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Author **Ryuu Nakajima**

Illust. **Nokito**

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Reincarnator Executioner

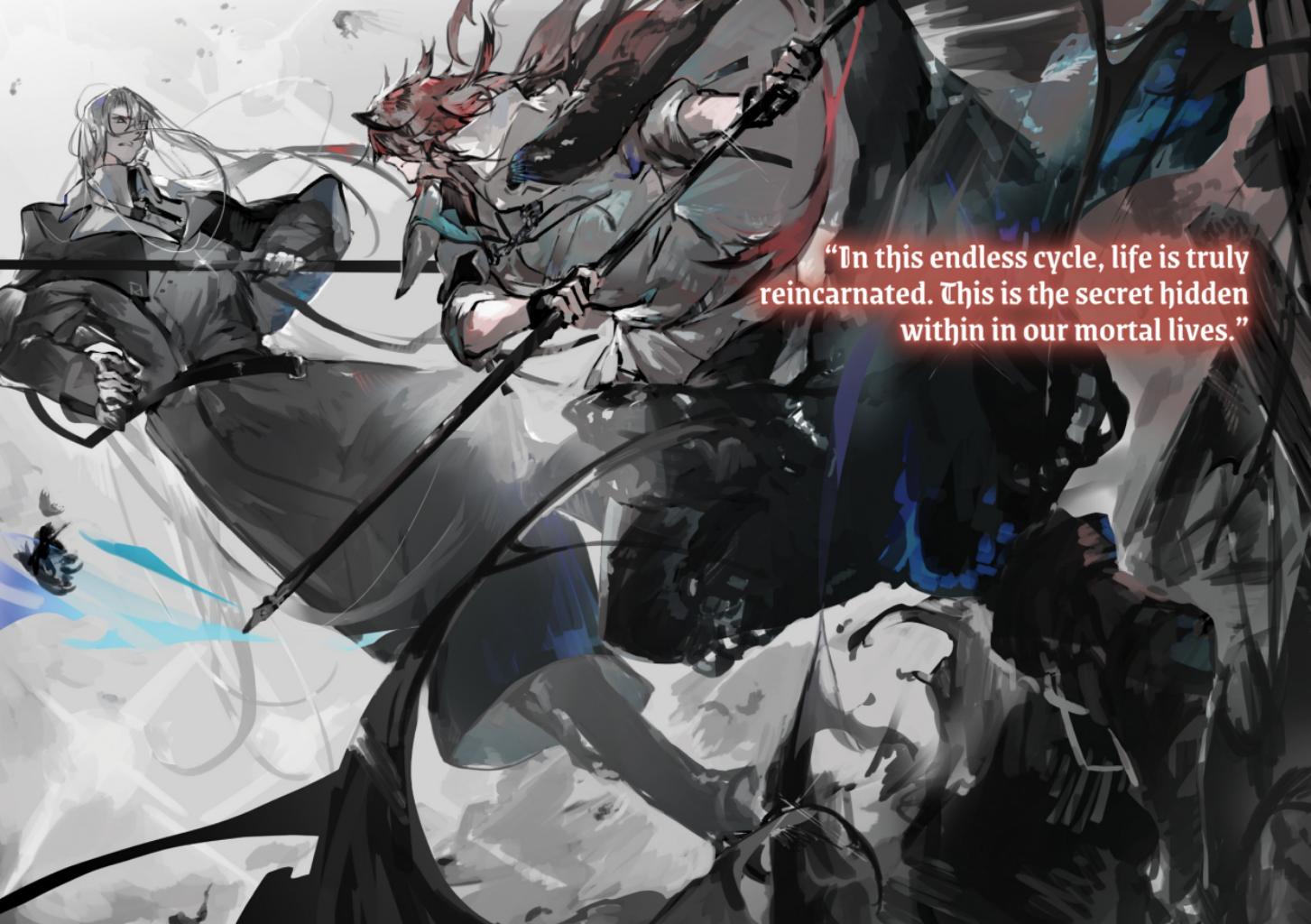
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"In this endless cycle, life is truly
reincarnated. This is the secret hidden
within in our mortal lives."

CHARACTERS

Dill Steel-Link

The protagonist. His true identity is Aegisthus, hero of the Holy War. He fights to take back the body of his daughter, stolen by the Reincarnators.

Sid Faron

A boy who calls Dill "Master." After obtaining the powers of a young Reincarnator girl, Rei, he emulates Dill's appearance. In this form, he introduces himself as "Orestes."

Cinulia Steel-Link

Dill's wife. Attacked by Reincarnators, she tried to protect Sid and Nue, but...

Dill's adopted daughter. Descended from the ancient gods. When her power runs out of control, she transforms into a Titan.

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Halberd

Dill's boss. A giant man of preternatural strength. Although he values Dill, he looks unfavorably on Nue.

Rick Wake

Dill's comrade-in-arms and friend. Wields a crossbow. A bard.

Mace

Dill's comrade-in-arms. Wields an iron club. A courteous battle-priest.

Whitehead

Dills comrade-in-arms. A plain-speaking lieutenant. Has taken a liking to Sid.

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Hero

A Manager-class Reincarnator. Goes by the name "Eugene." He was defeated by Dill and Sid, but is resurrected in the body of the hero Prodotis.

Shiden

The self-styled "strongest Reincarnator." General Manager. Controls lightning.

Repeater

A Chief-class Reincarnator. Controls flames, and is an excellent martial artist. Has a history with Dill and Sid.

Toiler

A Manager-class Reincarnator. Controls invisible hands of psychokinesis. Defeated by Dill in battle.

A hero of Redguard, who actually existed five hundred years ago. King of the ancient kingdom of Krios. His many legends have been passed down through epic poems and tragedies.

Prodotis

Re:RE

Reincarnator Executioner

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Long ago, in the age when the last light of gods and heroes shone, the king of Krios, Prodoris, set out with seven heroes to wage war against the holy city of Vulcan. Prodoris fell to his friend's treachery. In a one-on-one battle between champions meant to represent the warring armies, a stone thrown by an unnamed member of the crowd ended the hero's life.

The seven generals were also slain, sent into the sky to become stars after their death. Kranos of the shining helm. Nefritis, killer of beasts. Achtida with her arrows of light. Falaina, the white whale. Itimenos the indomitable. Papus the wise. Diros of the swift arrow. To this day, the stars of the seven generals still shine in the sky.

Time has passed since the Silver Age. Now, following the Age of Iron is the age of the dead who open their graves. Redguard is now ruled by the Reincarnators, who boast that they have overcome even death.

The city of Vulcan, once besieged by heroes, is now threatened again—this time at the hands of the Reincarnators.

CHAPTER 1 — METAMORPHOSES

Let us step back in time from the moment when Dill Steel-Link and Sid Faron vanquished Hero of the Reincarnators. In Vulcan of the Eleven Cities, we find ourselves in an unnamed alley, which the residents have all deserted to attend a festival. The Reincarnator girl who would later give her name as “Rei” now announces her departure.

“Cirulia. Nue. Thank you. And...sorry.”

“Wait—” A woman with milky-white hair who lay sprawled on the ground called out to stop her, but the one she sought had already vanished. It was not that she had run off quickly—she had literally vanished. She had used one of the powers possessed by Reincarnators, known as Skills. The person who should have been the young boy Sid Faron had become a Reincarnator girl and disappeared.

“Don’t let her escape! We’re going after her!” The ones hollering at each other who left in pursuit were also Reincarnators. They gave Cirulia a glance as she hunched over on the ground, but ultimately disregarded her as they ran off.

Cirulia Steel-Link, who was left all alone, tore at her short, milky-white hair and shouted, “Damn it!” Paying no attention to the manicure she had painstakingly applied for the day’s event, she scratched away at the pavement. Her light, tasteful makeup was ruined by her teary eyes and runny nose. And on top of that, the high-heeled sandals she’d worn to make her legs look long and slender had been the cause of her ankle injury. “Damn it, damn it! I’m sorry, Sid. I couldn’t protect you. I’m so sorry. Not again...”

Iris. After mumbling that name, Cirulia finally huddled down on the ground again. Close by, she heard the sound of an anguished young girl wheezing, and the sour smell of vomit hit her nose.

“Of course—Nue. Wait, I’m coming! I’ll be right there... Don’t worry!” Stirred by a sense of duty, Cirulia rose to her feet, but limping along with her injured ankle irritated her. The distant sound of revelry from the festival was disagreeable too, sounding almost like jeering. Today was a joyous day for Vulcan of the Eleven Cities—the day of the City Deity Festival. The black-haired girl, who was still retching up vomit tinged with blood, had performed

onstage only just a short while earlier.

With the appearance of the Reincarnators, everything had been ruined. Upon discovering the body of his long-lost friend, Cirulia's husband had disappeared in pursuit, and another Reincarnator had appeared before Cirulia once she was left on her own. This Reincarnator visited brutality upon her and the children, beating them to the ground... Why had things turned out this way?

After crawling some distance, Cirulia finally made it to the girl, knelt down in the pool of vomit, and started to rub her back. "Oh, Nue. You poor thing. That must have hurt. You must have been scared. I'm sorry I couldn't do anything... You did your best. Sorry...I'm so sorry. Ahh, damn it, damn it, damn it..."

The girl's name was Nue Kirisaki, and she was not related to Cirulia by blood. Cirulia's husband, Dill, had found her as an orphan in the aftermath of the conflict known as the Holy War. Nue had become very attached to Cirulia, who now thought of Nue fondly. This was all in spite of the fact that the girl harbored an extremely troublesome secret.

Splat. Squelch. Despite Cirulia's efforts in tending to the girl, Nue continued to vomit horribly. From somewhere beneath her, there came a wet squelching sound. Cirulia looked down, and her gaze met that of a large eyeball with no eyelids.

"Geh geh geh. Geh hah." The eyeball belonged to a lump of flesh with haphazardly placed fingers, hair, and lips. The surface of the lump was smooth and pink in color, and the eyes and fingers attached to it moved busily, but without purpose. The color of its hair and eyes both matched Nue's.

"Don't worry. I'll squash it right away."

"Shall I tell you the secrets of the world?" Thus spoke the lump of flesh. Its voice was also the same as Nue's.

"There's no such thing...sorry." The sole of Cirulia's sandal came down on the thing as it flopped around wetly like a fish, crushing it.

"What is this?" Several newly arrived Reincarnators regarded the scene before them. Called here by the Reincarnator known as Repeater, they all hesitated, unable to understand what was happening.

"This child is not a monster." Cirulia forced herself up again, despite her injured foot. Her eyes shone with a desperate, reckless resolve.

Suddenly, a strange odor stung Cirulia's nose. "Indeed. This girl is no mere monster. She belongs to a prouder race than that," a man's voice interjected.

And then...something happened. First, a Reincarnator with a goggle set over one eye died. Then the Reincarnator next to him died, then a Reincarnator who

tried to aim his firearm.

Within moments, they were all dead.

The three men fell, almost as if they were drawn into the darkness at their feet. Then, there was a cracking sound, like raw wood splitting, and a beastly stench. The darkness there was so deep it was difficult to see what was happening.

“Who are you?” Cirulia didn’t know the owner of the voice she had just heard. As far as she knew, it didn’t belong to any of her husband’s fellow soldiers. Her body instinctively stiffened in fear.

Something flashed in the darkness—a pair of red eyes. Nue, who was completely emaciated at this point, looked up as if drawn in by the sight of them.

“My name is Lycaon.” With a sound like leaves rustling in the wind, the darkness dissipated. In its place stood a man with black hair and red eyes. He wore a fur cloak around his shoulders. Nue knew this man. “As a general in the alliance defeated by the Terean Empire five years ago...and as the current leader of the alliance of all Titans...Nue Kirasaki, Chimera of this generation—I have come to escort you home.”

Five years earlier, in a camp in the Holy Land where stone towers stood in rows, Nue hid in the shadows and eavesdropped.

“So you sent that child home to the south... It’ll be lonely without him.”

“That fool of a son would have been no help in battle—this won’t influence the tide of war. I must say, though, that the commotion did cheer me up from time to time. He was quite attached to you too.”

“Yes, and to our daughter.” One of the two people who were speaking, the woman with red eyes, stole a glance over her shoulder in Nue’s direction. Nue held her breath and lay low. She was good at concealing her presence—she could even be described as a natural, on par with the beasts. However, the two adults talking were even more skilled.

“Certainly. I, too, miss being able to hear the two children making their silly racket together. Let’s do our best to keep things lively with the one who is left.”

The man’s voice was not disparaging. He spoke loudly, seemingly intending Nue to hear it from the very beginning. Nue knew this, and it took all her effort to hold back her laughter as she lay in the shadows. Her head was filled with questions—when to reveal herself and how to make the grown-ups laugh. In

spite of that...

“The problem is the state of the war. The army in Zephyros is reluctant to bolster its numbers, and Notos has long since reached its limit. Lack of faith in the west will deal the fatal blow. It won’t be long before they cease sending support to the front line entirely.”

Nue was on the verge of leaping out into her mother’s arms, but thought better of it.

“It’s so foolish. The Tereans, their eyes clouded by greed, have overextended themselves. If we can just hold out here, we can push back the battlefield. How incorrigible these people are, to not understand that!”

“...In the south and the west, the people need to prepare for the dry season.”

“The same thing is true for the Titan villages! Ultimately, these people think they can survive by using us ancients as a shield.”

This was no longer an atmosphere in which Nue could come out to seek affection. Her expression clouded as she stayed hidden in the shadows.

“Chimera, why don’t you evacuate your daughter? If the battlefield recedes any further, a decisive conflict will eventually come to this haven. It’s about time you faced facts. Just as Lyca remains in reserve for me, if you die there will be no one besides your daughter who can take your place. You can’t continue to keep her just to satisfy your own personal feelings. Or, if you like, we could have the girl fight instead to give her a taste of blood?”

After this, a few further exchanges followed, and the man left in indignation. Nue was hiding directly in his path, and the man stopped in his tracks. His eyes met Nue’s—the same red eyes that she possessed.

“Uncle Dog...”

“My name is Lycaon. Little Chimera, don’t become a coward like your mother. We are Titans. We are warriors who do not mind becoming monsters to protect our brethren.”

Not long after leaving those words behind, Lycaon himself betrayed them. On the final day of the Holy War, upon seeing his mother stand side by side with a rusty-haired mercenary in order to stop a rampaging god, Lycaon abruptly abandoned her.

Five years had passed since then. As the chief of the Satyrs, one of the Titan clans, Lycaon once again stood before Nue Kirisaki.

“Why have you come here...after all this time?” Nue said. Cirulia, standing between the two of them, was shocked by Nue’s bluntness.

“Don’t make me repeat myself. I’m here to escort you home. Come with me.”

“No.”

“Be reasonable. The Reincarnators will soon begin their invasion in earnest, and the city of Vulcan will fall. You need to escape before that happens.”

Vulcan will fall? This utterance, which could not be ignored, returned Cirulia to her senses. “I-I beg your pardon! Why would you say such a thing? To begin with, Nue is my daughter now. Don’t come in here talking as if you own the place—eek!”

The darkness stirred. The black fur cloak Lycaon wore writhed independently from the wind in the night.

“A proud princess of the Titans is a child in the house of a Terean, you say?” Lycaon took a step forward. A strong smell of blood floated in the air around him. “You take your insults too far, woman of Terea!”

It was Nue who stopped Lycaon as he took another step forward and reached out, his hand curled into a hooked claw, to grasp Cirulia.

“Lycaon. Go home.”

“You persist in this nonsense, Chimera?!”

“My name is Nue Kirisaki.” Nue wouldn’t budge. “My mother was Matsuri Kirisaki. I don’t know anyone called Chimera. Dill and Cirulia are my family now. Go home. I don’t need you.”

“You refuse my help?” Two pairs of red eyes glared at each other. Eventually Lycaon seemed to think of something. “You had better not regret this decision.”

The man of the beast tribe crouched down, then vanished in an incredible display of instantaneous power. Cirulia was shocked by the blast of wind that accompanied his withdrawal, closing her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again, she saw a Reincarnator approaching from where Lycaon had just been standing.

“I heard something strange was happening, so I came straight here...but what is this?” The Reincarnator looked at the lump of flesh at his feet, then at the shredded corpses of the other Reincarnators. “...Did you do this?” This Reincarnator walked with an air of majesty, an impression that was only enhanced by the long military coat he wore open at the front. The lining of his coat appeared, impossibly, to contain the night sky. Around the edge of the coat was a rainbow glow, suggesting the activation of his Skill.

The lining of the coat was covered entirely with the deepest blackness through which no light could pass, but from inside, countless points of light, big and small, shone like a miniature galaxy.

The Reincarnator plunged his hand into the void within his coat, retrieving a long baton and a shield. Upon his arm were two bands, marking him as one of only six high-ranking members within the Reincarnators' Project—a Manager.

"I don't know how you did this, but it looks like I shouldn't underestimate you. I will enlighten you."

Nue started to advance. When Cirulia tried to hold her back, she turned, narrowed her red eyes, and smiled. "Please, stay there and watch. I'll do my very best! But while you watch, I'd really like you to stay a little bit farther away."

"Nue, don't! You..."

The girl shoved both of her hands into her mouth, grasping her top jaw with her right hand and the bottom with her left.

Then she pulled, turning her mouth inside out.

Her cheeks tore apart, her bottom jaw sagged down as far as her chest, and her head lolled backward, falling down to her shoulder blades. The pink flesh inside her oral cavity was now exposed to the air. Despite this gruesome act, her two hands did not rest, continuing to pull her body apart. Inside became outside, and outside became inside.

"What is this?" the Reincarnator with the starry coat asked. The law of conservation of mass was casually being ignored. After turning herself inside out, the pink mound of flesh that stood in place of the girl was over five meters in height—a giant.

"What...is this?" repeated the Manager. The part of the pink flesh mound that was probably its head split in two. A single red eye emerged from the fissure and met the Reincarnator's gaze. Then the pink mound of flesh toppled forward to crush him.

"Curse you, monster!" The Reincarnator's voice sounded from behind—the Manager, who had managed to escape using his Skill, once again plunged his hand into his coat that glowed with the colors of a starry sky and whipped out a light machine gun. He mercilessly unloaded in a fiery flash, and the giant mound of flesh recoiled in pain, but it was too large to suffer a fatal blow from the barrage.

Furthermore...each of the wounds made by the bullets began to tear apart. In their place emerged pearly white stones...or rather teeth. While crawling clumsily across the cobblestones, the being gnashed its new sets of teeth,

snapping at the Reincarnator. The Manager wrapped his coat around himself and vanished, reappearing a short distance away.

“Interesting! Chasing people who can’t fight back was starting to make me feel like crap. Subduing a monster sounds like much more fun!” Upon saying this, the Reincarnator flung out several orbs of iron, one of which came rolling up to Cirulia’s feet as she called out to the flesh mound to stop. This orb-shaped device was called a grenade. A moment later, Cirulia was sent flying.

“—lia, Cirulia!” She could hear a voice very close at hand—a pleasant, familiar voice, calling for someone in desperation.

“Cirulia!” As Cirulia awoke, she saw her husband peering at her with a haggard expression on his face. A man with long, rust-colored hair—the man she had known since he was a boy, now getting on in years: Dill Steel-Link.

“Oh, my. What was I doing just now?” Cirulia murmured.

“I’m sorry.” Dill apologized, without answering Cirulia’s question. “I’ve only just gotten back. I know it took a while. Forgive me...!”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“I thought you’d been killed... You were bleeding from your head. I suppose only the skin was broken—otherwise you’d be dead... Hold on, I’ll move you somewhere where you can lie down. I’m going to lift you up slowly.”

“Do I really look that bad?” Cirulia laughed. Dill’s face, which wasn’t smiling, gave Cirulia her answer. She felt Dill pick her up, and it was at that moment that the one-eyed giant entered her field of vision once again. She could see it laying waste to the town, showered with cannon fire.

“...That’s right—Nue!”

“Stop, don’t move!” shouted Dill. “I’ll go and get Nue.”

Blood rushed to Cirulia’s head, and all at once her memory of the day’s events resurfaced. It was the day of the festival, which she had been looking forward to eagerly. She had taken out her makeup case for the first time in a while and gone out on the town dressed in her finest clothes. She had taken the two children, Nue Kirasaki and Sid Faron, with her; they’d walked around the festival stalls and had all enjoyed a meal together. The blissful climax of the evening had been watching Nue perform in the play. If only the day could have truly ended with that.

“Dill, Dill! I’m sorry. I couldn’t protect them. Yet again, I couldn’t do anything! Instead, Sid and Nue protected me, when they should have been worrying about themselves! They did what I couldn’t...”

“Sid is all right. I met up with him, and I left him with Halberd and his men.” Upon the unlit porch of a civilian home, on a couch that under normal circumstances would likely have served as a place of relaxation for the residents, Dill laid Cirulia down. There was no sound from inside the house—the residents were either out at the festival or had already fallen at the hands of the Reincarnators.

“You say he’s all right, but Sid...is now...”

“A Reincarnator, right? Even that turned out all right. I had to deal with a lot too. What I have to say might confuse you, but listen while I dress your wounds...”

Right in the center of Vulcan of the Eleven Cities of the North, a city which was constructed in the middle of a giant crater, stood Ex Machina Amputation. Not only did the god itself reside here, but there was also a temple dating from antiquity upon the hill, surrounded by the Acropolis.

A band of men now descended the hill on a funicular as the Reincarnators bombarded the slopes of Vulcan. One of their number, a young boy with long, white hair, gazed down at the city with a grim expression.

The master the boy admired, whose hair was the color of rust—Dill—was not here. They had been together until just a while ago, but upon seeing the one-eyed giant striding through the streets of Vulcan, he had gone off by himself without saying even a word of parting.

“Sweet little Sid, are you nervous?” One of the men spoke to Sid. The man had a beautiful voice, and his black hair was decorated with tufts of red and blue. A chain mail cloak hung from his shoulders. Besides Sid himself, everyone present was wearing the same style of cloak.

“I’m a boy, you know...” Sid Faron pursed his lips.

“I know, I know. I have long hair too, so I get it. You wanted to look like Steel-Link, didn’t you?”

“No, I didn’t!”

“Really? I did. I mean, isn’t that guy cool?” The man was nonchalant, in contrast to Sid, who turned bright red as he voiced his denial.

“I’m Rick Wake. Speaking of Steel-Link—rather than calling myself one of his comrades-in-arms, I’d say I’m his personal bard...or maybe just a fan. Well, really, I might say we’re bosom buddies...?” said Rick, striking a pose.

“I wouldn’t put too much stock in what he says. Just for your reference, there are a couple of names I could introduce Rick by—Rick the Braggart or Rick Wake the Big-mouthed, just to name a few...”

“Shut up! You’re just a destructive priest with muscles for brains!”

Stepping past Rick, the other man who had spoken to Sid greeted him politely from beneath his chain mail hood. “Forgive the late introduction, but my name is Mace. I am a mercenary and chaplain in the brigade. I hope we can become better acquainted in the future.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you. I’m Sid Faron. It’s good to meet you...”

While retaining a placid expression, Mace raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Do you not introduce yourself as Orestes?”



"Right, right—that's right! Hey, Sid, you can transform and stuff, right?! I've heard you can look like Steel-Link in his younger days! I really want to see that."

"I...probably can." As Rick leaned toward him, Sid looked down evasively and blushed. The power to transform. It was an ability Sid had acquired only about an hour earlier, and it was not original to the world of Redguard. A Reincarnator girl, who had come from another world, had temporarily taken over Sid's body and then disappeared, leaving this power as a parting gift.

Even now, though, he struggled to consider it his own. He wondered if he would ever be able to use it again.

"The power of Orestes, a new hero, inheriting the legacy of Aegisthus, interests me as well. If you really intend to fight with us, as you said earlier, it's all the more important that we understand our new ally's abilities." Mace was as courteous as ever, but he seemed adamant about this point.

Sid furrowed his brow as he thought to himself. Then, choosing his words carefully, he said, "It's...not that I can't...but I don't really want to."

"Huh, why not?!" Rick reacted in exaggerated surprise, but Mace gestured for him to calm down, and encouraged Sid to continue.

"This power, the power of Orestes...isn't my power. The girl who dwelt within me, Rei—she left me this power, and I used it to copy my master, Dill Steel-Link. That is Orestes. The real me can't fight like that. So if I carelessly turn into Orestes anyway... Well, I feel like that's not a good idea."

"No, I think it's fine!" After Rick said this, Mace's elbow bored into his solar plexus.

"So that's your reasoning, Sid Faron." Ignoring his comrade who was staggering in pain, Mace continued. "Humility is the greatest virtue mortal men can possess. Any of the Ex Machina would look favorably upon you. However..." His gaze turned outside of the funicular to look at a convoy of vehicles barrelling toward them. "Regardless, it looks like we shall need you to show us the power of Orestes very soon."

"My boys! Prepare for battle!" An immense voice shook the ground beneath them—the colossus of the mail-cloaks, Halberd, shouted his command. The scion of giants looked meaningfully at Sid and smiled.

There was a strident noise from behind them. The approaching vehicles they had been watching burst through the chain-link fence separating the funicular rail from the town and started to chase them along the tracks—one light truck and two motorbikes, driven by pale-faced men. They were reanimated corpses

with blue blood coursing through their veins—in a word, Reincarnators.

A Reincarnator with spiked-up hair stood up on the exposed truck bed, crying out and taunting them. “Hey, hey, hey, hey! What are a bunch of barbarians doing riding on a train, one of civilization’s great conveniences?! That’s not right! You have to pay your fare!” Without responding to this, the men in chain mail cloaks readied their weapons.

“Guess I’ll go first.” Rick, who had readied his crossbow, pulled the trigger. The bow, built in the great forges of Vulcan, loosed three bolts all at once. His target was the most vulnerable Reincarnator, who rode astride one of the motorbikes. This Reincarnator, wearing full riding gear and a helmet, had to contend with the speed of the bolts relative to his own forward velocity, so they would be difficult to evade... That is, if he didn’t possess a Skill.

The Reincarnator on the bike abruptly vanished, and the bolts passed through thin air. Where the Reincarnator had been, there was now a circle of black fog.

“That’s a Jumper’s teleportation! Here he comes!” cried Rick. Several mail-cloaks in the funicular turned around reflexively and Sid looked in the same direction, on the right toward where the vehicle was heading. There was the Reincarnator on a bike, who had most definitely just vanished. Leaning forward, he raised his firearm and aimed it at the mail-cloaks.

“It begins, Sid Faron!” The instant after Mace said this, they heard the report of the gun in front of them, and the truck crashing into them from behind. Sid was small in stature and looked like he might be bowled over. However, he barely managed to stay upright by clutching the handrail long enough to see the Reincarnators on the bed of the truck start to board the funicular. Their pale faces drew nearer and nearer.

The memory of his home burning to the ground, seeing his father reanimated only to be strangled by him moments later, rekindled the flames of hatred in Sid’s heart.

