendered. The situation is shifting.”

“I’m Second Lieutenant Ninha Lekaf, vice commander of the Hail Mary Regiment—I’m sure even small fries like you have at least read the memos.”

Despite being a traitor, the female officer who surrendered herself acted quite inappropriately, holding her nose high in pride. The soldiers on patrol were a little daunted by her behavior. She had the arrogance of the ruling class and felt no reservations about calling other people *small fries* to their faces.

“Lead me to your commander. I will supply you information about the Hail Mary Regiment. In exchange, I have a condition.”

“Lady Ninha ran away?”

“...Yes.” Noele hung her head, her face as dark as the night sky outside the broken window.

Mele couldn’t believe it. Lady Ninha was Princess Noele’s classmate from the officer academy and had even called her a best friend. But more than anything, how could someone betray the princess?

“Her gun, uniform, and all her things are gone, and none of her subordinates know where she is. I don’t know either, of course. So...as much as it pains me to say it, I have to assume she fled.”

Noele bit her dry, chapped lips. After two weeks of living on the run, her hair, skin, and nails were unkempt. Seeing this pained Mele.

“Of course, Ninha knows about this place. If she is taken captive and tortured, it’s only a matter of time before she divulges our position... We have to move before they come for us.”

Her chocolate-colored eyes, with their unique smoky appearance, clouded over in sorrowful resolve.

“We must use—no, save the leviathan. If we find the youngling, the leviathan should come to us. And since it chose us... Yes, this must be a trial. If we find the youngling, the leviathan will surely help us. And the second northern front will be saved... Mele.”

As she told him of her delusional prediction, too unrealistic to even be called

wishful thinking, Noele leaned forward. This was deeply dishonest of her, considering the lives of two hundred of her subordinates rested on her shoulders.

But Noele had no recourse but to believe. And even now, Mele wasn't going to question her.

"Mele, I place you in command of the scout unit. I want you to be the one to find the youngling."

Mele's eyes widened in disbelief. "Me?"

After all, he was nothing but the child of a serf family. A rank-and-file soldier. He couldn't possibly do something as difficult as tackling the leviathan's trial.

"Sir Rex or Lady Chilm— No, even Kiahí or Rilé..."

"Rex and Chilm aren't coming back. Kiahí has his hands full transporting the nuclear weapon. My main unit will stand out, and we're slow... You're the only one who can do this. You're the only one I can count on."

As she said this, Noele's gaze fixed onto him. It was like she was clinging to him for help. She seemed lost, her chocolate-colored eyes on the verge of tears. Even Mele, for all his misgivings, had to steel himself. Yes. It was a serf's job to obey the princess's words. And he'd sworn to do just that.

"Of course, Princess Noele."

He would finally fulfill the vow he'd made when he was little—that someday, he would fight alongside his princess.

"I will find it for you... I will be of use to you, Princess."

Ninha told them of the Hail Mary Regiment's hiding place, how many "nuclear weapons" they had left, how many people they were working with, as well as their current actions. After the dirty bombs' failure, they gave up on using them and instead decided to have the Fisara destroy the Legion.

From the information Ninha provided, the renegade unit's movements seemed so haphazard that the second northern front's generals were baffled beyond all belief. The renegades' use of dirty bombs and the Fisara were all within the scope of the generals' predictions, and yet...

"We've gathered supporting evidence to back up her information. Let's move out."

As the commander issued this order, the generals all nodded. Most of them were Cairns native to this land, and their smoky eyes glinted.

"With this, we should be able to suppress those fools and retrieve the nuclear

fuel. Give the Strike Package the order. We will move forward with the second northern front's original mission of restoring the defensive river by destroying the dams.”

Suddenly, the second northern front's chief of staff spoke up, as if she'd just remembered something.

“What about the condition Ninja Lekaf mentioned?”

She asked this as a question, but she already knew the answer. The commander replied curtly and without much thought.

“Oh... Let her have it. We can afford to grant her that much.”

It was early morning when Lieutenant Colonel Mialona started the briefing.

“—The Lady Bluebird Regiment will begin the operation to suppress the remnants of the Hail Mary Regiment.”

The regiment members looking up at her didn't so much as stir—proof of their experience and level of organization. Projected at the corner of the holoscreen was the unit's emblem, a ladybug with a blue carapace.

They lost one company in the encounter with the Fisara, but seasoned soldiers like them weren't going to be rattled by an aquatic lizard that had wandered into a battlefield where it didn't belong, even if it *was* a dragon sovereign. And they certainly weren't going to let a bunch of stupid pumpkin roosters and hens who put their homeland and comrades in danger scare them, either.

“Our operation will take place in the contested area, the Sneenikeit region located on the eastern shore of the new Tataswa floodway. The Hail Mary survivors are currently hiding in the ruins of the village there. The enemy has just short of two hundred surviving infantrymen. As before, we will suppress them using only armored units. The accompanying armored infantry are to form a perimeter and close off the area.”

Their dependable allies, the armored infantrymen, couldn't join them on this operation. The nuclear fuel the Hail Mary Regiment stole had dangerously irradiated the area. They couldn't risk detonating it.

Lieutenant Colonel Mialona continued, the emblem of a lovely ladybird behind her. She told them of the ultramarine-blue jewel brought in ancient times from across the sea. Its beauty and rarity led to the color's use in images of the

holy mother and heaven itself. It was the unblemished, awe-inspiring pure blue of a bird soaring through the sky.

It was the blue of the flame House Mialona used to light up the dark northern winters. The azure flame of nuclear fire that had been disgraced and now threatened to burn and pollute their homeland. If its dignity was tarnished, she needed to restore its honor with her own two hands.

“As such, the engineers and Strike Package will simultaneously launch the operation to seize the Kadunan floodway. You are all to keep up with them and not allow those fools to get in our guests’ way. Keep the combat area locked up like a cage.”

“The 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Armored Divisions’ operation area is a sixty-kilometer range along the Shihano mountains and the Kadunan floodway, starting in the contested area and moving into the Legion territories. We are to eliminate all hostiles within the area until the engineers escorting us are done detonating and dismantling all the dams.”

Shin turned to face the others in the briefing room. The map of the combat area projected on the holo-screen highlighted the twenty-two dams of the Kadunan floodway. By destroying the dams, they would turn the Womisam basin into a wetland trap and restore the Reginia line’s river, which would impede the Legion’s invasion. This was the Strike Package’s current mission.

“In addition to the combat engineers, each armored division will be escorted by three armored infantry regiments and three recon battalions made up of the Fleet Countries’ volunteer troops. In addition, it is estimated that there are two leviathans swimming in the Kadunan floodway at present. A youngling of unidentified breed and a Fisara. If either of them is discovered, you are to observe only and abstain from making any kind of contact with it. Do not fire at it, aim at it, or do anything that might be considered an offensive action. I believe fighting in their general area won’t be a problem, but...”

Shin trailed off and grimaced. Battles were always a foggy affair. No army, no matter how well trained, could fully remove all uncertainty. He’d checked with Ishmael before the briefing about what actions might provoke a counterattack from the leviathans, but the man had only grimaced, just as Shin was doing now, and said:

“They’re wild animals. We can never know how one might react. So if at all possible, avoid approaching them altogether.”

“We will be embarking on a sweep-up operation for the renegade unit while the Strike Package’s main force deploys for the dam-destruction operation. To serve as a decoy for both of these, the 4th Armored Division and all Alkonost units are to strike at the Legion territories.”

While Shin and the first three armored divisions deployed to destroy the dams, Suiu’s 4th Armored Division was given a different task. They would be placed under Vika’s command for the duration of this operation. To be more exact, the 4th Armored Division and the United Kingdom military dispatch battalion were temporarily joined to form a strike force, with Vika as its supreme authority.

The operation map displayed on the screen showed neither the Shihano mountains to the western edge of the front nor the current defensive position along the Reginia line, to the south. Instead, it showed the river region running west to east in the north of the Womisam basin.

“The operation area will be the old defensive line, the southern bank of the Hiyano River. While splitting up our forces is ill-advised, there are times one must rely on schemes to get by.”

During the advance operation, the second northern front’s main force would keep the Legion on the front lines in check and offer covering fire for the advance unit, as it had in past operations. Ishmael and the Fleet Countries’ Free Corps were also given orders. They would join the Strike Package on the dam-destruction operation as a recon unit. In a deeply forested area, where visibility was limited, they would serve as the advance force’s eyes.

Since they would move ahead of the rest of the force and be the first to make contact with the enemy, the mortality rate for this role was exceedingly high, and yet it was a task that required skilled troops.

“This *was* the promise we made to convince the Federacy to shelter our entire nation... But they sure don’t think twice about using us. Guess they’re not too different from the Empire that way.”

Ishmael spat these words as he walked through the empty halls of the barracks, the last to leave the briefing room. The barracks consisted of old, prefabricated buildings, but were not markedly worse than those given to the Federacy soldiers. The food and equipment were likewise of similar quality.

But when it came to the Fleet Countries’ treatment at times like these, the former Imperial generals’ coldhearted, cold-blooded attitude was clear. They

took advantage of their weakened position—having lost their country, and with nowhere else to turn—and treated their lives as the cheapest currency.

The second wave of Fleet Countries soldiers currently in training might be different, but the volunteers fighting right now were simple infantrymen. The month since they'd arrived was not sufficient to complete the training for armored exoskeletons, so if they were going to join the Federacy on the merit of their ready firepower, they would have no choice but to risk life and limb. On top of all that, being sent out as a recon unit meant their casualty rate would be even higher.

“—Shit.”

The corridor was empty. He didn't have to worry about his subordinates overhearing. So he let his anger get the better of him, spat out curses, and slammed his fist against the thin, battered prefab wall.

“Whoa!”

The thud of his punch, which felt weak and silly in the face of his anger, was silenced by a small screech. Ishmael turned around in a hurry.

“S-sorry, little lady! Did I startle you?”

Standing there with her already large eyes open even wider was the Strike Package's Mascot. Frederica was her name. Despite her small size, she had a great deal of resolve. He'd seen it when she participated on the operation aboard the supercarrier.

She shook her head and approached him with brisk steps. Her clear, crimson eyes peered at him carefully.

“...Are you all right?”

Her gaze, full of wisdom beyond her years, showed surprising concern for his fist. Ishmael faced her with a guilty smile.

“Aye, I'm fine... Sorry for showing you something that pitiful.”

A grown adult, failing to restrain himself and becoming emotional.

“You are not pitiful at all. You are a capable commander, a captain, and an older brother respected by all.”

“...Thank you.”

Her words were frank and without any pretense, which made Ishmael feel all the more pathetic. He didn't consider himself the kind of man who deserved such praise. Especially not from someone with such a frank, direct gaze. The words he'd tried to bottle up slipped out.

“Since I already made a disgrace of myself, would you mind if I complained a bit, little lady?”

“Not at all.”

“It’s tough, having to live with the shame. I wanted to save them, if I could... But I couldn’t, and I wish someone would punish me for it.”

They’d scuttled the Stella Maris. And when they evacuated, they had to abandon the model of the leviathan skeleton with it. Now, Ishmael was the only one left to pass down word of the glorious exploits of the Open Sea fleet.

He was the captain of the supercarrier and the next commander of the fleet, meaning that for the crew and their families, he was the next chief of the Open Sea clans. A political candidate, graced with combat experience and the finest education the fleet and the clans could provide. This made him valuable personnel for the Federacy, since he could lead the Fleet Countries’ refugees and organize the volunteer soldiers. The Federacy army returned the right and responsibility to command the volunteer soldiers to him, while Ishmael was allowed to voice his opinion and negotiate their orders.

He couldn’t afford to die—he had to make sure that the memory of the Open Sea fleet was passed down and that his comrades weren’t forced to accept unreasonable orders.

No matter who in the clans died, which of his subordinates perished, how many of his comrades might fall, he alone had to go on, carrying the shame of survival—to keep living, bearing that sin.

Frederica shook her head in denial. For some reason, she pursed her pale, pink lips tightly.

“You are not pathetic... That is also a legitimate way to fight.”

“...Tohru.”

Claude turned around, his moon-colored eyes contorting bitterly. He was in the hangar of the 1st Armored Division’s 1st Battalion in the division base. Claude’s Bandersnatch stood beside Tohru’s Jabberwock as the noise of the units launching in order filled the space.

“Sorry you have to keep worrying about me all the time.”

It’d been two months since the second large-scale offensive, and a month since the fall of the Republic. After thinking about it for a moment, Tohru shook his head.

“Hmm. Well, don’t let it bother you. I know your brother was the only thing on your mind.”

The brother he hadn’t recognized—whom he’d thought he’d left to die. As a result, he’d had to shoulder pain he was better off not carrying with regard to the

fall of the Republic. Indeed, the timing his brother chose to reveal his survival couldn't have been worse. It was only natural that Claude would lose his temper. With that thought in mind, Tohru laughed.



“It wasn’t that hard for me. Not before, and not now.”

He didn’t have the same issues as Claude—who, back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, had to grapple with his own despicable Alba blood, and with his anger toward his brother and his father, who deserted him and his mother, but whom he nevertheless still loved. Tohru was an Aventura, making it easy to recognize him as an Eighty-Six, and his parents and grandfather were killed in the Republic, so he could unconditionally hate the Republic for what they did to him.

“The fact you can talk like that is why I’m saying this,” Claude told him, his moon-white eyes fixed on Tohru.

“Mm?”

“We’re not just throwing things away. We’re not just setting out buckets to handle a leaky roof. We weren’t before, and we aren’t now.”

We’re not losing. It’s not that we can’t win. We’re not being dragged around the same place over and over.

Tohru smirked at him. “Cut it out with the sympathy.”

Claude growled at him in annoyance.

“I didn’t mean it like that, moron.”

The scout platoon Mele was placed in charge of was short on people. They had only twenty members, significantly lower than standard.

“Lots of people are getting sick, huh? Winter’s right around the corner; wonder if they all caught colds.”

The forest was terribly silent before dawn, with the birds asleep and the nocturnal animals returning to their dens. Mele heard Otto rambling as they walked side by side. Even though the Hail Mary Regiment’s princess gave the order to move out, everyone was down with some kind of illness and couldn’t move. Pathetic. How could they disobey the princess?

The platoon members piped in to comment.

“Are you sure what they have is a cold?”

“They don’t have fevers, but they’re throwing up and have weird swellings all over their bodies.”

“I saw the production team from Sul village when I went to pick up the nuclear weapon, and they looked really bad. Their hair was falling out, and they had bruises everywhere. Some of them were coughing up blood.”

“Shut up,” Mele stopped them, annoyed. “Focus on searching. It should be around here, along the river.”

"I mean, yeah, Mele, but the river is pretty wide," Otto replied with a frown.

He was the one who'd suggested they find the baby leviathan in the first place, but he looked quite bored already and was using the muzzle of his assault rifle to kick away the fallen leaves at their feet.

"We don't have enough people to look around this big of a river. It'd be faster to start searching once everyone gets better."

"Well... I mean, Lady Ninha—"

Just then, one of the members at the edge of their row called out loudly.

"Oh... Hey! Isn't that it?!"

He pointed ahead into the blue darkness before dawn, past the trees of the cold, deep forest. The morning mist typical of this season didn't extend to the high elevation of the Shihano mountains. Cast in blue darkness and decorated by countless fallen leaves was a vast, terrifyingly clear, and bottomless lake. Its waters reflected the faint glow of the dark, starlit sky, and atop its rippling surface, they saw what they were looking for.

A snow-white, glasswork creature covered in a delicate veil, swimming with its head held high.



Patrolling in the skies twenty thousand meters up, the Rabe detected multiple heat signatures moving under the cover of the moonless dawn and morning mist. Those signatures corresponded to Vánagandrs and armored infantrymen.

<<Dragonfly One to Firefly.>> <<Second northern front military confirmed on the move.>>

It seemed they were moving past the second northern front's defensive position, the Reginia line. At the same time, countless rockets and howitzers were fired from behind the Neikuwa hills to shield their progress. Preparation fire. The opening artillery shots launched before an armored unit's advance, meant to destroy enemy units and fortifications and clear a way.

The metallic raven also spotted a small unit moving through the woods in the Shihano mountains' peaks.

<<Based on the scouts' route, their objective is in the Shihano

mountains, near the area designated by the humans as the Kadunan floodway.>> <<Dragonfly One to Firefly-expedition of operation schedule advised.>>

†

Standing within the dreamlike shower of green leaves in the blue, glittering interstice between the heavenly sphere and the water's surface was the majestic sight of the leviathan youngling. Mele froze up, staring at it. It was like a mermaid princess from a legend. A pure-white silhouette, covered in a modest veil and a long trailing dress. The soft light of the stars twinkled against its scales as it floated on the water's surface like a meticulously detailed glasswork statue.

“...It's so pretty...”

Such a beautiful creature must be a good, correct thing. This fair being would surely save them and their princess. Feeling drawn to it, Mele approached the creature and reached his hand out to it, tilting his head as he looked up at the mermaid princess. But then far below its veil—the spot Mele had mistaken for its head—three eyes suddenly swerved to look at him.

“...?!”

Diamond-shaped pupils with a metallic luster, unlike those of any human or terrestrial animal. A gaze, stranger than anything Mele had ever felt, pierced him, making every hair on his body stand on end. The creature was wary of his hand, now half raised and frozen in place.

The Leuca parted its jaws, revealing lines of sharp, angular teeth similar to those of a shark or a crocodile, and baring the dark depths of its gullet, which was as eerie as the corpse of a deep-sea fish.

It took one deep breath of crisp autumn air, and then—

“*Giiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!*”

The man-eating mermaid, native to the open seas, let out an ear-piercing screech to intimidate the mammals approaching it.

The Leuca released its howl. Had it been a mature specimen, the cry's bubble pulse would have been capable of rupturing armored plates. Its loud screech echoed through the Shihano mountains at dawn. Startled by the unfamiliar roar,

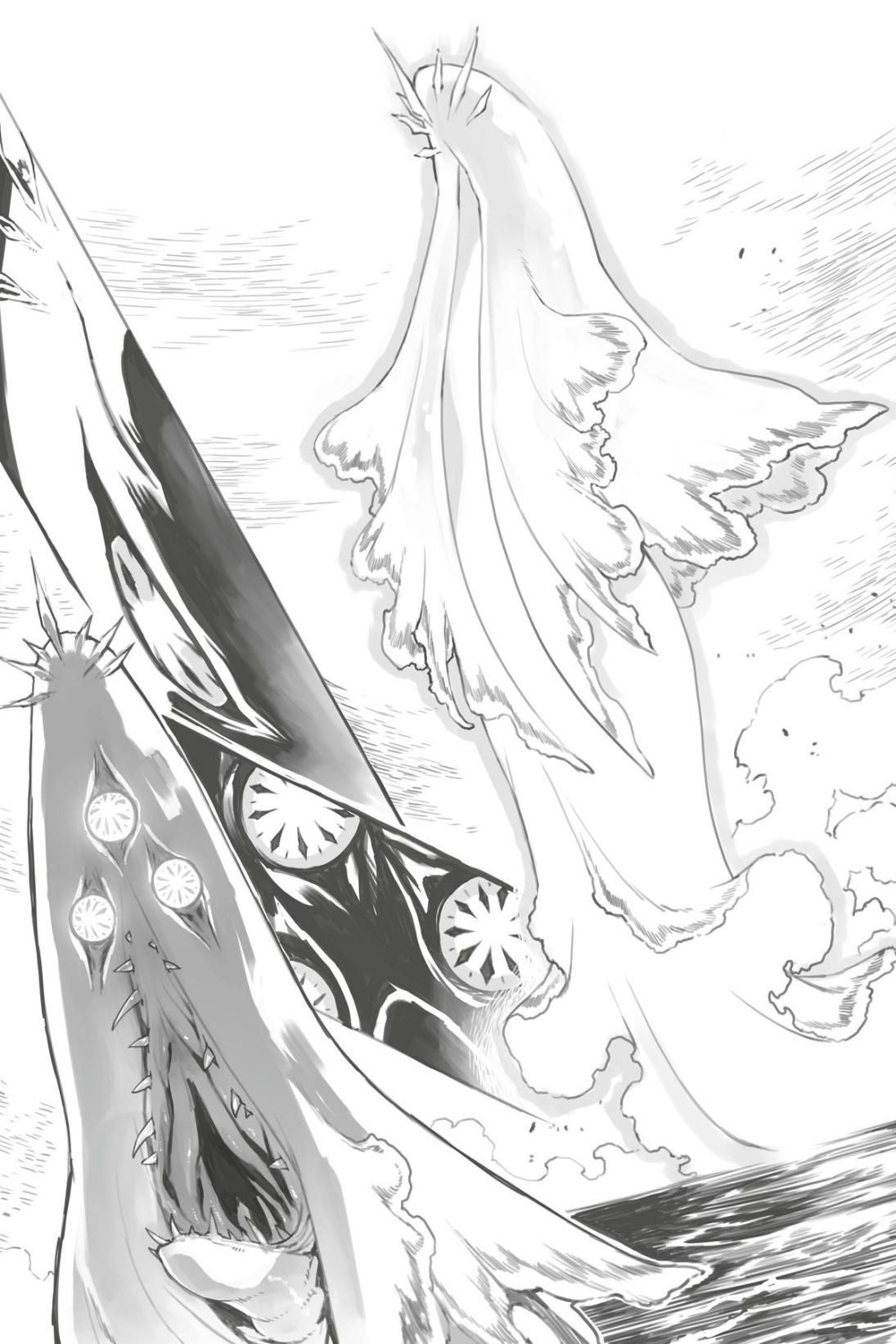
birds took off from the treetops and flew off into the sky. Unfortunate squirrels that had climbed up the nearby trees fainted at the sound and fell to the ground. The howl traveled up the Kadunan floodway, reaching the Fisara now swimming up the stream of one of the dammed rivers.