“My name is Orestes!” He planted a foot on the handrail of the funicular, and with phosphors from his Skill gushing out behind him, Sid—Orestes—leaped toward the Reincarnators’ truck. The name of the enemy Orestes slew at this moment was, indeed, Vanguard, who had just tried to jump over to the funicular by kicking off from the truck’s roof. Orestes effortlessly swung the longsword that had been too heavy for the boy Sid to carry—and cut the Reincarnator down!

Pushing aside Vanguard’s body and landing on top of the roof, Orestes slowly raised his head and glared at the pursuers. The sight of his long, white

hair streaming behind him in the roaring wind brought to mind a god, not a man.

“Y-You’ve got to be kidding me! Wasn’t that a Skill? Doesn’t that kind of power belong to Reincarnators...?” The Reincarnator Blusterer, whose hair was swept back, pointed at Orestes. “Isn’t that a cheat only we can use?! You dare...”

“This is Rei’s power, and my master’s power. It doesn’t belong to you.”

“Whaaat?!”

“My name is Orestes!”

“Huh. Looks like he doesn’t need us.” As the mercenary Rick reloaded his crossbow, he watched Orestes’s battle out of the corner of his eye. The long-haired Orestes, as always, stepped close to his enemy. Without fear, he brought the battle straight to his foes—defeating one, then using that body as a shield to progress to the next, whom he struck down in quick succession.

Blusterer, whose Skill was difficult to deal with at a distance, was unable to put up much of a fight as Orestes severed his head.

“Gah hah hoo hoo... At any rate, it would seem that Steel-Link’s report was no falsehood...” The laugh was like the rumbling of the earth. The captain of the brigade, Halberd, said all of this as he dragged one of the bike riders toward him with a chain, strangling him. “With that, let us begin the final test. You don’t mind, do you, Whitehead?”

“Not at all.” The aged lieutenant nodded as he deflected shots from the other bike rider, who discharged his shotgun wildly as he fled. At the same time, Orestes thrust his sword through the roof of the truck, dispatching the Reincarnator driving it. The truck, no longer under control, veered off at an angle away from the funicular. Sid kicked off from the roof, returning to the mail-cloaks. Phosphors fell from his body, which became that of a boy once more.

“Well done, Orestes. Honestly, your performance exceeded my expectations. I meant to go and help you, but saw no opportunity to do so.” Mace greeted Sid cheerfully, hefting his thick club in his sturdy arms.

“Yeah, yeah, that was totally like Steel-Link. Orestes, you’re freaking cool!” Commended by Rick and Mace, Sid mumbled his protests unintelligibly, trying to be modest. His face was bright red, as expected.

“Indeed. That was quite an impressive scuffle.” Halberd took a step, and that was all that was needed for the funicular to emit a screech. “How about it, Orestes? Would you like to have a go at *that* next?” The giant, Halberd, pointed at the gun emplacement the Reincarnators had built inside the walls of Vulcan.

“Hey now, General! Isn’t it a bit early to be trying that?! ”

"It's already within range. It wouldn't do to leave Orestes and Captain Halberd behind."

"That's not what I meant!" Rick protested, but Mace shut him down. Sid had no idea what they were talking about. Halberd chuckled to himself.

"We can fly, you know. Surprise attacks are fundamental in war... Whitehead, give us a demonstration."

The lieutenant, the oldest member of the brigade besides Halberd, exchanged a glance with the giant, and then jumped high into the air. As Sid stood frozen in astonishment, Halberd swung his giant lump of iron, which roared as it passed. His target...was Whitehead, still in midair! *Why?!*

Whitehead...kicked back at the same time! The lump of iron and his foot collided. For a moment they were still—then Halberd followed through.

Whitehead extended his bent leg, and leaped forward, soaring through the air.

"This is the crowning glory of our brigade, the human catapult! During the Holy War we used this technique countless times, taking the people of the south by surprise. How about it, Orestes? If you slip up..."

"I'll do it," Sid answered immediately. "Orestes is a copy of my master, so he must be able to do the same things. I want to be...like Dill Steel-Link."

"Seriously?" Rick muttered, his expression a mix of shock and amazement. Mace simply nodded.

"Gah hah hoo hoo hoo! That's the spirit! Rest assured, Orestes. Even supposing you lose your life, well, all men are destined to die. Life is short, but glory lasts forever—and we have a stylish poet right here who can pass down the tale of your valor! Now, let us begin!" Without giving Sid a chance to reconsider, the giant twisted his body and swung his lump of iron. Sid did feel fear, but he also believed—in Dill, in Rei, in their power.

Sid jumped. As he rose into the air, phosphors enveloped his body, and he once again transformed into the young man, Orestes. His body already knew what he needed to do from that point. Turning his head back slightly, his eyes met Halberd's. In under a second they performed a minute correction. At the same time as the iron lump met his feet, Sid kicked back—not to refuse the blow, but to contain it. A moment later, the force was released.

Thus, Sid flew. He endured the acceleration, which felt as if it might tear his body apart. Tracing a sharp parabola, he cut through the windy night sky over Vulcan. He did not look up at the starry sky where he had flown together with Rei. Instead, Sid stared squarely at the enemy emplacement on the ground below him as it raced up to meet him.

Sid, I believe in you. The words Dill had left Sid in parting had been brief, but they were more than enough for him. Dill had recognized Sid not as a child to protect, but a comrade who could stand with him shoulder to shoulder in battle. Even though that was only possible through a power that wasn't Sid's own—it even felt like cheating somehow—it still made him happy. He wanted to live up to Dill's expectations.

Sid fell toward the earth. His body, launched by Halberd in a perfectly calculated trajectory, headed for the gun emplacement of the castle walls as if guided there. At this very moment, from that platform constructed from columns of piping and sheet metal the biomechanical Sphinxes bearing cannons on their backs continued their bombardment of the city.

This level of the emplacement was the highest of three. From above the heads of the Sphinxes specified for cannon use, Sid plummeted down. The wave from his impact radiated out through the sheet metal, peeling it back from the structure. The moment he touched down, phosphors formed a sphere around him to defend him, and he thrust his sword through the cranium of the Sphinx directly in front of him, killing it instantly. Sid kicked the carcass aside.

"Yes..." The reality of what happened finally caught up with Sid. "I did it. I did it!" At the appearance of this intruder, Reincarnators approached in a flurry. One of them was pierced from behind by a spear and died.

"Well met, Orestes. I will acknowledge you." The one who had slain the Reincarnator was none other than the veteran of the brigade, Whitehead! He held out a chain mail cloak to Sid. "Take this. It was left behind by one of our comrades who fell in the earlier battle. You have the right to wear it."

"Lieutenant!"

"Call me Whitehead. I thought you were a suspicious individual, using the power of a Reincarnator and all, but I was wrong. Fight by my side. Whatever enemies might come at us, I can promise that you will not fall before I do."

"I will! Thank you!"

The number of Reincarnators occupying the gun emplacement was great. The two warriors were completely surrounded. Sid and Whitehead, clad in their chain mail cloaks, prepared to face the enemy forces back-to-back.

Wielding their Skills, the Reincarnators set upon them all at once. Sid recklessly stood against them. The mail-cloaks launched into the air after them, touched down successfully upon the emplacement one by one, and joined the battle.

The funicular descended the slope at a steady speed. Finding himself the only

one left behind, the giant watched the back of the last mercenary he'd launched recede into the distance and exhaled in satisfaction.

The sound of hooves approached, and a horse galloped adroitly onto the tracks, coming up alongside Halberd. The man gripping the reins also wore a chain mail cloak.

"Captain Halberd! So you're unharmed! Have you any orders for us?" The man was slightly small in stature for a warrior, but sat with his head high and his chest thrust out gallantly. He had combed his hair and beard through with oil. This man, who looked more like a regular soldier than a mercenary, was Halberd's aide.

"Hm. Hathaway, I see... Don't you find the tide of this battle tiresome? On closer inspection, the seemingly random bombardment is actually trying to avoid hitting the lines of evacuating citizens."

"Perhaps they wish to avoid damaging the bodies? Looking at their route, it seems the evacuees are headed for the Acropolis. The Reincarnators might even be guiding them in that direction."

It was true that the fires at the foot of the hill stood out. The giant snorted. "So they're chasing them to the summit in order to round them up in one fell swoop? That really stinks. That said, we can't ignore the artillery. Steel-Link went to deal with the daughter of Titans, but that doesn't sit well with me either."

"Did anyone accompany him?"

"He insisted on going by himself. Since we don't exactly have men to spare, I allowed it, but I remain pessimistic. Hathaway, will you go?"

The adjutant, reading between the lines, gave a meek smile and bowed respectfully. "...If that is your command, sir."

"She's the daughter of Chimera, the death god who gave us such a hard time in the Holy War... I let her live until now, thinking she might be useful, but it looks like it's time to cut our losses. I think you understand my meaning, Hathaway."

"Yes, sir. I will work to fulfill your wishes in their entirety."

"Good. Now go."

The adjutant, Hathaway, turned his steed back along the path it had come by. As he left, the silver adornments on the scabbard hanging from his waist glittered dimly.

At this time, in the battle for the artillery encampment, the names of those who were slain and those who slew them were...

Whitehead, chief of the detachment, struck the Reincarnator called Splendor with his spear and slew him; Orestes, with his rosy cheeks, cut down Red Raven; and Arthurs, wielding his two swords, cut Quagmire and Osmosis asunder!

It was the Chief Reincarnator Fleetfoot, his armband sparkling, who shifted into retaliation at this point. He raced along a path of small teleportation gates set at one-meter intervals, crisscrossing the emplacement. The Jumper, Fleetfoot, proceeded to cut away at the mercenaries with the daggers he held in both hands, moving in a series of sharp trajectories.

“Ugh...that hurts, damn it! That bastard Fleetfoot—can’t someone do something?!”

“It wouldn’t do to get separated! Our numbers are scant—we’ll be at a disadvantage if we can’t cooperate.” As Mace said this, blinding projectiles of light rained down from above his head, sending him flying along with the Reincarnator, Valorous, with which he’d been exchanging blows. This was the Reincarnator Meteor’s typical strategy—saturation bombing, without any regard for friendly fire!

“Brawn-for-Brains! Is he dead?!”

“...As if!” The priest rose to his feet, twirled his club in one hand like a baton, and used it to repel the visible psychokinetic projectiles thrown by Meteor. However, behind him appeared a line of connected portals...

“What a blunder...!” Mace twisted his body around, the tendons in his arm pulling in the opposite direction to block the incoming blow. A moment later, Fleetfoot passed through the gate and slashed Mace’s wrist with his dagger. Mace reflexively dropped his club. And once again, Meteor’s projectiles rained down ceaselessly.

“I am the light born of the dawn! I am Orestes, who announces daybreak!” A shadow leaped in from Mace’s side and stood in front of him as a veil of phosphors enveloped the two of them. As the light projectiles collided with the fiery shield, they were annihilated—but little by little, the bolts chipped away at the phosphors in turn. They were not so potent as they had been when wielded by the Reincarnator girl, Rei.

Orestes lent Mace his shoulder and decided to retreat from battle for the time being.

“Orestes, you saved me. How could I be so...”

“Please listen. That Reincarnator in the wheelchair is the key.” The young

man interrupted Mace's apology. "It may seem like he's doing nothing on his own, but his Skill enables cooperation between the Reincarnators. I will take him down. Can I ask you to lend me a hand?"

Mace looked at Sid in astonishment, but next he smiled. "That's not quite right. You should say it like this, Orestes: 'Lend me a hand, and I shall slay Commander!'" The two nodded to each other.

At that moment, the phosphors holding back Meteor's assault were finally depleted, and the psychokinetic projectiles bore down upon them once more. However, there was one figure who slipped by them, breaking through the tumult and leaping into the air with his silk-white hair fluttering behind him. It was Orestes, with his sword ready! And it was none other than Mace who had launched him forward, using the human catapult technique!

Mace, having shot Orestes forward with all his might, stumbled and disappeared amongst Meteor's projectiles—but Meteor, focused on his psychokinesis, had left himself vulnerable in turn. Orestes plummeted back down to the earth in an almost vertical trajectory, swinging his sword...and slicing the stunned Meteor's head clean off.

"What? That's not good..." The Chief-class Reincarnator, Fleetfoot, saw Orestes head toward the wheelchair-bound Commander right after slaying Meteor, and he made to turn around.

"Do you mean to go after Orestes?" Someone grasped Fleetfoot's arm. It was the veteran, Whitehead, whose face was a complex tapestry of aged wrinkles and old scars. His spear, held high up the shaft to strike at close range, clashed with Fleetfoot's dagger, sending sparks flying.

Meanwhile, Orestes headed straight for Commander, who directed the bombardment.

"Hmm." As Orestes swung his sword with blazing speed to sever Commander's head, a man in a dark suit—Summoner—suddenly appeared, seizing the sword mid-swing. Orestes shifted his footing and point of leverage; he pushed down on the sword, perhaps just trying to wrest it from his foe's grip, but the gauntlet-clad hand would not budge.

The arm defending Commander stood firm and proud, as did the two armbands adorning it.

"Now's your chance. Please move to the next checkpoint."

"Manager?! But it's too soon to withdraw! We still have more than enough manpower..."

Summoner answered Commander's protests simply by pointing to the

battlefield. Meteor, whose saturation bombing had suppressed their enemies' movements, had fallen; Fleetfoot, tasked with sowing disorder, was locked in battle with Whitehead. There was no one left to stop the mail-cloaks from moving freely now. The Reincarnators were about to be slaughtered before Commander's eyes.

"While you still have forces left, withdraw!" declared Summoner, deflecting a kick from Sid with his other gauntlet.

This was difficult for Commander to accept.

"Manager! Please, *please* grant me another chance! I can't just retreat now. I still have men left. It's too soon to withdraw. I will produce results! I promise!"

According to their schedule, this bombardment was supposed to continue for another hour, pushing the citizens of Vulcan to the top of the Acropolis and drawing enemy forces to the vicinity of the Reincarnators' emplacement, separating the combatants from the civilians. If Commander pulled out now, he would not even have achieved half of his objectives. Having been tasked with the defense and supervision of the artillery emplacement, he was clearly the one who would be held responsible for this failure.

"I suppose I don't mind..." began Summoner. To close with Summoner and prevent him from even using his fists, let alone his Skill, Sid stepped forth boldly. Summoner drove his knee into his opponent's solar plexus, but instead of following with another attack, he leaped backward to put some distance between them. As if validating this judgment, Sid's blue eyes turned up to glare back at Summoner in defiance. The blow had clearly barely fazed Sid. If Summoner had pursued him further, he would have retaliated.

"I have a duty to patrol the other checkpoints. Just bear in mind that I can't return to cover you again."

"Thank you, sir!"

Summoner opened a gate and vanished, leaving nothing in Sid's way. Sid faced Commander and chuckled maliciously. "Huh, this is a surprise. To think that even Reincarnators, so proud of their immortality, get anxious... Lame."

"Quotas. Advancement. Performance reviews. Demotion. Punishments and rewards...I suppose these concepts mean nothing to you barbarians. Let's go! Let me show you the full extent of my power...!" Still in his wheelchair, Commander tensed his muscles—he was about to use his Skill, most likely a telepathic assault. But nothing happened to Sid as he stepped forth to cut Summoner down. The change instead happened among the Reincarnators that surrounded him.

"Ohhhhh...aaaaah...ohhh?!"

“Ah-ah-aaaaaaah!”

Strange cries erupted from the Reincarnators’ mouths as they writhed in pain. Even the fearless mercenaries hesitated to attack them in this state, but Sid still summoned his courage and cut down Commander. His courage, however, backfired. An immense mass suddenly dove toward Sid from somewhere in front of him, sending him flying with a lariat strike from a brawny arm.

As Sid tumbled to the ground, he looked up. Commander had been protected by one of the Reincarnator’s bioweapons—a Charging Support unit. However, it was behaving strangely. It beat the iron mask covering its face in irritation, and even began to tear it off, the skin on its face coming with it.

A similar reaction could be observed among the other Reincarnators. They bellowed, scratched at their skin, and attacked the mercenaries recklessly with their Skills. In the chaos, some Reincarnators even injured each other.

“B-Bastard! Are you completely desperate?!” Fleetfoot, the only Reincarnator who had managed to maintain control, glared at Commander, even though he was unable to do more than clutch his own head.

“*Senpai*, don’t say such things. Don’t make people think I’ve lost it—I’m just giving a little seminar. One that will reform everyone’s consciousness—”

“Reform my consciousness...!”

“Right. All of you may be immortal soldiers who can be replaced *ad infinitum*, but your approach to fighting hasn’t changed at all since you were in the bodies you were born with. You need to exploit the advantage of immortality! Die over and over, come back to life over and over, kill over and over—do that, and our economy will thrive! It’s the PDCA cycle of life!”

“Where do you get the nerve...?! Our performance evaluation drops if we die too often. That’s not even what PDCA means!”

“Yes, yes, I get it. Show us your best, *senpai*.” Commander held his hand out toward Fleetfoot and, using his telepathy, forcefully stimulated Fleetfoot’s mind. With his will to fight raised to unbelievable heights, Fleetfoot transformed into a roaring beast.

The tide of battle reversed. Sid was knocked to the ground by a Charging Support, a mere foot soldier. The mechanical ape, in its state of abnormal excitation, climbed atop Sid and battered him repeatedly with one fist, then the other. Even this did not seem to fully satisfy its violent impulses, so it occasionally pounded at its own chest too. Apparently it exerted too much force in doing so, as Sid could hear several of its ribs crack from the impact. With his sword and both arms, Sid guarded his face and waited for an opportunity to

strike back...but what would such an opportunity look like? His enemy, like a primeval beast or a simple machine, simply hammered away at him with all the strength it had. Its behavior wasn't complicated enough to present an opening for Sid to take advantage of.

"Orestes!" A voice called to Sid, pulling him back from the brink of despair. That voice belonged to Whitehead. Even as Fleetfoot beat Whitehead to the ground, the warrior turned to Sid and tossed him his shield. It slid across the floor and collided with Sid's hand—but it was nothing but an ordinary shield.

What does he expect me to do with this? However, the moment he thought this, his body moved. His hand grasped the shield, while the other wrapped the belt around his arm and fastened it in place. The shield fit him well, as if he had been born with it on. A shield. A symbol of Aegisthus. Sid knew how to use it—or rather, Orestes's body knew.

At least, he should. The Charging Support unit let out a disgruntled noise as the shield deflected its fists, the punches it threw in succession also bouncing off the metal. The ape became steadily more frustrated and unleashed a disorderly swing of its fist. Sid raised the shield and withstood it—and not only did he withstand it, but gradually lifted the shield higher!

Sid pushed his upper body off the ground. He raised the shield even higher, bringing it closer to the Charging Support's chest. Only then did Sid finally rise to his feet, and the shield approached the beast's muzzle. And then, he struck it there! The Charging Support bent over backward! Its feet started to leave the ground! Sid extracted a foot from under it and landed a kick on the beast, which finally pulled away from Sid entirely.

"My name is Orestes!" His blade shimmered white as he drove it into the Charging Support's neck. However, what should have been a vital spot had been specifically reinforced by the steel wires and artificial muscles underneath its hide. Despite this, Sid now sliced through the creature's neck in a single swing.

Power surged forth from the core of his body. With the full force of his anger rivaling that of Commander, he hacked the beast's head from its shoulders.

"Listen up! Cowardly Tereans, who know only how to talk!" Sid turned immediately to castigate his allies. This, too, was an imitation of Dill, who had once taunted his allies to light a fire under them and rouse them into action. Sid's cheeks flushed red as fire, half in anger and half in embarrassment. "You always say that you are comrades of Aegisthus and think much of yourselves, but I wonder how you have the nerve to tell such a lie. While I, the youngest and least experienced, slew our enemies, you could do nothing but flee. Not one of you

had the guts to stand against the enemy, did you? To protect Vulcan, surrounded as it is by walls, I will no longer even consider looking to the likes of you for help. Aegisthus and I alone will be sufficient!"

To wrap up his speech, Sid exhaled fiercely through his nostrils. The mail-cloaks responded with wry smiles. This was not the reaction Sid had intended to produce, but it led to the same outcome.

"Hey! He really told us old-timers!" Rick took the lead.

"If we don't shape up, I guess we'll be fired!" Mace matched his tone—the mail-cloaks were stirred up. They wanted to protect and support this young man, who was earnest, if a bit unsteady.

Birkin slew Vision, Stewart took down Flying Swallow, and Whitehead slew Fleetfoot. Rick shot dead the Charging Supports bearing heavy cannons, whose bombardment of the city streets still continued.

Mace and Arthurs cut open a path for Orestes to strike down the chief, Commander. Commander trembled in fear, and tried to call out for help. He couldn't. The forces subjected to his Skill had exhausted themselves exercising their anger, and no longer had the strength to fight.

"Manager! Manager! I'm ready to withdraw..." *Just bear in mind that I can't return to cover you again.* Any and all expression fell from Commander's face. Still, he tried to escape, desperately turning the wheels of his wheelchair. One of the wheels went over the edge of the emplacement.

Sid was one step too far away to reach him in time. He looked down at Commander as he fell, while behind him the mail-cloaks let out cries of triumph. The threat had been driven from the emplacement. Sid had achieved his objective.

Beneath the castle walls, Commander was thrown clear from the wreckage of his wheelchair. Still not dead, he crawled along the ground.

"I'm not finished yet...my kill-death ratio...my personal assessment...is still...!" There was a creak...a heavy sound...then a shudder, like an earthquake, and another creaking sound. They were footsteps. A dark shadow fell over Commander's head as he tried to crawl away.

"Gah hah hoo hoo...ha ha ha ha... My name is Halberd."

"Well, I'll be off, then." Dill stood up to leave, then turned around. "The bleeding has stopped, but don't move around too much or the wound will open

again. Until I come to get you, just wait here quietly. I promise I'll take care of Nue..."

"That's all right. I know... Just go." Cirulia lay down on the sofa, the one Dill had brought for her by kicking down the door of the civilian home and bearing the sofa on his back. On top of her head was a bloodstained bandage, wrapped around a painfully throbbing wound. She also ran a fever. She felt dazed. "If I went with you, it's not like I would be any help...so go."

"I'll definitely be back." Dill then departed, his chain mail cloak ringing. Cirulia pulled the blanket closer around her.

"I'm cold..." She felt for the ring on her finger, and began to shed tears once she felt it. "I'm...so frustrated."

Dill left the residential district, then looked up at the slopes of Vulcan. A trail of destruction proceeded up the hill, as if aiming for the summit, and he could hear the sounds of battle, very nearly out of earshot. The one-eyed giant Nue Kirisaki had transformed into was being showered with gunfire. Each time a muzzle flashed, the giant staggered and let out a sluggish scream.

Should I have just abandoned Cirulia and headed for Nue right away? Dill brushed aside the doubts that surfaced in his mind and ran. He emerged from the narrow rows of houses in Vulcan's downtown and headed for the thoroughfare leading up the slope of the hill, where the sound of some machine operating began to approach from behind him. It was an armored truck driven by Reincarnators.

"Take him down! That's Dill Steel-Link, an S-rank body!" Guns were fired wildly, but Dill deflected the bullets with his shield and met the approaching truck head-on. "Who cares if we do some damage—just run him over!"

As the truck approached, crushing the stalls along the street as it did so, the moment before he was about to be hit, Dill leaped into the air, clearing the cabin, and landed on the bed at the rear of the truck!

"You've saved me the trouble of introducing myself." With one thrust of his spear Dill killed two Reincarnators, and with a bash from his shield he knocked a third from the truck. The last Reincarnator left on the truck bed wore a red armband, the mark of a Chief; Dill moved toward him, his rust-colored eyes burning with anger. "Get off. I'm going to be using this car."

"Spoken like a common thief!" The Reincarnator Chief, Pitfall, activated his Skill, and the entire base of the truck bed was painted black in an instant. The rainbow glow typical of a Jumper's Skill could be seen around the edge of the blackness. It was a teleportation gate to another dimension—the corpses and

firearms piled up on the truck bed all vanished into the gate, along with the bodies of the Reincarnators Dill had just killed.

“*You’re* the thief. I’ll have you return the bodies of Vulcan’s people.” Dill’s feet were not on the floor of the truck bed, however. The moment Pitfall activated his Skill, Dill had jumped high and drove his spear into the Reincarnator from midair. The head of the spear piercing Pitfall’s chest was driven in even deeper by the weight of Dill’s body. The Reincarnator expired and sank into the hole he himself had created.

At the same time Pitfall disappeared, so did the portal he had opened on the floor of the truck bed. Dill’s feet touched back down and, having thrown aside the spear as the point of it had gone into the portal with the Reincarnator Chief, drew his sword and swung it at the Reincarnator in the driver’s seat.

Just then, Dill heard the sound of persistent cannon fire ahead of the truck. The shells battered the front face of the vehicle, killing the Reincarnator in the driver’s seat instantly. The truck, however, did not stop, instead barrelling into the Reincarnator corps fanning out in its path. Dill briefly crouched low in the truck bed, then jumped out just as it collided with the Reincarnator corps.

From the spot he landed on the ground he killed one Reincarnator, then a second, cutting off and holding up one of the heads as he declared, “My name is Aegisthus! I am the hero of the Tereans, the protector of the holy city of Vulcan!”

Just as Dill had planned, the Reincarnators heard this disturbance and proceeded to gather in even greater numbers. These were probably the very Reincarnators who had been deployed to deal with the Cyclops Nue had transformed herself into.

“Know that as long as Aegisthus remains, the god of the forge’s great city will not fall.” Dill glared at the ring of enemies around him. Although the Reincarnators were hesitant, still they readied their guns and their Skills.

“Hold your fire! Ready...continue! Wait!” Just then, a solitary Reincarnator appeared. His commands rang so sharply in the air that one might have thought that was his Skill. The interior of his military coat was a starry sky, and the footsteps of his army boots rang out loudly as he swaggered toward Dill.

On the arm of this man in military garb were two armbands, marking him as a Manager-class Reincarnator, Starlight. “So, hero, you’ve come to stop me from subduing the monster, have you? And this despite the fact that we’re fighting the monster with the intention of protecting the city. If you’re going to rampage, could you go do it to someone else’s troops?”

“I refuse. That’s my daughter.”

“Ahh... I didn’t know this world even had that kind of humor?” Starlight displayed an unusual amount of bewilderment at this, but Dill ignored him.

“I can assume you’re the commander of these troops, then. I’m going to kill you.”

“Good grief, must you really? Ready...fire!” Starlight deftly switched his tone of voice and delivered an order to his troops. Without a shred of disorder, they all fired in unison. Dill defended himself with his shield and chain mail cloak, then charged at the nearest Reincarnator. The gunfire softened as the others reflexively held back to avoid friendly fire.

“Cease fire...continue!” With a cry from Starlight, the oppressive gunfire returned. The Reincarnator Dill was attacking also resisted, striking at him with the butt of his rifle as he tried to hold back Dill’s reckless charge.

Dill hurriedly dealt the fatal blow to this Reincarnator and moved on. Without worrying about hitting their allies who stood across from Dill, the Reincarnators’ gunfire followed him.

“Die confidently, and then return! I’ll pay back anyone who dies upon my command for the cost of his body! If you land a hit on the enemy I’ll buy you a drink! Finish him off and get a bonus!” Starlight’s voice carried well. Dill realized something—this man’s method of fighting was similar to his own. In his own unique way, Starlight was rallying his allies. It seemed that the Manager’s double armband was not just for show.

Dill saw an opportunity, took out a javelin from beneath his chain mail cloak, and threw it straight at Starlight. The Reincarnator Manager stopped barking orders and swiftly thrust out an arm. His military coat opened and the galactic hues peeking out from inside it enveloped the spear Dill had thrown; the spear vanished, drawn into the portal, and Starlight stood unharmed.

“The enemy is exhausted. Press upon him now! For R and R, we’re going to a hot spring!” From Starlight’s baton, pointed straight at Dill, extended the red beam of a laser sight. The Reincarnators’ lines of fire focused around this point. Dill gathered his shield and cloak in front of himself, steeling himself for the impact as he knew he could no longer escape without a scratch. As Dill accepted this, there was a sudden change.

“The steward of loyalty, the adjutant who serves the eagle—I, Hathaway, will join you in battle!” Hathaway’s introduction was carried forward by the pounding hooves of his steed. As the man appeared, he was accompanied by a gallant whinny from his horse, which scattered the Reincarnator lines as it

galloped through. He then dismounted right in front of Starlight, drew his rapier from its silver scabbard, and held it glittering in the air. At first Starlight tried to engage him, but he soon desisted, opting instead to envelop himself in his teleportation coat.

“The new arrival also has some skill.” Starlight, reappearing far away, looked at the thin blade driven deep into the cobblestone road—as well as Hathaway, who pulled it free and sheathed it in an instant—and made his assessment.

“You saved me! Adjutant Hathaway, to think you’d come to help me...” Dill’s face shone.

“Those were Captain Halberd’s orders. Let’s decide this battle at once!”

Back-to-back, Dill and Hathaway continued the fight. There was a lapse in Starlight’s mechanical command, and the Reincarnators each launched attacks with their individual Skills in a chaotic storm. But this chaos was more to the liking of the mail-cloaks, who had survived the epic Holy War. In this moment, the names of the enemies the two brave warriors slew were...

The reckless Ironblood; the swift Messenger, Coursechange; Observer; and Gunner, who turned to fire at them. With blue blood dripping from his hair, Dill cried, “Forget the past, Adjutant!”

“Stop calling me that. It’s uncomfortable.”

“Why?! That’s what you are.”

“You calling me that after fighting me for the position just sounds like sarcasm.”

The Reincarnator Eastwind, who levitated his own body with his psychokinesis, slid toward the heroes with a bayonet in his hand, but Hathaway ran him through with his rapier. After this, Hathaway turned around immediately and killed Jackboot, who was standing behind him, before weaving through the gaps in the fierce battle and elegantly wiping the blood from his slender blade.

Meanwhile, behind Hathaway, Dill strangled an enemy to death with his bare hands; then using his body as a shield, he dragged the next enemy toward himself. His rusty hair was tangled wildly, even fearsomely, and the will to fight drained from the foe before him.

“To be honest, I didn’t think we’d ever make amends,” muttered Dill, in a calm voice unbefitting of the melee in which the two were embroiled.

Hathaway took a while to respond. “Five years have passed. I’ve changed too. But, such sentimental talk...”

“Right—it can wait until after we’ve killed these bastards!”

The man in the long coat appeared before the two heroes as they stood

shoulder to shoulder. The lining of his coat glowed.

“Cease fire!” He gestured to his men by clenching his raised hand into a fist. At this command, silence fell upon the street. Starlight stood alone before Dill and Hathaway, without anyone attending him.

“All hands...at ease! I’ve seen more than enough. I’ll take it from here.” Silence descended. The murderous intent exchanged between the three men was so concentrated one might choke on it.

Their elevated nerves would have snapped with just one more push, the smallest thing capable of shattering the silence.

Just then, there was a heavy thud. A colossal red eye peered into the street, and buildings crumbled at the corners of the intersection as it passed. What emerged was a one-eyed giant, which had swollen to a total of eight meters in height.

“The daughter of Chimera, one of the twelve Titan generals.” Hathaway narrowed his eyes.

“Was I too late...?” muttered Starlight, looking up at the red-eyed monster that had appeared and beginning to show signs of anxiety. He had used his Skill to vanish himself, moving to another location and returning to his position of command. Pursuing Dill did not seem to interest him any longer.

“*Metamorphoses*. Book One. Cyclops, the one-eyed giant.” This was a special ability even among the Titans, granted only to the Chimera clan. However, the giant that appeared in Vulcan had an ugliness that both did and did not resemble the transformation undergone by the girl’s mother. Its body lacked perfect vertical symmetry. The solitary red eye on its face was off center. The shape of its mouth was also crooked, opening vertically from its chin down to its throat.

Dill, who was defenseless, began to walk toward the Titan.

“Steel-Link?!” Hathaway went after Dill, but shots fired from his flank stopped him in his tracks. The soldiers of the Project had their guns at the ready, but Hathaway drew his cloak around him and endured the barrage. An instant later, his cloak bounced dramatically off the ground, and he vanished.

“Out of my way, small fry!” Hathaway closed with the Reincarnators in a flash, drawing his slender blade and driving it up to the hilt into the heart of the nearest foe. He pulled himself away before the blood had even begun to spray; quick-striking Hathaway had already skewered the next enemy and readied his sword once again.

“Ready, aim...fire! Fall back, three paces! Ready, fire!” Starlight gave orders

to the foot soldiers verbally and to the light trucks with mounted machine guns via his remote terminal, all in an effort to deal with the monster that had appeared in the middle of the thoroughfare.

The initial plan—for a detachment of Reincarnators to draw the giant into a narrow corridor, where the main force would fan into the thoroughfare and gun it down with heavy firearms—had fallen apart. The truck Dill had commandeered and crashed into the street had overturned another vehicle, blocking the path toward the foot of the hill. This had stymied the Reincarnators, who had planned to retreat downhill while drawing the monster’s attention with gunfire.

Starlight looked back. Behind him was the path leading to the summit of the Acropolis. He now had no choice but to inch backward up the hill while battling the creature. This was the opposite of what he’d planned. They would now have to kill the creature once and for all *before* reaching the top of the hill, where a mass Enlightenment was to be conducted.

The troops maintained a high degree of cooperation as they turned their fire upon the one-eyed monster. The monster’s intelligence seemed low, so the same method remained effective no matter how many times they employed it. It had no advantage but its size, a mere lump of flesh.

At the cost of a few sacrifices and using some troops as bait, the Reincarnators scored an effective hit on the creature. Starlight himself retrieved a rocket launcher from the portal inside his coat and sank multiple rounds into the monster. In the blink of an eye, the road’s surface was covered in blood and flesh that had spilled from the creature’s body.

“Now...looks to be about time.”

“Huh?” Starlight’s subordinate, riding on the same truck bed, started to respond...and then his head fell off at an angle. A man pushed through the gunpowder smoke and leaped onto the truck bed.

“My name is Dill Steel-Link.”

“Ah, welcome. I thought you’d come around this time.” Starlight crossed his arms and drew his weapons from the shoulders of his coat. In his right hand was a T-shaped tonfa, and in his left was a wickedly sharp dagger. He readied the different weapons together in a cross, assuming a low stance.

Dill, however, struck first! Holding his shield in front of him, he pushed forward without concern for whatever his enemy’s response might be, looking only to crush him. Starlight kicked off from the truck bed and escaped from the vehicle, and there was the noise of shattering glass as the rear window of the truck’s cabin was broken. Dill cautiously dispatched the Reincarnator in the

driver's seat before turning on his heel and pursuing Starlight.

"Charge, engage!" Dill was caught off guard by Starlight's signal—he cast his eye around the vicinity, but no one stepped forward to challenge him. The Reincarnator's order had been to attack Nue. From the buildings on each side of the thoroughfare, two Reincarnators leaped across the rooftops then down into the street. One was Spiralblade, who wielded a gargantuan chainsaw by levitating it with psychokinesis. The other Reincarnator was Red Lotus, the butcher's knife and axe he held in his hands glowing red-hot as a result of his Skill.

"Nue..." Dill tried to run toward his transformed daughter, but found the tip of Starlight's tonfa pressed against his throat.

"Unfortunately, you'll have to go through me." Dill's sword, shaking as an expression of his rage, clashed with Starlight's tonfa. Just then, a twisted scream erupted from behind them—the two Chief-class Reincarnators had cut into the giant from its left and right. Spiralblade landed on top of the colossal chainsaw after throwing it using psychokinesis. She snapped her fingers, and the blade started turning, chewing through the Titan's flesh. Furthermore, Red Lotus alighted on the Titan's shoulder and, wielding his heavy-bladed cleaver and his battle-axe, hacked haphazardly at the monster. The weapons, heated by his Skill, burned and cleaved through the Titan's body like butter, and a revolting stench rose into the air around them.

"Let's take it out in one shot! I'll cut its head off."

"In that case, I'll bring it to its knees." The chainsaw, whose advance had slowed after hitting bone, was forcefully pulled out via psychokinesis and slammed against the Titan's neck. Red Lotus leaped down from the creature's shoulder, landing in front of it, and with his red-hot weapons, he slashed at both of its legs.

The mound of flesh crumpled to the ground. Its solitary eye could no longer keep up with the movements of its enemies, and it could now only glare aimlessly up as it lay on the ground. No—its glance was not completely aimless. In the direction the red eye gazed, a man with rust-colored hair was locked in battle. He cut down one, two Reincarnators, then drove his elbow into the face of Scorched Earth, who came at him from behind. He then bellowed and ran toward Nue in a straight line, aiming for the great red eye. The Titan tried to crawl toward Dill.

"Aren't you a naughty girl? You're supposed to die right here!" The pressure applied to the giant chainsaw pressed against Nue's neck increased. In the blink

of an eye the blade sank deep inside the Titan's flesh, then finally ground to a halt as it hit bone again. The Titan simply seemed irritated. *Ahhh, what a nuisance.*

"Huh? It stopped again. What the hell is in there...?" Spiralblade peered into the wound rent open by her chainsaw, then screamed. Myriad red eyes were crammed into the gaping gash, and every one of them met Spiralblade's gaze in perfect unison.

The Titan transformed again. The wounds all over its body squirmed, then round objects from inside of its flesh protruded out of the wounds, filling them up. They were eyeballs. From each laceration, an equally sized eyeball with a red iris emerged to the surface of the Titan's body.

Metamorphoses. Book Two. Argos, the hundred-eyed giant.

"Stand firm! Kill that monster!" The resolute Red Lotus barked orders, while he himself slashed at the Titan with his red-hot weapons. The many-eyed monster was engulfed in a maelstrom of gunfire, the eyeballs that had just emerged bursting open. From each of the now empty sockets, something else immediately crawled out.

This time, it was arms. Innumerable arms, big and small, none matching another in length, girth, or number of joints surged forth like a swarm of insects and seized the nearby Spiralblade and Red Lotus. In the first moment, the Reincarnator Chiefs resisted, but they were soon pulled inside the empty eye sockets, and all was silent.

Metamorphoses. Book Three. Hecatoncheir, the hundred-handed giant.

"I mean...what is that? For crying out loud!" Starlight could now only stand there stunned, smiling dryly.

"Nue Kirisaki. My daughter."

The Reincarnator troops were unable to hold out against the Titan as it began to move once again. Its absurd series of transformations had instilled fear in them, even though they would certainly not be permanently killed. They cast aside their weapons, abandoned their posts, and fled. Any stragglers were seized by the many-eyed, many-handed Titan and swallowed whole. The Manager, Starlight, who should have rallied their spirit and issued orders, was unable to return to his command. This time, it was Dill who stood in Starlight's way. He would not allow the Reincarnator to raise his voice to give orders, pressing upon him with sword and shield.

Starlight knocked aside the shield with the tonfa on his arm as Dill bashed him with it. He then dodged the sword swinging up toward him from the ground

and used the momentum from his dodge to counter with a roundhouse kick. Dill tilted his head to one side, then sandwiched Starlight's leg in between his head and shoulder. The force seemed to concuss Dill, but his rust-colored eyes remained fixed firmly on his enemy.

A second swing from Dill's sword sent Starlight's defensive tonfa flying into the air with a satisfying crack. Starlight twisted his body around and escaped, then charged at Dill while staying low to the ground, his dagger in hand, but Dill stomped down hard on the wrist behind the dagger, crushing both limb and weapon.

In the next instant, Dill's foot swung up into Starlight's chin, and the Reincarnator Manager's back slammed straight onto the road's surface. His arms and legs splayed out, Starlight looked at his broken wrist and smiled in resignation. "Hey, now. You're not allowed to use modern martial arts. The time period for this setting is only supposed to have advanced up to around the Greco-Roman era."

"I know you Reincarnators claim to have come, metaphorically, from the future...but there's nothing to be surprised about here. Where once gods walked the earth, heroes walked after them; now, this place is inhabited by ordinary humans. Those born in later ages are naturally inferior to those who came before. You have no chance of winning here." Dill swung his sword once more toward Starlight, who no longer tried to defend himself, to deliver the killing blow.

"Ha ha ha. The olden days were great. I agree." Starlight took something out from the portal in the lining of his coat—it was a lit cigarette. "Well, you win. I surrender. Kill me."

Dill did just that.

"Looks like it's over," said Hathaway, the brigade's adjutant. He must have fought a fair number of enemies, since he was uncharacteristically covered in blood. There were no survivors to be found among the Reincarnators; those around Hathaway had either been slain by him, or they had fled. "So, what do you want to do about *that*?" Hathaway gestured at the Titan. Unspoken were the words, *Shall I kill it?*

"There's nothing to be done." Dill sheathed his sword and approached the Titan. Hathaway became agitated.

"Stop—stay back! We can't lose you too, you bastard! Have you forgotten the battle of Notos?! That's..."

"Nue is my daughter. Sorry to keep you waiting... It's me, papa—the one

you've been waiting for. Nue, let's go home."

Upon hearing Dill's voice, the savage giant bristling with many eyes and many hands suddenly froze. Its hands, which had repeatedly smashed a truck driven by Reincarnators against the ground like a child throwing a tantrum, were still. Countless red eyes turned to look at Dill—and then, one by one, began to shed lukewarm tears.

Dill looked back at Hathaway. "You see, Adjutant? My daughter is a good girl."

"I can't believe what I'm seeing..."

The Titan's body started to rapidly wither. Like dried bean husks, its skin turned a pale brown, losing its moisture and turning hard. The skin started to peel off in little pieces, crumbling to dust and falling to the ground. Dill stretched out both his arms, and a single large mass fell straight toward his open embrace. It was a young girl with black hair.

"Welcome back, princess."

The girl coughed. She resigned herself to having her naked body covered with clothes taken from one of the fallen Reincarnators. After a while, once she could finally speak again, she asked guardedly, "Are you mad?"

"Of course not. Why would I be?" Dill's voice was gentle.

"I broke our promise again."

"You did it to protect Cirulia, didn't you? I was the one at fault for not being there by your side." Dill and Nue gazed at each other, and Nue's red eyes were wet with tears.

"Steel-Link. I know you two are reluctant to part again, but could we head to the Acropolis now?" Hathaway coughed, and interrupted. "The evacuees are gathering up there. It seems that they were guided there intentionally. The Reincarnators look to have something in mind, and we'll need your strength to stop them."



“Understood. In exchange, could I ask you to look after Nue? Cirulia should still be nearby. If possible, I’d like you to escort them both home.”

“But of course. Take the horse I rode here on to the Acropolis. Hurry, now.”

“Right, I will... Hey, Hathaway.” Dill had called him by his name. Hathaway had started to turn away from Dill, but now faced him once more. “Thanks. I was only able to save Nue because you showed up.”

“...Think nothing of it. I was just doing my job.”

Dill nodded, mounted the horse, and rode away. Nue Kirisaki stared at Dill’s back, watching him until he disappeared from view.

And then, Hathaway drew his slender blade from its sheath and thrust it toward Nue. “Don’t think ill of me for this. This is also part of my job.”

CHAPTER 2 — REJECT:REINCARNATOR

An ancient battle was illustrated upon the pediment holding up the triangular roof of the temple, with two quarreling armies depicted on the left and right. On the right stood the army of Terea Boreas and its allies, led by the great king Haos. On the left were the heroic warriors of the ancient kingdom of Krios. Their leader was the hero, Prodotis the Silver.

The Reincarnator, Hero, looked up at the pediment, and contemplated the past with a mysterious expression on his face. At his feet lay the body of a Vulcan soldier he had cut down. Hero now stood at the summit of Vulcan's proud holy mount, the Acropolis. There was a vast square there for the performance of religious rituals as well as a grand temple built from white limestone, with the god, Ex Machina Amputation, bursting out through the ground, proud and imposing in his appearance.

The Reincarnator forces who had occupied the temple in front of the Production Module, Amputation, were watched over by the citizens of Vulcan, who had been evacuated during the bombardment at the foot of the hill, as they joined the warriors in chain mail cloaks in battle.

"Your new body seems to be working well for you, Yuujin." A man approached Hero. His facial features were ordinary, which had been a deliberate choice on his part, and he wore a pleasant but empty smile. Three bands adorned his arm. This man was the Project Leader, Shiden. The most powerful Reincarnator. "This is a bright day for us Reincarnators. I'll have to have you wear your armbands too."

"Indeed. Let's make it known among the natives that the hero they worship, Prodotis, has surrendered to the Reincarnators." Hero wound two bands around his own arm. Yuujin, Hero of the Reincarnators, was the first among the Project Managers, who numbered only six in total. Two other Managers, Toiler and Summoner, were battling the mail-cloaks who had come to reclaim the temple.

"Now, it's showtime." Shiden pressed the switch for the intercom. "Hello, everyone. It's so nice to meet you." Amplified by the speakers, Shiden's voice echoed through the vast plaza. At the same time, a hologram was projected in the

sky above, displaying the upper half of Shiden's body magnified many times. For people unused to the products of technology, this alone was enough to instill a sense of fear.

"Don't be afraid! This is only some kind of trick—not an attack!" The mail-cloak charged with leading the corps to take back the temple, Bastard, raised his voice and called out to his men, but their confusion did not abate. In truth, he was hardly confident that the image in the sky did not signal some impending enemy assault.

Shiden, projected in the sky, smiled. Bastard's temples tensed up in anger. "Please rest assured," Shiden went on, "that we have visited your city today to invite you to participate in a very profitable Project. Fighting you is not our objective."

"Lies and deception!"

"I am the one overseeing the Project—the General Manager, Shiden. I am the one responsible for all Enlightenment efforts in Redguard."

This is the man himself? A wave of anxiety passed through the mail-cloaks and the citizens of Vulcan.

"Are you aware of the Smart Polises we've constructed in each region of Redguard?" With a wave of Shiden's hand, a portion of the image in the sky changed. Playback began on a promotional video where the hologram showed a far-off vision of a colonial city, divided into orderly districts. The people there were smiling. Reincarnators and Tereans worked together—one Terean rode a tractor among them. There were railway lines, show windows, sweets that looked like gemstones... The PR video, overflowing with material, continued.

However, what stole the attention of the people looking over the makeshift barricade was not anything displayed in the center of the screen. It was the old stone walls shown in the background—the cornerstone of an altar, the statue of one of the Ex Machina that the rain had started to erode away—these familiar sights of the hometown they remembered stood beside newly constructed buildings, almost looking embarrassing by comparison.

No small number of the people living in Vulcan were refugees who had escaped from Terea. Each time they saw a familiar alleyway or caught a glimpse of a former neighbor from the place they'd left behind, the people murmured and sighed.

The city had been painted over and warped to some extent, but it was still unmistakably *their* city. Although they had thought it utterly destroyed, it was not completely gone—it still retained a shadow of what they remembered. Upon

seeing their hometown, which they were sure they would never lay eyes upon again, and the backs of neighbors they had long since given up for dead, they started to feel homesick.

“We are accepting applications from anyone who wishes to relocate to the Smart Polises. Let’s all take part in the Project!” came the announcement over the intercom.

The refugees could return home—as long as they did what the Reincarnators told them to. The Reincarnators had artillery, illumination rounds, and holograms in the sky. Their scientific power was even more vast than the people of Redguard had imagined. Thus, submission started to seem a much easier path than resistance. One person, then another, climbed over the barricade. People began flocking to the Reincarnators, as if they were drawn toward them.

“What are you doing?! Come back! When it comes to siege warfare, this is the oldest trick in the book. It’s obviously a trap!”

“Have you forgotten what the Reincarnators did to us?”

“There’s no way they intend to keep their promises!”

“Hurry! Someone go find Steel-Link and bring him here!”

The men in chain mail cloaks ran around the civilians, even trying to threaten them with their weapons, but the flow of people did not stop.

“They’ve fallen for it,” muttered Shiden after shutting off the intercom. The natives had voluntarily thrown down their weapons and were pushing their way toward the Reincarnators en masse. Shiden was under a misapprehension at that moment, but the outcome was the same. Vulcan would surrender.

“I am the wings that beat in the north wind, the young eagle who soars in the sky!” Just then, an announcement came down from the sky, followed by a sublime crash. It was Hero who rose to meet the young man in the chain mail cloak as he dropped down holding his sword overhead. The iron shaft of Hero’s spear clashed against the steel blade of Sid’s sword, and after a moment’s delay, cracks appeared along the ground at Hero’s feet from the impact.

“My name is Orestes!”

Hero managed to shake Orestes off, and after the young man alighted on the ground once more a little farther away, the two glared at each other.

“How surprising—I didn’t think he’d come from the sky.” Shiden, who would have been cut in two from head to groin if he hadn’t been defended by Hero, didn’t actually seem all that surprised. “It looks like there are more of them. Do you mind taking care of that?”

Orestes was followed by Stewart, Whitehead, and Mace, who also swooped

down from the sky. Reincarnators swarmed to the spot where they touched down, ready to meet them in battle. Engine, Reflector, Repeater, Fleetfoot, Fortress...these were all equally powerful warriors—Chief-class Reincarnators from the Project!

“Atten...tion!!!” A deafening cry boomed across the temple—not one amplified by a machine, but someone’s bona fide, natural voice. Who could be the owner of this imposing voice, which resounded like an earthquake? None other than the scion of the giant clan, the towering Halberd. With a broad grin on his face, he stepped through the entrance of the plaza, crushing a troop of Reincarnators beneath his feet. “We are the Halberd Brigade! The victors of the Holy War and the strongest force in all Terea! I myself am the giant whose valor in battle is known in heaven and earth—Halberd! We have gathered at the castle walls, scattered the pitiful forces of the Reincarnators, and have just now returned! We are those who are about to mop up the enemies who have infiltrated the Acropolis! Gah hoo...gah ha ha ha ha...!”

The giant swung his lump of iron, reducing the Reincarnators lined up before him to pulp, then pointed at the enemy commander, Shiden, and charged. The wave of people hurrying to surrender to the Reincarnators faltered and stopped where they stood. If they went any further now, they would be killed—not by the Reincarnators, it seemed, but by Halberd.

“It’s good to see you, Orestes. You’ll do nicely for my test run.” Hero thrust his spear toward Sid, then performed a half turn. He struck at Sid with the butt of his spear, then pressed upon him further, stepping in and striking with the palm of his hand. Not to be outdone by Hero, Sid stepped in and tackled his enemy as Hero was about to put all his momentum into his own maneuver—but he was too heavy to move! Sid lost the struggle and was repelled!

“This is the body of the hero Prodotis. It’s not the same as the body of the nobleman you faced up until now.”

“Even so, the one you’re praising is Prodotis. Could I ask you not to talk so high and mighty?” With a sullen expression, Sid rose to his feet and brushed dust off of his clothes.

“Indeed. And right now, I am Prodotis.” Hero removed the mask covering his mouth. Sid felt his heart race, then he slashed at Hero to stop him! Hero kept him at bay with his spear in one hand, and began to speak calmly. “Listen. People of northern Redguard, citizens of Vulcan. Do you recognize my face?”

The intercom picked up Hero’s voice, making compensations and adding a mysterious echo before broadcasting it. The hologram in the sky changed in

tandem, and zoomed into Hero's face. His white, translucent skin put one in mind of a corpse. His silver hair was long and fine, its texture resembling a cold blade. He was tall in stature. His shoulders were far broader than the average man's, the muscles much thicker.

"You must all know me. After all, this city has passed down my story through generations."

"Orestes! Don't let that man say his name!" cried the lieutenant Whitehead at the top of his lungs. Whitehead himself had been waylaid by two troublesome Chiefs, Fortress and Fleetfoot, and was unable to move.

Sid answered Whitehead's call. Fearless of repeating his previous failures, he stepped forth boldly, entwined his blade with phosphors—and struck at Hero! Hero looked up in the air, glancing at the living drone that the Reincarnators used for photography. And then he swung his spear. The sword and spear collided, then stopped, remaining locked together. The impact between them kicked up a wind, disturbing both combatants' hair. Sid yelled, and the phosphors surrounding his sword exploded.

A night wind blew in from the north, snuffing out the flames from the explosion. Sid stood stunned—Hero's body had not budged an inch. There was no trace of him having activated his Skill. In this contest of strength, Sid had utterly lost.

"My name is Prodotis."

Ah. Before Sid could mumble a response, Hero drove his foot deep into his stomach, sending him flying. This scene was broadcast live, so the people of Vulcan witnessed their hope's light, the warrior in the chain mail cloak, meet his sudden defeat. "The hero Prodotis will participate in the Reincarnators' Project. Surrender now, people of Vulcan."

The camera shifted, showing the tableau that met Hero's gaze as he looked up. Behind the spear he held in his hand was the solemn gabled roof of the temple. In the center stood the city's deity, Amputation. To the god's left was depicted the very man who now addressed the people, Prodotis, wielding a spear, with silver hair flowing behind him.

Hero's performance was intended to give the impression that this myth had been revived. Taking the name of the hero of antiquity would reinforce the Project's legitimacy.

The plaza fell silent, and the people gathered there exchanged glances with each other.

It was at that moment, as the crowd stood helpless, that from above their

heads a rust-colored gale blew in. With a high-pitched ringing sound, Hero's spear intercepted the assailant's sword.

“Took you long enough, Aegisthus.”



“Being late is just another point of etiquette when it comes to propaganda.” Dill’s feet touched down on the ground, and he held his shield and sword high as he commenced a violent retort against Hero, who readied his spear and his Skill in answer.

“Kill him, my dear Aegisthus.” After catapulting the late arrival with his lump of iron, Halberd smiled in satisfaction. Years ago, in the Holy War, he had sent Dill off in the same way many times. In those days they had found themselves surrounded by Titans, but now they faced off against undying Reincarnators.

“Hmm.” Fearing the influence the giant would have on the battle, the Manager—Summoner—appeared, commanding a small group of skilled Chiefs. Halberd gleefully readied his lump of iron. Mail-cloaks equal in number to the enemy Chiefs lined up alongside Halberd.

In front of the temple, Dill and Hero traded blows as the flying observation drone whirled around them, broadcasting live video. Each time Dill jumped, somersaulted, or whirled around, his rusty hair and chain mail cloak followed his movements. The opposing Hero’s long, silvery-white hair silhouetted his body like the spray of waves crashing against a craggy cliff.