The Fisara raised its head, turning its long neck in the direction of the youngling's cry. From the sound, it could grasp the youngling's rough location and position, as well as the state of danger it was in.

".....!"

It roared back in response, trying to warn its still-unseen enemy. And then the Fisara began to swim back along the gentle river current in search of its youngling.

The recon unit sent out ahead of the advance force heard the two howls and forwarded them to division HQ, which analyzed the sounds and communicated their findings to the different divisions.



“...Tch. Roger that.”

Much like how its bases were made from standardized shelter modules, the Federacy military used dedicated trailers coupled together for its frontline command posts to enable swift construction, dismantling, and movement. Also, in order to smooth operations, the three tactical commanders aside from Lena had access to their armored command vehicles, while Vika and Zashya had their command-configuration Barushka Matushkas.

The command post, surrounded by steel and bluish-white shadows, was manned by the brigade commander Grethe, as well as the Strike Package’s commanders, staff officers, and control personnel.

Marcel, who sat in one part of it, inside a control trailer with one of its flank panels deployed, nodded in acknowledgment. Glancing to the side, he confirmed the same information had reached his superior officers and switched his Para-RAID target.

The division HQ’s command post had a communication network in place, so information was shared almost instantaneously. However, the combat units on the front lines outside the command post were obstructed by Eintagsfliege jamming, meaning they didn’t receive information as quickly.

“Læraðr HQ to Undertaker. Positions of Waltraute Two (leviathan youngling) and Waltraute One (Fisara) confirmed. Waltraute Two is one kilometer east of the Karakuna dam. Waltraute One is upstream of the Karakuna dam, at a spot twelve kilometers away. It’s proceeding east along the Karakuna River to recover Waltraute Two.”

At the end of autumn, the treetops at the peaks of the Shihano mountains were colored a burning red, and even in the darkness before dawn, the place was relatively bright. The Spearhead squadron, led by Undertaker, sped through a magnificent grove of maple trees. As they raced under their canopy, starlight shone through the red foliage above them in a crimson glow, the same color as the leaves carpeting the ground beneath.

The maple leaves in this area edged past red and crimson, and had a somewhat violet hue. The starlight against the crimson-purple leaves looked like something out of a dream as it cast uneven patterns along their path. Their current route looked up to the Kadunan floodway; they were traversing a forest road that hadn’t seen human traffic in ages.

The Lady Bluebird Regiment, who were going about their operation in

tandem, broke off at the forest zone near the bottom of the mountain and made their way to the other artificial river, the new Tataswa floodway.

Though relieved that the radioactive matter hadn't affected them, Shin narrowed his eyes grimly all the same.

"Do we have an estimated time for when Waltraute One will reach the dam?"
Marcel fell silent for a moment.

"It's 0530. Almost exactly the same time you're set to arrive."

<<Fisara is confirmed to be in motion. It is estimated to cross paths with enemy advance force. Psyche Twelve is to restrain and lead the Fisara away, provoking it into attacking the advance unit.>>

Of course, the Legion were also aware of the Leuca's screech and the Fisara's movements. Having readjusted their unit's operation plan, the commander unit spoke, its mechanical voice traveling across the battlefield.

<<Psyche One, acknowledged.>> <<There is a matter of concern, however.>> <<Termite Five has yet to retreat.>>

A large unit they'd deployed to the operation area hadn't evacuated and remained there. The commander unit paused for thought. The unit in question was a type with exceedingly slow movement speed. Now that the schedule of their operation against the second northern front had been moved up, it likely wouldn't be able to retreat in time.

<<Firefly to Psyche Twelve. Termite Five is to remain on standby at Point Karakuna. It is to be placed under Psyche Twelve's command and will join the attack on the enemy advance force.>>

<<Acknowledged.>>

†

It was neither the howling of a wolf nor the cry of a bird or a deer. Neither was it the calling of the Legion, with their silent footsteps. It was a more intense cry

than anything he had ever heard, but somehow, the young soldier was able to maintain his composure and peer outside their pillbox's eyelet to inspect what was happening. He heard the constant roaring of large volumes of water from the nearby dam, and the echoing of the screeching from earlier.

What in the world was that? Did some kind of fairy-tale dragon drop out of the sky? Some burning star or the blue steed of the gods? He looked around the pillbox, and thankfully, nothing was out of the ordinary—

No. From the corner of the cascading waters of the dam gate, he caught sight of a group of metallic forms blending into the trees. They were moving along the trail used for the dam's construction, now mostly faded. Feeling something was off, he turned back to the trees, and then all his hair stood on end.

—*The company commander never mentioned anything like that!*

It was clear from a single glance—this thing was dangerous. Unlike the terrifying but harmless howl from afar, this was a much greater, more immediate threat to this pillbox and its inhabitants.

Some time ago, they were given manuals for handling enemies like these—but just remembering that was painful. Those raised in the territories' villages never learned to read and write, and though he had since learned, he and his friend had trouble with long texts; they had to have their company commander explain them to them. Their usually stern sergeant would write them down for them in simpler terms, so they could check them whenever they needed, but that sergeant was gone now. He died a month ago, on the night burning stars fell from the heavens.

Before he knew it, a small child came over and peered up at him. The soldier hurriedly wiped his tears away. If he was surprised, such a small child must have been even more frightened.

“Don’t worry. The monster that made that howl won’t come here. Go back and hide inside with everyone else.”

He had to prepare for battle like always. And he had to check with everyone to make sure they remembered how to handle that Legion he’d seen just a moment ago. Without realizing it, his finger tightened on the grip of the assault rifle he hadn’t let go of for this entire month.

These are the terms for my surrender, Ninha asserted, and the Lady Bluebird Regiment agreed to let her join them without too much fuss. Of course, she wasn’t allowed to carry a weapon. As she sat in the corner of the infantry combat

car, which was packed with armored infantry and reeked of dirt and blood, Ninha whispered to herself.

“Just you wait, Noele. I’ll be sure to give you what you truly want.”

The starting point of the Kadunan floodway, the dam that held back the flow of the Roginia River, was under the control of the second northern front. But seizing all the dams north of the Roginia dam was the Strike Package’s role. The 4th Battalion, which had Saki serving as acting battalion commander; Mitsuda’s 5th Battalion, Rito’s 2nd Battalion, and Kunoe’s 6th Battalion were all charged with securing their way back.

Seizing the seven dams on their way to their destination fell to Michihi’s 3rd Battalion and Locan’s 7th Battalion. This left only five squadrons from the 1st Battalion, starting with the Scythe squadron.

Shin’s unit was to seize the 1st Armored Division’s final target, the Karakuna dam. His unit was made up of three squadrons: Spearhead and Nordlicht, in addition to the Brisingamen squadron.

“Læraðr HQ, the 1st Battalion’s team one has arrived at the Karakuna dam.”

The Legion likely knew their destination, but the soldiers still tried to pass through spots with thick foliage and dense treetops so as to avoid the Rabe’s watchful eye. With that foliage as their cover, Shin brought Undertaker and the units following him to a halt. Farther north were Siri’s 2nd Armored Division and Canaan’s 3rd Armored Division, but they had to stay behind while Shin’s group entered the woods.

All the units hid in the shadow of the foliage as they peered at their target, the Karakuna dam, on the other side of the trees. The Karakuna River flowed between two mountains, but it was blocked by a concrete fortification. From the dry side of the river, the dam stood several dozen meters tall, but the thin arch-shaped structure was built so as to dig into the two mountains’ slopes, filling the canyon with water.

The dam’s gate was carved into the mountains’ ridges to redirect the flow of the water north of the basin and was on the other side of the dam. There were five catwalks set up, running side by side for construction and maintenance. On the other side of this towering structure, along the northern and southern slopes to either side of the dam, they could see them.

—*They’re here.*

Shin could hear the wailing of countless Legion. And since these were

woods, where it was easy to lie in ambush, there were probably more of them in shutdown mode so as to fool him.

“If the Hail Mary Regiment didn’t cause all this pointless trouble, maybe the fighting would have been a bit easier,” Raiden scoffed.

Originally, the plan was to conceal the Strike Package’s presence in the area until the operation started. If that had succeeded, the Legion likely wouldn’t have hidden enemies for the explicit purpose of fooling Shin’s ability. They wouldn’t have been careless regardless, but the fact remained that the Legion had taken measures to react specifically to his presence.

“No point saying that now. The enemy’s on the move on the other side of the dam. I’ll confirm what type they are.”

“That’s a lake on the other side, right? It looks like a pretty big type...”

A shadow descended on them. It seemed almost surreal, looming over the near-vertical arch dam, faint light shining over it. It rose from within the reservoir on the other side of the dam, its large body surpassing the structure’s highest point. Hanging from its long neck was a hook, a pair of what looked like pliers, and a pair of wings.

It was the metallic sheen of the Legion, but it was unlike any Legion he’d ever seen before—like the skeleton of some sort of winged beast. As the agonized cries of the dead boomed from it, it faced them from the other side of the arch dam.

CHAPTER 4

MARY'S LITTLE LAMB, AND THE USUAL SHEEP-HUNTING SKELETONS

The medical facility's farm annex kept several well-trained, friendly, large-breed dogs. One of them in particular was Lena's favorite. Or perhaps the dog was just very attached to Lena. That day, Lena was at the farm watching the free-roaming lambs, young goats, and piglets playing with one another when the dog ran over to her, excitedly demanding pats.

“There!”

“Woof!”

Lena rubbed the animal, a little too roughly in her opinion, but apparently, it was just right by dog standards. She gave into its demands, ruffling up its black fur, and it wagged its tail with visible glee. It pushed its head against her, which tickled, and Lena laughed.

He reminds me a bit of Shin, Lena thought. The dog's pitch-black fur and pretty blue scarf were clear parallels, but the way its noble atmosphere contrasted with its friendly, kind demeanor, along with how it was just a bit spoiled, also felt very much like him.

Were Shin and the others fighting right now?

—*Please be safe. Next time, I'll be fighting with you.*

But as she looked up to the northern sky—

“Whoa!?”

—a piglet charged and headbutted the back of Lena’s knees, making her fall. The piglet flipped over onto its back, its feet wiggling helplessly. Lena tried to break her fall with her hands but ended up hurting her elbows. As she remained on the ground, momentarily unable to get up, the black dog circled around her, concerned.

“Colonel, ma’am, are you all right?!” She heard a nearby captain, also here for therapy, call out to her.



The Legion overhead was a type not even Shin, the most veteran member of the Strike Package, had ever seen the likes of. Its long neck towered diagonally up to the sky, and at its tip was a hook. It had a pair of plier-like arms and bone-shaped wings.

It must have been absurdly large if it stood at the bottom of the reservoir on the other side, even if that reservoir was filled with a century’s worth of sediment. Its long neck stood a good thirty meters taller than the already-towering dam arch—or at least, it looked like a neck. It was, in fact, a crane, made up of scaffolding in a truss structure. Its massive hook, constructed from what looked like thick, metallic wires, was equipped with hydraulic equipment that could obviously lift several tonnes’ worth of weight with ease.

“A crane... No, it’s more than just that.”

Its many joints granted it a great degree of freedom, and it had a pair of multipurpose arms with shears at the end that served as high-pressure pliers for dismantling purposes. The parts that looked like the skeletal, plucked wings of a bird were its rear sub-beams, and based on the jibs and masts of its wings and arms, it could easily swing them around to strike and engage opponents in melee combat.

It had no armor or firearms, meaning it wasn’t a combat type but some kind of combat-engineer unit. And it was present here, in a dam in the contested areas not far from the second northern front.

—*Just like Vika predicted.*

“All units. The enemy heavy-engineer unit is to be designated Aranea. It doesn’t seem to have any firearms, but try to avoid attacking it from this

position. We want to avoid damaging the body of the dam as much as possible.”

The Strike Package’s objective in this mission was to destroy the dam, but more importantly, it was to restore the river and turn the battlefield into a wetland. If they were to prevent the Legion from rebuilding the structure, they’d need to demolish it from its very foundations.

If they fired at the dam and partially wrecked it, it could collapse in a way that would prevent their combat engineers from approaching it and achieving their objective. And with the Fisara nearby, attacking recklessly could make it feel threatened enough to retaliate.

Shin looked over to the sides of the structure—it was a gravity dam, and its thick slope was wedged between the bare rock of two mountains. They had originally formed a valley, now filled with the water of the dam.

“Spread out to the mountains on the sides, go around the dam itself, and strike it from there. The Nordlicht and Brisingamen squadrons—”

But just as he was starting to give instructions, Shin noticed something. At the tip of the Aranea’s main beam was a blue optical sensor that suddenly turned to glare at them. Shin’s experienced combat instincts alerted him that the opponent had just zoomed in on them, and he keenly sensed its gaze.

Its bloodthirsty gaze.

Its rear sub-beams spread out, like the fearsome flapping of a giant bird’s wings. It swung the cranes up, the two joints at the end of them rotating, brandishing the super-heavy structures as if they were thin branches. They were formed, like the main crane, of scaffolding, and myriad feathers clung to each one, standing up in a rippling movement as they moved.

Shin heard an ominous, low rumbling in the pit of his stomach. The wings swung up to the left and right. The sound of them tearing through the air had all the intensity of the medieval Warwolf. It fanned out and fired the feather blades, which soared up in the trajectory of its wing tips. They first shot up into the sky before reaching a zenith and plummeting down toward the earth at an acute angle.

Without any need for instructions from Shin, all the units lying in hiding spread out, distancing themselves from one another, seeking cover or terrain to shield themselves from the impact. If the feathers were scatter shots or high-explosive projectiles, the trees would serve to abate the shock waves and block the fragments. Incendiary bombs would be more trouble, but the Reginleifs’ agility would allow them to escape before the fire reached them.

Then Shin realized that the projectile feathers the Aranea threw were

themselves emitting the unique howl of the mechanical ghosts. He looked up in surprise and saw them spread their limbs, trying to adjust the trajectory of their descent—

“These are self-propelled mines! Be careful even after impact; they’ll try to cling to you!”

Impact.

As they hit the treetops or the ground covered in leaves, several of the self-propelled mines instantly exploded. And with that serving as a smoke screen, their fellows reached the ground, rolling onto the dry underbrush and crawling about, their limbs bent and broken from landing.

“Tch... This is annoying!”

“There’s a few of them left on the trees! Don’t keep your eyes on the ground!”

Self-propelled mines were incapable of attacking in any way except self-destructing, and they were slow to move and unarmored. They weren’t tricky opponents for a Reginleif, but there were too many of them. What’s more, they were in a dark forest with plenty of cover, making the self-propelled mines difficult to spot.

To keep from missing any, the Reginleifs switched their radars from passive to active. The units shared the mines’ positions via data link, using radio waves to detect the flocking enemies and shoot them down.

“Nouzen, get back,” one of the platoon members said. This was Tachina, who used a machine-gun configuration. **“We need you to command the entire operation, and you’re not suited for a situation like this.”**

“Sorry, Tachina. I’m counting on you.” Shin nodded.

Tachina was right—since Undertaker was equipped with high-frequency blades instead of a machine-gun configuration, it was ill-suited for dealing with self-propelled mines.

He let the platoon members handle intercepting the enemy and looked up at the Aranea through the newly opened gaps in the treetops. The Reginleif’s system automatically followed his gaze, zoomed in on the target, and opened a sub-window displaying it. With its wings having thrown their load, Shin could see more humanoid forms crawling up it. From the howling and groaning he could hear, he sensed it had an abundance of extra ammo prepared. Shin clicked his tongue.

“Shiden, Bernholdt, what’s your status?”

“All good, Li’l Reaper. We’re almost done sweeping ‘em up.”

“Likewise for the Nordlicht squadron, Captain. Assuming more of them aren’t about to rain down on us.”

“The next barrage is on its way. Sergeant Rachim?”

“We’re almost done, too. The engineers are fine, as well,”

The reply came from the captain of the armored infantry unit charged with guarding the combat engineers.

He was told that a squadron had been pulled from the 2nd Battalion sealing off the area to protect the vulnerable engineers from the next self-propelled mine attack.

“Roger that. All units, the Aranea is slow to reload its self-propelled mines, but it can throw a great number of them each time. We shouldn’t count on it running out of ammo anytime soon. Once they land, sweep them up before the next barrage. There are no changes to the plan. Go along the side of the dam through the mountains to the north and south to approach and strike at the target.”

“Roger that.”

“Aye, aye.”

“The Spearhead squadron will serve as bait. The Nordlicht squadron will scale up from the south, while the Brisingamen squadron will head to the north through the forest.”

“Longbow squadron has arrived at the Recannac dam. Proceeding to seize the position.”

News of the Spearhead squadron being intercepted by the Legion reached Canaan’s 3rd Armored Division. Since he fully expected an ambush, he wearily looked around the misty Recannac dam at the Kadunan floodway’s northern end. Due to the terrain, the Spearhead squadron had to approach their dam from downstream, but thankfully, the Longbow squadron were able to approach the Recannac dam from upstream. They’d end up destroying the dam regardless, but this way, they’d be able to fight without having to fear damaging the body of the dam before the engineers were done attaching the explosives.

“Looks like the heavy-engineer unit they reported about, the Aranea, isn’t here.”

Hiding a thirty-meter-tall heavy crane would have been challenging even in this forest. A tank, perhaps, but the only way something so large could be concealed here was if it was capable of staying submerged underwater, which

was doubtful, as it was heavy machinery.

On the other hand, the Recannac dam was near the cascading waterfall that marked the terminus of the Kadunan floodway and the start of the Hiyano River, which produced a thick morning mist. Between that and the abundance of potential hiding places in the forest, this was a perfect spot for a Legion ambush.

Since the forest impeded their field of vision and also interfered with their radar, the armored infantry spread out to search for the enemy and serve as the armored unit's eyes. As Canaan walked through the white darkness of the mist and scanned the shadows of the thick trees...suddenly, his radio crackled out a distinctive static.

"You there, in the Úlfheðinn! You're an ally—from the Federacy's second northern front, right?!"

The transmission referred to the armored infantrymen, but it was sent over an emergency channel used among units in the Federacy military. Any Reginleif in range would receive and decrypt it.

But there weren't any other units in the Recannac dam aside from the Strike Package, the armored infantry, and the combat engineers. The armored infantry stopped in their tracks and warily took cover, while the Reginleifs' systems automatically detected the source of the transmission. It came from the opposite side: the northern bank of the reservoir, in a faraway building on the top of a distant cliff past the dam gate.

A sub-window popped up and zoomed in on the footage, matching it with the map data to call up its name—the Kadunan artillery observation site. It was originally a Federacy military pillbox, which was supposedly abandoned during the second large-scale offensive.

There was someone hiding there.

It wasn't that they refused to give their name. They sounded like they didn't have the time.

"Remain firmly on guard! The other bank is swarming with invisible Legion!"

And the next moment, just as the voice warned them, muzzles flashed on the opposite side of the reservoir.



<<Psyche Thirty-Three to Firefly.>> <<Enemy unit presence detected at Point Yosa.>>

<<Psyche Twelve to Firefly.>> <<Enemy advance force at Point Karakuna confirmed to be the Strike Package.>> <<High-priority target Báleygr spotted.>>
<<Firefly, acknowledged.>>

As the defensive units stationed up the Kadunan floodway began sending in reports, the Legion commander unit replied in a dispassionate manner. They had forced the second northern front into an advance operation and set a corridor of traps for them. Upon confirming the enemy's advance force had reached the farthest point, Point Recannac, it gave the order.

<<All Psyche units are to exit shutdown mode. Cut off the enemy advance force's avenue of escape and hold them in place.>>

†

Shiden and Bernholdt knew from past experience that Shin's ability was unable to detect Legion in shutdown mode. As such, they kept up their guard despite the silence. In fact, since they fully expected a Legion ambush, they paid attention to any terrain that could serve as a hiding place and made plans to use them against the Legion.

Despite this, both units were taken by surprise.

The voices of the mechanical ghosts bellowed out at once. As a shower of dry crimson leaves obstructed their field of vision, Legion rose up all over the autumn woods.

However—

“Tch... Again with the optical camouflage?!”

—they could hear them but couldn't see them. Even after switching their radar to active, it detected nothing. Optical camouflage—a type of camouflage unique to the Phönix. The units would cover themselves in Eintagsfliege, capable of refracting both electromagnetic waves and light, in order to become invisible to both the naked eye and radar.

Since the Phönix had to maintain high mobility, it did not carry any heavy firearms. It did not use any projectile weapons, save for liquid armor and, albeit still unconfirmed, recoilless rifles. Despite that, the blinding light of a muzzle flash erupted from where there appeared to be nothing. The rumbling that

followed was the unique sound of steel plates beating against one another—the roar of a tank turret.

“A tank turret?! So these aren’t Phönix!”

“Are these Stier? No...!”

Cyclops and Freki One hopped away from the attack, firing their own tank turrets in retaliation. But the invisible enemy easily deflected their shells. This wasn’t the thinly armored Stier, specialized for ambushes.

The Eintagsfliege deploying the optical camouflage were as fragile as butterflies. So where the shells made contact, they flaked off like powder snow, forced to flap their silvery wings as they were blown off by the shock wave. This revealed the Legion hidden beneath them in all its metallic majesty.

Eight legs like iron spikes. An imposing 120 mm smoothbore gun. Boasting a combat weight of fifty tonnes and a fuselage guarded by composite armor that matched 650 mm thick steel plates in strength. And now, on top of all that, it was covered by countless silver butterflies.

“Löwe...!”

Tank types, of all things, in a forest battlefield with a limited firing range...!

Dodging the fire from the optically camouflaged enemy, Siri groaned. *That was close.*

“If it weren’t for you, Captain Olivia, that first shot would have hit me...!”

Olivia had the ability to see three seconds into the future. If he hadn’t kept his “eyes” open in this forest, with its poor visibility, and warned them in time, this could have ended very differently.