“Master! Let me join you!” Sid leaped out of a gate of phosphors floating in the air and positioned himself on a diagonal from Dill, trapping Hero between them. Sid traced Dill’s movements, and they executed a perfectly synchronized pincer attack against their foe.

“Orestes,” Hero said. “Haven’t you learned your lesson? How many times have you already tried this and failed? It appears that you don’t know the difference between courage and recklessness, and it’s about time you faced facts. You are inferior to me.”

“No way I’ll be giving up! Master and the other men in the brigade grew strong by doing the same thing over and over again. The strength you and I have, attained easily through our Skills, is counterfeit!”

For a moment Hero looked stunned, apparently taken aback by Sid’s words. Dill did not overlook this. “No matter how many times you change your body, it’s no use. Your weakness is that indecisive mind of yours.” Dill stretched an arm toward Hero, which he dodged a moment before it connected, narrowly avoiding Dill seizing hold of his throat. All Dill had in his hand was the intercom receiver that Hero had held to his mouth—but that had been his aim all along.

“By merely plucking a single gadget from me, what do you—”

“Eugene, Hero of the Reincarnators—your speech was comical. Let me show

you what real propaganda looks like.”

Hero realized that the hologram in the sky now displayed a massive image of Dill. What was the observation drone doing? Turning his head, Hero saw a grinning man with a tattoo, holding the drone he had shot down with his crossbow.

“Tell them, partner!” cried the bard with the eagle tattoo, Rick. Dill raised the intercom receiver to his mouth and started to speak. Dill’s hologram stared sternly at the crowd. His features were sharp, though the scars of past battles were emblazoned across his face. His expression was dark as he turned his eyes down; under the black shadow cast by his bangs, his rust-colored eyes burned with the glow of hatred. The remnants of the magic he once had when he was considered a child prodigy as an actor continued to captivate people’s gazes.

Dill did not speak immediately. He knew just how much dramatic effect a calculated silence could produce. “—My name is ‘Aegis,’ the broad shield. I am the one who opposes the tyranny of the Reincarnators.” His voice resounded throughout the temple. It was a low, expansive, deep voice. Even his enemies, the Reincarnators, reflexively stayed their hands and listened. “Tereans, tamers of horses, and Vulcans, who gather around the anvil—I know you well. In the bygone days of the Holy War, the warriors of Terea ran through the fields of Notos with armaments forged by the people of Vulcan. We aimed for the Holy Land, with its tall spires, where the father of the gods, Ex Machina Anxiety, lives. To reclaim our god from the hands of heretics who paid their respects to the Titans, Terea and the Eleven Fortress Cities formed an alliance by divine providence.”

Dill’s speech continued. The Reincarnators, who at first had simply observed the situation, were no longer willing to stand and watch. To cut his speech short, Hero assumed a stance in preparation for unleashing his Skill.

“Don’t you dare—”

“—interrupt him!”

Hero was driven back by the young lion, Orestes, and the veteran, Whitehead.

“Our battles, as fierce as any found in mythology, could no doubt be heard raging far in the distance—even to the ends of the earth. We fought armies counting the Satyrs, Gigantes, and the Nymphs—all legendary Titans—among their numbers. In the Holy Land, Dios, we struck down the enemy general Lycaon and Chimera, the heretic priestess. These numerous acts of valor, and the mountains of treasure sent back to our hometowns, were only possible thanks to

the bravery of Terean men and the skill of Vulcan craftsmen. I know you well... I don't believe the same people, in the middle of this sacred city, watched over by your god, would sell themselves to the enemy without a fight. I know for a fact that you are not a crowd of such pitiful cowards!"

As Dill raised his voice, a shudder went through the assembled refugees. A true battle had already broken out in the plaza as Halberd led the mail-cloaks in his brigade to hinder the Reincarnators who tried to interrupt Dill's speech.

From time to time, Dill was forced to evade gunfire and psychokinetic projectiles raining down on him. Still, he continued to face the broadcasting device held by Rick Wake and did not falter in his speech.

Dill pointed to the other half of the skyward hologram, the PR video of the colonial city. "Gaze upon the terrible state of our home city! Towers from another world have been driven into the fallen land of our forefathers! The invaders have trampled upon our lovely flowers and ancient castles, as if they own the place! Those of our brethren unable to flee in time have been reduced to slavery, forcing smiles to please their captors! I know them well. The free people of Terea were said to be the proudest and most favored by the Ex Machina!"

As directed by Commander, a squad of four Charging Support Sphinxes formed and barrelled toward Dill. With the camera still in one hand, Rick used the other to fire his crossbow wildly, managing to hold back the Charging Supports' advance.

From out of the shadows cast by the Charging Supports leaped Fleetfoot. Using the apes as a shield, he slipped past Arthur's two swords, and even with a bolt from Rick's crossbow lodged in his thigh he arrived right in front of Dill.

"Don't get carried away, barbarian!" Opening successive miniature portals, Fleetfoot mesmerized Dill with his footwork before finally unleashing an attack that was sure to kill his foe. He held his knife in an overhand grip and slashed...but his knife met only air.

Leaning to one side to evade the strike, Dill gripped his spear high up the shaft and drove the head into Fleetfoot's chin from underneath. With Fleetfoot still skewered on his spear, he lifted it high above his head, then thrust it toward the camera.

"You must choose, people of the free state of Vulcan, and you Tereans, whose homeland was trampled by the Reincarnators! Will you submit to slavery and death?! Or will you take up arms and fight, emerge victorious and welcome a new dawn?! My name is Dill Steel-Link! In war, the name Aegis was bestowed upon me. I was born in Aspro Terea, and fought in the Holy War for

the good of my homeland. Neither the overgrown forests of Notos nor the Titan ambushes sent by Lycaon stood any chance of holding back my invincible might! You know me well!"

"Adolf..." muttered Hero, still standing stunned and not joining the fight.
"It's like...Adolf Hitler..."

"My name is Aegisthus—son of Halberd, hero of the Holy War! As a shepherd of our armies I was known as Aegisthus, the Titan killer! For the sake of all Tereans, to save the sacred city of Vulcan, Aegisthus has now returned!"

Tossing aside the spear with which he had skewered Fleetfoot, Dill drew his sword and struck the center of his shield with the hilt so that it rang. This fierce motion caused his rusty hair to sway, and with glistening beads of sweat flying from the nape of his neck, he was truly the image of a god.

"For victory! For freedom! Fight, O mortal children of men!" Dill turned his back to the camera. "Aegisthus will walk beside you." Dill's chain mail cloak billowed behind him and thunderously beat against the paving stones at his feet; he clashed with Repeater as she charged at him from one side and pushed her back. A cheer erupted throughout the plaza.

Behind the scenes, Halberd had made arrangements for weapons forged in Vulcan to be distributed to the civilians. The civilians, in their excitement, flocked to Dill with those weapons in hand.

Hero remained frozen where he stood. *What is this? I thought they would be unable to resist in the face of this overwhelming difference in strength, the attractiveness of our terms of surrender, and the influence of the hero Prodotis. Why didn't my words resonate with them? And why does Aegisthus always succeed when he gives a speech like that? This frenzied excitement... I've seen it somewhere once before.*

"Oh, man, this won't do at all! Shut the broadcast down at once! And what are you doing, Yuujin? Take this fight seriously." The leader of the Project, Shiden, wielder of lightning, had finally managed to shake off the persistent pursuit of the mail-cloaks and return to the plaza. In each hand he held a warrior of the brigade—the scout Stewart on one side and the burly soldier Bastard on the other. He cast their corpses, burnt black with eyes ruptured from within, casually aside.

"Dill Steel-Link must be killed," muttered Hero.

"Eh? What else is new? Hurry up and get to it."

Ignoring Shiden, Hero advanced at Dill. Noticing this, Dill left the other Reincarnators to his comrades, and turned to face Hero.

“My name is Eugene.”

“My name is Aegisthus,” answered Dill.

“My name is Orestes!” followed Sid, standing beside Dill. Also, the giant, Halberd, brushed off a few Reincarnators and joined the party.

“And my name is Halberd... Gah ha hoo, looks like all the main players are here.” In pursuit of the giant, Summoner emerged through an open portal. He was dressed as an office worker except for the gauntlets he wore on his hands and a helmet to protect his head—he had come decently well armored.

Shiden, who shrugged off these introductions with a yawn, became aware of a delicate silence and exchanged a glance with Summoner. “...Could you be waiting for me to introduce myself? I’m not going to. It’s embarrassing.”

“Hmm...would my business card be sufficient?” Still wearing his gauntlets, Summoner fumbled in his breast pocket to take out his business card case. Unsurprisingly, he dropped it, and the clatter of the case on the ground was taken as the signal to raise the curtain on their fierce battle!

“I don’t care for half measures. Let’s decide this once and for all, martial artist from another world.”

“Aegisthus, the instigator. How many times have men like you played with the hearts of the people, getting in the way of men like me? You’ve been placed before me to test my *heroic* ideals.” Halberd faced Summoner, Hero faced Dill.

“Which means...I suppose I’ll be fighting you? Are you content with that? I’m the strongest one here, you know?” Shiden smiled at Sid, with lightning bolts of seven colors illuminating him from behind.

“My name is Orestes. That name means, ‘he who will surpass Aegisthus.’ Shiden, general of the Reincarnators, listen well—Orestes will take your head.”

“...Ha ha ha ha! Pretty cool! You don’t stand a chance, though! Not a chance, not a chance! I am the strongest Reincarnator!”

“My father was a politician. I know this is coming from me, his son...but I assure you he was a fine man.” With a Skill-crafted coat of flames hanging from his shoulders, Hero surrounded the spear he wielded with a repulsive force field using his psychokinesis.

Dill raised his shield and bore the brunt of Hero’s spear—the blow was heavy, the spear imbued with an unnatural weight. Dill’s bones creaked, and he felt like the assault might blow off his arm as well as his shield. However, he

managed to swiftly jump back to his feet and prepare to receive another impact. His body was sent flying like a cannonball, grinding against the stone pavement as he touched back down a good distance away from where he had stood only a moment ago. This was fine with him—if he tried to stand firm in the face of this power, his arms would be easily broken.

Dill only had a moment of relief. Hero's follow-up attack arrived immediately as he closed the distance between them with a teleportation gate.

“My father is dead,” Hero went on. “He was abandoned and ignored by a society that had tired of him. People spread baseless rumors of corruption about him as though they were fact. My father was a righteous man...but he was *too* righteous. The people of our time couldn't live up to his standard of integrity.” This time, Dill dodged the force-field-enhanced spear instead of weathering the blow, retaliating with a thrust from his sword. Hero tilted his head to one side, dodging the strike. He then proceeded to lower his stance, planted a hand on the ground and executed an inverted roundhouse kick, which Dill blocked using his shield. Neither man would back down from the other. Dill held his sword overhand and moved to stab Hero before he could recover his stance.

“Your speech back there reminded me of the demagoguery of my father's political opponents.”

This statement made Dill suddenly feel uneasy, and he halted his attack. It was at that moment he realized something had changed. It was no longer there—Hero no longer wore the coat of flames he had created.

The coat had left Hero's shoulders and flew into the air, transforming into a swarm of butterflies which fluttered back down to earth. Beset on all sides by wings of flame, Dill shrouded himself in his chain mail cloak and endured the assault. Spinning around, he spread his cloak again, and the resulting gust scattering the butterflies.

As his field of vision opened up once more, Dill saw Hero waiting for him, prepared to strike him with his spear with all his might. “Aegisthus. I really don't like you.”

The force field spear came at Dill, impossible to defend against. It was utterly impossible now to block with his shield or to deflect with a blow to its side. Could he dodge it? It was already too late for that!

“You are fated to die, Dill Steel-Link!”

Nevertheless, Dill stepped forward. Before the spear achieved the peak of its momentum, he struck Hero with a preemptive shield bash, forcing the Reincarnator back. The tip of the spear pierced Dill's shoulder, but it did not go

all the way through, so the weapon was pulled free of his flesh as Hero flew backward.

Dill groaned and dropped to his knees. The spear might not have stabbed completely through his shoulder, but it was certainly no shallow wound.

“Aegisthus... Resourceful as ever, I see. No, rather...it was my failure. I held my spear in a short overhand grip with the intent of finishing you off. If I had made full use of my reach, I could have more reliably dealt you a mortal blow. I was too eager to win.” Hero did not seem to be addressing Dill as he said all this. “...In this way, I am still immature. But there is one ability I have that my father didn’t: I am a Reincarnator. I will never die. I can start over as many times as I need, so I will continue to develop endlessly.”

To buy time to staunch his wound, Dill decided to humor Hero. “I wonder. For my part, I think people are able to live diligently precisely *because* there are limits to their lives.”

“We’d call that living fast and dying young. It’s always instigators like you who fool, cajole, and light a fire under the masses—those who are pressed upon by their work and the passing days, and whose ignorance has not yet been banished by the light of knowledge.” Hero spat the words at Dill, his hatred laid bare. “Though I suppose if every member of that great crowd was a Socrates or a Plato, I guess there would never be an opportunity for a Hitler to rise to power... Looks like you’ve stopped your bleeding. Let’s continue.”

Dill turned one side of his body away from Hero, carefully concealing his wounded shoulder as he prepared to resume fighting. He now cursed at Hero in response. “Stop toying with me.”

“Once I have thoroughly beaten you into the ground in a fair fight, right in front of the citizens of Vulcan, their eyes will be opened for the first time. Now, come at me.”

Dill assumed a low stance and dashed forward, while Hero struck the ground with the butt of his spear. *What sort of Skill is this?* Dill gazed at the place where Hero’s spear had struck as murky shadows erupted from the ground and covered the area between them in the blink of an eye. Dill halted his charge and retreated from Hero, jumping back another step, but he couldn’t escape the shadows. The darkness had oozed across far too much of the ground.

The shadow was actually an extremely broad teleportation gate. Dill remained motionless. With his feet sinking into the surface of the newly opened black lake, it was as though he was standing in a thick layer of mud. He couldn’t move.

Dill had seen this Skill once before. This was the snare employed by the Reincarnator Pitfall, whom Dill had fought on his way to the current battle. But with this Skill in effect, Hero himself should also have been unable to move.

“Can you really get away...without moving?” Dill muttered in astoundment and readied his shield in front of himself. There was nothing else he could do. In answer, a dazzling ring of light appeared behind Hero—an incredibly powerful manifestation of his psychokinesis, so powerful it was visible with the naked eye. The ring of light broke into fragments which flew through the air, tracing parabolas. One by one, they fell to earth like shooting stars. This was Meteor’s Skill: a psychokinetic saturation bombing.

“Protect Steel-Link! We can’t allow our Aegisthus to die!”

Against the constant barrage of light projectiles, Dill’s shield shattered, and he was blown back. Now directly exposed to the barrage, Dill heard the voice of his comrade, Rick. Another familiar voice answered, raising a battle cry.

“Wait! Stop...” Dill fell to the ground and tumbled awkwardly, then struggled to raise his head. The barrage of light projectiles paused momentarily, and he saw Hero fighting with his comrades from the Halberd Brigade.

The names of the men the Reincarnator, Hero, slew in this moment were...

First was Arthurs, who did not rely on a shield. He cried out his own name before challenging Hero to single combat. The first sword he slashed at Hero with was stopped by a repulsion field generated by Hero’s psychokinesis, and the backup sword he wielded in his left hand locked with the head of Hero’s spear. Hero then sent it flying out of view. Without a shield, Arthurs had nothing left to protect him, and there was nothing left for him but to be skewered by Hero’s spear.

Next to charge forth was Lawrenson, a skilled shield-user eager to defend the body of his fallen comrade. He tried to strike at Hero with his stout shield, forged in Vulcan, but this would be his downfall. With his shield in front of him, Lawrenson could not see the teleportation gate at his feet. He stepped through, and reappeared with his back to Hero, who instantly pierced his heart from behind. Darkness then fell over Lawrenson’s eyes.

After seeing two brave warriors fall in the blink of an eye, the Vulcans battling in the plaza were put to rout, but the seasoned mercenaries of the Halberd Brigade stood firm. Receiving covering fire from Rick Wake’s crossbow, grizzled Whitehead made a dash at Hero. His hands glowed red with the blood of Prodotis he had injected earlier, and the spear he clutched conducted that heat, giving off the same red glow.

Hero gave Whitehead a glance, then ignited flames at his fingertips using his pyrokinesis and gently flicked the head of his spear. With this alone, his iron spear was engulfed in flames; Hero was now a warrior armed with the same weapon as the approaching Whitehead, with the same fiery blood in his veins. Out of the two warriors, it was Whitehead who struck first. The cover fire provided by Rick had proved effective, but seeing Hero tilt his body to one side to avoid the crossbow bolt, Whitehead decided to first aim for his feet to reduce his mobility. Hero ignited his foot in flames in response, kicking Whitehead's spear up high.

"Don't take me for a fool." The reason Whitehead's spear had been sent flying so high was that he had released his grip on it the moment before Hero kicked it. Whitehead swept a dagger out from its sheath around his knee and slashed at Hero, who was still in the middle of his kick—but what Whitehead saw was really just a hazy illusion Hero had constructed through telepathy.

The real Hero, who was standing two steps to the side of the illusion as it dissolved, then thrust with his spear, skewering Whitehead and lifting his body high into the air for all to see. The veteran lieutenant was burned by the flames imbued into the spear, and Hero tossed the body aside once the screams had subsided.

This frightful scene instilled fear even in the hearts of the warriors in chain mail cloaks. Hero would not let up in his slaughter, and proceeded to slay the nimble Birkin, the Kynthia-born Knightley, the Vulcan knight commander Beckett, and the reckless Chamberlain. Still Hero's bloodthirst was not quenched, so he went on to kill the archer Subal, Tobias, Vickers, Osborne, Talys, Scimitar, Dirac, Vaughn, Bennett, Driscoll, McBain Junior, Alan, Spencer, Welch, Usher, Saxon—Hero slaughtered every man named and flung their corpses away.

The Reincarnators were wildly excited by Hero's unstoppable advance and began to attack in a frenzy to collect bodies of their own. As they scrambled to claim their prizes, even though they impeded each other in their competition, they still succeeded in hunting down and killing many people of Vulcan.

"You killed them," said a low voice, the speaker holding back his anger. "You've killed my comrades...again!" Rust-colored eyes, opened wide, fell squarely on Hero. In his hands Dill held a spear and a shield, both taken from the hands of his fallen comrades.

Hero wordlessly assumed a fighting stance, and it was at that moment that it came. Snow began to fall...black snow. The sound of beating wings filled the air.

The sky, which had been lit up bright as day by illumination flares, suddenly grew dark. People found this curious and looked up, narrowing their eyes—and the black snow looked back at them.

They were looking at bird feathers, an eyeball growing out of each one. This was not the same as the pattern on a peacock's feathers—there was a genuine, plump eyeball protruding from near the center of each black feather. The eyes were *embedded* in them, and each iris was a vivid red.

A moment after their eyes locked with those of the feathers, after a few seconds of silence, the people started to scream. Frantically, they fled. From the sky, the being that scattered those feathers with eyeballs started its gradual descent.

Metamorphoses. Book Four. Harpy. This transformation, in contrast to the ones that came before, retained a humanoid shape. Nue Kirisaki. The red-eyed girl's arms changed midway into a pair of birdlike wings.

The feathers seemed to have been formed from what was originally her hair. Black just like the feathers, her hair was now wound around her shoulders and flowed into her wings, the span of which far surpassed the natural length of her arms. Like tree branches, they bifurcated repeatedly as they rampantly sprouted. In place of the rustle of leaves, there was the random, repetitive blinking of red eyes. The feathers each gazed in their own unique direction, looking down at the creatures crawling on the earth with contempt. She was a Titan, a Great One. A member of an ancient race.

Without saying a word, the child of Chimera alighted between Dill and Hero.

This is what had happened a short while before Nue appeared in the temple plaza.

“Don’t think badly of me. We’d already made this decision five years ago, but held off on putting it into action.” They were halfway up the slope of the Acropolis, on a narrow side street off the thoroughfare. Hathaway, adjutant of the Halberd Brigade, spoke to the girl with red eyes; his silver scabbard shone as he backed her into a corner.

“Be a good girl and show me your face. You are still a girl, after all, even though you’re a monster. I won’t make you suffer needlessly.”

“Grrrah...grr-gah. I’m...nada monster...!” came the reply. With a cul-de-sac behind her, the girl glared back at Hathaway and growled. There really was no word to describe her appearance right now except “monster,” though. Part of her black hair had transformed into crow-like wings. Her jaw had dislocated and its shape had twisted into something similar to a dog’s muzzle, sharp fangs

sprouting from her gums.

Nue's red eyes glowed, and she pounced at Hathaway like a beast, kicking off the opposite wall to attack him from above. Hathaway stayed calm, readied his slender blade, and rammed it precisely into Nue's shoulder while she was still airborne. He then proceeded to thrust the sword deeper into her shoulder, slamming her back against the wall behind her. Without letting his guard down, Hathaway jumped back immediately after his blow struck. Nue's attempt at retaliating hit only air.

Nue cried out in pain, and her voice wavered between the roar of a beast and the scream of a little girl. With a sword piercing her right shoulder, nailing her to the wall, Nue hung there in a strange, lopsided posture. Her feet could not quite reach the ground. As she struggled, the tips of her toes just barely brushed the floor. The slender blade had been driven into her shoulder up to the hilt, so no matter how much she struggled she could not pull it out. Her hostile snarling soon gave way to infantile whining, followed by sobs.

“Why are you doing this?”

Hathaway drew the second sword he had hanging from his belt. Without stopping to answer Nue's plea, he moved to deliver the killing blow—but seeing the red eyes he had once seen in the Holy War, eyes that had appeared to him in nightmares, now wet with helpless tears, he was struck with pity.

“This is for Steel-Link's sake.”

“Dill told you to kill me?”

Hathaway imagined that if he answered “yes,” the girl would cease her resistance. Still, he went on. “No, that's not what I meant. It's not good for him to have you around. He is Aegisthus. He's the last man Terea can hold up as a hero.”

“Dill...is just Dill...”

“Do you think heroes have time for nonsense like that? Aegisthus has a duty to claim victory in the fight with the Reincarnators and guide the people of Redguard. We cannot allow anything to cloud his judgment. For him to adopt a Titan like you is preposterous. Captain Halberd and I were both opposed to it from the start.”

Nue limply raised her head and looked up at the face of the slightly built man who was poised to kill her...or perhaps at the darkness lurking behind him.

“Thinking back now, you might have been the cause of it all. The man's daughter, Iris, died, then you came along and took her place. As a result, Dill abandoned the Brigade. You have to give him back. You must return him to us,

the people of Terea!"

"Stop," murmured Nue.

"It's no use begging."

"Please. Stop." Her red eyes were not looking at Hathaway.

"Pathetic. Your mother, Chimera, would never have..."

"Stop, Lycaon."

Hathaway noticed the tepid stench of blood rising up from behind him. He swiftly changed his grip on his sword, holding it overhand instead, and turned around to bring the weapon down on the space just behind him. In that very instant, a blade tore its way into Hathaway's shoulder and was drawn back almost as swiftly. Hathaway was then swept aside by an immense physical blow, and he kept on flying in that direction until he hit a wall.

"What the hell...are you doing here...?!" As Hathaway looked up, coughing blood, he saw the lurking darkness writhe...then take the form of a person.

"That was close, but I'm glad I made it in time." The man now standing before Hathaway had red eyes and black hair, and an animal pelt was draped around his shoulders. Besides this pelt, he only wore light armor on his shoulders and over his hands and shins—a heavily simplified form of battle attire. He did not seem to be armed, but this man had no need to carry a blade. The chief of the beast clan proceeded to ignore Hathaway completely, turning his attention entirely toward Nue, who was still nailed to the wall.

"I've come to rescue you, Nue Kirisaki."

"Liar...you were watching the whole time."

"I have no idea what you mean," Lycaon lied transparently.

"To make sure I'd owe you a favor, you waited until the last minute to act."

"Complete nonsense, girl...grrr...don't irritate me too much, or I might decide not to help you after all."

"I don't need help from the likes of you...!" Nue placed both hands on the hilt of the slender sword buried in her shoulder, groaning as she exerted force against it. The sword had dug deep into the stone wall and would not budge. Hathaway's skill with the rapier was truly something to be feared.

"Don't be so stubborn. I'll lend you a hand right now."

"Don't touch me! I don't want your help—not after you abandoned mama and me! Get out of here! You're only after Chimera's power!" With tears in her red eyes, Nue glared at the Satyr and bared her sharpened teeth to menace him.

"I believed you! I believed you were my dad the whole time!"

Nue then began to struggle violently. With each shake of her body, blood

poured out of the wound in her shoulder. Unable to withstand the pain, she cried out, writhed in agony, and whimpered. Eventually, she retched up something from deep within her chest and vomited it out into a bloody puddle on the ground. Inside that puddle were squirming lumps of flesh, sporting imperfect humanoid body parts—and they all started to speak.

“Traitor.”

“Jerk.”

“You abandoned mama.”

“You abandoned *me*.”

“Coward.”

“Keeping yourself out of harm’s way.”

“I believed you.”

“You fooled me!”

“You are not...”

“...my papa!”

The flesh lumps all shouted abuse, their voices overlapping. Lycaon’s hair stood up as he yelled back at them. “Be quiet! What would a little girl like you understand?! Those of us born to noble clans don’t have the right to go willingly to our deaths! Chimera refused to retreat for foolish reasons and even went so far as to join forces with Aegisthus to fight the Ex Machina—she was a traitor! She did all this knowing that if she didn’t retreat, neither could her daughter!”

Two pairs of red eyes glared at each other emotionally, and it was Nue who cooled down first. “That’s enough. You didn’t save me. Even now, you wouldn’t have saved me if you didn’t expect something in return. Dill was the one who helped me back then...and I’m going to go to Dill right now.” Having said this, she opened her mouth wide and shoved her free left hand into it. Still retching, she swallowed her hand, her wrist—her whole arm up to the elbow. Then, after feeling for something with her fingers, she wrenched it out. What emerged was darkness.

Blub-dub-dub-blub-dub-dub-dub-dub-dub-dub. *Blub.* *Blub...dub.* Nue spat out a clump of black feathers.

“Stop. It’s no use. You can’t escape from my wolf pack.” Lycaon found himself ignored. The feathers squirmed like insects, trembled, then floated up as lightly as bubbles. Some of them stuck to Nue’s body; the rest, like black snow falling in reverse, climbed silently into the sky. On each feather was a pattern resembling an eye, something like that of a peacock... No. Those patterns were in fact actual eyeballs. Each of the countless feathers bore an eyeball with a red

iris.

“Wait!” Lycaon started to lunge at Nue, then hesitated. His formerly coldhearted expression had become more human somehow—it was now a father’s face. The black feathers that had stuck to Nue clustered around her arms and began to grow outward like the branches of a tree. They bifurcated, becoming overgrown before blossoming into wings. Still on each feather was a single red eye, all of them blinking rapidly. The process of her transformation finally pushed the slender blade out of her shoulder, and it clattered to the ground. Starting at her chest, Nue’s torso was wrapped up in a dress made from her own feathers. From the knee down her legs were bare, and a black ooze ran from her wings down her thighs, eventually dripping from the tips of her toes.

“...Do you think I have no regrets?” Lycaon said. “That I fled without caring at all?”

“Bye-bye, Lycaon.”

“Wait, please! Just once more, give me a chance to be your father again...”

The girl floated above the ground, then flew into the air without once looking back. The sound of beating wings receded into the distance, and a fallen feather brushed against Lycaon’s cheek.

Nue Kirisaki—the girl who had once called Lycaon “father.” Lycaon did not pursue her. After a while, he snorted and went to leave.

“Wait. Did you think I’d let you get away?” Hathaway called out to Lycaon. He had staunched his wound, and now he held out his shortsword, blocking Lycaon’s path.

“Don’t get carried away, mortal. I’m the one who’s letting you live. Now get lost.”

The two glared at each other. Hathaway’s desire to kill Lycaon did not appear to wane, but regardless he slowly stepped back, then turned and left—likely to join his friends who still battled atop the Acropolis. The reasons were not important to Lycaon.

“I came all the way to the land of Boreas, but in the end it was for nothing. Looks like the recruitment of the new twelve generals is back to square one.” As Lycaon muttered to himself, he heard something—something screaming with Nue Kirisaki’s voice.

“Noooo! I don’t want to die! Nooo!” A comparatively large lump of flesh from among those Nue had vomited up greedily devoured the other lumps. It was a gruesome scene, and one that made Lycaon want to turn away—the sight of a half-hearted life-form, brought into the world unfinished. If he just left it

there, it would soon die. Lycaon turned his back and started to walk away, but then a thought came to him.

“Is that right? You don’t want to die?” He looked down at the largest lump of flesh. It seemed to possess ears. “Then, do you have the wits to make a deal for your life?”

The beating of those abnormal wings could be compared to the screeching of a hundred flocks of birds. As the harpy flew, an immense number of feathers came loose and fell behind her, but they did not scatter upon the wind. Instead, they stayed floating in the air, painting the sky above Vulcan black. The light of the illumination flares fired into the air by the Reincarnators began to fade, like the sun disappearing in an eclipse.

People looked up and saw Nyx, goddess of the night, descend from the sky. The eyes within the feathers, closed during flight, now opened. The hundred red eyes embedded in the coat of feathers gazed at the Reincarnators, the mercenaries, and the people of Vulcan.

“Nue, what are you doing here?”

Iris, what are you doing here?

Uncle, look out!

Memories flooded back to Dill, keenly sharpening his senses.

The Project Leader, Shiden, unleashed his lightning, directly targeting Nue. In response, Dill aimed his spear above his head and hurled it. The spear diverted the Reincarnator’s lightning bolt toward it, charring it black. The weapon clattered to the ground before crumbling into ash.

“Whoops, that was a failure.”

“Shiden! I am your opponent!” Sid slashed at Shiden, drawing the Project’s chief back into a one-on-one fight.

“Sid...?” Nue asked hesitantly, knowing nothing of Orestes.

“Shiden...this is preposterous.” Hero frowned.

“Nue, are you all right?” Dill picked up a replacement spear and ran toward her.

“Yep. Thanks. Um, I...” The girl’s expression was downcast. She was at a loss as to how to explain everything—Hathaway’s betrayal, Lycaon’s visit—and most of all, how to excuse the fact that she had disobeyed Dill’s wishes once again by transforming.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sure you had a good reason. Are you afraid I’ll be mad at you? We can talk about it later.” Dill moved to put himself between Nue and Hero. “Right now, I just need to protect you.”

“...Okay!”

Hero observed this exchange carefully. There had been reports of this bizarre young girl with wings, and this was most likely the very same being as the transformed giant that had appeared in the middle of the city. Hero had heard that the Managers who’d gone to deal with the giant had been obstructed in their cleanup by the appearance of Dill Steel-Link. So, was this winged girl an enemy? The nightmarish appearance of the feathers with eyeballs filling up the sky, along with the nerve-wracking noise of their blinking, had sent the Reincarnators and the natives indiscriminately into a state of confusion.

“S-Stop! Don’t stick to me! Whaa...eeeeek?!” A man screamed pitifully—he was the lab coat-wearing Reincarnator, Puppeteer, who had been hiding behind one of the temple’s pillars. Now he fled wildly, with eyeball feathers clinging. As if the fear had thrown his Skill into disarray, his self-targeted brainwashing was dispelled, returning him to his true self: a hunchbacked coward.

“Just like that man there with his unsightly wailing...” Dill drew closer to Hero. “...You too will be humiliated. You’ve lost your lifeline—your mood stabilizer.”

“I don’t consider that man my doctor, but my warden. This will just make it even easier for me to fight.” Dill and Hero closed the distance between them and crossed spears. As this continued, Nue Kirisaki continued to beat her blinking wings. Fallen black feathers floated into the air. The sky was now completely obscured by feathers, which had formed a dome without even a single crack in it; not even a thin shaft of light from the Reincarnators’ flares could break through. The only light left illuminating the great temple plaza were the festival bonfires still burning on the ground.

“Don’t recoil, advance! Dispose of that red-eyed girl and don’t hold back, you morons! Don’t you know that fear is nothing more than electrical signals in the brain?!” A solitary female Reincarnator gave her motionless subordinates a verbal thrashing. This woman was Repeater, a Chief-class Reincarnator. Repeater cast her eyes around the immediate area, but found that each and every low-ranking Reincarnator had lost the will to fight. “You cowardly dropouts! How did it come to this...?!”

“You’re the lady from earlier, aren’t you?” At the sound of this voice, every other noise audible to Repeater seemed to disappear. Before her was a young girl

with red eyes. A hundred more red eyes, these glaring out of wings overgrown like the trees in a dark forest, now stared down at Repeater. Her mouth went instantly dry, and she quickly looked left and right. There was no one there to help her—everyone had either fled or was now curled up on the ground, clutching their heads.

“I will enlighten you.” The voice Repeater managed to wring out of her own throat was so hoarse it surprised even her. Her field of vision began to waver up and down very slightly as her knees shook. “Impossible...what manner of Skill is this? This can’t be. I’m...”

The hundred eyes peering at Repeater turned up crookedly in glee. They were smiling. The hundred eyelids narrowed but did not close entirely, still leaving a thin gap through which they undoubtedly continued to stare at Repeater. A jolt of fear shot through her, raising goosebumps on her arms.

“You’re the lady who treated us so horribly, aren’t you?” The girl slid straight toward Repeater. Her wings were not beating—instead she floated in the air by some unknown force that appeared similar to levitation or magnetic repulsion.

“We Reincarnators are undying. Unyielding warriors who do not fear death...” The brave words she had recited so many times fell automatically from her lips as Repeater stepped back.

“Would you like to play tag? Or maybe hide and seek?”

Repeater turned away from Nue, and as she did she opened her mouth and let out a scream from the depths of her belly. Using her pyrokinesis, she fired bursts of flame from the heels of her feet, devoting everything she had to her escape. Her feet, unexpectedly, cut into the ground, and Repeater suddenly noticed the black mud spreading below her feet. With the girl’s feet at its epicenter, the pool of mud continued to expand. Black liquid ran down the girl’s white thighs, then her ankles, and finally dripped from the tips of her toes. Forming droplets, it fell to collect on the ground, and the area around them had become a pitch-black swamp. Repeater’s body sank. She couldn’t find her footing. *This is impossible. The plaza is flat and featureless, yet I can hear singing. Is it coming from the bottom of this swamp? No...it’s like the black water itself is vibrating—singing—with a girl’s voice.*

With a wet *plop*, something floated to the surface of the water. It was an eyeball with a red iris.

Heedless of the chaos reaching its peak in the plaza around them, the battle

between the two heroes intensified. Dill raised his shield and charged headlong at Hero, only for the Reincarnator to blast jets of flame from his back and push Dill away. With the shield between them, they fought for dominance. Dill tried lowering his shield to crush Hero's foot with his full weight, but Hero retaliated with a headbutt as soon as Dill's face was exposed.

Dill staggered back, blood flowing from a gash on his forehead. Hero pressed his advantage, swinging down his spear, imbued with a force field, but Dill threw his own spear faster than Hero could swing, forcing Hero to deflect the attack. In that opening, Dill threw himself against Hero.

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha!" Hero roared with laughter. Grappling with Hero, whose body temperature was abnormally high, was causing Dill pain. Maybe this was due to the fiery blood of the hero Prodotis coursing through Hero's veins, or maybe he had heated his whole body with his Skill, but in any case, in a bare-knuckle brawl, Dill was at a disadvantage.

"Heroes really are wonderful! Don't you agree, Aegisthus?!"

Dill shook off Hero's grasp and bashed him with his shield, retreating with the recoil from that blow. He then brought his foot down on the hilt of a sword resting on the ground at his feet, launching it into the air. In an instant, he seized the sword and thrust it forward.

One clash, two clashes, three—sparks flew as the two exchanged blows, grinding down their weapons while throwing their entire souls into their battle. Dill, however, was outmatched and sent flying. An explosion that Hero had created behind his back using his Skill had generated a blast of destructive power.

Dill skillfully broke his fall as he landed on the ground. He felt no agitation. Quite the opposite—his rust-colored eyes were cold.

"Having become a hero myself, I finally feel certain! My belief that a mighty superhuman should guide the masses was absolutely right! First I will defeat you, then Orestes, and then I will force this city to surrender! Maybe next I'll try destroying Panopticon itself?! Hah ha ha ha ha ha! There is no need for a complex society. An age of power, with a hero ruling over all, is much more desirable!" Hero cackled again and again.

Flames traced a spiral as they wrapped around Hero's spear, and he then thrust it at Dill, although Dill was out of striking range. The flames extended from the head of the spear, searing a straight line in front of Hero.

Holding his shield above his head, Dill ducked and evaded the flames. Two Reincarnators who fought nearby, Flagbearer and Halo, were caught in the burst

of flame and perished, rust-colored eyes watching them all the while. Dill noticed that the flames surrounding the spear had burnt Hero's fingertips black. It was just as Dill had predicted—without Puppeteer's telepathic intervention, Hero had lost his sanity. Sooner or later, this enemy would destroy himself.

As Dill stepped toward Hero to provoke a further assault, a coat with a camouflage pattern opened between them, blocking his path.

“Home delivery service, with a prescription for Hero. You’re up, Mr. Quack.”

“Eeeek! I’m scared, so scared, so scared! I wanna go home!”

Starlight, the Jumper who had just appeared, dragged out the man in the lab coat from the twinkling interior of his military coat and pushed him toward Hero. This “quack” was Hero’s chief physician: the user of telepathic brainwashing, Puppeteer.

Starlight turned around swiftly. “We meet again, Dill Steel-Link. Well, not that I wanted to, really...but it’s my job. Until our ace’s treatment is finished, would you be kind enough to play with me?” Starlight readied his tonfa and dagger, crossing them in front of himself. Facing Dill, he started to charge, but someone grabbed Starlight’s shoulder from behind.

“Out of my way, commoner.”

Starlight tried to give an answer, but could only cough up blood. He looked down at his midsection to see that he had been skewered by Hero’s spear. Behind Hero lay the doctor, Puppeteer, victim to a similar strike.

“Now, Aegisthus—let’s continue...”

“My name is Dill Steel-Link. Killer of Reincarnators...!” Dill had already unleashed his attack, and there was no reason he shouldn’t exploit the infighting between his enemies. Starlight had remained standing after being run through, so Dill used the man’s body as a shield as he circled around Hero to attack from the flank. This attack was blocked, predictably leading into another close-quarters battle.

“How many times do I have to tell you? I am no hero! I only take the name Aegisthus to intimidate my enemies and rally my allies. My name is Dill Steel-Link! The *actor* Dill Steel-Link!”

One of the two kicked at the other, who retaliated with his own kick, whereupon the two leaped away from each other. How many times had they repeated this exchange? It had happened in the middle of the festival, when they’d met in front of the stage, and again in the interior of Ex Machina Amputation. Now, it happened once more, in the midst of this duel in the temple

plaza.

“I’m going to finish this. I’ve had enough of fighting you.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth. Instigator Dill Steel-Link, you are no hero—you are merely an ordinary man. You only have so many cards to play, after all. I’ve grown bored of you, and I’ve gotten used to your movements—but my Skill has infinite possibilities. I shall bury you with a new technique.”

“Stop blathering and try me. I’ll crush your attempt and watch your heart break.”

“...Laughable! Let me show you my band of heroes.” With his spear in hand, Hero came at Dill with a low stance. Although he was swift, it was otherwise an ordinary charge...but the outline of his body seemed to be blurred. The blur expanded, creating two more Heroes, one on either side of the original.

This was most likely a telepathic illusion, so Dill now had to distinguish the original and take him out. The three Heroes fanned out in front of Dill, all of them striking at him with their weapons, and the timing between their attacks was cunningly varied.

Dill tried to guess which was the real Hero from their sight lines and the orientation of their bodies, but gave up. Hero’s illusion did not display any of the visual fraying characteristic of illusions created by low-ranking Whispers. Instead, Dill decided to view all three Heroes as genuine and deal with them all!

With a snap of his wrist, Dill hooked the spear coming from his left with his shield and deflected it. He locked his own spear with the spear coming from his right. As for the spear that approached him head-on, he gave that as much focus as he could muster, dodging it at the last second.

“You’re kidding me...” Dill breathed. He’d dealt with Hero’s attack perfectly, but he was left stunned. All three Heroes wielded spears with real weight which did not disappear when touched.

And at that moment, a fourth Hero manifested behind Dill and thrust his spear into Dill’s side from the back.

“This is...my Iliad!” The Reincarnator cried. Four fully physical Heroes, completely surrounding Dill, once more thrust their spears at him. It seemed he had nowhere to run, but Dill made a final desperate effort. Twisting his body, he pulled the spear piercing his flank—and its wielder—closer. Then, he swung the copy of Hero holding the spear around, leaving Dill outside of the circle and the copy now within it. The Hero who had stood behind him was pierced by the spears of the other three, screaming as blood gushed from his wound, before vanishing from sight.

“A physical illusion?!”

“That’s right! I used the psychokinesis of a Conductor to solidify the illusions of a Whisper, giving them transient flesh. I wouldn’t underestimate them if I were you. Each copy shares my fighting ability!”

The three remaining Heroes each attacked with a differently enhanced spear. One spear sported a force field, another dragged flames behind it, and the third crackled with lightning. Any of these Skill-imbued spears would do serious damage if they even grazed Dill, and he could see no opening in the assault. As the moments flowed on, so did Dill’s blood from the wound in his flank.

Dill’s expression was pitiful to behold. His rusty hair was matted with sweat and the shadows cast on his face were dark, like an omen of his own death. Hero became even more savage, filled with even more rage than before.

“I should thank you—it was you who gave me the idea for this technique! If we need a hero, I might as well become one. And then we might as well have more! Like this, Caesar shall no longer need to fear Brutus’s dagger. One man will rule as one hundred heroes! Instigators such as you could start an uprising of thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of my subjects, but I would still stamp it out! In this moment, I have accomplished my heroic ideal!”

The three Heroes crouched down together, then moved to leap at Dill. But then, the cobblestones at their feet shattered. A thick arrow quivered in the floor. Hero turned—the bolt had been fired by the bard, Rick Wake, who knelt down at the opposite edge of the black swamp, steadyng his long-barrelled crossbow.

The sound of a metallic strike followed, and a shadow flew across the swamp. It was the battle priest Mace, who had sent the warrior flying with his club—and then in a flash arrived the adjutant of the brigade, Hathaway. He landed on the far side of the battle and slashed at the Heroes.

The assault from the mail-cloaks forced two of the Heroes to stop in their tracks. The one in the center tried to continue his attack against Dill, but found he could not. He turned to face a spear coming toward him, and managed to hold it at bay with his psychokinesis. Hero was stunned.

“I thought I killed you...!”

“Too bad, huh?” With a spear wound to his abdomen and his body scorched all over, it was Whitehead, who had challenged Hero once and lost. “I have been revived, thanks to the blood of the hero...although I had to use about five years’ worth. Prodotis is Redguard’s hero. Even in death, he will ally with us.”

“Silence! I am Prodotis! What are the rest of you Reincarnators doing?!”

Hero looked around, expecting to see allies, and for the first time he understood

the disaster that had fallen on the plaza. The sky was blanketed by black feathers, and the ground had sunk beneath black ooze. Overturned armored cars and the bodies of Hero's fallen comrades were strewn throughout. The only ones still able to put up a fight were the Project Leader, Shiden, and the Manager Summoner. All other Reincarnators had lost their commanders and ceased to function as a group.

"When you are calm, you lack ambition and waver in indecision. When you become excited, your vision narrows. Eugene...you are not a hero. You have too many weaknesses." Dill ceased his performance of a man who had been cornered and advanced on Hero, his armaments clanging against his chain mail cloak. His approach was nothing short of fearsome.

"What...what is happening?"

"You believed too much in your own strength and refused to cooperate with others. This is the result. Among the subordinates you treated with such scorn, there were surely those who could have compensated for your weaknesses."

"Scorn? No, I simply..."

"You *scorned* your comrades," Dill repeated, with emphasis. He drove home that pivotal word. Hero probably had more to say, but Dill's words were forceful, without any hesitation. Therefore, they were convincing. Hero started to believe them in spite of himself. This was the power of the actor, Dill Steel-Link.

"I am but another mortal man, fated to die. I have many weaknesses. But I also have comrades. Eugene, you are alone. The words you deliver from on high will resonate in no one's heart." Dill raised his voice to a booming pitch.

"Halberd Brigade! We're forcing our way through!"

Whitehead and Hathaway slashed at Hero's two clones, who were too slow to react. Both of them were perfect clones of the real Yuujin—too perfect, as it turns out, as they were arrested by the same emotional disturbance. Without the slightest delay between them, the clones both activated their Skills. From the infinite possibilities available to a Play Actor, the effects matched Yuujin's preference—their spears glowed red with electrical current, with the aim of incinerating the enemies they fought. Unfortunately for them, they realized too late that this was not the optimal choice.

Their overconfidence in their own fighting ability was their undoing. They could have used more powerful Skills that covered a wider area, but had unconsciously decided to hold back. This opening was exploited. Dodging past the two clones, Dill Steel-Link had already arrived right in front of the real Hero.

Dill raised a battle cry. He had no words left, or even any time to spare for the role of Aegisthus. He was already too close to Hero for the Reincarnator to utilize most of his Skills. The only technique Hero had available to him was to send an electrical current through his spear, and in this close-quarters battle, taking the time to concentrate on activating a large-scale Skill would result in a swift beheading.

Striking the electrified spear with his shield, Dill knocked it aside. This brief contact allowed the current to run through the shield and up Dill's arm, searing him mercilessly, but he gritted his teeth and endured the pain. He had no particular plan to prevail in this fight—he simply brought all the willpower he had to bear.

Dill took a step forward and thrust out his spear, and Hero retreated to avoid the strike, creating some distance between them. If Hero withdrew for now and managed to widen the gap between them, he would gain the advantage of his Skill once again. From a vast array of options, he would use the safest, most certain combination of Skills, and achieve total victory.

But Hero could not. Dill continued to endure every hardship, never giving Hero a moment in which to retreat.

The thrusts from Dill's spear came closer. Each time Hero retreated, Dill stepped closer—one step, two steps, three. With his spear at the ready, he continued to pursue Hero.

Defeat. The word rose up in Hero's mind as he recalled the earlier battle within Ex Machina Amputation. *No. Impossible. It can't be. This time, I know every card in my enemy's hand.* Fear drove Hero to a decision. He gathered flames at the soles of his feet, then ignited jets there to propel his retreat, even casting away his spear to make himself lighter.

Hero shot straight backward. But Dill came after him. Clutching his spear, his feet pounding against ground, Dill's advance was foolishly direct. This gung ho approach, hardly befitting Dill's years of experience, gave Hero a sense of *déjà vu*.

"This...is Orestes's technique?! Dill Steel-Link! You mean to tell me that you're imitating someone created as an imitation of you?!"

Dill gave Hero his answer. Determining that this would be his final step, he dropped his stance and thrust his right hand forward with his spear, declaring, "My name is Dill Steel-Link. Son of Orestes." With this shockingly ordinary strike, the spear stabbed clear through Yuujin's chest. Yuujin, who had obtained the body of the hero Prodotis and commanded a panoply of Skills—who stood at

the very apex of all Reincarnators—was run through.

“The moment a child is born, duty toward that child makes a man into a father and a woman into a mother. Even as the parents bring forth a child, the child in turn brings forth their parents. In this endless cycle, life is truly reincarnated. This is the secret hidden within our mortal lives.”

“You know, I don’t share any of Yuujin’s beliefs. I am a completely transparent person.” As Shiden took a step forward, red lightning emerged from his toes and crawled along the ground like a snake to attack Sid. Phosphors burst at Sid’s feet, neutralizing the attack from Shiden’s Skill, but Shiden generated another serpent of red energy with every step he took, each one grinding away at Sid’s guard.

“When my creator designed me, that’s what he desired.” Shiden snapped his fingers. Beyond the sky covered in black feathers, there was a sound like the gurgling of a giant’s throat—that was the omen.

Part of the carpet of black feathers spanning the heavens glowed white hot, and a moment later it was pierced by a descending pillar of light. Each time Shiden activated his Skill, it struck at the speed of light, impossible to evade—but the area it covered was constrained. Using his observations of their battle up to this point, along with the Skill of clairvoyance that he had stolen from Hero, Sid was able to predict and dodge Shiden’s attacks. He drew closer to Shiden, then swung his naked blade, wreathed in phosphors.

Sid’s attack struck Shiden’s barrier, and he was sent flying backward with a green flash of light, his body singed black. Shiden approached Sid calmly as he struggled to stand back up.

“My Skill is powerful, isn’t it? It’s a gift. I’ve never worked hard to hone it. In fact, I’m not even allowed to work hard. People expect me to be a high performance product immediately,” whispered Shiden, as he stood next to Sid. His barrier of green light was currently inactive, as he had disabled its automatic function. “Well, see how much you can do. I still haven’t performed to the extent of my specifications. See if you can draw even more from my Skill.”

“I don’t need...your permission!” Sid leaped to his feet and unleashed his skilled swordplay instead. In addition, using his phosphorescent psychokinesis he drew a shield to his free hand, grasped it, and thrust it forward to strike Shiden.

Shiden snapped the fingers of both of his hands. Light pierced through the ceiling of feathers above their heads—the sign of another impending lightning strike.

"I am hope itself. Given a Skill, even an empty piece of garbage like me can become stronger than anyone!" the Reincarnator cried. Sid leaped away. The lightning engulfed Shiden himself...and then he reemerged, glowing gold with overwhelming electrical charge. The Reincarnator grinned—and then he vanished and reappeared behind Sid. Already struck by Shiden's fists moving at four times the speed of light, Sid went flying.

"I am the flagship product of the new line offered by Panopticon! This battle will be broadcast, and a lot of viewers will want to buy me. This program was brought to you by Panopticon Security Complex!" Shiden burst out laughing. Seven colors of electricity crackled around him, reacting to his heightened emotions.

Sid repressed the shaking in his knees and rose to his feet as phosphors slowly reconstructed his charred flesh. Shiden had already landed countless attacks that ought to have been fatal, but still Sid stood back up. As long as his will was not broken, Rei's phosphors would continue to answer his call.

"...Oh? You don't have to get up. If that last attack had killed you, that would have been a perfect ending." Shiden still smiled, but irritation was starting to creep into his voice.

At that moment, a cheer resounded like a roaring wave, prompting Shiden to turn his head ninety degrees to the side, his expression still vacant.

The ceiling of black feathers overhead, which had been left tattered by repeated strikes of lightning, had started to fall apart. The citizens of Vulcan, who had so feared the gaze of the red eyes embedded in the feathers covering the sky, finally regained their vigor at the sight of this. And then their eyes were drawn to the sight of Yuujin, Hero of the Reincarnators, meeting his ultimate defeat.

Dill cried out his own name in triumph, rallying the crowd. The people found their courage once more, thundering into the plaza like an avalanche and engulfing the Reincarnators of the Project.

With a smile still plastered on his face, Shiden tilted his head to one side.

"Reincarnators, you lose!" Sid yelled. "Aegisthus will kill you next! But first, I, Orestes will—"

"Ah, whatever. Let's go with plan B."

"Yes, sir." A man in a black suit, Summoner, suddenly appeared, despite the fact that a moment ago he had been exchanging blows with Halberd on the other side of the plaza. Underneath the Grim Reaper of the Project's smashed helmet, his unkempt comb-over fluttered in the wind. With an incongruous air of dignity

he moved his arms, first bringing his hands together, then parting them slowly like ripples expanding in a body of water. Sid, who had launched an attack toward Summoner to interrupt him, was himself held back by Shiden's barrier of green light. Dill, who rushed to support Sid, thrust his spear into the barrier, but he was too late. Summoner had finished opening a teleportation gate that was as large as he was capable of creating, excavating a yawning black hole in the night sky. Its size was beyond reckoning, but it certainly didn't appear any smaller than the ceiling of black feathers.

Following Dill, Nue came sliding through the air, then looked up at the colossal gate and growled. Something was starting to emerge from inside it. At first, it looked like a spherical mass suspended from several tubes. Then it started to move, emitting a sound of cyclical vibration as it seemingly communicated with whatever still lay unseen at the other end of the tubes.

"Allow me to introduce your god."

Ex Machina Amputation. Everyone present was now looking at the very image of the god *Ex Machina Amputation*, an ancient relic that had been preserved inside the temple at the top of the Acropolis. Its waist was an exposed cross section, and its chest had been constructed in meticulous detail, giving it a sense of vitality. Next to emerge was its muscular right arm, then the left arm, which was connected to a construction crane. Finally, the severe expression of an old man's face appeared before the eyes of the crowd.

The god's descent stopped. The many chains connected to the giant teleportation gate that held the god in its upright posture were pulled taut, as they suspended the god in midair. The spherical mass, connected to the exposed midsection of the god's hip by dangling tubes, was a power engine the Reincarnators had attached there. Its tubing pulsed ominously, almost like live entrails.

The god's face, elaborately constructed by the historical craftsmen of Vulcan, twitched almost imperceptibly. Then it lifted one of its eyelids, halfway revealing an eye carved from a single slab of marble. On the ground, people were awestruck.

"Now then, ladies and gentlemen." Assured of his own victory, Shiden stood atop the right shoulder of the blacksmith god. "I suggest that you surrender."

In the same fashion as many Vulcans around him, Dill rested both knees on the ground and bowed his head low.

"Master?! What are you doing? You have to stand and fight..."

"No. I'm fine as I am." Tears sparkled in Dill's eyes. To demonstrate his lack

of hostility, he held both hands up with his palms facing the sky. “The Ex Machina are our gods.”

Shiden watched the circle of prayer widen with cruel satisfaction. “Ohh? Amazing! Looks like religion matters most to these savage folk after all! We ought to have just done this in the first place. Now then, to make you truly understand the pecking order here, perhaps I’ll have your holy god perform a silly dance or something...wait, what?”