Siri’s Razor Edge squadron and Olivia’s instruction unit had to approach their dam from the dry side, much like the Spearhead squadron. They were lucky to have the Alliance’s instruction unit with them, since the latter were used to vertical combat owing to the precipitous terrain of their country.

As the Löwe stood dozens of meters away on the arch above them, likely fixing their muzzles on them while invisible—the optical camouflage was instantly restored between shots, making their mechanical forms blend in with the sky—Olivia looked up at them from his Stollenwurm. He spoke, Anna Maria’s optical sensor fixed firmly in place.

“We jumped right into their ambush.”

“Yeah, we did. Seems like they knew we were coming.”

“With the defensive river lost, the second northern front’s struggling to keep up. The Legion knew they’d be forced to go out on an advance operation.”

Under the vicious assault of the camouflaged Löwe, Canaan’s unit, along with the armored infantryman, were forced to lie low, unable to proceed. The metallic human silhouettes somehow managed to crawl back under the line of fire, motioning for the Scavengers following them to bring out anti-tank weaponry.

The friendly forces presumed to be holed up in the pillbox on the other bank reported the enemy unit’s numbers, and Canaan manually inputted their positions in place of the useless radar. The Löwe were apparently a battalion-size force. The Reginleifs and armored infantry outnumbered them, meaning they weren’t a serious threat, at least.

He squinted his indigo eyes sternly behind his thin, silver-rimmed glasses.

“The number of Löwe they had on reserve matches our predictions, but... optical camouflage, huh?”

Cyclops’s 88 mm scatter-shot cannon wasn’t made for a shoot-out with Löwe. Shiden dodged the enemy assault by relying on reflex, while Mika’s unit, Bluebell, returned fire in her stead. But the shot was easily deflected.

“Argh! I hit their frontal armor again!”

Whether they were using optical camouflage or not, a single scatter shot or machine-gun barrage would be enough to defeat the Phönix so long as it hit. The Löwe having that camouflage was much more problematic, especially in this forest battleground. Their speed and mobility was inferior to the Phönix, but they surpassed them in every other parameter.

Their 120 mm tank turrets boasted an effective range of seven kilometers, as well as high power capable of penetrating a Reginleif and even a Vánagandr, assuming it hit anywhere except for its frontal armor. And in terms of speed, their 120 mm APFSDS shells could travel at a hundred fifty meters per second, which slightly outpaced the Phönix’s top speed.

But most important of all was their exceedingly tough armor.

Even a Vánagandr’s 120 mm shell couldn’t penetrate its frontal armor, so the Reginleif’s 88 mm turret couldn’t hope to beat a Löwe head-on. It would have to use its agility to attack the thinner parts of its armor on the flanks, back, or top. But with the optical camouflage obfuscating the Löwe, it was impossible to aim for its vulnerable areas.

Based on the flashing of the turrets and the roar of the shots, they could follow the Löwe's general positions, but they couldn't distinguish their impregnable fronts from the more fragile flank or back. Every shot they fired in return was for naught, only good for blowing off the silvery butterflies to momentarily reveal the frontal armor beneath before they once again blended into their surroundings.

With the thick treetops, still lush even during the deciduous season, they couldn't utilize howitzers to tear away the camouflage, nor could they use incendiary shells in a forest full of flammable foliage. The aged trees served as thick cover to defend the Löwe's vulnerable spots from the Reginleifs' line of fire.

Shiden clicked her tongue. This was a pain. If it was just Löwe, or just optical camouflage, or just combat in a forest—they had experience in each of those situations individually and wouldn't be having this hard of a time.

"Mika, I'll shoot next. If it's from the side, even a scatter shot should work."

Unlike a howitzer shell, which flew in an arc, Cyclops used scatter-shot projectiles, which traveled at low altitude perpendicular to the ground. These wouldn't be impeded by the branches.

"If you can connect a shot, destroy it, and if not, at least confirm which way those shitheads are facin'. We have to expose their flanks first. We'll never win by shooting them in the front."

The Aranea launched its self-propelled mines from above, breaking through the layer of warning lines set up around the Karakuna dam. The Spearhead squadron couldn't let these enemies from out of the blue get any closer to the Nordlicht and Brisingamen squadrons facing the Löwe, or the vulnerable combat engineers hiding in the woods.

So to draw the Aranea's attention, the Spearhead squadron threw themselves into the area under the dam, into the dried riverbed where there was little cover, and continually fought off the self-propelled mines it threw their way.

The Aranea clearly wasn't a combat type, but it soon learned to use one wing at a time rather than both, to cut down on reload time. Its scaffolding wings, which were long enough to give the self-propelled mines plenty of room to cling to, would then be swung up and down, sending the humanoid figures plummeting right to them from even higher up than the dam arch.

"—Don't let any more of them land! Shoot!"

In response, Claude's 4th Platoon, a firepower-suppression platoon with machine-gun-configuration units, turned their muzzles diagonally up and opened fire. They let the other platoons handle the already countless self-propelled mines swarming around them and gunned down the ones falling toward Tohru's 3rd Platoon.

Since the self-propelled mines lacked any means of airborne propulsion, they couldn't change their trajectories midfall. As such, during their descent, they were essentially target practice, but the angles at which the 4th Platoon could fire their machine guns were limited since they didn't want to risk damaging the dam.

And so their struggle was for naught, and some of the self-propelled mines were able to slip through the barrage. Spreading out their limbs like animals, they landed on the gravel of the dry riverbed.

And on top of that—

“Claude!”

Upon hearing Shin's sharp warning, the 4th Platoon jumped away to evade, and the next moment, a metallic shadow swept past where they stood seconds ago, cutting through the riverbed like a guillotine's blade. By reeling out the wire dangling from the end of its main crane to its maximal length, the Aranea swung the hook like a weapon. It spun the rotary mechanism loaded onto the main crane in a half circle to propel the hook to the other side, and then it did the same motion in reverse to once again slam it into the riverbed. As it cut—no, smashed through the air, the metallic mass, which must have weighed several tonnes on its own, fell toward them with an ominous howl while slightly changing its trajectory.

“Tch.”

As Claude's Bandersnatch retreated farther back, he tried to take aim at the hook's wire, but the moment it skimmed against the riverbed, it reached maximal velocity. It moved too fast for him to accurately hit it. Instead, the Aranea took advantage of the moment he returned fire to use the telescopic mechanism originally meant for extending its multipurpose arm upward to slam it down onto the ground, attempting to thrust its hydraulic pliers at Claude.

Mouthing a “Shit!” Bandersnatch made a large leap back this time. In its place, Kurena's Gunslinger aimed its sights at the Aranea. But the Legion knew they couldn't risk damaging the dam. It somehow retreated back into the reservoir, using the dam itself as a shield.

“Aaah, dammit! If it wasn't for the stupid dam, that thing would

just be one big target!"

"Kurena, the next attack's coming—get back!"

Autocannons fired at rapid rates and caused their barrels to overheat, meaning they couldn't be used for extended periods of time. As the Aranea flashed its wings over the dam arch and threw more self-propelled mines at them, Raiden's 2nd Platoon moved in to take the 4th Platoon's place and intercept them.

"There're too many self-propelled mines here. We'll sweep them away—all units, evade!"

Anju's Snow Witch aimed its missile launcher up toward the sky, firing anti-light-armor ammunition that went off in midair, wiping out most of the self-propelled mines.

"The self-propelled mines are annoying on their own, but the Aranea itself is pretty dangerous, too," Raiden growled.

Its hook, capable of lifting hundreds of tonnes, dangled from its crane, and its hydraulic pliers packed destructive power. That, coupled with the absurd output and hefty weight of its heavy machinery, made its body a dangerous weapon. Just the hook and pliers were capable of delivering blows of several tonnes, and a direct hit would crush a Reginleif's armor.

"Yeah... And if we climb up to the dam arch and it knocks us down, the Reginleif's buffering and shock absorbers wouldn't be able to take it. But before we even consider that, we need to somehow stop it from throwing self-propelled mines."

Upstream from the Karakuna dam, at the reservoir where the vast amount of water held back by the dam was stored, was a long, narrow, and deep artificial lake formed by the natural ravine. The surface of the water, dammed so that its level was much higher, flowed down into the Kadunan floodway over the gate carved into the northern ridgeline as opposed to the dam's crest. While narrow, it had a maximum width of five hundred meters, and so both its banks were connected by a cable-stayed bridge and a line of netting that ran parallel to it.

The dam was built in an arc that faced upstream, and the countless wires of the bridge stretched from the main tower to the bridge girder in a lyre-like structure. Between those two graceful buildings stood the large, boorish form of the Aranea.

As Bernholdt fought the Löwe on the southern shore of the reservoir, its

massive form stood out conspicuously in his eyes. He had to be wary of it at all times in case it decided to launch more self-propelled mines at them. But even before that, the Aranea was simply too big to go unnoticed.

Its main crane with the hook which it kept swinging around. The hydraulic pliers on both its sides. The sub-beams that served as its wings. He'd seen all those back when they were below the dam, too, but now he saw the large, thick body supporting them, and the eight, long legs extending from its flanks and dipping into the water. Its appearance was reminiscent of an ominous, enchanting wasp spider sitting on its throne in the center of a silvery web.

It walked along the bottom of the reservoir, despite it being too deep to see the bottom. It shifted back, retreating from someone in the Spearhead squadron fixing their sights on it, using the dam's concrete body for cover. It seemed to be taking into account that they were wary of damaging the dam—a truly nasty trick.

"Captain, as far as I can see, the Aranea's only weapons are the crane, the hydraulic pliers, and its wings. Aside from the one at the tip of its crane, it has a few other optical sensors on its front, looking down just over the arch. There's also one optical sensor at the base of each leg."

Since the Spearhead squadron was on the other side, at the bottom of the dam, they couldn't see the Aranea's full body or how it moved. At this distance, Bernholdt would have been able to send footage using the data link, but he had his hands full fighting. Trying to focus on recording while controlling a Reginleif would be impossible.

Shin, who was also in the midst of battle, kept his responses to a minimum as Bernholdt continued.

"Whenever it tilts the main crane and pliers down, it has to lower its wings a great deal to maintain its balance. They probably function as counterweights. There's a bridge right behind the bastard, which limits its movement, but there's self-propelled mines swarming all over the bridge. Guess it's taking advantage of this chance to..."

As it fell back, the Aranea extended its wings to the bridge, where the self-propelled mines climbed over the cables and main tower to load themselves onto it. Only once the self-propelled mines had crawled onto the wings and clung to their full breadth did it advance once again. Its multijointed legs sloshed through the water as they moved with heavy steps.

But as Bernholdt considered the whole sequence of events, something felt off.

“...Isn’t it too short?”

He was only eyeballing it, but it felt like the unit’s legs were far too short to stand upright in the water. Was there a village or something submerged under the water, a remaining structure it could stand on?

“Master Sergeant?”

“Aah, sorry... The length of its legs doesn’t match the depth of the water. There must be some kind of footing underneath it.”

“Could you send it over?”

Shin was referring to footage of the area around its legs. Bernholdt swiftly guessed at what he meant, but again, he was in the middle of combat. He didn’t reply, but an armored infantry accompanying him, who likely heard their exchange via the Para-RAID, made a hand sign that stood for *I’ll handle it*.

Since armored infantry were only slightly larger than human combatants, they were harder to detect. The armored infantryman crawled onto the reservoir’s bank and used the camera at the bottom of its visor to send the footage over to Undertaker. Shin fell silent.

“...Master Sergeant, would it be possible to drop the bridge?”

He likely wanted to drown the pesky self-propelled mines before they could be launched. Bernholdt understood what Shin meant, but...

“First, I have a follow-up report... There’s a leviathan right behind the bridge. The bigger one.”

Swimming circles in clear irritation inside the reservoir and the Karakuna River leading up to it, which were both clearly too small to accommodate its size, was a sea monster, much larger and more imposing than any land creature.

“Looks like it wants to cross over to this side, but with us and the Aranea fighting, we’re blocking it, so it’s staying away... Apparently, what they said about it only counterattacking enemies on land is true.”

Shin held back the urge to click his tongue.

“So it did show up... Meaning we can’t fire at the Aranea’s joints either, can we?”

The leviathan wouldn’t initiate an attack on its own, but if they did anything to make it feel targeted, it would counter in turn. This meant that if they were to try and shoot at the highest angle of elevation and fire shells in a parabola to fly over the dam, the Fisara would block them.

“That really limits our firing range... I imagine the leviathan wasn’t something the Legion planned for, either, but it stopping us from stopping their optical camouflage is just making this harder.”

†

<<Interception unit, hostilities opened.>> <Use of firebombs to counter optical camouflage undetected.>>

The Legion learned. They greedily studied their enemies' weapons and tactics, developing countermeasures to stop them. So when the Strike Package developed countermeasures against the Phönix, the Legion developed countermeasures to counter those, too. If they fought in a forest full of flammable matter, the Strike Package wouldn't be able to use firebombs, and the treetops and foliage hanging overhead would block off mere antipersonnel scatter shots.

In other words, in a forest environment, they would be able to effectively use the Eintagsfliege's optical camouflage.

<<Objective of restraining the enemy advance unit achieved. Firefly to Grilse One. Undo shutdown mode on the primary force, the *heavy-armored units*, and commence attack.>>

They had captured their prey and put the clasp on their cage. All that remained...

<<Break through the second northern front's old Reginia River defensive line.>>

...was to overrun and burn down their prey's nest, to ensure they had no home to return to.

†

The optical footage showed the area down below, or rather the area below Lerche's Chaika, which lay hidden as she gazed at the Hiyano River's southern coast. The grainy, low-quality video was being shared by an impromptu communication network.

“—So you're trying to snare us in your trap again, you fools.”

As Dinosauria that'd lain prone like statues suddenly extended their eight legs and got up—likely having received the order for the primary force, made up of the heavy-armor units, to undo their shutdown mode—Vika sneered.

The group of Löwe and Dinosauria rose from shutdown mode with the orderly accuracy of brick flagstones, without a single gap. They gathered, filling the southern bank of the Hiyano River, which cut through the battlefield from west to east. All of these Dinosauria—each of them weighing a hundred tonnes—had been brought here in the month since the second large-scale offensive while evading the Reaper's ability to pick up on their voices. And as to how they did it...

“They were ferried via waterway after all. Having seized a river with so much water allowed them to build a waterway to transport them.”

On the other side of the Hiyano River—the northern shore—a new channel not listed on the Federacy’s map cut through the riverbank and into the large river. It traveled up into the northern wetland and flowed deep into the fog. It likely drew water from up the Hiyano River, passed through a Weisel somewhere far away, and returned downstream to this point. And it was used to ferry the Dinosauria from that Weisel all the way upstream.

On a battlefield, rivers were an obstacle, but on the other hand, they could be used for large-scale transportation. Even tanks, which would be challenging to transport on land, could be moved in entire units aboard a large ship.

Looking down on it, Lerche said:

“Apparently, the Spearhead squadron encountered a Legion heavy-machinery unit. It seems they deployed weaker heavy-machinery units to the war-torn contested zones to maintain the flow in case the spillway gate was destroyed.”

“If the flow was changed upstream, their transportation plan would be set back. Since they predicted the Federacy military would try to destroy the dam, the Legion had to take their own countermeasures.”

The artificial floodway was made to gather water from multiple rivers, which established the Hiyano as a line of national defense and reclaimed land for agriculture. If the upstream dam were to be destroyed, the water flow would greatly decrease. The Legion had to consider the possibility of the bridge being damaged, too, and had to deploy forces and engineers to fend off the advance force approaching the dam.

“The Legion forced the Federacy into this advance mission in the first place,

and now they're setting up countermeasures? They're the countermeasure the Legion set up to push back the advance operation they forced the Federacy to embark on. How ironic. They intentionally made us divide our army, only to have to split up their own forces, too."

They pressured the humans' defensive lines, making them send out their elites to break the stalemate and luring them into Legion territory where they could pin them down. At the same time, they planned to use their heavy-armored units to strike and topple the defensive line.

This was effectively the same operation the Merciless Queen, Zelene, tried to use on them during the frozen summer in the United Kingdom.

They made the same play.

"And there's no chance they'll take us by surprise this time around. Compared with Zelene, this commander unit is a third-rate hack."

The Dinosauria seemed to be activating one by one, but except for the units standing at the very ends of the line, most of them didn't get up. They didn't even move. This was the Legion's primary heavy-armor force, meant to remain hidden until they attacked the second northern front. They couldn't risk the Federacy's recon units discovering them, so they hadn't spread out. For the sake of transportation efficiency, they remained in a neat line, right up against one another, and so the Dinosauria lacked the space to stand up.

Normally, after being transported along the channel, they would split up into small groups and find a place to lay in ambush—but since they learned of Shin's presence at the second northern front, they stayed in shutdown mode and remained stacked there like cargo.

Suiu spoke. Her voice had a unique androgynous quality to it, bearing both the gentleness of a girl and the fastidiousness of a boy. And right now, it also held the hint of a ferocious smile—the cruel innocence of a feline ready to pounce.

"Your Highness, the 4th Armored Division is done setting up the encirclement. Can we eat them already?"

"Yes."

Indeed, this saved a great deal of time compared with having the Dinosauria march through the wetland. But on the other hand, the amount of effort the Legion wasted on establishing this transport route was great. They had to dig a canal wide and deep enough for a boat to make round trips to the Weisel dozens of kilometers away. And they needed to repair the Hiyano River's wharf, which was destroyed by the satellite missiles a month ago as part of the humans'

defensive line.

All that likely wasn't a terrible bother to the Legion, but it wasn't an insignificant burden, either. Now, they would take all that effort the Legion had invested in order to break the second northern front, and the heavy-armored unit they'd painstakingly bolstered and kept in reserve, and...

"Go ahead! Turn it all into nothing—wipe them out."

The Legion masked by optical camouflage were set not just around the dam, but all along the advance force's route. They rose up to cut off their way back, isolating each unit and not allowing them to pass.

Despite the autumn woods being full of fallen leaves, the invisible ghosts traveled quietly, transparently weaving through the trees to block the advance force's path and the first warning line set up by the armored infantry.

"—There they are. One-trick-pony idiots."

Under their feet, they felt the pressure, vibrations, and sounds of a wire being pulled. By the time they detected it, the fuse had gone off.

Directional scatter-shot mines detonated. The trap, consisting of countless bits of shrapnel, dispersed and fanned out in a fifty-meter range, going off over and over. The armored infantry formed the first row of the warning line. The mines set in front of them blew up and fired shrapnel, forming a sweeping shock wave that blew the fallen leaves into the air. This wasn't meant to eliminate the enemy, but mostly to serve as an alarm, with multiple other types of mines set up alongside the scatter-shots.

They weren't meant to undo the Eintagsfliege's optical camouflage, which refracted both visible light and electromagnetic waves, nor to destroy the Legion's hulking forms. But the pressure of their steps and the vibrations of a mobile weapon, which couldn't be entirely nullified by their advanced buffering systems, tripped the wires spread between the trees, setting off the mines and warning of their approach. The explosions and flames of the mines revealed the locations of the foolish units that activated them.

The scatter shots traveled rapidly like a storm, blowing off and tearing apart the brittle Eintagsfliege and exposing the large shadows of the Legion. Their sneak attack had failed, and the armored infantry stood at the ready to gun them down.

“—This is the kind of rough tactic only the Federacy could pull off.”

Since the scout unit had completed its march and he'd finished setting up the warning line, Ishmael had little business going around the battlefield without any protection. The armored infantry told him he should back down since he was simply in their way, and so he ended up being pushed back behind the warning line.

As the 12.7 mm assault rifles roared loudly and another layer of scatter-shot mines went off, Ishmael could only grumble tiredly. Big, powerful countries had the luxury of using reckless tactics like this. Directional scatter-shot mines packed enough force to turn human opponents into mincemeat, and they were only able to use them because the majority of the Federacy's infantry forces were armored infantry, sent in waves. In a battlefield filled with normal infantry, they could end up killing their own troops.

Suddenly, he heard the bulky steps of the armored-infantry squad leader running over to him, shouting at him through the Para-RAID.

“Get down, sailors, we’re checking the inner side!”

The squad's armored infantry hung over the scout party to shield them, and then they threw large hand grenades in every direction, which detonated in midair. The explosion scattered blue, conspicuous fluorescent paint.

These were clearly nonlethal weapons used in consideration of the scouts. As Ishmael and his men looked on with wide eyes, the armored infantry seemed to smirk under their visors.

“These are prototype anti-optical-camouflage grenades developed for defending our transport routes. We were right to bring them, what with having unarmored soldiers like you around!”

As Ishmael looked back at the expressionless visors of the armored infantry, covered in the painted mist and shielding them from fragments, he started feeling awfully stupid.

No matter how much the nobles who took command of the overall battle may have presented themselves as ruthless, the soldiers who were out there fighting still saw the scout unit as both their important “eyes” and as their comrades. They wouldn't sleep well at night if Ishmael and his men died in the line of duty, to say nothing of abandoning them. Even if they were refugees from another country or people from the Fleet Countries.

“You've got no trust in us at all, do you? We wouldn't miss something that big.”

“I dunno about that. Compared with the Leviathans you people

hunt, these things are like cockroaches by comparison.”

“I’ll admit the Legion are smaller, but cockroaches?”

Ishmael seemed to forget that, as the older brother of the supercarrier, he’d named the Noctiluca after a type of plankton.

“Nah, these damn pieces of scrap are cockroaches, all right. If not cockroaches, they’re grasshoppers or locusts,” said one member of Ishmael’s scout team roughly.

This was, however, a Federacy soldier and not one of Ishmael’s crewmates. As he spoke, he reloaded a magazine and cocked his gun loudly—he’d run out of ammo while on patrol earlier.