The god quaked beneath Shiden’s feet, shaking him off. Strongest though he may have been among the Reincarnators, he was thrown helplessly against the ground. To make matters worse for Shiden, the arm with the crane came crashing down upon him. With a massive crushing sound, the orange bolts of lightning Shiden had left behind to guard his body were scattered to the winds!

“You’re attacking me?! Why?!” Shiden reconstituted his body, then stood stunned.

“Of course he would attack you.” A deep, expansive, resonant voice rang out. This was a voice Shiden had long since grown tired of hearing—the actor, Dill Steel-Link. At some point Dill had stood up and begun walking toward Shiden. “This world’s name is Redguard. In this land, people and gods live together. No matter how many equations you drag out from your pale heads in your efforts to replace mythology with science, it’s no use. The gods do exist. Miracles happen. Destiny is unshakeable. The proof of all this is in everything you see before you—in this very moment.”

Shiden was overwhelmed. He was swallowed up by the force of Dill’s conviction and the unusual atmosphere that had begun to sweep the plaza. Shiden stood stunned for a spell, and then his composed expression went limp. “You’re too barbaric—there’s no convincing you. I suppose, in the end, we’ll have to go for Plan A to deal with you morons—overwhelming force!”

Dill and Sid—Aegisthus and Orestes—both assumed their battle stances.

“My name is Aegisthus!”

“And I am his son, Orestes!”

“Like I keep saying, I’m not going to announce my name! Although I will say that I am the strongest Reincarnator!”

Like a god sitting in heaven, delighting in his power over lightning, Shiden crashed against the battalion of mail-cloaks commanded by the two heroes. Amputation, god of the forge, watched over them. He was the genuine article, the protector god who presided over the castle city.

The man who was cast aside as this new legend unfolded could only look up in disbelief. The scene before him was blurred by the tears in his eyes. As he wiped the tears away to see more clearly, his eyes were only flooded again with a fresh round welling up. The acknowledgment of his own defeat lodged tightly in Yuujin's chest. He had fought twice and had now lost twice. Despite fighting under even more favorable circumstances the second time, still he found himself defeated.

I will never be a hero. Crossing between worlds, enduring hypnotic surgery and its severe aftereffects, finally I landed here, on Redguard. But the scant scraps of truth we seized at the end of this lengthy war didn't belong to me. I accept that now. I said that I sought a hero. That was a lie. In truth, I wanted to become one myself. I sought the kind of hero who could guide people and save a civilization—a strong, kind, fair, and capable hero. But I couldn't do it. The legendary battle unfolding in the plaza is not far removed in terms of distance, but I can now only think of it as an event happening beyond the heavens. I am no longer worthy to take part in what happens there.

To a Reincarnator, who does not possess a body, acknowledging one's own defeat was in some sense tantamount to death. Even if his mind were transferred to another body, Yuujin had calmly accepted that he would probably not be of any further use.

“Yuujin-san, that was a good effort. How are you feeling?” The voice was nonchalant and without emotion, as if reading from a script. Although his body and voice had changed, Yuujin could still tell who the speaker was. It was the Manager who served as Yuujin’s chief physician, Puppeteer. His spine was now elegantly straightened.

“...Doctor. I’m sorry about what happened earlier. I was on a bit of a high, I’m embarrassed to say.”

“Think nothing of it. You’ve calmed down now, haven’t you?”

“So have you, Doctor.” Yuujin smiled.

Accompanied by the footsteps of several others, Puppeteer came to stand in front of Yuujin. The Reincarnators guarding him dispersed, preventing the Vulcan civilians who had been watching the proceedings from getting any closer.

“Hey, Doctor, I have something to tell you...I think it’s time I quit the Project. I don’t mind if you send me back to military service. To succeed me as Manager...”

“285 days.”

“Huh?”

“It’s a new record for you.”

Yuujin didn’t understand the meaning of Puppeteer’s words. The doctor walked right up to Yuujin and scrutinized the damage to his body. “This body is truly magnificent. It drew out more of your power than any you’ve worn previously. What’s more, it’s still usable. Astonishing, really.”

“About that, Doctor...unfortunately, I’ve already decided...”

“Yes, yes. As I was saying, I heard you say the same thing 285 days ago.”

285. A new record. Yuujin finally understood what Puppeteer was talking about. *What version of me...am I?*

In that moment, Yuujin activated his Skill, sweeping the air in front of him with flames from his hands. The Reincarnator bodyguards were all immolated—he had attacked so swiftly they had no chance to react! However...

“Nice try, but I’ve already touched you.” The illusion dissipated. Standing behind Yuujin, Puppeteer had his hand on Yuujin’s head. “Now then...I’m going to reset you. Welcome to the Project. I’m pleased to have another chance to work with you.”

Yuujin let out a scream of terror. “No! No, please stop! I can’t do it! It’s impossible! Stop...stop!!!”

At that moment, something happened that was entirely beyond Puppeteer’s expectations. Yuujin resisted and retaliated in a way he hadn’t during the five resets that had been performed on him up until now. With direct contact, Puppeteer’s telepathy should have been too powerful to give Yuujin any leeway to resist. This irregularity was most likely caused by something to do with the body of the ancient hero.

Yuujin seized Puppeteer by the head and activated the same Skill that had just been used on him. He interposed his own will within Puppeteer’s personality, overwriting it—trampling upon it. This was the Skill of brainwashing, and Yuujin thrust the appendage of his newly copied Skill into Puppeteer’s brain and set about scrambling it. He peeled away the sturdy layers of protection the Skill’s original practitioner had installed there and began to rewrite Puppeteer’s mind. Puppeteer increased the output of his own Skill in an attempt to resist Yuujin and with extreme force, the likes of which he had never employed before, he began to assault Yuujin’s mind in retaliation.

Then an accident occurred. Yuujin’s fragile, unstable mind shattered almost audibly. The seat of his influence, which had kept the body under control, was suddenly left empty. The ancient spirit within his body did not overlook this

opportunity.

“The time has come.” With a popping sound, Puppeteer’s head was crushed within a mighty fist. The newly awakened man looked up at the sky, then down at his feet. A spear was stuck in his belly, left there after Dill had pierced it.

The man pulled out the spear and cast it aside. Blood gushed from the wound. The blood was colored blue—the blue of nanomachines—but as if being eroded away, the blue was gradually replaced by red. The blood that spilled at the man’s feet began to boil, sending up steam—this blood was searing hot. The red-hot blood cauterized the man’s wound as it poured out, and finally the bleeding stopped.

The man took a deep breath. For the first time in five hundred years, he smelled the air of Redguard.

“It is time for my revenge.”

Thunder roared, and feathers with eyes fluttered in the air. On the ground, the two heroes collided with the chief of the Reincarnators, who did not know death. Swords clashed against solidified lightning.

The man silently walked through the maelstrom. An arrow passed very close to his side, grazing him. Red electrical current crawled across the paving stones at his feet, passing between his legs. Still, the man did not react. He only gave a glance to the god of the forge dangling from the giant teleportation gate, then knitted his brow.

“...Accursed false god.” The man halted in front of the temple. He then stared at the pediment holding up the roof and the deceitful history carved upon it.

“I am the warrior of the armies of Terea, the hero who defended his kingdom—Aegisthus the pious.” Dill walked over to confront the man. “Are you still not done dying, Reincarnator who scorns the gods...!”

“Hero...of the Tereans?” The man looked at Dill, who stopped in his tracks. He shrunk back before the unexpected ferocity emanating from the man.

“Master! Something...is wrong. This man is not a Reincarnator.”

Sid, who should have been fighting with Shiden, instead came to Dill’s side and tugged at his clothes to pull him away, shaking his head again and again. Dill seemed shocked by Sid’s behavior.

“You aren’t Yuujin, are you? Who are you, then?” At the sound of Shiden’s voice, several teleportation gates opened, surrounding the man who was once the

Reincarnator called Hero. The Manager known as Summoner emerged alongside a number of notable Chiefs.

There was silence. The battle for the Acropolis now stood still as all attention was focused on this solitary man. The man glared at the Reincarnators surrounding him, the mail-cloaks beyond them, and finally at the people of Vulcan of the Eleven Cities, standing in the distance. A far-off expression fell upon the man's eyes and his pupils dilated, as if he were sighing. Deep emotions welled up inside him, ones that only he could understand. Finally, with an air of resignation, he broke the ice.

"My name is Prodotis." His voice was propelled with the force of superhuman lungs. Echoes layered infinitely upon each other, growing in volume the farther they traveled, reaching as far as the castle walls surrounding Vulcan before returning. "I am the warrior reared in Krios of the fierce winds, the king who rules over the fortress city. I am the hero, Prodotis."

Many among those gathered there did not understand what they were hearing at first—and even Dill was among them. Summoner issued a command to his subordinates.

Four Reincarnator Chiefs attacked Prodotis at once. And just as immediately, they died. The names of those slain were Flaming Dragon, Spartan, and Blue Storm. The moment before Flaming Dragon released an inferno from his mouth, he received a blow to his jaw and incinerated himself instead. Next, the hero unleashed a kick that obliterated Spartan despite the heavy armor he wore. Blue Storm's point-blank attack against Prodotis was ineffective, deflected by the hero's skin before he countered with his empty fist. This counterattack caved in the Reincarnator's forehead, killing him.

"It would seem that a great many years have passed since my death. Am I to understand that this world is now in the era of walking corpses known as Reincarnators?" Prodotis read information directly through his fingertips from Engine, the one Chief still alive, as he clutched the Reincarnator's head in one mighty hand. Where Prodotis's fingers touched Engine's head, gradually Engine's flesh and bone melted from the hero's body heat and started to cave in. His body proceeded to go up in flames, turning to charcoal and finally crumbling.

"That's right. The coming age belongs to us!" The General Manager of the Project was not frightened, and his tone was inappropriately bright. Such emotions as fear simply had not been programmed into him to begin with. "Hey, Yuujin, I know cosplay can be fun when you're a teenager, but we're grown

adults, aren't we? So it's about time we got back to work!"

A spear surrounded by purple lightning flashed into existence—electricity given form by force which then started to break apart, dissolving back into bolts of lightning as it rushed toward the ancient hero's chest.

How did Prodotis meet this threat?

"Prodotis the Silver, son of Geryon, has arrived." The spear's progress halted abruptly—Prodotis had seized it in one of his bare hands. Even touching the spear shouldn't have left him unharmed. As the spear of lightning disintegrated, the destructive energy composing it began to dissipate into the surrounding air. But the hero would not let go. Blood began to flow from his wounded hand—red blood, from which plumes of steam rose.

The wounds sustained by the hero closed up rapidly, his skin returning to its original appearance. The destruction inflicted by the forged lightning in his grasp and the regenerative properties of his blood fought each other for dominance. Prodotis's face was grim, but he did not flinch. With his other hand, the hero grabbed Shiden by the head.

"...Hey! You're tough. Have I lost? According to our specifications, your obsolete Liquid Computer should not be able to withstand my electrical assault. Has it been updated since then? I need to have them investigate this in Tower City. I have to remain the strongest Reincarnator, after all..."

"You seem to be incapable of fear. I pity you." Prodotis interrupted Shiden even as his body was still being burned by Shiden's lightning. His face, illuminated by blinding flashes of electricity, was stern, in stark contrast to Shiden's giddy laughter.

"You pity me?"

"Let me tell you why."

"What do you think you're doing—"

Prodotis activated his Skill. This Skill belonged to Eugene, Hero of the Reincarnators, but also to the original source from which it had been copied—the Manager, Puppeteer. It was the Skill of telepathy—of personality intervention. Shiden, who had never known fear, suddenly screamed. He opened his eyes wide and gazed at the messenger of death approaching him, the hero from antiquity who had returned to life.

"I think I shall take your 'Skill' as well." The arm that grasped Shiden's head glowed, and the veins pulsed as the lightning was sucked from his body.

Prodotis then made noise of annoyance as Summoner, who had opened a gate, emerged with his fist thrust forward. As he threw all his might behind a

blow aimed at Prodotis's spine, the hero said, "Your power also looks like it might be useful," and seized him by his head as well, throwing Shiden to the ground. The fallen Reincarnator lay motionless. Next, it was Summoner who cried out in horror. Eventually, he, too, fell silent and was cast aside.

No one else had the nerve to challenge Prodotis. The Reincarnators of the Project whispered something to each other. Some of them communicated with some other station on their remote terminals, while others just started to back away slowly.

"Excuse me," inquired Sid, summoning up his courage. "You're...our ally, aren't you?"

"An ally?" Prodotis responded. His otherworldly curtain of long, silver hair wavered as he turned his head. Sid gulped. "You ask me if I am an ally of the Tereans?" Prodotis took a step forward. "You ask the man who stole the blood of the gods from the cities of the north, where it was monopolized, and gave it to the people of Terea—you ask *me* if I am an ally of the Tereans?"

"Sid." Dill shook his head and readied his spear and shield. Cold sweat ran down the nape of his neck.

"You ask me, the man who stood together with Haos, king of Terea, against the proud armies of Boreas, if I am an ally of the Tereans?"

The commotion amongst the Reincarnators grew steadily louder. The words that had previously been whispered were now close to being audible.

"You ask if I am an ally of the accursed Tereans, who in the middle of that war, learned of my plan to bestow eternal life upon all humanity, betrayed Krios, and joined forces with Boreas?!"

"Orestes! Prepare yourself for battle!" cried Dill.

"My name is Prodotis! I am the king of golden Krios, who was betrayed by the Tereans and whose life was ended before achieving its purpose! I am Prodotis, the savior!"

"This man is both a hero and a Reincarnator! A legend approaches!"

The hero of mythology leaned forward. The paving stones at his feet cracked, lifted off the ground, then flew behind him like buckshot. He charged forward, smashing the ground he tread upon. Dill held up his shield, and Sid expanded a barrier of phosphors. Now standing right in front of them, Prodotis lifted a spear formed from lightning and thrust it at the pair.

There was a flash as if the sun itself had risen. Waves of electricity and pressure raced through the plaza, along with the roar of thunder. Sid's curtain of phosphors was torn apart like silk, powerless to stop the attack. Overhead, Dill's

shield flew from his hands and shattered into pieces.

The screams of the Reincarnators rose above the plaza.

“We’ve received communications from the Tower Capital! Shiden and the Manager’s cloud data has been lost... They’re both dead! They can’t ever be revived again!”

“Run! The cyclical Reincarnation system is down!” The Reincarnators threw down their weapons and ran off in random directions, no longer an organized group but a mob of individuals. The numbers in the crowd only amplified their fear. Their retreating backs aroused a primitive desire to pursue them in the minds of the people of Vulcan, as the Vulcans remembered the destruction wrought upon their home city, and remembered that they held weapons in their hands. Thus they gave themselves over to acts of revenge.

Amidst the chaos in the plaza, Dill and the hero Prodotis glared at each other. In the first clash, Dill lost his shield, and Sid was sent flying far away from the action. Dill didn’t even know if Sid was still alive, and he didn’t have time to check.

Dill adjusted his footing, moved his spear so the point was pressed against Prodotis, and began to push his enemy back. Sid had only been able to fight against Shiden because his protective phosphors had counterbalanced the Reincarnator’s electrical shocks, but Dill had no such protection. If he took an attack head-on, that would be it for him.

Dill swept his chain mail cloak around him, concealing himself for an instant. Turning his head to look away from Prodotis, he sprang suddenly in the opposite direction. Still wielding his spear, Dill wheeled around to Prodotis’s back; he could hardly have been swifter if he’d employed a Reincarnator’s teleportation. From that position, he drove his spear into the vulnerable nape of Prodotis’s neck.

Prodotis did not even attempt to dodge. The spear was deflected with a metallic noise, the head of it bending limply. The resistance Dill encountered felt as though he’d struck solid bronze. Dill could not believe his own eyes—there was only an extremely shallow mark on the hero’s neck. Even that slight graze was soon filled in by the burning red blood that seeped out of it.

“Why so shocked? Are the people of this age really so ignorant? A hero has the same blood as the gods, and flesh forged from bronze. It is for that reason that we are called demigods.” The hero Prodotis took a heavy step. Without taking up a weapon, he casually thrust out an open hand, pushing Dill back, and Dill was flung away.

The impact to Dill's chest made him cough up blood, and after spinning a full rotation in the air, he landed on the ground back first. The links of his chain mail cloak unraveled and clattered on the ground.

Prodotis had not even put any Skill behind that attack. When the Reincarnator, Hero, had inhabited the body, this power had been forgotten—not even tested, but left hidden. This was the true strength of a hero. Several mail-cloaks stood against Prodotis, who had come to deliver the killing blow to Dill, but Prodotis was unfazed by their efforts, even though Halberd was among those who challenged him.

“Stop it!” The flutter of wings, a black wind...the red eyes dancing in the air all focused their gaze on a single point.

“...Princess of the Titans. Why do you stand in my way?” Prodotis stopped in his tracks. He looked up at the bizarre form of Nue not in fear, but in puzzlement.

“Because...he’s my family.”

“Family? You both hail from different tribes.”

“That’s not what I mean...”

Prodotis showed no further interest in Nue’s situation. “Long ago, on the occasion of my adventure to retrieve the blood of the gods from Phoebus of the Eleven Cities, the gods of the Titans assisted me. I would like to request your help in this century too—you shall come with me.” Without asking permission, Prodotis stretched out his hand and grabbed Nue by the arm. Her black wings beat furiously in an attempt to resist the hero, but it was no use.

“Nue...Nue!” Dill cried out and tried to stand up. Unable to do so, he fell on his face. Nue stretched out her own hand toward Dill and screamed. That old nightmare flared to life again in Dill’s mind—Iris slain and taken away from him. Once again, his hand would never reach her.

“Wait, don’t go! Don’t leave me here!”

“You may rest assured, Terean—false hero, Aegisthus. In due course, I will return to Vulcan. I will assume command of these immortal armies, so that this time I may bring down the hated cities of the Ex Machina.”

“Nue! Give Nue back! Give me back my daughter! You can’t do this to me... I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you, Prodotis!”

“Dill! Save me...!” Nue cried.

The hero then used the power of the Reincarnators at last—one of his Skills. A gate opened, rainbows glittering around its edge, and Prodotis, still holding Nue, disappeared through it. With the desperation of a dying man, Dill searched

for the place where they would reemerge. Thanks to his persistence, he found it, atop the southern wall of the castle. But Prodotis soon opened another gate and disappeared through it. After that...he couldn't find them again.

Dill shouted until he was hoarse. Half-crazed, he ran around the battlefield, dragging out Reincarnators who had hidden underneath piles of corpses and slaying them—until finally he lost consciousness.

CHAPTER 3 — FEATHERS, FALL OUT

With a dull, heavy pain in his head, Dill opened his eyes. It seemed that he had not dreamed, nor had he been relieved of his fatigue. However, he did not feel like going back to sleep.

Dill sat up. He was in his own bedroom, at home. The light breaking in through the window illuminated the floorboards, but he saw nothing else of note.

Next to Dill on the bed was Sid, lying in the spot where Cirulia would usually be found sleeping. The boy's body was entirely covered in bandages, stained with blood in several places. Dill's own condition was not too different. Beside the double bed was an old cooking pot that had not been used in quite some time, but now it was full of Dill and Sid's blood-soaked bandages someone had changed for Dill and Sid.

Dill got out of bed. The boy, who lay breathing inaudibly with a pained expression, did not show any signs of awakening.

Entering the living room, Dill found Cirulia. She sat at a desk with forehead resting on top of her folded hands, looking like a cold statue of bronze.

Finally, Dill broke the silence. "I have something to talk to you about."

"...Sit down." It turned out Cirulia was awake. Dill did not sit down. "Don't you even have time to rest your legs?" she said.

"I'm going to get Nue back." There was a pause in the conversation, and neither of them moved. Cirulia, who had kept her face turned down, did not look up at Dill.

After a moment, Cirulia finally spoke. "I often think to myself: when in my life was I happiest?" Her voice was unnaturally bright. "When Iris was born, I was happy. Before that, when we lived together with Apollo and Maria, all four of us in one house, was fun and lively too. Of course, I like Nue as well. I really do. She may be noisy and spoiled, but she's surprisingly thoughtful in spite of that... Not only do I like her, I probably *love* her. Enough that it's not important that we aren't related by blood."

Dill did not respond. By his silence, he encouraged Cirulia to continue.

"But more than anyone else...I loved you, Dill Steel-Link." Cirulia raised her head. Having nursed Dill and Sid through the night, crying all the while, her

eyes were swollen with dark bags underneath. Her ruined festival makeup, which she'd had no time to wash off, was still smeared across her face—proof of her devotion. It seemed Cirulia had done nothing for herself; the bandage Dill had wrapped around her head the previous night was still there, untouched. Dill had dressed her wound with far less skill than she had dressed his—her bandage had come almost completely loose and sagged down to her brow. Around the back of her head where her wound was located, blood had coagulated in her milky-white hair, making it stick up as though she'd just gotten out of bed.

"For me, the peak of my happiness was the moment I was wed to you, a washed-up actor... We were poor, with no prospects for our future; we lived in a slum; and back then you were still a grouchy, disagreeable fellow, and not even very kind...but once in a while you were kind, despite that. I was foolish, and I was happy with that. The time we lived together, just the two of us, was the happiest time in my life..." Her eyes sparkled as she looked at Dill. Those were eyes that were longing for the past. Although she faced Dill, she was not truly looking at him.

Dill did not respond. He didn't even indicate that he was listening. He knew he had no right to say anything, and he knew how much he had forced Cirulia to sacrifice in the years leading up to this day.

The light vanished from Cirulia's eyes. "Dill. I have a favor to ask. Let's break up. I can't take it anymore. I can't go on waiting, worrying if you'll come home or not." Dill gritted his teeth and looked down—looking for a way out. During his silence, Cirulia went on. "This isn't a threat, you understand. I'm not asking you to give up on Nue for me. I mean, even if I did, you'd still go to save her, wouldn't you?" Cirulia smiled coldly. A fragment of a convulsive, hysterical laugh broke through her calmness, but her pride immediately suppressed it. Cirulia Steel-Link was a truly proud woman. And yet, in spite of this, in the next moment her grief escaped in paroxysms, as her composure finally crumbled.

"...Did I fail you by never bearing you a child?" Cirulia came closer to Dill, holding out her hands to him like she was begging for mercy—and then she drew them back suddenly, as if shocked by static electricity, and buried her face in them. "I just don't know anymore," said Cirulia, sobbing. "Dill...I love you. More than anyone."

Dill extended a hand to lay it on Cirulia's shoulder. She raised her head again. "Never show me your face again," she said. She then pulled her ring from her thin, sinewy finger, the skin on her hands in tatters from too much soap, and

slammed it down on the desk. The last flecks of nail polish from yesterday's manicure chipped from her nails and fell to the ground.

Dill picked up Cirulia's ring—the first ring he had ever given her, a cheap bauble whose gold plating had long since worn off. Then for a moment, he reflected with a sense of regret that if he could do his life over, he ought not to adopt any children at all, but instead he should simply live together with this woman, just the two of them.

"...I promise I'll rescue Nue and come back to you. Then we can try one more time..."

"Don't you dare! Do you still intend to be so cruel, giving me false hope?!" Cirulia grasped at Dill, and then after they had stared at each other for a moment, she turned her face away and burst into tears. "Just leave."

In the end, that's just what Dill did.

"Hey, partner." In front of the gates stood a group of about ten men in chain mail cloaks. They sat atop horses in full battle gear, and Dill knew each of them well. He was briefly struck by how few men were actually gathered there.

"...Are we leaving some members of the brigade in Vulcan?"

"No, we aren't. Everyone who isn't here died yesterday," answered Halberd, whose burns from the electric shocks he had received could be glimpsed in the gaps between the bandages on his body.

"Normally, the first thing you'd say is 'Are you really coming with me?!" or something like that, wouldn't you?" The poet Rick, who laughed after he spoke, had his right eye obscured by an eye patch.

"I suppose that's true... What do you think, General?" Dill looked up at the giant with a wry smile. Halberd threw his head back and laughed.

"It's like I always say—for those who are fated to die, the best course of action is to meet one's end in battle, with honor. We're all going to die one day, after all. That being the case, this first-rate prey—the revived hero, Prodotis—cannot be passed over."

"I'm glad you're so straightforward. It means I can always count on you. Well, how about the rest of you?"

"Do not worry. It looks like we'll be well compensated." The superhuman priest, Mace, who had managed to survive the previous night's battle, smiled while flexing his biceps.

"Master. I'm coming too," came a voice from behind Dill. "Without Orestes, do you really think you can win against the legendary hero?" As Sid came into view, Dill looked at him with a complex expression. The boy was well prepared for the journey. Could he really have done all that himself in this brief window of time? It seemed impossible.

After being woken up by Dill and Cirulia's argument, Sid had headed after Dill and had probably exchanged a few words with Cirulia...then he had asked for her help and prepared. In the end, what had Cirulia been thinking?

Dill closed his rust-colored eyes as everyone awaited his words. When he opened them, he began to speak with the air of an actor taking the stage. "First of all, I am pleased to have so many of my brothers in arms rise up to join this battle against the famed Prodotis, whose name causes even the mightiest soldiers to tremble where they stand. However, it will be difficult for everyone gathered here to return alive to walk upon the land of Vulcan again. Even if the Ex Machina, who dwell in heaven, should join forces with us, we will not be able to avoid an arduous battle. But I'll spare you a tedious speech—after all, no one amongst you will cower in fear, no matter how long a list of threats I give you."

Dill looked at each of his comrades' faces in turn. None of them averted their eyes. The adjutant, Hathaway, nodded forcefully in response, clearly deep in thought.

"Nice. This is *definitely* gonna be like one of the epics," teased Rick. Dill answered him with a smile.

"...That's about the shape of it. Let's go...and let's die. Or else survive to bathe in the sunlight, and one day far from now, look back on what happened today and reminisce. Those of us who are fated to die spend our whole lives awash with suffering. Saying that, we have faced such hardships in the past—and we persevered." The Brigade of the Eagle silently set off, with no one to bid them farewell.

On horseback, they descended the slopes of Vulcan, a city which remained seemingly deserted even though they had fought so hard to save it. All who dwelt there were still sleeping, exhausted by recent events. The mercenaries passed through the open gates of the fortress, kicking up a narrow plume of dust in the Crater of Vulcan, before leaving the city far behind.

When the mercenaries reached the edge of the crater, they suddenly became aware of a gloomy man wearing a hood and surrounded by mist, standing on the gentle slope behind them. His name was Foghorn, and he was the last of the six

Project Managers.

From the depths of the mist sounded the muffled exhausts of several engines. A number of unadorned vehicles made of steel passed by the Manager known as Foghorn. They were all headed in the same direction as the Halberd Brigade, who had already passed by. After watching the throng of over twenty vehicles depart, Foghorn deactivated his Skill. He was standing by a respawn point the Reincarnators had built surreptitiously by the crater as a forward base for attacking Vulcan, whose true purpose he had kept shrouded in the mist.

The instant Nue Kirisaki opened her red eyes, she leaped up from the ground with beastlike agility and surveyed the space around her. The sky was tinged with yellow as the sun approached the horizon and afternoon gave way to sunset. Around Nue was a ruined wall, and beneath her feet was a decayed stone floor. All dried and eroded, the structure had begun to turn to dust and disappear into the sands of the surrounding wasteland. She was in a land that was gradually dying.

This is... Nue scoured her memory. She had seen this place before. In fact, she had come here several times in the past. In the course of Dill's hunt for Reincarnators, they had visited this place as they traveled between Vulcan and the Terean region.

These were the ruins of the ancient kingdom of Krios, three days' journey from Vulcan on foot. She should be able to return home to Dill from here, then, even if she had to walk.

“So you are awake, Princess of the Titans.” The hope Nue had started to cling to was suddenly shattered. Prodotis appeared before her with his armor removed and his upper body practically bare. He had a single extravagant sheet of fabric wrapped around his waist and fastened at his left shoulder, leaving the rest of his exceptional body exposed. This was exactly the garb of a classical statue, the likes of which were placed at every intersection in Vulcan. “Welcome to my kingdom.”

Looks like I won't be escaping so easily, Nue thought. Was this person's body really the same one he'd had before? The magnitude of his presence was totally different from when the Reincarnator, Hero, had inhabited it. The length of his limbs, the breadth of his shoulders, the shape of his face, its angles...every element was beautiful, as though they had been entirely constructed according to

the proportions of perfection determined by nature—the golden and silver ratios. When Hero's personality had taken precedence, this perfection had been hidden. This was not beauty in the common sense. It was a mathematical beauty, of perfect balance—a beauty that belonged in the realm of the gods.

"...What are you going to do to me?" Nue's nerves kept her voice quiet.

"Nothing. At least, not yet." The hero pointed to an opened box at his feet. "I have prepared a change of garments for you. If they appeal, you may change into them." The contents of the old-fashioned chest were pure white clothes from antiquity. They looked a bit like the costume Nue had worn for the play at the City Deity Festival—a woolen *peplos*, adorned with many pleats.

Now that it had been mentioned, she noticed that the dress of black feathers that had formed during her transformation had begun to deteriorate and fall apart.

"Is something the matter? Do not hesitate on my behalf. When I was alive, we were taught that guests should receive hospitality. Or could it be that you do not know how to wear garments in the style of Krios? I only wish I could summon you a handmaiden, but my subjects all met their end at the hands of the Tereans, without exception."

Prodotis's words somehow lacked intonation, and Nue felt that something was fundamentally off about him. Was this simply a characteristic of the race known as heroes, or dissociation as a result of coming from the classical age to the contemporary? Nue could not tell.

Time...the irreversible flow of the river. Nue suddenly felt the dry wind of the wastes of Krios blow slightly colder on her bare arms. "What are you going to do? Will you become king again, in an empty kingdom...?"

"A king is not a king without his people. As things stand, I cannot call myself king, but part of my duty as a monarch is to take revenge for my lost subjects. I have requested reinforcements for that purpose."

"You won't find anyone to help you with that... Let me go home, already." Nue was starting to think this man might be insane. Prodotis, however, was filled with unclouded confidence as he pointed to the heavens.

"Look up." Within the border between the setting sun and the night sky were seven stars that formed a constellation. They shone brighter for an instant, then started to move. "Awaken from your slumber, Seven Generals of Krios." One of the stars accelerated and broke away from the others, a tail of light trailing behind it. This star from the head of the constellation drew closer, headed directly for Nue and Prodotis's location.

The top of the shooting star broke off, and something like a conical parachute unfolded above it, slowing the star's descent. Expanding in the wind, the parachute was nearly carried away by the air currents high in the sky, but as Prodotis raised his hand, the unseen force of his psychokinesis supported the craft, restoring its stability.

Slowly, with almost frustrating sluggishness, the conical metallic object drew closer. It eventually touched down softly, right in front of their eyes. Its height was in excess of two meters, and the cone's apex was cut off, leaving it flat, giving the object the overall appearance of a pot or cauldron. With its base burnt black by the heat its descent generated, a door on the side of the cone burst open and flew off. Inside was a colossal seashell, with white flesh between its two halves. Buried in that flesh was a human—a man.

"What is this smell...a Titan?" Nue asked. Before she had the time to feel cautious, Nue was overcome by a wave of nostalgia. The wistful feeling seemed to originate from the shell and the mass of flesh crammed into the conical device.

Prodotis answered Nue. After the manner of an ancient hero, his tone was matter-of-fact like an imperious god, the lack of expression in his face transcending the contemporary expectations of good and evil. "The Cradle of Ouranos...or so it was once called by the princess of the Erinyes."

The man enveloped in the mass of flesh shifted. He then extended his arms outward, parting the spongy tissue. His shoulders followed, and then he emerged entirely as if falling from the shell.

Prodotis stood before the man. They both had silver hair, and they were also close to each other in stature, with the same glorious sense of balance in their proportions. Without the man giving his name, Nue already knew what he must be. She had already heard it in the tales of mythology told by Dill.

"Show thy face, my son. O treasure of Krios—Kranos of the shining helm."

"It has been some time, father. Far too long, truly...!" A moment after the hero Kranos looked up at his father, he prostrated himself at his feet and kissed his toes.

Prodotis responded magnanimously. "After the death of your father, I do not know whether you faithfully inherited my kingdom and fought against the forces of Terea. For now, let us say that you did. I commend you for safely returning to life and meeting with me once again, O son." The father laid his hand on his son's head. It was a moving reunion in some ways, but it was clear that the ideals at the root of their relationship were not in keeping with contemporary

thinking.

Nue felt a sense of stunned unease. Her misgivings were confirmed by the next words out of Kranos's mouth. "With all due respect, father, I must say this. The people of Terea must be driven from the land of Redguard. Following your death, their exploits became lawless in the extreme, with their craven treachery eventually leading to the demise of our beloved Krios! How many winters have passed since that war ravaged our land...? No matter—we must kill the descendants of the brazen Haos. We cannot leave a single one alive, not even a newborn babe."

"O son, your thoughts align with those of your father. With my strength combined with that of yours and the rest of the Seven Generals, let us achieve that." As the father and son spoke, metal cones that continued to fall from the sky successively deployed parachutes overhead and descended to the ground. Shells crammed with white flesh cracked open and the ancient heroes within were resurrected, their hearts still clinging to the hatred born from the day they were vanquished in their war with Terea, five hundred years prior.

One of the parachutes was buffeted by the wind high in the sky, dramatically diverting its progress. It appeared that the psychokinesis that Prodoris had exerted on Kranos's vessel would not reach as far as this one that had flown off course. The isolated conical vessel plummeted into the open wasteland of Krios, beyond the ruins.

A plume of dust rose out of the wastes. In the very place where the cone had fallen and disturbed the ground, there approached a band of cavalry. Upon the standard they raised was the crest of a three-headed eagle. Light sparkled in Nue's red eyes.

"Dill!"

The march of the cavalry continued without rest. The sun was already beginning to set; Sid, riding with Dill and utterly exhausted, started to nod off. Dill, who held the reins, supported Sid in front of him, to prevent the boy from falling off the horse. He couldn't bring himself to criticize Sid's drowsiness or lack of alertness, though. The boy was not used to riding on horseback, and it was a tiring task. Besides, the presence of this one boy had prevented the atmosphere in the Halberd Brigade from becoming too dismal.

Last night, they had lost a great many comrades. They rode in single file,

advancing without speaking a word to each other. The thundering of hooves was all the more clamorous for the cavalrymen's silence. Conifer trees, characteristic of the northern regions, gradually grew more sparse as they traveled. The air became drier and filled with dust. Against Dill's chest, Sid stirred. He coughed, as if he had inhaled some of the dust in the air.

"Master, this is..." Sid rubbed his sleepy eyes and gazed across the barren land.

"Right. These are the wastes of Krios." Dill and Sid had visited this place once before. They had passed through after Dill had rescued Sid from the village at the crossroads, during their journey to Vulcan. "Prodotis is the king of Krios. At the hands of the Tereans in that era, his fortress city was destroyed. I've even heard that the forests around it were burned and salt was scattered over the ground so it would never recover...but I can't think that one of the ancients, having just been resurrected, would go anywhere else. He would have to start by trying to return to his home."

"Didn't Prodotis fight against the Ex Machina? Hearing that the Tereans destroyed his city...that wasn't how the play I saw went at all." Dill smiled in response to Sid's doubts. He remembered the story of the play well, as both he and Nue had performed in it before.

"You're right. The historical reality is quite different. The direct opponents of Prodotis were not the Ex Machina themselves, but the faithful who worshipped them. In other words, the people of the northern region of Boreas, which included Vulcan, and us, the people of Terea. So...I think he probably still bears a grudge against us." Dill looked up at the sky, searching for a group of seven stars—the stars of the Seven Generals, who had inherited the war in defense of Krios after the death of Prodotis and had later died fruitlessly themselves.

History was written by the victors. However, truths that were once buried can sometimes be unearthed through the work of archaeologists and philologists. Dill was well aware of the fact that the idolization of Prodotis and the Seven Generals through their depictions in plays and epic poems had an undercurrent of guilt to it.

As Dill looked up at the sky, he saw the stars begin to move. The constellation that was said to have existed in the night sky for the past five hundred years suddenly broke apart. The very first to fall was the brightest of the seven stars—Kranos. Next was Nefritis, followed by Achtida, falling in turn and tearing through the evening sky as they approached.

There was a buzz amongst the men of the brigade as they realized that the

shooting stars were headed toward their own destination, the ruins of Krios.

“Hey now, hey now! I hope I’m wrong, but...”

“When we went through the contract, I’m pretty sure it said that Prodotis would be our only opponent... It looks like we’ll need to request a special bonus from Halberd.” In spite of their vehement protests, the mercenaries, still atop their horses, were already making preparations for battle.

The stars raining down from the sky opened parachutes halfway down, and decelerated. One of them was blown away by the wind, and its course was redirected toward the mercenaries.

“The white whale, Falaina of the Seven Generals of Krios...!” Dill murmured the name given to that star when it still resided in the sky. Now that he had a closer look at the hero’s star, it was revealed to be a conical hunk of metal, which shuddered and produced a disturbing noise from inside.

The strange noise sounded once again. With the vessel still airborne, a musclebound arm tore through the side of the metal cone and stuck out like a chick’s beak breaking through an eggshell. But even seen from afar, it was clear that the arm was too large for an ordinary human. Even compared to Halberd, who rode beside the mercenaries on a chariot drawn by four horses, it still looked enormous.

“Be careful! If the legends are true, the hero Falaina is a scion of the race of giants!” The metal cone shook after opening a parachute and decelerating, and the giant’s arm that had broken through the wall of the craft proceeded to rip off its own parachute. There was a metallic clang as the craft sped downward and slammed against the ground—and in the next moment, the metal shell was blown apart from within.

There was a roar that made the mercenaries’ hair stand on end. The giant’s bellow, greater even than thunder, echoed as far as the plains of Vulcan. The man who emerged from the vessel was twice as tall as Halberd. Standing atop the shell of a colossal bivalve, he stared up at the heavens with his mouth agape.

The proportions of his body were, as one might expect, different from those of a normal person. His back muscles were disproportionately enlarged compared to the rest of his body, giving him the silhouette of a man carrying a heavy load on his back.

His entire body was muscled—even his arms and legs, which compared to his massive hunched back seemed almost slender, bulged like the fluted pillars that supported the roofs of temples, and he loomed with undeniably strength. His skin, which was surprisingly smooth and fair of complexion, contributed even

further to the heroic giant's splendor and resemblance to a marble carving.

"A giant of purer blood than I...even the Titans we encountered in the Holy War had much thinner blood than their godly forebears and could not sustain such colossal bodies. My boys, engage this enemy with care! This is, without question, the greatest of all heroes in this world!" With this long-awaited, legendary foe before him, Halberd could not conceal his excitement.

The hero Falaina, returned to the world in the present day, slowly became aware of the brigade. Trampling the bivalve shell at his feet, he turned to stare directly at the mercenaries. His chalk-white skin burned bright in the evening sun, and the growl he let out to intimidate the men shook the very air, like a portent of a coming earthquake. The cavalry of the brigade fanned out to surround Falaina, then stopped.

"You men of Terea are persistent, not to mention hasty... Can you not even wait for me to assemble my army of undying soldiers to attack Vulcan?" A dark vortex whirled into life between the giant and the mercenary band, and out of it a voice echoed. This was the power of teleportation, stolen from the Reincarnator Summoner. It was of course the king of Krios himself, Prodotis, who emerged from the portal.

"O great star Falaina, who shakes the very earth. I regret to ask this of you so soon after your awakening, but I need you to fight these men. You alone should suffice. I still have much to do at Krios."

"Ὑμνος τιγενεάκογχη Πτυσίσλοσλοσαίπύς φάκε' φάκελύω γρειράωλύωαι πίνσόρεύσάκ•μήλύω." Falaina answered his king by roaring incomprehensibly at the heavens. With eyes opened wide, Prodotis looked up at the giant.

"Did you not bring forward the same intelligence you had in your previous life? Ah. What a pity." Prodotis then vanished.

The curtain had opened on this epic battle.

"Have at him, Aegisthus!"

"My name is Aegisthus! Hero of Terea and valorous warrior of the Halberd Brigade! In order to wrest back my daughter from Prodotis, I will defeat you, Falaina the hero, and push my way past!" In accordance with Halberd's command, Dill announced himself loudly.

The brigade's adjutant, Hathaway, supported Dill with his own rallying cry. "We have nothing to fear from these long-decayed heroes of old! We have among us the hero Aegisthus, the divine shield! Charge!" Still mounted, Dill and Hathaway broke away from the rest of the brigade, along with Halberd, who dismounted from his four-horse chariot and hefted his repaired lump of iron

before advancing.

Sid had separated from Dill and was now mounted upon the lieutenant Whitehead's steed. "We'll keep Orestes in reserve. Let's go. While Steel-Link and the others keep Falaina busy, we'll retrieve Nue Kirisaki. Vanquishing the hero is not our top priority."

"Yes, sir!" answered Sid.

In spite of the grievous injuries he'd sustained in the battle of the previous night, there was no obvious change in Whitehead's voice. Clinging to his back, Sid thought about how trustworthy the lieutenant seemed. The horse veered around the hero Falaina and headed straight for Krios. Mace and Dwayne, another mail-cloak, followed Sid and Whitehead in support.

"—Whitehead!" resounded a strained voice. It was Dill who had spoken. Sid looked over his shoulder and saw the mountainous bulk of Falaina, who paid no heed to Dill and Hathaway's attack, hefting something to throw right at him and the lieutenant as they rode away. What was it that the giant had clutched in his hands...? It was a foundation stone, torn from the earth beneath the ruins.

“πλησίοσθ’ φάκε → λύωλύω»φάτκελύωπυσίς=λύώ!” Without shifting his posture, the giant raised his right leg above his head and then brought it down, stomping forcefully upon the ground. Then he drew back his right arm and swung it forward, along with the rest of his body. The boulder clutched in his hand was sent soaring through the air, and what seemed to be a single stone was in fact a number of identical slabs bound together, which broke apart in midair and rained down upon Sid's party with terrifying velocity. For Sid, this brought to mind the psychokinetic saturation bombing employed by the Reincarnator Meteor.

"Orestes! Hold on tight!" cried Whitehead as he grabbed a hold of Sid, who was still seated behind him, before leaping off of his horse in order to use the animal's body as a shield from the boulders. With a fearsome noise, the boulder soared through the air and for a moment they heard the horse's pitiful whinny.

"It's all right now. Get up." Whitehead, who had pinned Sid down on the ground to shield him, let the boy go. Sid opened his eyes wide. Dwayne, the mail-cloak who had accompanied them on their race to the ruined castle of Krios, was no longer there. He had been crushed along with his horse under one of the slabs thrown by Falaina, which jutted out of the ground diagonally. Mace was still alive, but his horse had also been crushed by a stone, its body strewn in pieces across the ground. The horse Sid and Whitehead had ridden had met with the same fate.

“Watch out! Stop Falaina!” someone yelled. Falaina, the giant, had already turned away from Sid’s party and set his sights on the four-horse chariot Halberd had been riding. Brave warriors in chain mail cloaks struck him with spears or slashed at him with swords from behind, but it was like hacking away at marble pillars. Although he was a being of living flesh, blades could scarcely pierce his skin—instead the weapons themselves were chipped from each blow. Even the light grazes they managed to inflict were immediately closed up by the steaming red blood that seeped out of them.

Falaina arrived in front of the chariot. The horses tried to flee in various directions despite being lashed to the same vehicle, but the giant beat them all into the dirt.

“Looks like we managed to slip away... Falaina, the white whale, was even better known for his shrewd tactics than his colossal stature, and it seems his strategic mind is somewhat intact. He’s severely limited our mobility.” Whitehead uncharacteristically let his emotions show plainly on his aged, dignified face.

Dill, Hathaway, and Rick together released their horses’ reins and dismounted, leaving their steeds to flee in the directions of their choosing. However, it was already too late. Three horses alone could not carry every member of the brigade.

“Gya hoo ha ha...not too shabby, hero of ancient Krios. Even displaced into the present day, the fighting prowess of the white whale Falaina never falters. That leaves no alternative but for my brigade to encircle you and bring you down.”

Falaina could not speak—he could only growl incoherent sounds. However, the sparkle in his eyes spoke to the fact that the giant still retained a keen sense of reason. Falaina crouched down once again. Whitehead’s party, who had doubled back, formed up and readied their weapons. Sid brought Orestes to the fore, cloaking himself in phosphors and transforming.

Falaina charged, kicking up dust as he came. This caused a small-scale sandstorm, cutting the mail-cloaks off from their comrades. Through the cacophony around them and their occluded field of vision, they heard someone scream. As the dust cleared, they saw one of their comrades had fallen, then another.

“My name is Orestes!” Launched forward by a blow from Whitehead’s shield, Sid slashed at Falaina from high in the air, his sword surrounded by phosphors! The hero, Falaina, saw through this with a swiftness that did not

match his enormous stature. He tilted his head to one side, taking the sword strike on his exposed shoulder...but the sword did not seem to cleave through Falaina's flesh, instead stopping with a shrill ringing noise. His skin was tough. But Sid let the phosphors gathered at the blade's edge explode, pushing the blade that had only made a shallow cut deeper into the giant's flesh!

“φρῦνος ξύπνειρβάλλω λύωστρῦνω>λεωφό νροςβάθυςφάκεξάντι” At this point, Falaina let out a cry of agony for the first time and shook Sid off his shoulders. Cushioning the impact with his phosphors as he hit the ground, Sid immediately rose to his feet. His attack had hit home—but the celebratory shout he gave turned to a sigh once he looked up at Falaina, whose bulk far outweighed the wound Sid had managed to inflict.



Just how many times would he have to land a hit on this hero?

“Nue!” cried Dill, causing Sid to look in the same direction. Night had fallen more quickly above the ruins of Krios. What appeared at first to be a flock of birds was most likely a cloud of fallen black feathers. A pair of bizarre wings was molting even as they were flying through the sky—but the trajectory of their flight was unnatural. Rather than flying in a straight line, their motion was serpentine. As the wings beat furiously to gain altitude, they looked to be missing the majority of their feathers, as if they were shedding their feathers to hide themselves in an attempt to escape.

Something long and thin launched into the sky—a spear thrown with frightening speed, whose trajectory connected with the girl tracing a complex path through the sky and sent her plummeting out of the air.

“Nue is—” Without thinking, Sid leaned in Nue’s direction. Then a shadow fell over his head. Falaina, who had judged that he should vanquish Sid first of all, clenched his fists together and brought them down toward the boy.

An arrow, a spear, an iron lump, a club, a rapier, and a shield—all of these collided with Falaina’s colossal arms to halt their descent. Dill, who raised his shield and slammed into Falaina with his entire weight behind it, was sent flying back, tumbling across the wasteland. The combined attacks of all the mercenaries were eventually able to slightly slow the progress of Falaina’s fists, allowing Sid to just barely escape.

Shaking sand from his long hair, Dill shouted, “Orestes! Focus! If we lose you, we’ll have no chance of winning!”

“...Yes, Master!” Sid’s voice trembled at Dill’s reprimand. He sniffled, feeling absolutely hopeless. As long as Falaina still stood, he couldn’t go to help Nue, and she could not escape under her own strength. Sid had no choice but to defeat this hero!

Falaina’s ferocious assault continued. The giant’s pillar-like arms slammed against the earth, and without stopping swept toward the brigade, grinding against the ground as they came. Evading this incredibly far-reaching attack, Mace climbed atop Falaina’s arm, and Sid stepped forward courageously to pass between the giant’s legs. To allow his comrades to escape, Dill drew out Falaina’s attacks, running away at the last second, but he proved unable to evade each impact entirely. Again, he was sent tumbling across the wastes.

Sid set phosphors filled with rage along his blade and struck at the giant. Falaina, who had sustained a cut to his inner thigh, still moved with characteristic agility, pulling his leg back and bringing his fist down upon Sid—

a blow from the mighty fist of Falaina, the white whale, the likes of which was said to have once toppled the walls of Vulcan!

Sid spread out his phosphors thinly over a wide area in order to conceal himself. At the moment Falaina's aim wavered, Sid dropped to the ground and dodged the attack. Halberd, who was no longer marked for death by Falaina, and Dill, who had just returned to the battlefield, each delivered a blow to Falaina's tough hide!

"Damn...damn it! Fall! Hurry up, I'm begging you—just go down...!" Sid wielded his sword as he prayed, each blow decisively landing on Falaina's body. But no matter how much damage he took, none of it amounted to a mortal wound due to his colossal stature. Thanks to his size, Falaina had inexhaustible stamina and maintained a nightmarish agility. There was no end in sight.

"Ah!" A gasp escaped Sid's lips. At the edge of his vision, he saw Dill tumble. He had repeated that exploit countless times already, presenting himself as bait to give Sid opportunities to attack.

Raising a battle cry, Rick fired his crossbow wildly. Halberd threw down his lump of iron and charged ahead, grappling with an opponent twice his height in an effort to hold him back.

The arrows could not pierce Falaina's skin, and he paid no mind to the detonation of the explosives attached to the arrowheads. He peeled Halberd off his body with ease and tossed him away casually.

The end was approaching. Long before the hero, Falaina, ever fell, the mortal men who fought him would reach their limit. Falaina was now in front of Dill, who lay on the ground unable to stand; the giant raised one foot in the air and brought it down toward Dill. It was an utterly inglorious motion, an act of execution—but Falaina's foot stopped in midair. It was as if a massive, unseen hand had grabbed and held it there.

"Are you having some trouble, gentlemen...?" A pompous voice resounded throughout the wasteland. Dill recognized the theatrical manner of speech, more than the voice itself. The same was true for Whitehead and Mace. A keen sense of hostility started to surge through the members of the Halberd Brigade.

"To see those in need and not help shows a lack of courage! Please welcome to the stage a band of Reincarnators who love justice!" A pair of shiny leather shoes stepped firmly upon the sands of the wasteland. As if acting in a pantomime, the Project Manager called Toiler stepped through a teleportation gate with both hands raised in the air, stopping for dramatic effect.

Next to him appeared a man wearing a camouflage coat—the Manager

known as Starlight. The lining of his coat was connected to another dimension and sparkled as if stars were scattered throughout it. On this occasion Starlight carried a large waterproof sheet, which fluttered like a battle standard. This sheet of fabric, predictably, also received the influence of his Skill, turning it into another teleportation gate.

The overlapping roars of several engines could be heard resounding from within the wide sheet, and in the very next instant, a group of motorbikes leaped out of Starlight's portal. Leading the convoy was Repeater, an expert in combat and pyrokinesis. Igniting flames on both of her bike's wheels, she exceeded its normal top speed and thus was the first to arrive in front of Falaina. She then jumped off her bike, her leap assisted by an eruption of flames, and once she was high enough to be level with the giant's nose she unleashed a merciless flurry of six strikes—right, right, left, right, left, left!

Falaina, who still had one leg in the clutches of Toiler's unseen hands, wavered noticeably under these impacts. Even a hero of such colossal stature could be toppled if he lost his footing...and he had begun to tip over. The resurrected hero, Falaina—the castle crusher, the white whale—slammed into the ground on his back.

“What...what is the meaning of this, Reincarnators?!” Dill cried, glaring at Toiler. His reaction was only natural. It was only yesterday that, in pursuit of the body of his lost friend Apollonius, he had met these same Reincarnators in the interior of Ex Machina Amputation and fought against them. On that occasion, Toiler had used psychokinesis to seize a Vulcan soldier right in front of Dill’s eyes and proceeded to kill him as if wringing out a rag.

“Whoa now! I think you’re getting a little overexcited. You’ve picked up some bad habits as a rabble-rouser, Aegisthus, worthiest opponent of my lifetime! We’re just particularly passionate members of Project Re-Earth. It’s not as if *everyone* in the Project is cooperating with you.” Toiler spoke quickly in a bombastic, jocular tone.

As this scene unfolded, the tide of battle shifted. Falaina rose to his feet and with the intent of disposing of these new enemies he threw his colossal body back into battle. He solely targeted the Chief-class Reincarnator Fleetfoot, who toyed with Falaina using the superior mobility granted by a series of short-distance teleportations.

While watching this scene with satisfaction, Toiler strode up to Dill and whispered in his ear. “Let me be frank. At present the Project is breaking apart. Having lost Shiden and Yuujin, our leaders, we have broken up into those who

watch quietly, thinking only of self-preservation, and us, who seek self-preservation by using our powers to settle things down.”

“Sounds like both groups are yammering fools,” said Dill disdainfully.

“That’s harsh! But don’t you think our purposes have aligned for now?” Toiler dropped his voice lower still.

“There is no room for negotiation. Now *die*.” Dill’s arm moved swiftly and seized Toiler by his fancy necktie, drawing him closer as he brought the tip of the sword he held in his other hand against his opponent’s neck. The blade dug shallowly into Toiler’s skin.

The few Reincarnators who had not joined the fight against Falaina readied their Skills and faced Dill. Toiler was visibly agitated. He gestured for his subordinates to stand down. Sweat ran down his brow.

“Wait! Just listen to me!”

“I have no interest in listening to the words of you damned Reincarnators.” Dill was surprisingly calm in his rejection of Toiler’s offer. Seeing the color of his eyes at point-blank range, Toiler understood. Dill’s anger was not a fleeting whim—but that being said, it was not based on reason either. Reincarnators would die. Dill had already reached that conclusion. *I’ve misread him. Just as this man said, there’s no room for negotiation...*

“M-Master! I know how you feel, but right now we need their strength too!” Sid interrupted their exchange. Toiler, who was about to motion to his subordinates to attack without restraint, stopped at the last second. Dill did not look in Sid’s direction, continuing to stare coldly at Toiler. Toiler could feel his throat begin to tremble, and his lips started to curl.

“Ha...ha ha ha. What is this, the good cop/bad cop routine? Trying that trick on a scam artist like me is like giving a lecture to Buddha, but—eek! Don’t give me such a frightening look! I might be immortal, but some things are scary no matter what!”