“Unlike the leviathans or mother sea, those things don’t deserve any respect. Vermin is what they are. So let’s hit them with those scatter shots, cover them in paint and adhesive, and crush ’em.”

The soldier was an Amber, an ethnic group rare in the Fleet Countries, though many of them lived in lands adjacent to it. He looked up at Ishmael with wheat-colored eyes, the same color as the produce of this land the Legion took from them.

“And once we’re done exterminating the vermin, let’s go look for that lost baby leviathan. I don’t know much about that, though, so we’ll have to rely on your expertise.”

The scout went on to say that he could find cows and goats, though, alluding to his background as a farmer. Ishmael smirked. He never imagined he’d meet such people in this land so far from the sea.

“Yeah, leviathans are for us sailors to hunt. Leave it to us.”

Most of the operation took place in the contested area, a battlefield that the Eighty-Six didn’t often fight in. It was within the range of allied antiaircraft guns. Upon learning that the advance units were engaging the enemy, the antiaircraft guns behind the Reginia line deployed and opened fire. They blew up the Eintagsfliege fluttering in the air and interrupted their attempts to reapply the Legion’s optical camouflage. As the Eintagsfliege fell to the ground, unable to redeploy, the Löwe gradually became visible.

The second northern front was capable of handling the Legion even without the Strike Package’s Reaper, who could hear the ghosts’ voices. After all, they’d fought without his aid so far.

“Knowing that optical-camouflage units exist and how their camouflage

works is good enough for us.”

The armored infantry and artillery soldiers had all come up with and prepared their own countermeasures long ago. The fact that the Eintagsfliege, which were extremely troublesome as a group but weak individually, were the core of the optical camouflage was, in fact, a stroke of luck. By simply applying a bit of originality when building their defensive line, they could easily expose the Legion beneath the fragile butterflies.

Using flexibility a Feldrēß would be hard-pressed to imitate, the armored infantry fought not only on the ground, but even by climbing atop sturdy trees and shooting the Löwe in their vulnerable spots at the tops of their turrets. When Grauwolf and Ameise showed up to assist the Löwe, the infantry gunned them down, too.

Since the forest was full of obstacles, anti-tank missiles, which were top-tier attack armaments, weren’t of much use. Instead, they used heavy 30 mm anti-tank rifles, as well as rocket launchers, which were inaccurate but compensated with sheer numbers. Both of those were easy enough to handle even at the treetops with the armored exoskeleton’s superior strength.

“Don’t underestimate us, you pieces of scrap metal.”

Heroes? Elites? Brave, tragic child soldiers? To hell with that. They weren’t so far gone that they needed to rely on children.

“See that, Eighty-Six pip-squeaks?!”

The Reginleif battalion charged with maintaining the path of retreat joined the armored infantrymen’s defensive line. They left the lightweight Ameise and Grauwolf to the armored infantry and used their tank turrets, a level of ordinance infantry lacked, to take aim at the exposed Löwe. Some of them detected the enemy’s gathering point and swiftly hurried over to cut into the Legion’s reinforcements from the flank and tear them apart.

The armored infantry and Reginleifs’ counterattack routed the Legion before reinforcements could arrive. With this, the Legion force around the Kadunan floodway was greatly diminished.

Cyclops’s scatter-shot cannon and the Reginleifs’ dual heavy machine guns were effective against the Eintagsfliege. In addition, the covering fire from the armored infantry was a significant help. Their antipersonnel scatter-shot mines were relatively harmless against the Reginleifs and the Úlfhéðnar, and since this

land would be abandoned anyway, they had no qualms about scattering the mines. But the large Löwe couldn't evade them, causing loud explosions and resulting in the mines stripping their camouflage.

Upon hearing the mines go off, the armored infantry opened fire at the Löwe, which allowed the Reginleifs to slip into their exposed flanks and take them out. This was how they cooperated. One armored infantryman who returned with heavy-assault-rifle magazines from the Scavengers said this:

“Those Scavenger things are pretty convenient; they pick up plenty of ammo and mines on their own.”

If it was Fido, it'd have acted in a more endearing way, but sadly, those Scavengers were all unfriendly trash gatherers.

“And what, we’re not useful enough for ya?” Shiden said jokingly.

The armored infantryman replied—despite having a rough tone and the virile physique of a wild horse, they were a woman. She let out a high-pitched, clear cackle.

“You guys skitter around way too fast. It honestly kinda gets in our way. Plus, you look like spiders; it’s pretty creepy.”

“That’s mean.”

As she spoke, Shiden moved her cannon and pulled the trigger, felling an approaching Ameise. The armored infantrywoman ducked at the sound of the shot—an 88 mm turret was both extremely noisy and produced intense shock waves—and then she spoke with another cackle.

“I take that back. You’re just loud as hell.”

“That’s hella mean.”

“Nouzen, the prince and Suiu intercepted the Legion’s main offensive. It’s a one-sided fight in our favor for now, so no need to worry about getting hit from behind.”

“Roger that. But—”

Hearing Marcel report that the 4th Armored Division was successful in its surprise attack made Shin sigh in relief. The fact that he didn’t have to worry about getting hit from behind—or that the Legion’s main offensive force, the heavy-armored unit, might try to break through the Reginia line—was a weight off his shoulders, but still, they couldn’t take too long to seize the dam. The engineers needed time to work as well, and if they let the fighting around them drag on and provoked the Fisara into an attack, they’d be in trouble.

On top of having to defend the dam's body, they also couldn't fire from the front of the dam because of the Fisara behind it. The Nordlicht and Brisingamen units were still fighting to take care of the optically camouflaged Löwe. In the meantime, both squadrons and the armored infantry had gathered a great deal of information about the Aranea. How fast it was. Its range and how freely it could move its multipurpose arms. How far it could back away from the dam.

And how the rear sub-beams moved when it swung its crane and multipurpose arms...which could be used to stop it from throwing any more ammo or attacking the rearguard.

"All Spearhead units, change of plan. Shoot the Aranea from the slopes on both sides and from under the dam in a pincer attack. 2nd Platoon is to regroup with Nordlicht; 3rd and 4th Platoons are to regroup with Brisingamen and work to stall the Aranea."

"Are you actually thinking of attacking it from the front?" Raiden said, sounding like he was through being surprised.

"That's our safest option with the Fisara around. Kurena, once the 2nd Platoon reaches the cliff, 6th Platoon is to deploy at the designated position. Marcel—"

"Analysis of the Aranea's footing, right? I'm already on it," Marcel replied immediately.

As a control officer under Lena's direct command, he assisted the Strike Package in combat and had plenty of experience as support personnel.

"Like the master sergeant assumed, there's a sunken village in the dam, so I'm asking for a map of it. We're currently figuring that big bastard's range of movement."

"Thanks. We've established a communication network all the way to the command post. Once you're done, transfer the data to all units."

"You got it," Marcel replied with a smile and a hint of pride, like this was just what he'd expected.

Suddenly, Mele heard the rumbling of cannon fire overhead, and then he saw a white blur flash past the dam, which was just barely visible over the dense treetops. What was that? Otto, who was using a pair of binoculars to observe the fighting and saw it clearly, frowned.

"What's that Feldriff? I've never seen anything like it. It's all white and has four legs... Kind of looks like a skeleton."

At those words, Kiahí understood what he meant. He spoke the name of the cutting-edge Feldreß with envy.

“It’s a Reginleif. Eighty-Six. Rumor has it they’re the western-front army’s elite unit.”

Otto gasped in realization.

“The Strike Package! Yeah, I’ve heard of ‘em, too. Apparently, they’re these amazing heroes or something! Wow!”

Otto spoke with glittering eyes, but Mele couldn’t bring himself to nod. High above them, the headless skeletons raced.

What was this? They weren’t heroes; they weren’t amazing. They were more...

“Scary... No, those guys—I...”

...Hate them.

Mele didn’t know why, but for some reason, that was how he felt.

Dinosauria boasted a height of four meters and a weight of a hundred tonnes. They were, indeed, the apex predators when it came to land combat.

But now, incapable of standing up or moving, they were nothing but scrap metal.

As dawn rose over the heavy fog of the Hiyano riverside, a rain of fire came down on the Legion. With the river at their backs, impeding their movement, and with them packed together too densely to move, the heavy-armored Legion units had no choice but to bear the full assault of the 4th Armored Division’s artillery battalion.

Since the battalion’s howitzers were mounted on a Reginleif, they were 88 mm as opposed to the usual 155 mm ones, but they were more than sufficient for destroying the top of the Dinosauria’s turrets, which were poorly fortified. As they stood there stacked like flagstones, the metallic tanks could only stand exposed as the rain of shells mercilessly penetrated them, making them burst into flames and explode.

In the midst of this bombardment, the Alkonots raced like bluish blurs. They were headed for the very front of the pack of heavy-armored units. Only there were the Dinosauria able to fully get to their feet. There, where the space before them was clear, they began sprinting away with the soft sound of bones rubbing against one another. They moved one row at a time, like a cloth being unraveled by the tugging of its string.

“This is the first operation since we Sirins were granted a month of training by Lady Hero Princess. We are most honored to have so much prey to hunt!”

Lerche smiled and licked her lips within Chaika, which led the Sirins’ charge. This was a smile she would only show inside the cockpit—her instincts as a combat machine spurred her to widen her eyes and smile ferociously like a starved, wild animal.

One Dinosauria turned its blue optical sensor toward her and her unit. Its turret and the eight legs supporting its body shifted to face them, using its absurd mobility specs to move at top speed without any wasted motions. In the blink of an eye, it drew on Chaika. In the end, Alkonosts were nothing but disposable weapons, and their armaments no match for the superior firepower and tough armor of the Legion’s trump card.

However—

“This is a good chance to test my training. I will not grant you the courtesy of words of respect!”

—as Chaika distracted the Dinosauria, three units from her platoon spread out behind her without a single order. Each of them lunged at the Dinosauria, with an odd delay between each attack. Since they didn’t contain human pilots, Alkonosts were all built for high-speed combat and were able to move faster than even the Strike Package, and the Sirins piloting them had quicker reaction speeds than any human.

With that superhuman speed, the Alkonosts were able to distract and dodge the Dinosauria’s two revolving machine guns and the coaxial sub-armament, which moved with its main turret. Their primary tactic was to latch on to the enemy even at the cost of the comrades that restrained and pinned it down, though without any reinforcements from their homeland, they couldn’t afford to do that now.

But the true strength of the mechanical birds of death didn’t boil down to just this. With two revolving machine guns and a secondary turret, which could only aim in the same direction as its main turret, the Dinosauria couldn’t fire at four enemies at once and so locked on to only three of the units as the fourth unit slipped closer. The Dinosauria’s hundred tonnes of weight were a lethal weapon in their own right; it tried to kick the Alkonost away, but the smaller unit dodged it at the last second.

The attempt at a counterattack forced the massive steel monstrosity to stop in its tracks, during which another Alkonost snuck behind it and caught it in its laser sights. The machine guns swerved to react, as a missile hit it from yet

another direction.

Whenever the Dinosauria showed an opening, one of the Alkonosts took aim at it, and once their prey turned to react, another attacked it from a different direction. Like a pack of wolves, they repeated this until the opponent became too exhausted to move, and they did it with systematic accuracy and coordination that no wolf or even a human piloting these same Feldrēß would have been able to imitate.

Sirins were nothing but Alkonost components. Mass-produced industrial goods and, therefore, standardized and made identical. Even the combat memory circulating through and referenced by their artificial brains was identical among all the Sirins. The combat data of all past Sirins was gathered in their production plant, where it was analyzed to produce optimized tactics and backed up regularly so it could be updated into all present Sirin units.

When it came to combat, the Sirins weren't individuals, but a single, identical being. They didn't need any words or signals to fight in tandem.

This highly accurate assault came in waves, where all the attacking units were identical in their appearance and movements, making them indistinguishable from one another and gradually confusing the Dinosauria. In addition, its feeble sensors were unable to tell which unit it was facing, which unit was in front of it, and which units were behind it or at its flanks.

“And there—checkmate.”

One unit appeared right in front of it, under its turret—an Alkonost with a Personal Mark on it. Chaika, piloted by the only Sirin unit with Lerche's appearance, name, and memories. She shoved a missile launcher up against its turret ring like she was thrusting a sword between plates of armor. This was one of a tank's few vulnerable spots, which could not be armored in order to ensure the turret could move.

Without a moment's hesitation, she pulled the trigger.

The shell shot out of the muzzle, almost instantly hit its mark, and ruptured. Flames billowed within the turret, inducing explosions in the Dinosauria's ammunition and detonating it even further. The turret blew off and went flying high into the misty dawn.

At the Recannac dam, the fighting to strip the Löwe of their optical camouflage was still ongoing. The Legion made no audible footsteps thanks to their powerful shock absorbers, but trudging through the soil with four legs would

still kick up mud. Whenever their fifty-tonne bodies, with their long 120 mm turrets, cut through the air, the fog would visibly shift, and the countless leaves they pushed through also exposed their trajectory.

“They’re pretty easy to spot if you pay attention!”

Canaan spoke as his unit, Catoblepas, sped through the fallen leaves of the underbrush, and jumped through the deciduous foliage to pounce at a spot where the mist wavered. Based on the way the fog moved and the pattern of clinging leaves, he landed on what he believed was the top of its turret and fired from close range. Black smoke billowed, and the silhouette of the charred Löwe surfaced as countless silver butterflies fled from the tongues of flame lapping at them.

Silver and red rose up from the white fog as Canaan swiftly moved away. A cloaked unit had apparently turned its turret to return fire at him, but its movements exposed its position, after which it was attacked by an 88 mm turret.

“The mud, the fog, the branches and leaves. Forget fire and scatter shots—these things are full of weaknesses, Canaan!”

“Yeah. If nothing else, this camouflage is useless here on the second northern front.”

And once they returned the records of this battle to be analyzed, that wouldn’t be true just for the second northern front’s battlefield, covered as it was in mist, fallen leaves, and mud. Right now, they had to rely on the movements of the air, the branches, leaves, mud, and sand, but with enough data, their systems would be able to detect the concealed Legion on their own.

They hid in the forest to cancel out the Federacy’s countermeasures against the optical camouflage, but the scrap monsters only gave them the hint they needed to come up with more countermeasures. That thought made Canaan smirk cruelly in the darkness of his cockpit.

“Analysis complete. Sending it over now!”

The temporary communications network set up for this operation employed multiple wired communicators and relay devices, which now sent the image Marcel had analyzed over to Shin. It was the estimated movement range of the metallic water spider walking along the buildings sunk in the dam.

The next moment, the Spearhead squadron split into three groups and moved at once.

“All right, then, let’s go!”

Having stayed under the dam with the 1st Platoon, two units from the 5th Platoon under Anju's command aimed their missile launchers upward and opened fire. After soaring over the dam's peak, the anti-light-armor missiles went into a nosedive and blew up over the riverbed, unleashing countless pellets. In one fell swoop, this took care of the self-propelled mines the Aranea was trying to throw at them.

The black smoke from the explosion formed a smoke screen, which Shin's Undertaker used to lunge forward. He was heading past the towering, several-dozen-meters-high concrete wall of the dam, behind which hid the Aranea.

If they couldn't bombard it from the front, and their ability to shoot at it from the flanks was limited, too, then their only option was to either cut it down with melee armaments or close in on it and shoot it from point-blank range.

The flames cleared, and the Aranea's multiple optical sensors focused on Undertaker, the lone unit reckless enough to charge at it directly. But then tank shells flew in, focusing on each of the blue lenses that peeked over the arch, like they were trying to obstruct its field of vision.

The timed fuses triggered, making the shells self-destruct on the spot. The fragments and shock waves of the blast gouged into the lenses, and where they didn't, the flames blinded it. Under the cover of the anti-armor missiles' smoke screen, three of the 1st Platoon's units fired HEAT shells ahead of Undertaker to cover its forward sprint.

At that point, Undertaker was right below the arch's dam. At this range, the self-propelled mines couldn't reach him, but he was still within the range of where the main crane's hook and multipurpose arm could possibly sweep at him. The sub-beams, loaded with self-propelled mines, just barely skimmed over the water as the Aranea tilted its main crane forward, with its hook still dangling, so as to intercept Undertaker. The rotary mechanism spun, and then it swung the hook to the side.

At that very moment—

"You actually lowered it, idiot! Fire!"

The jibs of the Aranea's sub-beams, shaped like skeletal wings, were low enough to brush the water. The tank shells and debris fell straight into the sea, so there was no risk of hitting anything but the Aranea. The soldiers aimed carefully, using this rare chance to hit the Aranea without needing to worry about the Fisara counterattacking them. Tohru's 3rd Platoon and Claude's 4th Platoon had followed the Brisingamen squadron after they finished sweeping the northern bank of the reservoir and opened fire.

To keep the large main crane from tipping over, the rear sub-beams had counterweights attached to them. The Aranea, which relied on these weights for balance, appeared over the top of the dam and leaned deeply forward to sweep and thrust at Undertaker. As it did this, it had to bend the sub-beams back as far as they would go, tilting them toward the water to maintain its balance. During this time, it couldn't throw any self-propelled mines, and it exposed its sub-beams to attack from the enemy units on both sides of the reservoir.

A combination of 88 mm tank shells and 40 mm autocannon rounds unleashed concentrated fire on the unarmored scaffolding, tearing into it. The joints at the middle and the jibs on both sides came loose. The self-propelled mines thrashed, grabbing onto the sub-beams in an attempt to keep themselves from falling into the reservoir's water. As lightweight as they were, the self-propelled mines were still made of metal. If they sank into the water, they wouldn't be able to float up.

With both counterweights balancing it gone, the Aranea had to stop its attack for fear of tipping over and falling. It rebalanced its posture, moving back along its underwater footing to prepare to strike when Undertaker jumped over to the top of the dam.

It was using as its footing the sunken village's buildings, which the Strike Package had already analyzed.

Two platoons continued their bombardment. The shells plunged into the water, diagonally hitting the spots the Aranea's legs were trying to move toward as well as the surrounding area.

When the shells penetrated the water, they lost speed and their trajectories went awry, failing to destroy the legs, which were deep inside the reservoir. However, there were optical sensors set at the base of each of the Aranea's pairs of legs. These sensors were meant to cover the heavy machinery's blind spot, and having them targeted forced the Aranea to stop in its tracks.

"It stopped, Shin! Hit it hard!"

"Yeah, I just reached the top."

Undertaker raced up the slope of the curved concrete gravity dam, which supported the water pressure with nothing but its own weight, and finally reached the top. The Aranea swung its hook to sweep at him. Shin made it seem like he was about to lunge forward, but then he faked it out by retreating and launching his anchor to the top of the dam, dangling through the air to dodge the giant hook. Having avoided the several-tonne blow, Undertaker leaped forward for real.

High above him, antiaircraft fire was mowing down the clouds of Eintagsfliege. Below him, the armored infantry used their weapons to undo the optical camouflage and hunt down the Löwe.

Seeing this made Shin come to another realization.

The Federacy having chosen democracy meant the civilians were masters of their own fates. The soldiers' conduct was proof enough of that. These soldiers didn't raise their voices in complaint, demanding to know why they weren't being protected. The Federacy army had no need for heroes who swaggered and swore to protect anyone other than themselves.

Having reached the peak of its swing, the hook momentarily stopped and was then launched back the way it came. The metallic hook, weighing several tonnes, sped up and changed its angle thanks to the Aranea's revolving mechanism, and tried to bash Undertaker.

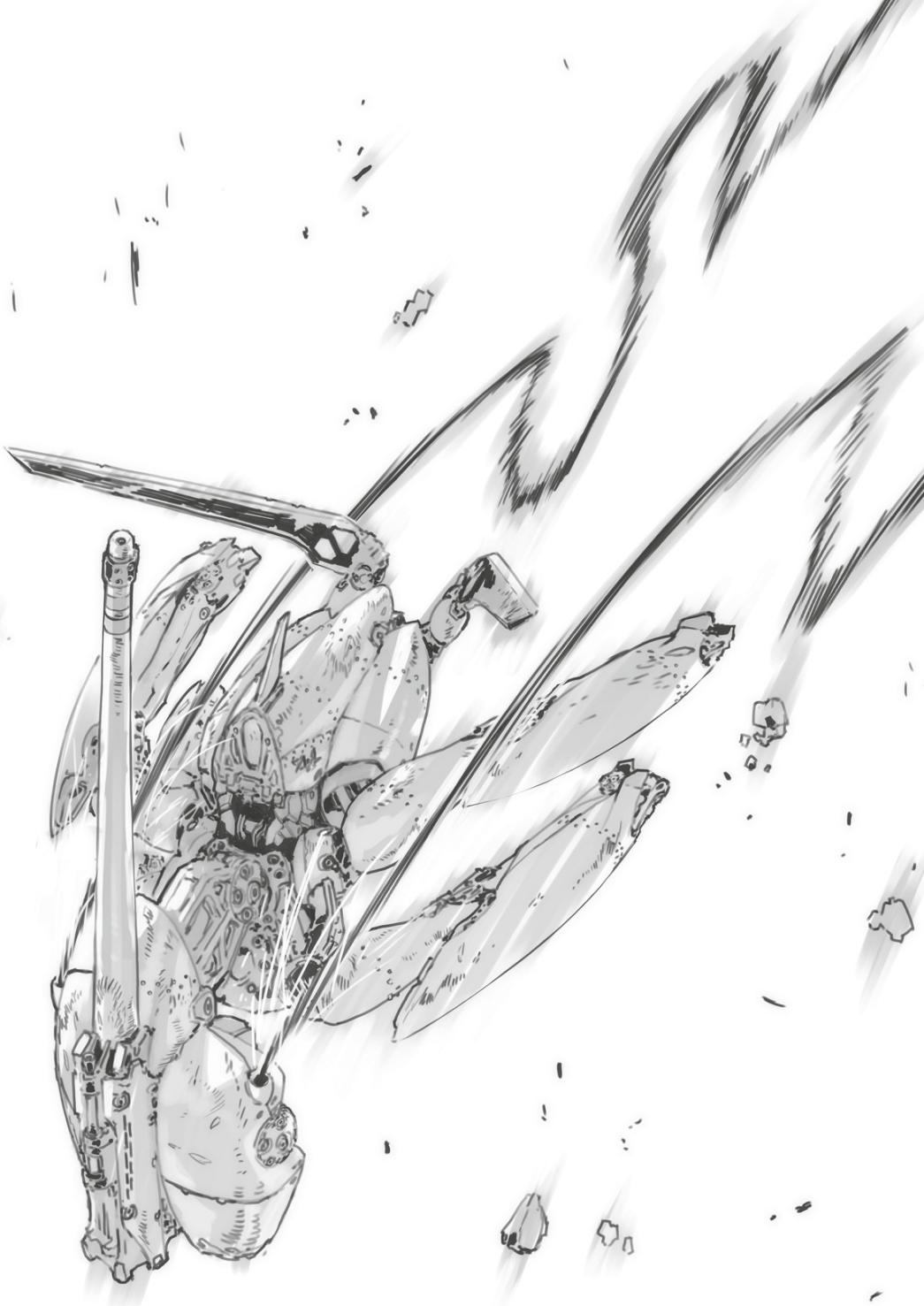
But before that could happen—

“—Trying to move after you stopped makes you slow down, and that makes you easy to aim at.”

After pretending like it was hiding in the reservoir's bank with the 2nd Platoon, Gunslinger climbed up to the southern slope and fired from there. The shot cut through the hook's wire, which came loose and was carried off in a random direction by its own momentum; it crashed with a *thud* and kicked up a cloud of dust. Undertaker passed beneath the torn wire.

Assuming Shin was about to latch on to it, the Aranea tried to retreat farther backward, even if it meant damaging its optical sensors. It raised one of its rear legs out of the water, but once the joint revealed itself, Kurena instantly changed targets and sniped it, too. With one of the legs supporting its weight gone, the Aranea fell over with a heavy splash. Its attempt to scramble away made it come to a complete standstill.

Shooting an anchor into the dam to maintain its jumping speed, Undertaker clung to the main crane. The Aranea tried to thrust its hydraulic pliers from both directions at him, hoping to take him down even if it meant damaging itself, but it was too late.



The Aranea wasn't meant to be a combat unit, and therefore, it was extremely slow. Its every movement was as sluggish as a self-propelled mine, and its reaction speed was even worse. Recovering his anchor, Undertaker jumped off the crane, only for the hydraulic plier to penetrate the crane and stop moving. Using this self-attack as a diversion, the Aranea swung its sub-beams forward, well aware that it would damage its foundation, and purged its sub-beams along with the self-propelled mines still clinging to them.

“—Tch. I figured it would do that...”

Having lain in wait in case the Aranea unleashed some kind of hidden weapon, Raiden's 2nd Platoon opened fire, gunning down all the self-propelled mines. However, they used their dual 40 mm heavy machine guns so as to not damage Undertaker, which was thinly armored. Lightweight heavy-machine-gun rounds wouldn't be able to shoot through the heavy scaffolding materials, however; they, like Shin, assumed the Aranea had something else in store.

Undertaker flipped in midair and triggered its four pile drivers at the same time. The purged piles blew into the air, and the explosion propelled Undertaker downward with intense force.

The projectiles flew through the air in vain, naturally incapable of tracking any target, and Undertaker's unexpected action was too fast for the Aranea's optical sensors to follow with its slow reaction speeds. Flipping midfall again, Shin landed on the back of the Aranea and switched his armament selection. He set it to the 88 mm smoothbore gun and selected APFSDS ammunition.

The nondescript screaming of someone already dead thundered in his ears. It was the voice of a human, but its lamentation lacked any personality or will of its own. It was one of the Legion troops that had their memories destroyed, a Sheepdog. It came as no surprise, but the Legion weren't going to make a backline engineer unit into a Shepherd.

Its control core was right in front of Shin. Underneath a simple, unarmored panel. Shin pulled the trigger. As the APFSDS, a shell capable of silencing even a Löwe, penetrated its control core, the voice of that unfamiliar ghost died away.

While clearly disgruntled by the battle raging so close to it, the Fisara did seem aware that it had wandered into the fighters' territory, and didn't attack anyone. Still feeling ill at ease under its three-eyed gaze, Shin retreated along the collapsed main crane and moved over to the dam's head. Water spilled loudly from the shattered dam gate—apparently, the Aranea and the Fisara crossing

over it had ended up breaking it. Once he had gotten far enough away from the Fisara, he felt his unease calm down. Soon after, the Nordlicht squadron finished sweeping up the Löwe on its side, followed by the Brisingamen squadron. As they joined up, the two captains started complaining.

“What the hell, Li’l Reaper? I thought huntin’ the spider was our job!”

“I get we had our hands full fighting, but come on, Captain. You should give your elders a chance to shine sometimes, too.”

They both booed at him, but Shin gave them further orders. He felt bad about stealing their kill, as it were, but if they had this much energy to spare...

“There’re still self-propelled mines on the bridge, so go sweep them up. But be careful not to provoke a counterattack from the Fisara.”

He meant the leftover self-propelled mines the Aranea didn’t throw at them. Continuing to complain, the two squadrons moved to either side of the cable-stayed bridge. They aimed their shots so as to not hit each other and waited for a time when the Fisara swam away from the bridge to open fire, and then they swiftly retreated. Thankfully, the Fisara submerged underwater warily, and by the time it bobbed its head back out and looked around, both the Brisingamen and Nordlicht squadrons had retreated into the trees.

“Whoa, that was close... That thing’s seriously scary.”

“It’s in the way, so I wish it would pick up its kid and leave already.”

When they confirmed it wouldn’t counterattack, they once again came out of the trees to gun the self-propelled mines down. As they repeated this, the Fisara seemed to grow annoyed with them and swam away for a time, allowing them to shoot undisturbed.

“There we go... All done, Li’l Reaper.”

“Roger that—target area seized. Engineer unit, come on out. We’ll shift to securing the perimeter.”

“Yeah, leave it to us! It’s not often you get a chance to see a dam get bombed, so I hope you have your cameras ready.”

After the engineer captain replied in an oddly chipper manner, he and his engineer unit hurried over to the catwalk and went to work on the dam. They confirmed the number of explosives and the spots where they needed to be placed based on the dam’s existing schematics, and apparently, there was no need to make any modifications—implying the schematics were either accurate or that they’d simply redone the measurements while the fighting was taking

place.

That said, they did need the Fisara to get out of the reservoir before setting the charges off.

“Captain Ishmael, you said the Fisara would leave once it finds the youngling, right?”

“It should. It seems to be heading in the direction of the distress roar, but...,” Ishmael replied, with the sound of people walking through a thicket in the background.

But suddenly, Kurena, who was waiting at a higher altitude, spoke up.

“Shin, Captain, I found it. Seven hundred meters east of the dam, in a pond near point 980.”

Gunslinger sent its optical-sensor footage via data link, which popped up in a holo-window. In a clearing in the autumn treetops, a snow-white mermaid swam through a pond dyed red.

“...The leviathan youngling is an aquatic creature, so it should have passed through the Kadunan floodway or the new Tataswa floodway. What is it doing in the middle of nowhere like that?”

“The maps say that there’s a river branch to the east of the Kadunan floodway. It probably built up to form this lake. Since it’s a small stream, the youngling was able to swim through it, but the Fisara either couldn’t pass it or didn’t notice it was there, so that’s probably how they missed each other.”

Since Ishmael wasn’t wearing an armored exoskeleton, he couldn’t see the footage, but an accompanying communications soldier showed it to him via communication terminal. Shin felt him nod over the Para-RAID.

“It’s a Leuca youngling. A leviathan breed with a biological sonobuoy. At this size, if it lets out its supersonic waves, it’ll just be really loud. It shouldn’t be dangerous on its own, so no need to be as cautious.”

“Let us know if you make contact with the youngling. About the Fisara...”

Shin was about to ask how they were going to spur it to move, but he then seemed to realize something and fell silent, letting Ishmael carry on.

“The Leuca’s bound to cry out again at some point. Either that, or the Leuca will notice someone came to pick it up and head this way. If possible, could you get the Fisara to approach the dam a little?”

“That would be fastest. Once the engineers are done, we’ll have the armored division pull out of the area. It looks like it wants to come here, so if we leave, it

should get closer..."

Or rather, he'd been feeling the Fisara's three-eyed glare on him for a while now, basically telling them to hurry up and get out of the damn way already. It was frankly unnerving.

Watching the Reginleifs fight monstrously large Legion and felling them quickly made Mele shudder at their strength.

He finally realized what he hated so much about them. They weren't like him. They were just like the self-important nobles and the superior officers. They were the kind that made fun of him. The kind that could do anything but would do nothing for people like him.

"They—"

The Fisara seemed to want to return to the Kadunan floodway via the dam's gate, but with the Reginleifs running around, it couldn't come any closer and was growing visibly more annoyed. Its enormous figure circled just by the reservoir's coast, kicking up water at the Reginleifs, likely as some form of threat. When a large amount of water splashed over Bandersnatch's feet, it retreated. Seeing this, Shin said:

"Kurena, get down from there, just in case. No need to watch over the youngling anymore."

"R-roger," Kurena replied, her voice a little high-pitched.

Since Gunslinger stood out, as it was stationed in a high spot, it seemed to have given the Fisara the idea that she was the commander of the group, based on the way it was glaring at her. With how annoyed it was, it looked like it might fire a warning shot at any second.

Gunslinger got off its sniping spot and joined the 2nd Platoon, which had just finished fighting the armored units, as they were meant to help secure the area around the floodway.

Suiu resonated directly with the other three operations commanders.

"All units—the 4th Armored Division has finished eliminating the enemy heavy-armored units. Since we know their supply route, we'll destroy it with additional bombardment, after which we'll retreat."

Siri followed up with her own report.

"2nd Armored Division, we've finished seizing all the dams. The

only thing left is to detonate them.”

“3rd Armored Division, likewise...and then—”

As he spoke, Canaan turned the focus of his optical sensor in a certain direction. The waters of the Kadunan floodway cascaded down a steep slope, forming the Hiyano River below. At the end of that dam stood a gray building—a rustic-looking pillbox called the Kadunan artillery observation site. And inside it...

“We discovered a group of Federacy soldiers and civilians we believe were left behind. We’ll go in to retrieve them now.”

Canaan felt Shin’s eyes widen in surprise over the Resonance—even the stone-faced Reaper was shocked by that report.

“Civilians? Wait, you mean they’re survivors from the Fleet Countries?”

“Probably.”

There were twenty children there, the eldest aged ten, and an old man presumed to be a teacher. Some of the older children were pulling the younger ones, who clearly weren’t their siblings, by the hand. Since they were all kids evacuating together, the older ones likely felt responsible for the little ones.

They looked at the Reginleifs with round eyes, likely seeing them for the first time. One of the soldiers walked over to Catoblepas, staggering a little on his feet. He scrutinized the Reginleif with suspicious eyes and reached for his wireless device.

“I’m only checking to be doubly safe, but you’re Federacy military units, right?”

“Yes. First Lieutenant Canaan Nyuud, of the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package.”

“M-my apologies, First Lieutenant, sir!” The soldier immediately straightened his back. “I just, hmm, didn’t recognize your unit...”

“Were you a group that failed to escape during the second large-scale offensive?”

He must have been, if he didn’t know about the dam-destruction operation—the reason the Reginleifs were dispatched here.

“You mean the scrap monster bombardment and the attack that followed? Yes. We got an order to retreat, but our unit failed to get away, so we had no choice but to hide here in this pillbox... Those children are refugees from the Fleet Countries. Apparently, they got separated from the main evacuation group. The Legion all went south after the bombing ended, so they came here when the situation settled down.”

“...You did a good thing, protecting them.”

They must have had food or emergency reserves stored in the artillery observation site. A company of two hundred soldiers had to remain shut in there and wait for help they didn't know would come. As such, it was surprising they'd shared food with young children who couldn't fight.

Especially children unrelated to them, refugees from another country. They'd been isolated and separated from their group—no one would fault them for abandoning them in those conditions. It would have been seen as unavoidable.

The soldier gritted his teeth ever so slightly. It was a gesture that showed the thought had crossed his mind, though he regretted having even considered it.

"...Our late company commander told us to protect them."

They had hesitated, but their commander had wiped away that hesitation.

"He told us how to barricade ourselves. Told us how to fight and gave detailed instructions on how to do it. He knew that if anyone got hurt, they probably wouldn't make it. No, it's because he knew that, that we wouldn't be able to get away on our own, that he told us to barricade ourselves."

Having lost the noncommissioned officer who commanded them and even their company commander, a group of rank-and-file soldiers were given all the tools they needed to survive. And on top of that...

"He said help will definitely come, so we mustn't give up. That we have to keep faith until the very end. That we shouldn't think of anything but saving those kids... He said, 'You are proud Federacy soldiers. To these kids, you're heroes. You can become the heroes who saved them.'"

They could save themselves. This pillbox that kept them safe. Those weak, helpless children whom they were bound by duty to protect. Their own weak hearts, so close to yielding.

And their pride.

"The company commander might be dead...but even in death, he protected us."

At that point, the soldier's emotions burst like a dam. A soldier, a grown adult despite his youth, wept openly. He wiped his smudged cheeks with his fist over and over.

"Thank goodness... Thank goodness we didn't give up. You came. Help really did come. The commander was right. Thank goodness we didn't betray him... Thank goodness we...we had faith..."

Faith in their company commander. Faith that the Federacy military would come for them. Faith in the good of humanity, in the belief that there was virtue in this world. In their conscience—which spurred them, despite how weak they

were, to still believe in others, to still wish to protect others.

“...”

“This taught me that even people like us can protect someone—can save someone. That even former rooster serfs like us can do some good, can do something truly special.”

As Canaan looked on, overcome with keen emotion, the soldier flashed a tearful smile, his face screwed up in a sob.

“Thank God...”

Tohru heard the soldier’s confession over the Para-RAID.

“—Oh, come on.”

And hearing it made him feel like a weight was lifted from his shoulders.
Come on.

“We can do it after all, can’t we?”

Even us, the Eighty-Six, and the people on the other fronts, in other units. The operation they were charged with went well, and the soldiers from the other units hadn’t given up, either. They were still working hard, coming up with plans—so they could keep on fighting, so they could protect themselves and others, so they could win. And their efforts bore fruit.

Federacy soldiers who were also waiting for rescue were able to save those children, who had failed to flee to safety. They were able to find that bothersome leviathan youngling without anyone dying in the process.

They really could do something.

The emptiness clinging to him since the night of the second large-scale offensive, when stars fell from the heavens, had cast a dark curtain in front of his eyes that blurred his path forward—but it was gone now. It felt like he was finally able to let out a breath he’d been holding in for so long.

“See, I told you, Tohru. I didn’t just say it out of sympathy.”

“You’re right, Claude. Sorry. We...”

I, my comrades, the Federacy army...

They may have had things stolen from them. They may have lost once. But even so, little by little, one by one—they could take back what was theirs.

“...we’re not powerless.”

The flame burned bright in Tohru’s gold-tinted green eyes.

The Para-RAID linked people’s consciousness, transmitting the same degree of

emotions one would feel while talking with someone face-to-face. So when Shin contacted Frederica, who was in the command post, via the Para-RAID, he couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at the curious air she was letting off.

"What's wrong, Frederica?"

"Shinei. Could you, hmm, get a bit closer, perhaps? To the Leuca."

Frederica was apparently inside Gadyuka, peering at the footage shared in its sub-window. Shin could hear Vika's voice from behind her, saying things like **"Rosenfort, watch it if you have to, but get off my lap. Don't sit there."**

Picturing the scene in her mind, Anju choked, trying to restrain her laughter, while Marcel and the other control officers all let out dry coughs, likewise trying to hold back their mirth.

Shin then said, with utmost seriousness, a line that punctured all their efforts like a needle into a balloon.

"That's quite a big daughter to have at your age, Daddy."

Marcel and the others did a spit take, and Anju laughed out loud.

"Who do you think you're calling a father, Nouzen...?" Vika growled. **"Zashya, wait, why the notebook? Why are you sketching? Stop it. Don't ignore me, I know you can hear me. Stop it, stop drawing!"**

Zashya had started her own little rebellion, it seemed.

"Send the sketch over when you're done, Major Zashya," Raiden said.

"Like I said, please call me Roshya, First Lieutenant Shuga...but of course. I'll send it over to everyone in the Strike Package."

"Stop that, Ya—" Vika was about to shout Zashya's long full name, but then—

"Cap'n!"

—Rito cut into their talk.

"Cap'n, I want to see the Leviathan! Keep some gun-camera footage of it, please!"

Grethe responded, but as she did, Frederica squealed over the Resonance. Grethe had apparently pulled the girl out of Gadyuka by the collar and rescued the prince.

"You lot. And you too, the prince's control assistant. I don't mind you having fun, but not in the middle of a mission. Leave it for

later.”

“Sorry.”

“My apologies...”

“I’m sorry.”

“Wait, I have to apologize, too?!”

The combat-engineer captain reported back, informing that they were finishing setting the explosives.

“Roger. Once the other dams are prepared, we’ll enter the retreat phase.” Shin nodded and listened carefully to the movements of the remaining Legion.

The Legion around the Kadunan floodway had all been eliminated, and there was no sign of any reinforcements coming. The group facing the main force at the Reginia line also seemed to be pausing their offensive and retreating back into the territories. With their main offensive force, the heavy-armored units, eliminated, they deemed it impossible to break through the front line.

The 4th Armored Division, having finished their sweep of the enemy, began to pull back and retreat, and all the 1st Armored Division’s dams had their explosive charges set and ready. The soldiers and children discovered near the Recannac dam were placed into empty Scavenger containers and sent back along the retreat route, and the 2nd and 3rd Armored Divisions were progressing steadily in their preparations.

Having confirmed all this, Shin addressed the last unit remaining, charged with one task that had to be completed before their primary objective of blowing up the dam could be achieved—recovering the nuclear fuel.

“Lieutenant Colonel Mialona, what’s the status on the Lady Bluebird Regiment’s mission?”

Lieutenant Colonel Niam Mialona replied quietly from her metallic mount, the Vánagandr. There, she sat upon the gunner seat, which also doubled as the tank captain’s seat.

“It’s going swimmingly.”

CHAPTER 5

BLOODY MARY IS IN THE MIST

The radiation emitted by spent nuclear fuel could be blocked off by thick metallic shielding. While it wasn't perfect protection, it did go a long way toward minimizing the risk of radiation exposure. This was why, when pursuing the weak, unarmed Hail Mary Regiment, the military continually deployed Vánagandrs wrapped in composite armor made from a mix of ceramic and heavy metals. These cornerstones of the Federacy's ground force, built with similar armored weapons as their intended targets, each boasted a 120 mm smoothbore gun and a 12.7 mm heavy machine gun, and at fifty tonnes, could travel at up to a hundred kmh.

This pack of metallic wolves raced under the thick, heavy mist typical of late autumn on the second northern front.

The fire of their two revolving machine guns mowed down the fleeing soldiers in a cloud of blood splatter. Those who tried to hide behind crumbled stone walls were hit with tank shells that turned them into a mixture of crushed rock and flesh. Some tried to conceal themselves in the shadows, only to be torn apart as multipurpose tank shells burst in midair, releasing scatter shots that swept through them. Others became so panicked by the pursuit that they charged at the Vánagandrs empty-handed, only to be casually kicked away by their metallic legs.

The Hail Mary Regiment's soldiers carried 7.62 mm assault rifles—which, in

the Federacy, where armored infantry was the main force, were mostly considered weapons of self-defense, carried by transport units or combat engineers. Even the Republic's Juggernaut, the weakest and most poorly armored of all armored weapons, could deflect 7.62 mm bullets, so naturally, they wouldn't scratch a Vánagandr's stalwart armor.

And so the Hail Mary Regiment not only failed to take revenge but were instead killed for their trouble. Swiftly, and quite mercilessly—they were massacred.

All battlefields were shrouded in a kind of mist. No matter how carefully, thoroughly, or meticulously one gathered intelligence, there was no way to eliminate all uncertainty. It lurked everywhere—in the enemy army, politics, climate and terrain, and even in the actions of individual soldiers like those of the Hail Mary Regiment. With such factors influencing its course, an operation could never go exactly according to plan.

That was why, to Lieutenant Colonel Mialona, this battle felt so strange, and so horrific.

“...Just what did you fools hope to accomplish?”

In order to ensure none of the soldiers could possibly run off with the “nuclear weapon,” she'd formed a careful and thorough perimeter around them. They maintained radio silence and used the terrain to hide themselves so as to keep their approach and encirclement from being noticed.

In addition, to ensure the renegades didn't consider detonating the nuclear weapon in a “Hail Mary” moment, the first thing they did was storm and seize the warehouse where the “nuclear weapons” were being stored. They closely examined all their intelligence, then sent out scouts who swiftly but carefully confirmed the terrain and the target's position before launching the raid.

And yet, the fact that their approach, encirclement, scouting, and combat all went exactly according to plan made this a very unusual battle.

It was like their opponents had neither the planning, the preparation, nor even the will to resist. With their last ray of hope, the “nuclear weapon,” lost, the situation fell apart, and they all fled in fear.

...Yes, all they did was run.

At first, they only ran, like the stupid, cowardly roosters and hens they were. They didn't act out of loyalty to their country. Perhaps they thought they were acting out of love for their hometown or their comrades, but they weren't, in the

end. And it certainly wasn't out of a sense of righteous indignation, true feeling, or a desire for justice.

They were simply spurred on by terror. They couldn't stand the situation, so they ran wherever their legs would carry them. That was the absurd, foolish truth behind this whole upheaval. They were so rattled by fear that they ended up exposing the front, their own comrades, and indeed the entire country to danger—and all in the name of simple, unsightly escapism.

They hadn't even tried to see themselves for what they were—pitiful fools who couldn't contain even one of their own emotions. And with that foolish, powerless, and slothful attitude...

"How did you expect to save anyone when you couldn't even discipline yourselves? What did you expect to happen, you imbeciles?"

"Princess, save me! Save me!"

"Princess, I don't want to die!"

"Protect us, Princess! Princess!"

With the sound of her dying soldiers thundering in her ears, Noele wept and screamed in an attempt to shut them out.

"It's not my fault, it's not my fault! No, it's everyone else, not me, but everyone else—"

None of them would think, and they simply clung to me, begging to be saved, so I tried my hardest, I—I tried, I tried so hard, and that's why I had to do this... But I really—I didn't really want to!

Her eyes turned to Rilé, running from a Vánagandr. Upon seeing her, Rilé reached out to her with a desperate expression.

"Princ—"

But before Rilé could finish her sentence, a Vánagandr's foot crushed her to bits. Noele should have never heard her voice—never seen her face again. And yet, she could hear that voice cursing her, see that face blaming her.

"You told us to do it, Princess. You ordered us. You decided to do this, and you got us caught up in your mess."

"...No!"

We had to correct the mistake. I only acted to protect and save the others. So it can't be my fault. It isn't my fault!

"It's only because all of you couldn't do it properly! It's not my fault!"

The fact that we couldn't make the nuclear weapon, that everyone ended up

dying... I wasn't wrong. I was right! There had to be a perfect solution prepared for me! The world can't be that cruel... So it's not my fault I didn't find that solution. It's not my fault we couldn't do it!

“—That's right.”

Someone caught her in their arms. She turned around and found Ninha smiling at her.

“That's right, this isn't your fault. It's all okay now. I'll protect everyone.”

Noele felt her breath catch in her throat. In that moment, she completely forgot all the sorrow and fear and tears she'd shed just a moment ago.

Ninha hadn't said *save me* or *help me* or *protect me*.

She'd said, *I'll protect...* Did she mean *protect Noele*?

“You don't have to think about anything anymore. No need to make decisions. I'll protect you from all that. I mean, I'm the only one who'd understand, right? It must have been such a burden, being a princess. But you'll be fine now.”

I...

Somewhere deep down, Noele did think it was a burden. Being the daughter of a regional knight, having the responsibilities of being an Imperial noble. Those were all things that'd been forced on her. If she could just give up on the title of princess, on all the things forced on her, it would be... It would be so lovely...

And then the revolving fire of a Vánagandr's machine gun pulverized both girls into a bloody mist.

Most of the nuclear weapons were inside the warehouse seized at the beginning of the battle. Kiahí held the final one in a bucket. He had to hold back the nausea rising up from the pit of his stomach and the weakness setting into his limbs as he walked among the remains of the massacre with unsteady steps.

The nuclear weapon's bucket was oddly heavy, and though he wasn't injured, his body felt terribly sluggish. But the anger burning inside him gave him the strength to keep dragging his feet along.

They wouldn't find that damn leviathan. And all their friends were dead. And it was all the Federacy's fault. The nobles' fault.

The princess's fault.

Kiahi gritted his teeth. It was because the princess was wrong. The princess had fooled them.

“I thought something was off all along.”

The Federacy, the nobles, the princess. They were all lying to us... Lying to me.

“So I’ll take revenge.”

Like a pathetic rat, he crawled and skulked about, avoiding the eyes of the Vánagandrs, making his way to a spot where he’d be able to stay out of those big machines’ sight. Realizing they wouldn’t be able to pursue him in a confined space, he took cover in a small, stone building.

Of course, unleashing the nuclear weapon in a space enclosed by stone walls would be a useless gesture, since the radioactive matter wouldn’t scatter anywhere, but Kiahi didn’t realize that. He simply believed that this nuclear weapon was his last trump card, and so he intended to detonate the old bucket and thereby wipe the pieces off the board, rather than let his enemy win.

He didn’t even think of the fact that the last time they’d used one of these weapons under the same conditions, it was only strong enough to blow up a single car.

All he had to do was detonate it and destroy everything.

This is revenge. Because it’s revenge, my anger is justified, which means there’s no way this can go wrong.

He tore off the duct tape holding the bucket’s lid firmly in place and stuffed all the plastic explosives he could over the countless eerie metallic pellets filling it. He put in the fuse and got to his feet as he pulled back the detonation cord. Nausea washed over him, and this time, he couldn’t take it and threw up.

...They threw up like this at first, too.

It happened after they opened the fuel rods, and after they detonated the first nuclear weapon and it didn’t work. His friends grew visibly weaker, their appearance changed, and they ended up dying.

It’s like some kind of curse.

They hadn’t been shot or burned by fire, but their bodies started swelling up, their hair fell off, and their skin started flaking. They threw up their own organs, and then they died. Everyone who handled the nuclear fuel died after touching it.

It probably was a curse. Nothing about the fuel looked wrong. It didn’t make any sounds or smell weird. But anyone who touched it died—so it must have cursed. They were never meant to touch this thing.

And the princess knew about it and stayed quiet. The Empire knew about it

when they'd put the power plant in their town.

Then I'll scatter it all over the place.

He wiped his mouth clean and got to his feet. It was only at that point that he realized that he was in a chapel. On the other side of the altar, the morning sunlight rose through the fog, casting a pale glow through the stained glass like the very light of heaven. On the glass was the image of a willowy woman looking down on him with a compassionate smile.

Her beautiful outfit was a glowing, transparent blue.

The governor's wife, Mary Lazulia. The very person who introduced nuclear power to their village.

Serves you all right. Just watch me, beautiful holy mother in your blue dress.

Kiah turned around...

...and found himself staring right into the barrel of a heavy assault rifle held by a woman in steel-colored full-body armor.

“...Hah.”

Somewhere, a loud, sharp gunshot blared.

The deafening roar of Vánagandr cannons and the high-pitched screeching of power packs had all died down enough for it to be audible. Milha crawled through the eerie silence in the dim morning mist. One of his legs had been blown off, so he couldn't stand, and as his right hand crept against the mud, his nearly severed palm was nothing more than an impediment.

His left hand was still fine, but Yono's body was heavy and kept slipping from his grasp because of the blood. Having to constantly adjust his grip on her was irritating and vexing.

She was annoying, weak, and cowardly, but she was still like a little sister to him. Despite how much of a pain she was, he had to protect her, and her weak, cowardly nature made him want to keep her safe from the world.

So why had she stopped crying and cowering like always?

Mud splashed over his dirty face.

Raising his head, he saw the shadow of a metallic, spikelike leg come down on the ground. The Federacy's... The Imperial nobles' mechanical monsters. A Vánagandr. The voice of a woman condemned him coldly from the machine's external speaker, with the same northern-province intonation as Noele.

“You're the last of your group of birdbrained, ground-pecking roosters. Is that tattered rag one of your friends? It's because you good-for-nothing fools

didn't know your place and did things you shouldn't have that your friends had to die."

Milha felt his rage seethe. *Tattered rag.* She meant Yono.

...Yeah. I know.

She hadn't been crying or cowering for a while now. He had to pick her up over and over again, but she wouldn't move on her own. Which made sense...

...given that she was missing her head.

And without it, she was missing her mouth and eyes, so she couldn't shed tears or cry out. And what made her like this, what reduced Yono to this form...

It was you. You officers. Superior officers. The Federacy.

"It's because you told us to think for ourselves!"

And then wouldn't forgive us when we couldn't.

"I... We never wanted that, but you told us to do it anyway! We tried to think and act on our own, just like you said, and now you tell us to know our place and not act?! If that's the case, why didn't you tell us we're good-for-nothings and we shouldn't do anything to begin with?!"

Even as he spoke, Milha knew the answer. He knew that telling roosters to know their place, calling them good-for-nothings, were things people couldn't say in the Federacy, words that were forbidden in a country of freedom and equality.

...No. That wasn't it.

"...You just didn't want to say it."

Because saying that in a country of freedom and equality wasn't the just thing to do. They didn't want to become unjust. They all knew deep down there wasn't a shred of justice to them, but they didn't want others to think they were unjust.

"You just didn't say it because you didn't want to be the bad guys! It's unfair!"

"...You're right."

As she spoke, Lieutenant Colonel Mialona pulled the trigger. Machine-gun fire blew the last of the renegades to bits. Looking down at the blood splatter, the lieutenant colonel muttered to herself, seated in the cramped gunner seat.

Because of the loud noise of the power pack, her Vánagandr's operator wouldn't hear her, despite being in the same cockpit, unless she switched on the internal radio.

"You're right. A just country *is* unfair."

Telling someone to think for themselves didn't mean all they had to do was think. Telling someone to act didn't mean they wouldn't be blamed regardless of what action they took. To people who couldn't make those distinctions, it all must have seemed terribly unfair.

To Noele Rohi, who didn't know there was no escaping the consequences of her own actions and simply ran around, weeping. To Ninja Lekaf, who surrendered herself far too late and, despite this, threw herself into the line of fire. To that one soldier who, to the bitter end, never learned or thought anything through and tried to detonate a dirty bomb in a closed space.

To them, freedom and equality was more than they could handle. And the Federacy, which forced those things on them in the name of justice...

"This is what we get for forcing rights on people who don't want education or seek to learn, who don't think and plan when given time, on sheep who don't try to make decisions even when given freedom. Some people want to be sheep who don't have to think or make choices, who simply follow their leader, and this is what you get for forcing freedom and equality on them."

They hadn't considered the hardships that came with freedom and equality, or else they'd irresponsibly believed that simply because they could handle it...

Indeed, to those with the qualities of a ruler—the capacity to be one's own master—freedom and equality were wonderful things. With the freedom to decide how to live their own lives, they would take no orders, nor would they be forced to do anything...and in the name of equality, they wouldn't carry responsibility for the lives of others.

They would have the strength of a ruler, but they wouldn't have to use it to protect the sheep too weak to shoulder that burden themselves.

They lied, saying that under the freedom and equality of democracy, each civilian would be their own king. And those who couldn't be masters of their own fates would still be responsible for themselves. While willingly accepting their own freedoms, they wouldn't grant their fellow citizens the peace they desired.

And in Lieutenant Colonel Mialona's eyes, this was irresponsible.

Those were her thoughts as a former Imperial noble of the Giadian Empire, who'd been responsible for ruling over her people and, as such, had been

squarely charged with the duties and concerns that came with the right of dominion. As someone who oversaw the fates and lives of the people.

It was arrogant for the citizens to enjoy their own strength while turning a blind eye to the weakness of the sheep.

“Freedom and equality... To those who simply wish to be sheep in a flock, those ideas are nothing short of cruelty.”

Both the switches for the external speaker and the internal radio were off, and so the lamentation of this governor, who’d been forced to slay the sheep she loved, went unheard.

“—It must have been such a burden, being a princess. But you’ll be fine now.”

He didn’t hear how Noele answered those words from Ninha. The loud, heavy gunfire that followed tore through Noele, Ninha, and, indeed, even the main unit’s radio transmitter itself.

“Huh...?”

As the radio ceased crackling and fell silent, Mele stopped in his tracks.

When the Strike Package’s combat at long last died down, he’d finally recalled his role. He’d tried to report to the princess about the leviathan.

But when he called in, what greeted him was the sound of all his friends, of his princess, being massacred.

“No... No!”

He attempted to reconnect the radio, but there was no response. Kiahí and Milha and Rilé and Yono—none of them answered.

“They’ve been wiped out...?” Otto said, dumbfounded. “Everyone... Everyone but us was killed...?”

Mele fell to his knees in shock. Kiahí. Milha. Rilé. Yono. So many of their comrades...and the princess.

Anger and sadness built up within him—toward the enemies who’d killed the princess, toward the leviathan that wouldn’t save her, and toward himself.

Honestly, he’d known how the princess felt about him. But she was a princess, someone from a different class. A former serf, a commoner like him who couldn’t do anything, wasn’t worthy of such a beautiful princess, so he’d pretended not to notice.

If things had to end like this, maybe he’d have been better off answering her feelings. Maybe the previous night, when he last saw her, he should have kissed her.

The bright rays of the sun shone irritatingly through the trees. A white

Reginleif descended from the dam, and the light reflected off its armor. Its crimson optical sensor turned their way. And unaware that Mele and Otto, the last survivors of the Hail Mary Regiment, were standing there in grief among the trees, they passed by and left.

Mele didn't know that the optical sensor's control was set to track the gaze of the Processor inside the cockpit. He saw this as a show of the operator's indifference. He assumed that since he could see them, the Operator must have noticed them, too, and chosen to look away indifferently.

At that moment, Mele felt every hair on his body stand up in humiliation and rage.

I'm in so much grief. The princess I loved died. So why won't you be sad for me? Why won't you grieve, too? Get mad for me? Why don't you ever understand our pain, our sorrow, our agony?

We... You... You...!

“You’re strong, and yet you...”

You’re strong, unlike us. You can do everything, choose anything, and act on your choices. So why didn’t you protect us, help us, guide us? Why didn’t you save the princess?

You’re strong. If you’re strong enough to do this, then there’s no reason why you shouldn’t.

Having to make choices and think is such a difficult, complicated, scary thing. We can’t do it, so you should protect us, guide us, save us. Us, the princess, everything.

And yet you people abandoned the princess... You good-for-nothing, slothful, arrogant, cruel...

“You abandoned her... This is all your fault!”

A figure sprung out of the fallen red leaves, howling like a wounded animal. Kurena was the first to notice it.

—A self-propelled mine...?! Wait, no!

As she focused her gaze on it, a holo-window popped up and zoomed in, showing the figure was wearing the Federacy's metal-black uniform. They had the face of a young man, unlike a self-propelled mine, and as far as Shin's ability

could tell, the screams of the Legion were distant. So this boy wasn't a self-propelled mine.

He was human—a Federacy soldier. Kurena's eyes, which were accustomed to the battlefield, instantly recognized him as a soldier on their side. But then why was he showing so much hostility? So much...bloodlust? Why was he approaching the leviathan youngling, which was passing by in an attempt to avoid attack, with so much hostility and bloodlust?

And the assault rifle he was holding, with his finger on the trigger—

“...H-Hail Mary! Shin!” Kurena shouted, feeling every hair on her body stand on end. Kurena was too far from him; she wouldn't make it in time from where she was. “There's a survivor! He's trying to shoot the youngling!”

As Mele bolted out, bellowing, Otto and their friends were inclined to follow, set off by Mele's scream and anger. *That's right. It's all their fault. We have to take revenge for our friends. This is all their fault. So if we can just kill the leviathan, if we can just kill it, the other leviathan will kill everyone else. The terrible Legion, the Federacy, the officers, the nobles, and these guys who abandoned our friends.*

It will destroy everyone we hate and everything that wronged us.

Let them all be destroyed!

“It's all your fault!”

Was it Mele who shouted this? Was it Otto? One of their comrades, maybe? They couldn't tell one another apart anymore. They were all dyed in the same shade of indignation, fanning their mutual anger.

“It's all your fault! All this is because of you!”

“We can't do it, so it's not our fault! But you're just lazy, good-for-nothing, arrogant pricks who abandoned us! You walked all over us, over and over and over again!”

“It hurt, it was terrible, and you still did it! It was frustrating and miserable, and you never understood, you never even tried to understand! So this is your fault!”

“You people never tried to protect us, not even once!”

They screamed. They ran. They howled and shouted as one, making their indignation known. All of them, together.

They felt the elation of thinking the same thing, feeling the same emotions, shouting the same words, running in the same direction. The joy of a group

sharing the same feelings and choices and actions, of becoming a singular creature.

The peace of becoming one with everyone. It was oh so pleasant, oh so soothing.

Mele and the Hail Mary Regiment survivors he'd become one with were all intoxicated by this pleasure.

Freedom, justice, free will, individuality—none of them could match the euphoria of this feeling of oneness.

Aah... This is how I always wanted to be. This is what I always wanted to become. To reach this wonderful realm—this vast, grand, boundless flock.

And the symbol of this grandness, the incarnation of their greatness, this force of violence that would destroy everything was right in front of them. He need only hold up his gun to it.

In his sights was that beautiful, fleeting, glasswork mermaid. And they were going to break it—that stunning, rare, and valuable creature. People as weak and foolish and incompetent as them would break it.

All our strength, everyone together. How wonderful.

Serves you right.

But just then—

Undertaker was just descending from the dam's arch to the riverbed, spurring on the Fisara. It arrived with a heavy *thud*, using the brakes that allowed the Reginleif to go from its maximal combat speed to zero. In a stroke of luck, he landed in a position between the Hail Mary Regiment and the Leuca, shielding it.

A shower of crimson, red, and vermillion leaves rained soundlessly down on him. Morning had just dawned over the woods, and with the soft sunlight shining through the fallen leaves, Shin faced the last of the renegades.

Assault-rifle fire couldn't penetrate a Reginleif's armor, and if they had any explosives, it had to have been an amount small enough for them to hide on their person. Unless they attached them to the Reginleif itself, they wouldn't do any damage.

But they didn't stop running. And if they came any closer, Shin would have to shoot them.

Reginleifs weren't equipped with nonlethal armaments. They had 88 mm smoothbore guns for penetrating tank armor, high-frequency blades, and anti-

armor pile drivers, as well as 12.7 mm heavy machine guns, which were only effective against lightly armored units but were far too powerful to be used on humans.

And to begin with, the unit's ten tonnes of weight alone were a lethal weapon against human opponents. This made even the wire anchors, despite not being weapons, or a simple kick from the unit's legs fatal.

If they weren't going to stop, he'd have to kill them.

He placed his hands over the trigger. The system fired its laser sight, and the tank turret automatically quivered. The invisible heat of the laser and the muzzle of the imposing turret made the soldiers flinch. Shin prayed to himself, wishing this would make them stop in their tracks—but unfortunately, every ounce of their fear tipped over into rage with strange swiftness.

Their faces were different, and yet somehow, they all looked the same to him. They were different people, but for some reason, he couldn't tell their faces apart. Shin shuddered. He didn't know why, but he was scared from the bottom of his heart.

At the same time, he came to the realization that threats wouldn't stop them. He had to shoot.

Shin steeled himself, and he forced his stiff fingers to move.

He made to pull the trigger. And then—

—a second before he could do so, the armored infantry and scout unit hurried over and fired their guns without a second thought.

The armored infantrymen's 12.7 mm heavy assault rifles were just barely usable thanks to the support of the reinforced exoskeletons, as they were originally armaments meant to be boarded onto a vehicle or an aircraft. This wasn't the kind of firepower an infantryman could typically wield.

These heavy machine guns unleashed a full-auto barrage, accompanied by fire from anti-light-armor full-size 7.62 mm rifles, which tore into the soldiers from the flank. The young man leading the charge, as well as the soldiers following him, vanished from Shin's optical screen. Their faces, contorted with hellish fury, were instantly swept aside. Their gazes alone, full of hatred that billowed like fire and blood, were burned into Shin's eyes—but nothing else of them remained. They were blown away, torn apart, and disappeared.

Shin was dumbfounded for a moment. It was too sudden. Even to Shin's eyes, which were used to how abrupt and merciless death on the battlefield could be, this was an absolute display of death. Even hatred, hatred so intense that it gripped them until their last moments, was gone without a trace.

As he glanced about, stunned, Ishmael spoke, standing there as he shouldered his 7.62 mm assault rifle, which still steamed from the heat of its full-auto fire.

"I told you, Captain. The people you can't save aren't your responsibility."

"...Captain."

"And that's especially true of idiots who had nothing to do with you until today, caused everyone trouble because of their ignorant stupidity, and then had the gall to ask why you didn't save them. Just because they demand that you help them doesn't mean you have to do it. You're not some kind of saint, you know."

Seeing Frederica shudder next to Gadyuka's open canopy, Vika narrowed his eyes. This was a gesture meant to hide the way the pit of her stomach trembled. Based on the glow in her bloodred eyes, her ability was active, and what she saw went without saying.

"—I told you to abandon them, Mascot."

A powerless symbol like her ought to have abandoned those it couldn't save. Better than to let them get throttled by her self-righteous wishes, only to die. And there was no need to spare them sympathy or force herself to watch the death of such fools.

Frederica threw a sidelong glance at him.

"Nay. To begin with, you have no place ordering me about, Serpent of Shackles."

Frederica turned to face him and glared at the serpentine prince.

"Indeed, the only thing I would not betray is my own conscience. And my own conscience is also the only thing I can truly protect right now. True, as I am, I cannot protect or save anyone. But if I choose to abandon people, at that point, I would fail to protect even my own conscience. And in that case, right now..."

Her eyes, the color of burning flames, shone bright with the crimson of newly shed blood.

"...not looking away is what I must do. I shall fight this war by watching how people fall and how destruction comes, never looking away. So that one day, when I am strong enough to protect others like you and Shinei, I will not let

lives slip through my fingers. And so, you haven't the right to comment."

"Conscience, you say." Vika narrowed his eyes ever so slightly in thin, unpleasant dislike. "Harboring that feeling will only get in your way."

It was nothing but hollow restraint, one that only had idealistic beauty to it but lacked any power or reality.

"I care not," Frederica spat out, her crimson eyes burning bright. "You once told me. Even if you cannot become king, you can conduct yourself as a noble. That this is how you wish to be. That even without the title of king, you can hold on to your nobility. So yes—I shall take after that. I shall act and conduct myself not upon a crown granted to me by others, but as the master of my own fate."

Vika sensed something was off with what she had just said. *Master of my own fate*. That was no different from the Eighty-Six—that was fine. But...

...not upon *a crown granted to her by others*?

A moment later, Vika realized. Even the serpentine prince couldn't help but be shocked for a moment. This girl before him. She didn't draw on the blood of an Imperial noble...

Looking at him, Frederica spoke in a low voice.

"I see. Truly, surprise does not show in either your conduct or your expression. I should take after that, as well."

"You—"

"I thought you weren't interested in my affairs?" She cut him off.

"...Well, I suppose that's true, but..."



Sheltering a former empress who was nothing but a puppet ruler and had no land of her own was nothing but trouble with no benefit to be had. Even a large country like the United Kingdom didn't want to oppose the biggest superpower in the continent, and getting involved in the millennia-old rivalries of the old Imperial nobles seemed like a terribly unappealing idea.

However.

"Right now, I might not feel the same way anymore."

The Empire's bloodline of eagles, the ones capable of shutting down all Legion units—right now, this member of the United Kingdom royalty was looking at one possible key for ending the hardship all the human nations were facing.

Frederica didn't budge, though.

"Surely, the Idinarohk's most prized gem would know better than to act hastily before all the conditions are in place?"

Vika scoffed at her. At least she understood that much.

"Who else knows? Milizé...probably doesn't. Does Nouzen know?"

"...He does."

Vika considered slipping a caterpillar down Shin's back. This wasn't information Shin could recklessly spread around, and it wasn't his place to share other people's personal circumstances with others. His sincerity was praiseworthy in that regard, but...it still ticked Vika off.

"Then I just have to keep cooperating with them. It's true that I don't have many cards to play."

Having Frederica, who was capable of giving the order, wasn't enough. They also needed to find the location of the command base capable of transmitting the order and seize it. Now that he was trapped in the Federacy and unable to return to his homeland, with only one regiment under his command, Vika lacked the means to help find or seize that place. He had to cooperate with Shin, the Strike Package, and the Federacy army.

And also with Shin's legal guardian, the Federacy's interim president—Ernst.

Frederica nodded. House Adel-Adler's flame-colored eyes gazed into the house of unicorns' Imperial violet ones. Driven from their thrones though they might be, they would not discard the pride of royalty.

"Take care more than ever before," she said. "So that we may protect the others."

Like Ishmael had said, when the Fisara peered out from over the dam arch, the Leuca let out a high-pitched cry and swam back up the channel toward the Kadunan floodway. The Fisara followed it, leaving the dam, and traveled toward the floodway—its massive form passing over the wrecked dam gate and inadvertently completely breaking it this time—and at long last, the two leviathans united in the autumn colors of the Kadunan floodway.

After all the trouble it took to make it happen, Shin wasn't very touched by their reunion. The other Processors and armored infantry reacted just as tiredly, honestly wishing the two creatures would hurry up and go away in peace. Fido alone gently approached the two of them on the riverbank and gave a few friendly beeps. The leviathans didn't even acknowledge it.

“Pi...” It sounded slightly hurt.

Seeing Fido drop its shoulders (the back of its frame) dejectedly, Shin couldn't help but feel like this indifference stood to reason. If a connection had formed between these two different species over such a short period of time, it would have bruised the pride of Ishmael's Open Sea clans, who'd spent a millennium fighting those creatures.

And indeed, as Ishmael looked at Fido's saddened behavior with exasperated eyes, the Fisara seemed to notice him out of the corner of its vision and, this time, turned around. It lowered its long neck as low as it could and glared straight at Ishmael. It was terribly clear that if this hadn't been land—if this wasn't humankind's territory—it would have fired its heat ray without question.

“...What? Do you remember me, you bastard?”

Perhaps it recognized the distinctive tattoo of the Open Sea clans. His light hair, faded by sea and sun. The permanent salty fragrance that clung to him mixed with the scent of its nemesis.

And a smile spread over Ishmael's face, too, a savage and somehow intimate smirk.

“What? Don't stare at me like that, you bastard. I'll tear you a new one, kid.”

Shin couldn't tell if he was happy or angry at the creature. Maybe it was both. The Leuca kept traveling north up the Kadunan floodway, indifferent to them. The Fisara followed it, its long neck bent as it continued glaring at Ishmael.

Once the two leviathans passed through the floodway, the command officers all instantly shouted orders at the surrounding units, forbidding them from touching the creatures.

†

Ernst received word that the second northern front's deserters had been disposed of and the remaining nuclear fuel recovered. He exhaled in relief—the crisis in the second northern front had been averted.

Despite that, somewhere in his heart, Ernst felt a twinge of regret.

—Sir, you speak of protecting people's ideals, but you don't actually care one bit about that, do you?

“...True,” he whispered to himself in the empty office of the president’s residence. “I don’t care one bit about anything—after all, I have nothing left to fear for.”

He had nothing that was truly precious to him anymore. All the things he feared to lose, that he felt driven to protect, were already gone. Not even the ideals *she* believed in but which hadn’t come to pass—the way humanity should act.

But he kept protecting those ideals because they were what she had believed in. A world of kindness and justice, where no one had to be abandoned and everyone could be saved. And if this ideal was to be tarnished, then he wished, from the bottom of his heart, that everything would burn—people, countries, the whole world.

But even that didn’t matter to him anymore.

“Because she’s already gone.”

†

The 4th Armored Division retreated from the Hiyano River and regrouped with Rito’s unit, which was protecting their path back. Accordingly, the 3rd Armored Division, which had encroached into the territories to the far north, also began its retreat. Once the rear guard evacuated far enough, the Recannac dam’s charges were detonated.

With a rumble, the thin concrete dam arch collapsed, unleashing the blocked waters of the Recannac River to their original flow. After that, the adjacent Niioka dam and Niusei dam had their charges detonated once the squadrons passed by and the retreat of the units that kept control of the area was confirmed.

As those units retreated, like a thread being reeled back, the twenty-two dams heading up the Kadunan floodway were destroyed. Lastly, the Roginia dam,

which held up the water at the top of the Roginia River's stream, was blown up, and at the same time, the floodgates of the old Tataswa floodway and the new floodway were closed.

With this, all the waters of the Hiyano overflowed to the drenched riverbed of the Roginia defensive line, flooding the Womisam basin. The great Roginia River's mire, which impeded the progress of the Legion, was now restored before the second northern front for the first time in over a century.

With the youngling in tow, the Fisara passed through the river mouth located in what the humans called the seaport of Zinori to reach the northern seas. Hostile metallic presences watched it from afar, but since they did not attack, it paid them no heed. Its attention was fixed off the coast, where the rest of the leviathan's school was singing.

The youngling Leuca sank its body into the cold water, sucking the liquid between its long, trailing overcoat-like membrane and its armor scales before spraying it in a jet to swiftly approach the school. The Fisara followed it, sinking underwater and swimming back to the school, to its home in the familiar, frozen waters of the clear northern sea.

Within the depths of the lapis-lazuli waters, a memory crossed the Fisara's mind. It thought of the group of bipedal creatures it had seen in the pond where it collected the youngling. As they murdered each other, it had heard something unfamiliar, barely audible—the cry of an individual which the leviathan could pick up. What could it have been?



In one of the Federacy's many training bases, one silver-haired, silver-eyed First Lieutenant Henry Knot arrived to become a volunteer soldier. He was a former Republic soldier—in other words, a Republic citizen.

He was praised for his devoted service—quite unusual for a Republic soldier—and allowed to maintain his company-officer rank. When he was called into the first reserve, the other Federacy soldiers training with him kept him at a distance, but given what the Republic did to the Eighty-Six, it was only natural, so he didn't let it bother him too much.

People would talk behind his back sometimes, but he faced no harassment,

which gave him the impression the Federacy army was well-ordered and disciplined.

So when one of his colleagues beckoned him over to the phone booth in their common room, Henry simply pointed at himself, baffled. Soldiers were authorized to make private calls from the booth, but Henry never used it. When he'd volunteered to become a soldier, he'd bid his father a lengthy farewell, so Henry saw no need to talk to him after just a month.

But despite that, his colleague spoke clearly.

"Yes, First Lieutenant. First Lieutenant Henry Knot. There's a call for you from your brother."

"Huh?!"

When Henry hurried over, he saw the soldier's expression was different from usual. The man looked awkward, like he felt that he was doing something wrong to Henry.

"Is your brother an Eighty-Six?"

Henry twitched and stiffened where he stood. Was he being accused of abandoning his family? His stepmother, and his little brother. It was true—he did abandon Claude.

"...Yes."

"I see. That, hmm...must have been hard on you."

Those words weren't what he expected. Henry looked up at the tall soldier in surprise. He was a young reserve soldier, perhaps a year or two older than Henry.

"The internment camps must have started around the time you were seventeen, right? At that age, you think you can do anything, when there's actually so much you can't. So it...must have been hard."

"..."

"So don't avoid your kid brother because you can't look him in the eye. If he called you, it means he wants to talk. Don't take that chance away from him."

"...Thank you."

Indeed, Henry had once denied him that chance, so Claude must have been mad. And despite being angry with him, Claude was giving him another chance to talk. In that case...

"...Henry?"

"Claude?"

Claude's voice sounded like he was trying to gauge the distance between them, but back when he thought Henry was just his unit's Handler, he used to

speak to him in a very unreserved tone. The fact that he started acting like this once he learned he was speaking to his brother was a stark reminder of the time they spent apart and the break in their relationship.

—*Big Bro.*

Claude would probably never call him that ever again.

“I heard you’re almost done with your training phase, so...I figured I’d reach out before it ends...”

“Oh... Thanks.”

Once he was stationed on the front line, he probably wouldn’t be able to take phone calls as easily as he could now.

“So what are you up to?” Henry asked, trying to keep his voice calm.

The fact that Claude called him meant he was back at his home base.

“Mm... I’m at a moon viewing.”

“Moon viewing?”

“There’s a festival like that somewhere. Shin... Well, my operations commander did something like that two years ago in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, and he decided to hold one again. You put up weird grass decorations and eat this weird candy.”

Henry glanced out the window across the room from the booth and gazed at the moon. The same moon Claude was looking up at now.

“Really...? That sounds fun.”

Since it was apparently essential for a moon viewing, they pulled out long leaves from around the Rüstkammer base’s maneuvering grounds. Sitting in the dining hall, where many such leaves were tied together and hung up as decoration, Shin connected with Lena via the Para-RAID. She was still at the medical facility, but she was looking up at the moon, too.

They made something similar to mooncakes under Michihi’s instructions. Shin mentioned offering up dumplings, and she responded they were made by kneading flour and boiling it. The Orienta members also brought up something about steamed potatoes, but they couldn’t decide on whether that meant potatoes or sweet potatoes, so they made both.

They probably got some...if not all the traditions wrong, but they just winged it based on feeling.

Two years ago, in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, Kujo suggested they have a moon viewing and mentioned something about a rabbit on the moon. Remembering this, Raiden cut apples into rabbit shapes, which, for some reason, turned one of

the tables into an apple-rabbit-cutting class.

The supply team complained that just boiling potatoes wasn't enough, so they put butter on them and made them into tarts. Having received a butter-fried one, Shin stuck his fork into it, noticed it was cut into a crescent, and looked up at the moon, which was in the same shape in the sky.

What they were talking about, sadly, wasn't quite as poetic—the events of the upheaval in the second northern front. Not a fun topic, to be sure, but Lena wanted to hear about the contents of the operation. She was baffled by the recklessness of making nuclear weapons, grimaced upon hearing about the Hail Mary Regiment's rash actions, and became speechless when she heard they used a dirty bomb. When he told her renegades tried to get a leviathan involved in the battle, she held her head before finally managing to say this:

"Hmm... It sounds like you had a hard time of it..."

"The operation itself wasn't that bad."

Albeit, all the things surrounding the operation ended up being a huge mess. After biting down on a buttered potato and swallowing a piece of it, Shin carried on.

"There were some good things... We were able to confirm in this operation that the Tausendfüßler are configured to decontaminate areas on top of collecting downed units and shell fragments. The effects of the dirty bomb they detonated should be minimal."

"That's... Well, at least that's a relief."

"Yeah... And, hmm, there's something I realized."

"Hmm? What?"

"The ringleader of the Hail Mary Regiment—she was the one who triggered the incident, but when her troops' demands escalated, and when she tried to meet their expectations, the situation spiraled out of control."

Shin had heard Ninha's testimony. The ringleader was from a line of knights who served as a single city's governors, and the soldiers from that town saw her as their lord and princess. She herself probably took pride in being a worthy leader to her people, in being a just-hearted princess, and her attempts to conduct herself as such were what landed her in so terrible a situation.

"The people who serve under someone can't just obey. They have to support those above them. Because if they don't, those they serve under will be driven to strive further and further until they're crushed under the pressure. So it made me think if we..."

If we Eighty-Six, serving under our queen—

“...might be placing a burden on you, Lena.”

The dining-hall supervisor, having heard about the moon viewing, taught Lena how to make sweet potatoes. Those were circular like a full moon, in contrast to the moon she was looking up at now. While eating one as an after-dinner dessert with the rest of the recuperating soldiers, Lena was baffled by Shin’s words.

Shin, you, of all people, would say that? The eastern front’s headless reaper? You’re not just a king—you’re like a god of salvation.

“You have nothing to worry about. You don’t just follow me; you support me as well. You don’t simply expect things of me; you believe in me, too.”

Your Majesty. That title had respect and trust to it, but no worship or coercion.

“Besides, not having you rely on me at all hurts. You know that already. Or do you want me to start crying again?”

She felt Shin crack a sardonic smile, recalling their quarrel in the United Kingdom.

“...Yes, you’re right.”

“Right?” Lena said, unaware of the proud, fulfilled smile playing over her lips. “Don’t worry, you all support me plenty enough as it is. If anything, I’d prefer it if you acted more spoiled around me, Shin. Like earlier, when you had a severe ‘me deficiency.’”

“Oh. Can I take that as a verbal promise?” Shin replied jokingly.

He sounded like a mischievous child, as if asking Lena whether she was sure she wanted to make that promise.

But then he changed his tone and spoke earnestly and honestly, with a sincere if slightly impatient heat to his voice.

“I don’t have enough of you, Lena. I want to see you soon. To have you by my side.”

Lena giggled. She already had enough rest, having been given the time she needed to work through the feelings of emptiness and guilt that filled her mind. She was free from that inescapable maze of concern and anxiety. She had cleared enough space in her heart to want to talk to her boyfriend on the other side of the Resonance about her dreams for the future or her fun plans for the next day.



“Yes. I don’t have enough of you, either.”

When Anju spotted Claude a ways off, returning from his phone call, she abruptly asked Dustin:

“Are you calling your mother regularly? I’m sure she’s worried about you.”

“Well, she probably is, but...”

A boy his age didn’t feel comfortable having his mother fuss over him too much. Except...

“You said I’m allowed to cheat a little...and that saved us.”

If she hadn’t said that, Dustin’s mother—a woman who’d emigrated from the Empire and had no influence in the Republic—might not have evacuated in time...and might not have survived.

“No big deal.” Anju smiled, but then she looked away from Dustin thoughtfully. “Though...you could cheat a little when it comes to me, too.”

Dustin stared at her, puzzled, but her sky-colored eyes didn’t meet his.

“You’re too pure, Dustin, so you don’t like cheating. So I wish you’d cheat a little and tell yourself you’re doing it for me. Before something happens and you go past the point of no return, I want you to stop and come back.”

She lowered her wavering gaze, remembering someone who never came back. Someone precious she wished would return to her but never did. And Dustin never intended to let her get hurt like that again.

“...If it’ll keep you from hating me.”

He didn’t want to become a total coward, but if it would keep her from being hurt, he could try.

“And you too, Anju. You can cheat a little and say you’re doing it for my sake. You’re not allowed to give up on coming back, either.”

“Oh, I think I’m quite the cheat already, you know? I’m fawning on you because you said I can.”

“Fawning on me isn’t cheating.”

She flashed an impish smile and rested her head on his shoulder as he wrapped an arm around her. Her giggle tickled his ear, and hearing it for the first time in a month, Dustin smiled blissfully without even realizing it.

Frederica had decided—she would be her own sovereign, master of her own fate. And such a sovereign wasn’t allowed to look grim. If she was too occupied with

her own troubles, she wouldn't be able to save others.

And so—

“First, I must endeavor to resolve my own issues,” she whispered firmly.

“We kept you waiting, lads! A freshly baked pumpkin pie, piping hot and fresh out of the oven!”

“Mm-hmm, I have been kept waiting, indeed! I, too, want a piece!”

The supply squad captain, a first lieutenant, walked in with a large plate of pumpkin pie and was instantly swarmed by the Processors. Frederica gleefully charged into the group of hungry boys and girls for her piece of the pie.

When they'd parted ways, Lieutenant Colonel Mialona brought in all sorts of books about nuclear power and nuclear weapons, her deputy looking on at his commander with a strained smile.

“This is all way over my head.”

Shiden could understand the contents of the books, but she didn't see any beauty in it. Lieutenant Colonel Mialona had asked her to taste-test all sorts of subjects, but sadly, this one didn't suit Shiden's palate. However, she had the feeling that if she did discover something she'd have fun looking into, the lieutenant colonel would be just as pleased.

She'd placed the books in their study room in the base, which resulted in some of the others reading them and one or two of them reading everything before asking the teaching staff for more, so perhaps Lieutenant Colonel Mialona's efforts did bear fruit.

“Beauty, eh...?”

Shiden felt like maybe, just maybe, she did understand the lieutenant colonel's words. Looking up at the faint clouds that hid the moon, shining brighter than the other clouds around them, Shiden found herself reaching out to the sky.

As the prince of a large country, Vika handled most of his personal necessities on his own. And while Raiden knew that, he never would have expected him to know how to cut apple peels into uniform ribbons or how to carve apples into rabbits. Raiden thought this as he watched Vika carefully cut an apple into the shape of rabbit ears.

And despite many having something like it on the front lines, he didn't

expect the prince to carry his own multi-tool knife.

“Aren’t you going to make rabbit apples, too, Lerche?” Rito asked.

“Hmm, well, Sir Milan, I’m afraid fashioning fruit is too tall an order for me...”

“I didn’t make her to be that dexterous. Same as how you wouldn’t ask your Scavenger over there to peel apples.”

Fido, which had been gazing up at the moon elegantly outside, approached the open window. Michihi handed it a fruit knife in amused curiosity, but...it seemed even the otherwise talented Fido, which was good at towing Juggernauts and plowing snow, had tasks it couldn’t perform. It tried picking up the knife several times but kept dropping it.

Raiden looked on as Fido dropped its shoulders in disappointment and Lerche placed a sympathetic hand over its optical sensor.

“Vika, we get it, you know how to do it, so stop peeling already. No one’s going to eat all of those.”

Vika’s Imperial violet eyes turned to Raiden in surprise.

“What?” Raiden asked.

“Nothing. I did tell you to call me that, but...I just thought it was unusual coming from you.”

“Well, you know,” Raiden said as he peeled another apple. “I figured calling you ‘prince’ is kind of heavy.”

A prince was one charged with the responsibility to save everyone and was required to take responsibility for it if they couldn’t. It was an endlessly heavy burden that one had to be ready to shoulder if they were to take on the title.

Vika remembered what he told Frederica, and the words the Republic citizens and the Hail Mary Regiment survivors shouted. *Help us. Protect us. Save us.* They clung, made demands, and followed blindly—a flock of sheep, driving both themselves and the governor girl who led them off the edge of a cliff.

So being a king—not one’s own king, but the king of many, of countless sheep, who both followed and drove one on—meant...

“I’m not one of your subjects...so you don’t need people like me, people who don’t follow you, to call you prince, too,” said Raiden. “At least, that’s what I figured.”

Even if it was a nickname with no loyalty or worship attached to it.

“I never thought it was heavy...” Vika tilted his head.

One’s social station was something one was born into, and it was as much a natural part of a person as their limbs, eyes, and ears. No one felt that their limbs

were heavy, and in much the same way, Vika didn't think his royal station was a burden.

He didn't, and yet—

“...But yes,” Vika said with an amused smile. “You are not one of my subjects. And if you're not going to speak to me with respect either way, I would prefer it if you called me by my name.”

Everyone else present exchanged looks, and Kurena was the first to nod.

“Then we'll call you Vika from now on!”

“Yeah, thanks, Vika.”

“And honestly, you could be more laid-back with us, too, Vika. Call us by our names, for once.”

“Yes! Plus, *Vika* is kinda long, so how about we just call you *Vi*?!” Tohru raised his hand, getting carried away.

“Do you want to quite literally be placed on the chopping block, fool?”

“...Stop it, you seven-year-old. It was a joke.”

“Yes, I, too, was joking, Your Highness. I truly was, Sir Jabberwock, so please don't be so frightened.”

Upon visiting Zelene's crypt for the first time in a month, Yatrai raised an eyebrow.

“You're in quite the pitiful state, Zelene Birkenbaum.”

As a Legion, Zelene had mechanisms in place that forbade her from leaking intelligence regardless of her will. Both the Federacy military and Yatrai were aware of that. And they also knew that there was no way of confirming if she was only pretending to be limited by those restrictions.

And that was why Yatrai ordered the intelligence personnel to have her tell them everything. They asked her whatever she might want to say, and all the questions the Federacy wanted answers to.

If she said she couldn't answer a question, that, too, was a kind of information. It told them what the Legion were prevented from sharing, what the mechanical threat was trying to hide. All those things, when stacked together, served as hints.

Of course, the Legion were never meant to speak in human language, so doing it for too long strained her. And being subjected to questioning for days

was a great burden. Set inside her restraining container, Zelene was no longer capable of sarcasm.

<<What do you want?>> her electronic voice asked tiredly.

“Oh, I just came to give you a small reward. I can’t elaborate on the details, but we did discover evidence to support how rigid your prohibitions are. It was worth the effort of checking, because we’ve regained some speck of trust in you.”

The upheaval in the second northern front did allow them to formulate a hypothesis. The Legion didn’t attempt to recover the nuclear fuel. That meant that, if nothing else, the prohibition forbidding them from using nuclear weaponry was incredibly strict and firm.

This prohibition included dirty bombs. Perhaps the use of nuclear reactors and depleted uranium, as well as armor plates with depleted uranium included in them, were the sole exceptions. It was much like the funny story of how the restriction on their use of biological weaponry became so strict, they were no longer able to work alongside regular soldiers.

The Legion were made to replace rank-and-file soldiers, noncommissioned officers, or low-ranking officers on the battlefield. Such ordinary roles weren’t permitted tactical weaponry. In that case, perhaps, like nukes, the prohibition extended to the use of ballistic missiles, too.

“One more thing—and this is strictly out of curiosity. If you don’t want to answer this question, you don’t have to.”

He felt her gaze fix on him from the paper bag placed on top of her container, which had a face drawn on it. Yatrai spoke while gazing into the one cheap camera that allowed Zelene to peer into the world outside her container.

“Your ‘throne’ had a passage that leads into a lake of lava.”

In the depths of the Dragon Fang Mountain in the United Kingdom, at the throne of the Legion commander unit called the Merciless Queen, there was indeed a passage that led into a lake of lava. It was an unnatural place to have in a commander unit’s residence.

“You dug a path underground that didn’t serve as an escape tunnel. Did you do it to have a means of ending yourself? In case no one defeated the Phönix and came for you?”

In case humankind’s defeat was set in stone and they never gained the key to shut the Legion down. Yatrai, a member of a warrior bloodline that had defended the Empire for a thousand years, cocked his head ever so slightly at the undying ghost of another warrior house.

"It doesn't have to be now. But if you can no longer bear the shame of staying alive, we're willing to dispose of you—the last descendant of the Imperial warrior house of Birkenbaum."

This was a modest mercy he would extend her as a member of another waning warrior house, who had to feel the shame of clinging to life.

Zelene's response was firm.

<<No.>>

Yatrai raised his brow. It was the first time he heard Zelene's tone take on a human intonation. Seeing his reaction, Zelene carried on. Yes, she did consider death for the moment all hope was lost. Indeed, death was the proper end for a mechanical ghost like her. However—

<<No. I won't die. I cannot choose death yet. Because those boys—Shinei Nouzen and Viktor Idinarohk—have yet to give up.>>

Even now, they were still out there, fighting. So for as long as there was a chance any information she could give them would contribute to their operations, to their victory, she had a duty to watch their battles to their conclusion.

<<I cannot afford to die yet.>>

Though they were given permission to leave the base, they had to do so in civilian clothes and with the military police following them.

I guess I am a Republic soldier..., Annette thought.

As she walked through the streets of Sankt Jeder, she saw the news being broadcast on the street television.

"...They're reporting on it."

Information about the "wiretaps" had finally been disclosed to the press. The wiretaps were the source of the information leak to the Legion. Since the Legion could still be listening in on their transmissions, the army couldn't afford to

share that information soon after the arrest. It had now been quite a while since the roundup, and the exact dates of when it happened were cleverly left unmentioned, but there were no lies in the report.

The Republic used Eighty-Six children in an act that breached the Federacy's faith.

"Yeah, that explains it."

Annette felt hard gazes on her from passersby, probably because of the reporting. There were many Alba citizens in a multiethnic country like the Federacy, and when she was in civilian uniform, there was no immediate way of identifying Annette as a Republic soldier. This implied a general drop in the popularity of Alba across the country, not just Republic citizens.

She heard comments from the crowd like "Hey there, Weißhaare," a derogatory term for the silver-haired Alba. The military police moved in quickly to block out their looks and insults.

"We're sorry, Major. You're cooperating with us, but our people say things like that..."

"Is it just around town, or do Alba soldiers get looked at like this, too?"

A soldier who spent most of their time inside the base likely knew how Alba were seen there. The military police officer made a bitter expression.

"I'm ashamed to say that they do."

"Native Alba are treated this way, too, and volunteer soldiers from the Republic are seen as traitors..."

The news was full of debates that criticized the Republic, which only made the voices in the crowd all the more enraged. "This is why you can't trust those weißhaare," they said. "Cowardly Alba. We saved their lives, and this is how the traitors repay our kindness."

"This is why those poor Eighty-Six children took revenge on them like that."

Even comments like that went unsilenced. "The bastards in the Republic treated the children so awfully that they decided to collude with the Legion to take revenge on them"—so said one indignant voice in the crowd.

I agree, the Republic are bastards, but..., Annette thought with a sigh.

She had a strange yearning for another one of those paper cups of caramel coffee with a cute cat drawn on it.

"What, Theo, you one of those wiretaps, too? They put a quasi-nerve crystal in you, did they?" one colleague asked in a poor attempt at a joke.

"Not anymore, the Federacy took it out when they picked us up. Wanna see the scar?" Theo replied indifferently.

"Uh... Sorry. I didn't think they really put one in you..." said the colleague apologetically.

It wasn't funny, but it wasn't worth getting mad over, either. The colleague apologized profusely, but Theo shook his head, said it was fine, and then returned his ear to the mobile phone he'd been holding away from his mouth while conversing with the man.

During operational hours, using a cell phone for personal calls was frowned upon from an information-security perspective, but Theo was on break, and he was currently in an instruction unit's base. He did need to watch what he was saying, but he was allowed to make the call.

"...Mister?"

"Oh, sorry, ignore that... How are you doing, Miel? How's life over there treating you?"

He was speaking from Sankt Jeder to a boy who lived in a territory on the western frontier, one of the evacuation sites for Republic refugees—Miel Renard, the bereaved son of Theo's old captain.

That's right, *Renard*—"fox."

It was only now, years later, that Theo realized this was why the man had used a fox as his Personal Mark. Incidentally, the captain's name was *Sylvain*, so his name meant "forest fox." His son's name, *Miel*, stood for "honey"—"honey-colored fox." Apparently, their entire family had some kind of affinity for foxes.

"Some stuff happened in a city where all the important people live, but my town is fine. The facility manager and the other Federacy soldiers are all nice. Oh, and..."

"Mm?"

"The food's really good." Young Miel sighed profoundly. "Real meat and fish taste so good. And eggs and milk and jam and cakes..."

Theo couldn't help but smile. That was good to hear. "Once everything settles down, I'll take you fishing. And we can make cakes and jam, too."

"Yeah!" He could almost feel the boy nod excitedly and lean in over the phone.

But then Miel hushed his voice.

"Say, hmm... Is everything okay on your side, though, mister?"

"My side? Why?"

"There're more scary people around there, right? What do they call them...? They have those really long names."

What was he talking about?

"When the Republic lost in the last large-scale offensive, they said it was all your...all the Eighty-Six's fault. They gathered around and protested that you didn't fight hard enough."

"...Oh."

He meant the Bleachers. Theo didn't remember their full name, either, but since their slogan was *reclaiming the pure white*, Shin took that and started calling them "bleachers," which caught on among the rest of the group.

"Those guys are only...wherever the Republic people are, so they're not in the capital."

"Oh, really?"

"But what do you mean 'more' scary people?"

Theo heard that after the second large-scale offensive, the Bleachers lost the civilians' support and had a stark drop in their political power.

"Well, the important people who'd say stuff like that didn't come back, but there's more people bad-mouthing you. They say the Republic wouldn't have fallen if the Eighty-Six fought right, and they should be fighting instead of them now."

The leaders who failed to reclaim the Eighty-Six and didn't save the Republic had all been driven out for their incompetency, but the people had still inherited their rhetoric of pinning the blame of defeat and military duty onto the Eighty-Six. With no one to lead or control them, these ideas continued to swell up on their own among the people.

"After we came to the Federacy, a lot of people had to go join the army. And now their families and the people who didn't want to enlist are unhappy with that... They're rioting all over the place every day."

The Republic citizens who'd fled to the Federacy were scattered around several evacuated towns in the western-frontier production territory of Monitozoto, with their government functions being stationed in the wintry health resort of Laka Mifaka.

A large hotel in the city center was devoted to the government building, while the remaining hotels and the villas in its suburbs were allotted to Celena high officials and former nobles. Despite them being refugees who'd evacuated here, they lived in high-class residences. However, since the people related to the wiretaps were arrested, a strange tension hung over the area. The Federacy didn't arrest just the low-ranking military officials operating the wiretaps, but also the high officials who'd given them the order to do so, as well. Whenever someone else was discovered to be related to the matter, the Federacy military

police would show up to arrest them, too, and so the upper classes weren't able to enjoy their luxurious lives.

The leader of the Bleachers, Primevére, was one person who was very much on tenterhooks over the possibility of the military police coming for her. She wasn't involved with the wiretaps, but the lieutenant colonel who was arrested was a comrade of hers. Since she'd lost much of her influence, she was given a relatively small villa, and eventually, the military police would likely come to question her, too.

“...What?”

But that day, Primevére went pale for a reason entirely unrelated to the military police. The Federacy's news programs reached Laka Mifaka as well. One of her colleagues saw the program and called her attention to it—a mugshot of an escaped Eighty-Six girl.

“The Actaeon survived...and escaped...?”

Among the Federacy army, many soldiers only received minimal education and didn't have detailed information about the nature of nuclear weapons. The vague news of the commotion in the second northern front's 37th Armored Division was received by the rest of the northern front and the other fronts as well with a degree of misunderstanding.

A dangerous nuclear weapon nearly destroyed the second northern front, and it was the Strike Package that stopped it from happening. Or the Fleet Countries' people summoned a monster called a leviathan that protected the second northern front from the nuclear weapon. Or nuclear weapons could destroy the Legion, but traitors tried to hide it. Or the Federacy was meant to win using this powerful superweapon called a nuke, but the leviathans got in the way. Or the traitors tried to cooperate with the Legion with the nuclear weapons, only to be stopped by the Strike Package.

Their stories didn't make it clear what the Strike Package even was anymore, but they did know it was an elite unit of amazing Eighty-Six heroes. And so the soldiers continued embellishing and exaggerating their stories until what they said didn't resemble the truth at all.

“—If they're supposed to be heroes.”

Looking at the mire that spread on the other side of the Reginia line's

currents, Vyov Katou, an armored infantryman, whispered in shocked amazement. Despite having fallen back, the second northern front's battlefield was still within the confines of the combat territories. Though many of its soldiers and field officers were former citizens of those territories, they weren't from here specifically. Even so, the outcome the Strike Package brought to this place came as a terrible shock for the soldiers.

There was no flour to be grown in this sea of mud. No sheep or cows or pigs to herd here.

Many of the territories' people were farmers. To them, the sight of the water and mud destroying this agricultural land and bringing it to a state that would take a long time to repair struck them as terribly cruel.

Vyov gritted his teeth. This wasn't a solution. This wasn't a success, or a victory. This wasn't the future or salvation he was looking forward to!

"What the hell is the Strike Package doing...?"

They were heroes. Elites. Weren't they supposed to save Vyov and the second northern front?!

"But you didn't do anything! Aren't heroes supposed to save everyone?! You good-for-nothings!"

It was sudden.

The faces of the boys who died before his eyes, young men just slightly older than him, their enraged expressions, and the sound of shouting wafted up in his mind like soap bubbles. It made Shin's breath catch in his throat.

The memory resurfaced, still fresh in his mind. An outrageous and yet terribly heartfelt shout.

It was the memory of the moment when those young men were torn to bits by gunfire.

They all had the same faces. Even though they all should have looked different from one another, when they completely discarded their individuality and moved in perfect tandem, when they spoke the same words, had the same thoughts, and were dyed in the same emotions—their faces all became the same to him.

It was a terrifying moment. People who couldn't become masters of their own fate, people who harbored no fear whatsoever. Even people as powerless as that could still blame others.

I can't. I won't decide. They would say that and still try to place blame. They

could still step over someone else.

They were different from the Eighty-Six who'd been made into Shepherds. People who, even through hatred, could not achieve anything. And for some reason, it terrified Shin.

Sensing Shin sink into thought, Lena blinked once.

"Shin? Is something wrong?"

"Huh?"

"Something upset you just now."

"Oh..." After a moment's thought, Shin shook his head. **"No, don't worry about it. I don't quite understand it yet myself."**

"Well, if you say so..."

What's wrong? As that thought lingered in her mind, Lena returned to the topic at hand. She was curious about that anxious, almost fearful silence, but if Shin himself didn't fully understand it, there wasn't much point in pressing him on it. She did know that, as he was now, Shin wouldn't simply look away from a problem or try to bottle it up and take it solely upon himself.

"Halloween. I'm disappointed I can't be there this year, but next year, I'll definitely participate. And I want you to participate with me."

"Well...I don't mind, but this year, it's mostly people wearing sheets to play around as ghosts, so a lot of people want to go all out next year."

In place of a farewell party, the second northern front threw a slightly delayed Halloween party, but since it was difficult for the supply line to provide an entire brigade's worth of costumes given the war situation, everyone had to improvise using their personal clothes and whatever materials they had handy. For the most part, that meant sheet ghosts, drawing stitch marks on their faces, using handkerchiefs to make werewolf ears, or putting on thick makeup to look like witches.

Lena paused to think. Sheet ghosts were easy enough to make, but they couldn't very well cut holes in the sheets.

"Could they see what was in front of them with those sheets on?"

"Apparently not. Most of them decided to change classes to witches, werewolves, or monsters."

One example that stood out for how simple it was: A few of the Orienta members, Michihi included, put paper talismans on their foreheads to pass off as

Far Eastern ghosts—a pretty successful idea. Marcel also got a lot of credit for writing the word *ghost* on his forehead and walking around with it with a straight face.

“What did you dress up as, Shin?”

“...I put an eyepatch over one of my eyes, and they had me hold a mop, saying it was a spear.”

Like a chief deity and god of death from a certain mythology, apparently.

“That’s cool!”

“Rito, who came up with it, laughed, and Raiden, Anju, and Kurena all snickered at me, too... Rito had a pumpkin drawn on his face, and Raiden wore grease camouflage paint to look like a zombie. Anju used blue makeup to look like a snow queen, and Kurena put on red lipstick to look like a vampire princess. It felt unfair that they laughed at me.”

Shin grumbled tiredly. Apparently, he didn’t appreciate it.

“Yes, but I can understand wanting to take that chance to be cute.”

“What would you wear, Lena? Like, for next year.”

Lena paused and considered this. Being a sheet ghost didn’t seem too appealing.

“...How about that magical girl Frederica likes?”

“Does that count? That’s not really a monster, it’s just a costume.”

“I think it counts as a witch.”

“Isn’t it more of a fairy...?”

Lena thought it didn’t really matter. More crucially—

“How about you dress up as a werewolf next year? With well-made ears, not handkerchiefs.”

“Shouldn’t that be Raiden? He’s the one piloting Wehrwolf.”

“But I want to see you with puppy ears, so I can rub your ears. And a tail, too!”

She then concluded that black cat ears with a tail like TP’s would work as well, and if Raiden being a werewolf was decided, they could put fox ears and a tail on Theo. That way, she’d be able to pat everyone.

Lena’s excited suggestion, however, only resulted in a very disgruntled voice from Shin.

“Ugh...”

Hearing Shin heave an exasperated groan, unlike anything she’d ever heard him make in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, Lena burst into laughter.

EPILOGUE

WELCOME TO MARY JANE'S NIGHTMARE, BELOVED DEER HUNTER

Based on the information gleamed from listening in on the Federacy's surviving forces, intelligence indicated that the Strike Package was once again stationed in the western front. But instead, they appeared far away in the second northern front, which alerted No Face to the fact that they'd been fed false information. He didn't know when the Federacy had seized the Republic targets they'd been listening in on and replaced them. He had to praise the enemy's graceful handling of the situation.

However.

...That will only cause a new disturbance for the Federacy, No Face thought coldly.

The communications network hadn't simply been crushed; it'd been taken over by the Federacy. And in that case, the Federacy recognized the Republic's betrayal. And that, on its own, would prove a source of trouble. Since the Legion lacked life and emotions, they never tired, felt hatred, or experienced fear. Not of battle, death, or anything.

But that didn't hold true for humans and their uncontrollable emotions.



Citri's boots and body were so dirty because apparently, she'd mostly walked all the way to the capital from her house in the territories. Despite having gotten a sizable allowance from her stepfather and there being long-distance buses and trains to the capital, she'd gone on foot, except for when she snuck onto a freight train to leave her town.

She couldn't use public transportation. In fact, she actively avoided coming anywhere near it whenever possible. She tried to stay away from any place where people gathered.

Yuuto asked her why.

He'd turned his back on his duty as a soldier by not reporting her to the Federacy military. But there was no way he could report *this*. He knew informing the military about her was the right thing to do, but if he did, this girl would be captured by the Federacy military and likely never see the light of day again.

She didn't have much time, and so she steeled her resolve and turned to her Eighty-Six brethren. Even if they had never fought together, she knew they would be hard-pressed not to sympathize with her, and if forced to choose between her and the Federacy, they would betray the military in favor of her, even if they didn't feel comfortable doing so.

And they would escort her on her and her comrades' journey.

"Are you sure, Yuuto? Us Actaeon, we—"

"Yeah. You're trying to avoid people as much as possible. But that means you'll need someone to procure food for you until you leave the Federacy. And then you need someone to guide you through the Legion territories."

He only told Amari the details. She wanted to come along, but he was able to talk her out of it. They needed someone to report to the Federacy military. This was the minimal bit of respect and gratitude they owed the Federacy army after everything, so he had her report them around the time they left Sankt Jeder.

He snuck out of the hospital wing under the guise of going out on a walk, bought a thick coat and shoes suited for long treks, as well as the minimum necessities they'd need, and made his way to where Citri and her comrades were hiding. His military coat was warm, but too conspicuous. He couldn't use the credit card he'd been provided upon enlisting after this shopping trip, since it was traceable. But he did have plenty of cash on hand, in addition to what Amari had given him.

He was used to camping out during winter and long treks on foot from his time in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. As Citri walked alongside him, she huddled her shoulders, trying to make herself seem as small and inconspicuous as possible.

“I’m sorry. For getting you involved,” she said.

“Don’t worry about it... I’ve heard people make the same wish many times before, but I never had a chance to grant it.”

He heard it many times back when he was trapped in the Eighty-Sixth Sector with countless others. In that hellish battlefield, where everyone was fated to die after five years but ended up dead before those five years had even elapsed.

What so many wished for on death’s door. The modest wish so many made, which always went ungranted.

Yuuto thought back to that wish. The wish Citri and the other fawns—Actaeon—made.

I want you to show us how to get home. To the Republic—to the town we were born in.

And he thought back to the other thing Citri said—the name she’d asked him about.

Also, I’m not sure if you’d know him, but...among the survivors from the Republic...

...have you heard of a man called Dustin Jaeger?

AFTERWORD

Thank you as always for your support, everyone, and hello, this is Asato Asato.

I'm grateful for your patience! And I'm proud to deliver *86—Eighty-Six, Vol. 12: Holy Blue Bullet!*

After Volume 11, my editors, Kiyose and Tsuchiya, had to resign. In the five years since *86*'s first volume, they taught me a great deal. I hope I can make a truly great work, one that you'll regret leaving behind, one you wish you could have worked on with me. Just watch me pull it off!

Thank you so much for all your help thus far.

Some commentary, as always.

- Hail Mary

It refers to an all-or-nothing long pass in American football. American football is cool; everyone should watch it.

- Return of the leviathans

I know I wrote that they wouldn't appear again, but the leviathans found some way to sneak back into the story. Actually, when I finished Volume 8, Tsuchiya told me that I-IV read the afterword and was disappointed when you said they wouldn't appear again. Well, here they are one more time! I added them to Volume 12's plot with that kind of lighthearted intention (which resulted in many headaches when I actually had to write down the manuscript).

I touched more on their background this time, but I don't think I'll write about them again. For real, this time.

I mean, it would end up changing the story into something else entirely.

Lastly, some thanks.

To my editor, Tabata. The first draft ended up being the volume with the largest number of pages to date. The days we spent stressing and fretting over this certainly aren't pleasant to think back on. (Sorry!) Looking at it now makes me shudder—Chapter 2 ended up being twice as many pages as originally planned...

To my new editor starting from this volume, Nishimura. I'm sorry I had to throw you right into a *How many pages can we cut?* contest right off the bat... but I'm sure I'll absolutely make you scream next time.

To Shirabii. The Halloween illustration you drew of Shin, Raiden, and Theo was so lovely that I ended up including Halloween in the main story!

To I-IV. As requested, a new leviathan (this time, a three-meter-tall mermaid-style one) is served in Volume 12. I'm sure you'll make it into fine sashimi.

To Yoshihara and Yamasaki. Thank you for the manga version. Please take care.

To Somemiya. Whenever I look at the cover of the anime extra story, *Magical Girl Regina ★ Lena*, it always makes me smile fondly. Especially when I think of Rei's pearly whites and Shin's dejected expression...!

To Shinjou. Thank you for seeing *Fragmental Neoteny* to its conclusion. I was happy to see Isuka's extra chapter!

To Director Ishii. Thank you for the anime. Having you direct the anime adaptation was a truly wonderful experience. Also, I based a city on your name. Thank you for allowing me to do so, although it was a long time ago.

And as always, a huge thank-you to all the readers who have stayed with the series thus far. I've already decided on Volume 13's title—and I decided on Dustin's name for this purpose. It's finally time for his story. So please look forward to Vol. 13: *Deer Hunter!*

Oh, also, I've said in the past that 86 will end on Volume 13, but I'm sorry! It's not over yet! We're gonna keep going.

In any case, I hope that for even a short moment, I could take you to a battlefield showered with autumn leaves, to a battle over the beautiful, fearsome blue.

Music playing while writing this afterword:
“Kamigami no Uta” by Himekami

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86—EIGHTY-SIX

Vol. 12

ASATO ASATO

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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.

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