By the end of his speech, Toiler had already returned to his jests. Dill pushed the Reincarnator aside but did nothing more than that. He looked down at Toiler, who guffawed while prostrate on the ground, and questioned him in a low voice. “Our objective is to take back my daughter from Prodotis. What is the objective of your group?”

Turning around, Toiler answered seriously. “Our goal is the deletion of the traitor Yuujin. By deletion, I mean what you would call death. No special method of killing is required. Back in the Mainland, the cloud data associated with the man Yuujin has already been destroyed. If we just kill him one more

time, he will never be able to reincarnate again.”

Dill leaned forward. “Reincarnators can be killed?”

“Well, if we want to do it.” The scam artist did not explain any further, but resumed speaking with precise timing. “So, what’ll it be, Aegisthus? I do think our interests are aligned here.”

After hesitating for a short while, Dill drew back his chin and glared at Toiler from underneath his brow. With Dill and Toiler at their center, the two forces continued to stare each other down. The Reincarnator corps doing battle with Falaina were starting to be pushed back. They couldn’t put off this decision any longer.

“Listen—don’t toy with me. My name is Dill Steel-Link. Killer of Reincarnators. A man whose daughter’s life was taken by you bastards...so know that the moment our mission is concluded, your heads will roll.”

“...What a terrifying business partner.” Toiler wiped cold sweat from his brow. “Now then, I suppose we’ll go ahead and begin our collaboration!” With that as the signal, the two groups ceased staring each other down and, after turning in the same direction, moved as one unit.

Dill raised his voice. “Stand to attention, soldiers of Terea! If you let yourselves be outdone by these damned Reincarnators in this battle, your shame will be known to future generations. Halberd, the boldest among us—stand firm and meet the enemy head-on! Wake, our harp player—try not to run out of arrows! Whitehead, leader of crowds; Mace, the resolute; Hathaway, the whirlwind; and Orestes, who is equal to the gods in bearing—fight alongside me on the front line. Do not be afraid simply because we face a hero of antiquity. It was at the hands of Tereans, our people, that Krios was toppled long ago!”

At this time, the names of those who challenged the hero Falaina were...

First, a volley of projectiles from Rick Wake and Meteor rained down on the face of the giant, bullets of light and crossbow bolts filling Falaina’s vision. Falaina swiftly dodged at an angle, stomping Pitfall into the dirt as he was in the middle of opening a portal upon the ground. The earth shook from the impact. Reincarnators who tried to draw close to Falaina on bikes crashed and fell. But Halberd, who could boast a giant stature himself, approached Falaina without heeding the tremors. He latched on to one of Falaina’s legs, which resembled a stone pillar, and pushed.

“We have both inherited the blood of Gigas, the proud giant clan! Now, let’s test our strength, just the two of us...!” Halberd laughed. Despite Falaina being twice his height, he withstood a blow from Falaina’s fist which struck his back

from overhead, blood dripping from the gums above his gritted teeth.

“Ἐπεὶ λήσμων βοήθεια—λύωφρῦνος βοήθεια! φάκε!” Falaina immediately proceeded to bring his fist down again with the intention of breaking Halberd’s spine. But with his fist still high in the air, he found it would not move, almost as if it had been seized by a colossal unseen hand. Standing far away with an arrogant smile was the scam artist in a double-breasted suit, Toiler. Holding both hands in the air, he focused his power, sealing the strength of Falaina’s right arm.

The sound of a motorbike’s exhaust drew closer. At the same moment that the motorbike’s rider showed her flank to Falaina with a sudden turn, she leaped from the bike, preserving her momentum, flames erupting from her feet. It was Repeater, with her lightning-fast fists—and from behind her there came Orestes, launched by Mace, the superhuman battle priest.

After leaving trails in the sands of the wasteland from the momentum of their landings, Orestes and Repeater turned around, both coming to face the back of Falaina’s knee at the same time. The two exchanged a sharp glance for an instant, then turned back to the enemy they had to defeat, readying sword and fists and unleashing their Skills.

Right, right, left, right, left, right—right-handed slash, right-handed slash, left-handed shield bash, right-footed kick, shield from the left, slash from the right!

Two sets of six strikes were accelerated by pyrokinetic thrust. They both struck at Falaina’s knee joint, forcing him to his knees. Farther still, Hathaway was also launched skyward by Mace, and together with Fleetfoot, who whirled around Falaina with his chain of teleportation, they delivered a pincer attack.

Falaina did not fail to resist. Even though he had been forced to kneel upon the ground, like a great serpent rearing its head he looked up at the sky, opened his great mouth and inhaled. Falaina’s upper body, already large, swelled as he drew air into his chest, which expanded until it was nearly spherical in shape. Then, with a great bellow, Falaina, who had drunk deeply of the air like a fish in water, exhaled the contents of his lungs.

“Βάρβαρος φάκε!”

An explosion of sound tore through the air above the wasteland. The pressure wave generated by the massive bellow blew Fleetfoot off of Falaina’s shoulder and knocked Hathaway, still in midair, out of the sky.

Dill, whose chain mail cloak rang as he ran across the ground, stopped to brace against the impact, sticking his sword and shield into the ground. Even

then the immense pressure from Falaina's bellow pushed Dill back. Falaina's exhalation simply would not end. The explosive noise would continue for as long as the giant still had air left in his lungs.

Halberd, who had grabbed onto the giant's right leg, Sid and Repeater, who were preparing for another attack at Falaina's feet, and even the Manager Toiler, who grappled with Falaina from afar with his psychokinetic grip—all were thrown back by the force of the sound. Finally Dill, whose feet had held fast until that moment, began to succumb as well.

“Shall I help you pacify this monster, heroes?” A cloth stretched wide behind Dill caught him as he was about to be sent flying. One side of that cloth sparkled like the night sky, scattered with stars. It was the waterproof sheet that had received the effect of the Manager Starlight’s Skill, turning it into a teleportation gate.

“Brace for impact!” Following Starlight’s instruction, Dill held his shield in front of himself. The teleportation gate swallowed Dill whole, and its exit...was in midair, directly above Falaina, who continued to roar at the heavens.

The destructive force of Falaina’s roar beat against the shield forged in Vulcan, causing it to creak and buckle. Dill’s body, which should have continued to fall due to gravity, stopped dead and was instead forced backward—such was the power of a hero. This was one of the Seven Generals of Krios who symbolized the Silver Age—Falaina, the white whale.

Dill, suspended in midair, could do nothing but withstand the onslaught. But there was no sign of despair in the rust-colored eyes hidden behind his shield. Dill looked at the spherical object Starlight had managed to sneak through the portal when he’d been sent through it—because the orb presented a smaller surface area than Dill, it was less affected by the pressure exerted by the sound waves, and so it continued to fall toward Falaina.

It was a hand grenade.

“Μάχητσκόρπιανυαλύω!” An explosion bloomed right before Falaina’s eyes. The giant ceased roaring, instead letting out a wail. Gravity began working properly again and Dill’s descent resumed. Dill tossed his shield away, holding his sword overhead and crying out his own name.

“My name is...Dill! Steel! Link!”

Falaina, whose face had been forced down by the shock of the grenade detonating inside his mouth, looked up at the sky once again. The giant gazed up in amazement, at the glow of Dill’s rust-colored hair illuminated by the blazing light of the setting sun. Dill’s long hair gave him an almost mythic appearance,

and that summoned up one of Falaina's memories. He overlaid Dill on top of the heroic image of the one who had slain him in the siege of Krios in the Silver Age —Iroas, the fleet-footed.

“And as a hero, my name is...Aegisthus!” Until the final moment, Falaina’s eyes remained wide open. As if drawn there, Dill’s sword pierced Falaina’s right eye. The sword sank in up to the hilt, but even that was not enough to finish off this scion of the giant clan.

Or at least, it wouldn’t have been, if not for the explosion of the phosphors entwined around the blade. On the ground, Sid, whom the mail-cloak Whitehead had safely caught, held his hand out with the palm facing Dill. His Skill activated, and Falaina’s eye socket burst to pieces. The right side of the giant’s face was completely torn apart. A geyser of blood and brain matter gushed forth, and the legendary hero...

“Λοιγός Φμονότης θ’ ὅσειράν φάκε, φάκε φάκελος ιατρός...”
...was defeated.

The wastelands sank into the darkness of the night. The plains of Krios, once said to be verdant, had been incinerated at the hands of the people of Terea following the war of the Silver Age.

The fortress city of Krios, which had once taken great pride in its influence, no longer retained even a shadow of its former glory. It was now no more than a pile of rubble strewn across the ground.

There was only one feature that spoke of the kingdom’s former prosperity—the remains of its extensive aqueducts, which the Tereans had not managed to level completely, still stretched across the landscape.

Beneath the encroaching night, the hero Falaina and the decaying aqueducts were both no more than shadows, difficult to distinguish. A desiccated wind blew through the wasteland. The dust in the air was largely made up of the eroded ruins. As if rebuked by the passage of time, Falaina collapsed on the ground, finally succumbing to the destiny that had not concluded five hundred years prior.

“Falaina...” murmured Prodotis, king of Krios, emerging from a teleportation gate. Motionless on the ground, Falaina’s skull was shattered. The red ichor seeping from his head would no longer heal his wounds. The hero Falaina, the white whale, one of the Seven Generals of Krios, had truly died in this place.

Prodotis's astonished expression turned hard with loathing. The ancient king turned his murderous intent toward the culprits of this slaughter. "So, as ever, you will join forces with your most bitter foes if it means the destruction of Krios...will you not, Tereans...?!"

Dill swung his sword, red blood falling from it and staining the ground. He then thrust the point of the blade toward Prodotis. "My name is Dill Steel-Link. Remember it. It is the name of the man who will kill you."

Veins stood out on Prodotis's temples. "What insolence is this? Prodotis himself now stands before you."

"It doesn't matter who you are. I am Dill Steel-Link. I will, without a doubt, take back my daughter."

Prodotis was silent for a moment. "...We call such impossible acts 'miracles.'" Then he vanished.

"Uh-oh...looks like you picked a fight with a legendary hero," said the poet Rick, with a dazed half smile. "Guess we're part of the myth now."

"Master!" Sid, who had undone his transformation, ran up to Dill. The mercenaries, along with the Reincarnators, sighed and let themselves relax. That was the moment where first a few observant people suddenly stood still. That number of people steadily grew. Blusterer had been chatting the whole time, but when he noticed the tremors at his feet suddenly grow larger, he fell quiet.

"Does this world also have earthquakes from time to time...?"

"We do have them, but all such events are sent to us from the Ex Machina or Titans, and are considered ill portents."

Hearing this, Toiler smirked for a moment. The rumbling in the ground became a roar. In the distance, the shadow of the ruins of Castle Krios began to heave up out of the earth. All gathered there quickly realized this was no simple shift in the earth's crust.

Underneath the ruins, raised up like a pillar, was something colossal—immeasurably huge, holding the ruins up. As the dust settled, it was revealed to be humanoid in form.

"A...Hundred-Handed One?" Those present murmured the name of the ancient tribe. But the being that rose out from beneath the land of Krios had only five arms. The other arms had all been lost, either broken in half or withered away. It was not told in any myth or history that such things slumbered beneath the earth in Krios. The children of men there could only stand in shock, mouths agape.

The tremors finally subsided. The mercenaries and Reincarnators looked up.

The size of the thing, so ridiculously large it could not even be compared to the giant whom they had defeated a short while ago, stretched to tens, perhaps hundreds of meters. They couldn't tell. In the wasteland at night, there was nothing to measure it against.

The titan, lifting the ruins of Krios with its remaining five arms along with the land beneath it, began to move again. It was slow, but perhaps it only appeared so due to its colossal size. Its head, drooping low as a result of supporting the ruined castle, faced the south. Then it started to walk.

One step. There was a strange tremor. Another step. Its foot descended on the wasteland, leaving a footprint like a crater, then carried on moving. It proceeded in the direction of...

“Aspro Terea.”

“The Mainland.”

The voices of the mercenaries and the Reincarnators overlapped. Both terms referred to the same place.

“Prodotis’s next objective is most likely the Imperial Capital. Toiler, can you ready cars and bikes to match our numbers?”

“Toiler? Ah, you mean me? Yeah. I think we can! We still have a few parked nearby. Shall we get after them right away? That walking castle may look sluggish from here, but we can’t be sure that it’s not traveling several kilometers per hour.”

The band hastily made preparations to set off. As a matter of necessity, they would have to wait to bring up their former grudges yet again.

In the middle of those preparations, something else happened.

“Hey, isn’t that...” Rick, whose gaze remained fixed on the walking castle of Krios, was the first to realize, and point it out.

“A Jumper’s...teleportation gate?! But it’s...” It was just too big. A black vortex appeared ahead of the castle of Krios, now a walking fortress, on a scale in keeping with its size.

“Is that Prodotis’s Skill?” muttered Dill. Starlight, the band’s resident Jumper, refuted this guess.

“That’s impossible. Regardless of how far our Manager, Yuujin, has convinced himself through self-suggestion that he’s an ancient hero, in order to stabilize his unstable mental state...you cannot exceed the limits of a Skill’s influence, which corresponds to the amount of Liquid Computer in one’s system.”

“That’s not quite right.” Sid spoke as his eyes drank in the scene before him,

staring at the castle of Krios stepping into the supermassive teleportation gate.

“The one that activated that Skill is the giant underneath the castle.”

“That must have hurt, Princess of the Titans. I was sure to miss any vital spots, but you still fell from quite a height.” A man’s deep voice echoed through the courtyard in the ruins of Krios. Nue, who had taken a spear to one of the wings granted by her transformation and fallen back to the ground, struggled desperately to pull the weapon out. However, footsteps ruthlessly made their way toward Nue before stopping right in front of her.

Nue’s red eyes glared sharply up at her enemy, then opened wide in surprise. What stood before her was a boy, his height no different from Nue’s or Sid’s.

“Forgive me. I take no pleasure in harming young girls, but the lord of this castle told me not to let you escape.” Despite looking no older than twelve, he said this in a man’s voice that had long since deepened. His prominent Adam’s apple was strangely sharp. The sun had already set, but Nue’s vision was superior to a human’s, so she was easily able to perceive all of this. “Excuse me, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Nefritis. When I still lived in this world, I was known by two other names—King of Adventures and King of Courage. I do not know whether or not those names were passed down to the present day...”

“You were a hero too?” Nue’s transformation was undone, her wings melting away and falling as black water. The spear that had pierced her fell away with them. By the time she had expressed her doubts, she was already convinced that this boy was the real thing. He was, without a doubt, one of the legends Dill had told her about—the hero Nefritis.

Although he was short in stature, he was muscular; across his skin, which was tanned to a dark brown, ran several old scars, the proof of his experience in battle. Most of them had not been left by weapons, but by the claws and fangs of beasts. One such prominent scar was etched along his cheek, and he wore it proudly, almost as though it were a family crest.

In addition to these features, Nefritis, like Prodotis, wore armor that was unthinkably light by the standards of contemporary warfare. For clothing he wore only a loincloth and a scarlet cloak that hung from his shoulders. For armor, he wore bronze greaves on his shins, but the style of these suggested that they were there more for decoration. There was no helm upon his head—instead he wore a hood fashioned from a lion’s skin. If the legends were true, that was the pelt of the steel-clawed Nemean lion that Nefritis had slain long ago.

The boy hero, as if seeing Nue's question as a naive attempt to create an opportunity to escape, showed her a smile whose magnanimity seemed out of place for a boy his age. Then, he gave her his answer. "Just so. I was twelve years old when I lost my life, meeting my end in the siege beneath the castle of Krios. In order to repay Lord Prodotis for once giving me food and lodging for a night, I allied with Krios in that war. Don't look down on me just because I'm a young whelp. I have had adventures in every region of this land, and not even the other heroes of the Golden Age can match the number of beasts and monsters I've slain. All recognize my ability as a first-class hero. Don't think you can escape me."

Nefritis languidly spread out his arms, a spear and shield clutched in each hand, standing before Nue with a smile. She could see no opening in which to strike. Nue's red eyes teared up in frustration as she growled deep in her throat to threaten her enemy. The hero Nefritis gave her a wry smile.

"I'm fond of women, but I do not care for children. Now, where was Achtida...?" For the first time, the boy hero showed an aspect of himself in keeping with his age—there was charm in the shy, wry smile he now showed. Perhaps this was his true face, though the content of his speech was still hardly something a child might say.

At this moment, the ground beneath their feet shook dramatically, and the tremors continued for quite some time. Nefritis opened his eyes wide, as if this was surprising to him as well.

"What's all this? Another of Prodotis's tricks...?" Nefritis said.

"Verily. My father has activated the final device within this city—behold Krios, the walking fortress. Originally it was intended to be the decisive weapon in our invasion of Vulcan of the Eleven Cities." A voice rang out as another hero showed himself in the courtyard. This was the hero Kranos, son of the king of Krios, Prodotis. Kranos was the first of the Seven Generals Prodotis had called back down from the starlit sky and resurrected. Nefritis's jade green eyes sparkled with affection at the sight.

"Ah, King Kranos! No, wait...since your father Prodotis has also been resurrected, I suppose it's more accurate to call you 'Prince' again, is it not?"

"Call me whatever you like. Now then, this castle's ambulation, which you were not informed of beforehand, must have shocked you. As well as the Titan princess over there..." With Kranos's silver-colored eyes looking at her, Nue reflexively turned her head away and sulked.

Nefritis laughed heartily. "As you can see, she's started to pout."

The son of the hero did not so much as crack a smile. “Since we have been ordered to treat the princess as a guest for now, I will say this for her ears also. At present, our Castle Krios is advancing south with the power of its walking Titan engine, headed for the center of the continent.”

Nue couldn’t believe what she was hearing. *These monsters—how could they...* But it appeared that the ancient heroes’ attention was elsewhere. Nefritis looked perplexed. “South? Should we not ascend northward to attack Vulcan?”

“Father says that the time is not yet ripe for that. For now, we are headed to the kingdom of the Terean people—the white-walled Aspro Terea.”

“...With what aim?” asked Nefritis, adopting a serious expression befitting his heroic name. Kranos remained aloof in his response.

“Blood and new subjects. And after that, eternal life.” Nue, who listened intently, felt goosebumps suddenly stand up all over her skin. She did not know why, but she sensed something ominous beyond reckoning implied in Kranos’s words. It seemed that Nefritis had, at least to some extent, a similar impression.

“My word...does His Majesty, your father, still hope to bring his plans for the Titan goddess to fruition? Prince Kranos, did you not seek to dissuade him?”

“Father has already obtained new powers from the newcomers, the tribe known as ‘Reincarnators.’ We are not the same heroes the Tereans faced in the previous war. This time, I am certain we will succeed. I will simply serve at his side.”

Nefritis, arms folded, mulled this over for a spell, then nodded. “...Well, I suppose that’s fine too. We’re past the point of no return. In either case, we have already lost our people, so I, Nefritis, will follow you to the end.”

“And I thank you for it. Now then—it appears we are prepared.” Kranos looked up at the sky. What was he thinking in this moment—this hero who, five hundred years prior, had fought the Tereans as they besieged Krios until he was the last soldier standing, then met his end in a state of fury? The smile that showed at the corners of his lips spoke of inhuman cruelty.

“Let us now witness a fraction of my father’s new powers.” The southern sky was even darker than the blackness of night, shrouded by an enormous hole. The edge of the hole glowed with rainbow-colored light, blending with the air around it, and the pitch blackness inside it was scattered with countless points of light like stars.

This was a teleportation gate of the kind created by the Reincarnators. Nue had seen enough of them to last a lifetime. Krios continued its march, slowly making its way through the titanic teleportation gate. Beyond the portal, they

found that they had advanced several kilometers in a single step, the scenery replaced by the pine forests south of Krios.

“My word. How strange...” Nefritis was shocked at the sight, but Kranos simply nodded.

“A sample of my father’s blood was introduced into the bloodstream of the Titan underneath the castle, and that culture grew and multiplied. I must say, this test-drive is going swimmingly...”

“You turned the Titan holding up the castle...into a Reincarnator...?” Nue murmured in shock. “A Titan one hundred times the size of a human also has one hundred times the volume of blood. Therefore the power of its Skill is also...a hundred times greater...” She was left at a loss for words.

Could she really afford to wait calmly for Dill to come and rescue her? With the heroes of antiquity aboard it, this castle headed toward the Reincarnator stronghold—the Tower Capital. What precisely did the heroes plan on doing there with their sinister technology? Was it really all right to leave them to it?

I might be the only one who can stop them, Nue thought.

The Aeros Region, found in the center of the continent. Across this vast plain that had once belonged to the Terean Empire there moved a bizarre band of people—a convoy of large trucks and many motorbikes. The two trucks driving at the center of the convoy had a number of spears sticking out of them, a battle standard depicting an eagle fluttering from the head of each one. The sides of each truck were painted with a motif of scenes taken from mythology that told the history of Redguard.

A portion of the bikes defending the trucks with these divine decorations had been remodeled in the same fashion, with warriors of the Halberd Brigade now astride them. The remaining bikes retained their original appearance as glossy, jet-black, functional machines—but the Reincarnator Blusterer, not wishing to be outdone by the men of the brigade, had carved such gallant phrases as “Good morning, Death!”, “Break away from the flock,” and “Ride for death, ride for love” onto his own bike using his native script.

Occasionally, words were exchanged amongst this mixed battle formation of Tereans and Reincarnators. “...So, at that moment, I had this realization. Being a street racer and avoiding the cops all the time just wasn’t *right*. My goal was always to become a legend—to be known as the Wind of the Capital City

Expressway, you know..."

"Nice! That's incredible. I absolutely get it, Blusterer old pal. After all, it was because I wanted to see myths unfold with my own eyes that I started following Steel-Link..." mused Rick Wake.

Four days had passed since the castle of Krios started moving. As they pursued the castle, which advanced southward both by walking and jumping through space, a strange sort of friendship had started to build among some of the former enemies in the band. Dill, however, maintained a grim expression as he rode at the head of the formation.

An unadorned bike approached Dill from behind. It was ridden by the Reincarnator Repeater. "Can you see anything from here?" she asked, apparently an attempt at small talk. Dill relaxed his arms and legs, which he had furtively kept tensed, and answered.

"No, nothing."

"Is that right?" Repeater carried on riding next to Dill without asking for permission. Apparently the conversation was not yet over. Dill couldn't read Repeater's expression. Her head was protected by a full-face helmet, the mirrored visor lifelessly reflecting the light from her surroundings.

"What do you want?" asked Dill, without looking at Repeater. His voice lacked any type of emotion.

Repeater answered. "I was surprised. To learn that you were the one known as Aegisthus, I mean."

"I'm honored to hear that I was so famous. But from the moment you people showed up, my activities as Aegisthus were put entirely on hold."

"Even though you may not have uttered the name, the people of Terea spread it around by themselves. 'Aegisthus will avenge us.' 'The hero will surely return.' Even the people of the New Terean Republic, who showed the Reinarnators compliance...deep down, they're waiting for Aegisthus. They'll probably say that they were only accepting our rule until Aegisthus came to lead the uprising. I don't care for people who do nothing but act obedient, you know."

"Hope is essential for everyone." *My hope was Iris.* Dill swallowed those words. Although it may have been temporary, at the moment he had formed an alliance with the Reincarnators. He didn't want to make waves. Repeater, however, was persistent.

"But because that hope exists, the war between Redguard and the Reincarnators has been prolonged unnecessarily. Steel-Link—no, Aegisthus.

Appeal to the people. Have them surrender. You have the power to bring this war to an end.”

No wave of emotion rose in Dill’s heart. He didn’t seek to argue against Repeater’s self-righteous overtures. What good would that do? “I tend to think that it’s not yet time to consider such things. The enemy before us is Prodotis. If we debate sensitive issues now, our alliance will only fall apart.”

“All the more reason, then. Do you really think we can trust each other based on a temporary truce, just because a common enemy has emerged?”

“Holding our mutual benefit to be supreme, we have made a trade using trust instead of coin. I should have thought that way of doing things was closest to the utilitarian ideals you Reincarnators espouse.” Although Dill made every effort to suppress his emotions, his words were accompanied by a subtle sting.

Underneath her helmet, Repeater seemed to be disgruntled. Her dissatisfaction was audible in her voice. “I’m not a merchant. If you think Reincarnators are all the same, that’s regrettable. To me, trust is justice.”

You, a Reincarnator, speak of justice, of all things? You people, who stole Iris from me. Thinking that made the next words out of Repeater’s mouth all the more shocking.

“Steel-Link, I...I want to put my trust in you. You have already fought side by side with Rei, a Reincarnator. You who, after seeing your daughter killed, must hate us more than anyone. There must be a way for us to live together. I’d like to try and find that potential by working with you.”

“...A way for the conquerors to live together with the conquered. So we might have a future together, as slaves and masters?”

“Not what I meant. Didn’t I already tell you that trust is justice? War is a truly barbaric act. There is also the path of competing with Reincarnators—in science, economics, and the development of our civilization. A more admirable sort of battle which doesn’t stray from the righteous path. If you attain a cultural victory, fair and square, surely we Reincarnators will no longer be able to look down on you.”

“So in order to stop the fighting, you’d like to have Aegisthus command the people. Is that right?” After a short silence, Dill raised his head. “...Repeater. What you say sounds reasonable on its face. But it is based on your own logic as conquerors. You speak of fighting fair and square, but what you propose isn’t fair in the slightest. It assumes that we, as Tereans, will ultimately be assimilated into your culture.”

“Of course. That is what we call Enlightenment. We want to educate you and

improve you..."

"Isn't that very idea the most damning proof that you look down on Redguard as uncivilized and refuse to understand us? You claim to want to treat us as equals, and yet you do not accept our differences and try to push your own values onto us?"

Total silence descended. It wasn't that Repeater couldn't find the words to counter Dill's argument. But at this moment she finally perceived the depth of the chasm separating Reincarnators from the people of Redguard. Repeater then changed her approach.

"If you were to cooperate, we could make a deal for control of the Tower Capital. That would surely make it easier for you to search for and retrieve Iris Earhart's body. I'm saying this for your sake. Think carefully. Think of what you ought to do as a father..."

These words touched a nerve, finally incurring Dill's anger. "Don't you dare use Iris as a bargaining chip." At that moment, the conversation was over. After a prolonged silence, Repeater slowed down her motorbike and ceased riding alongside Dill.

In her place, a much larger vehicle pulled up to the front of the convoy. There was the sound of several engine exhausts and metal wheels spinning. It was Halberd's chariot, drawn by four motorbikes adorned with the valiant armor that had been worn by the horses Falaina had killed.

"What's the trouble, my boy? Some manner of quarrel?"

"No, not really... I must say, General, you really seem to have taken a liking to those things."

"Gah ha hoo! The emblem of Aegis on your iron steed also suits you very well." Halberd's comment reminded Dill of the snake-haired woman's head that had been painted on his bike the night before, and the thought made him feel dejected. The culprits had been Rick and Mace, and Dill had been subjected to this indignity while he slept. "By the way, Steel-Link, have you noticed...?"

Halberd gazed at the distant horizon. Dill squinted hard. He couldn't see anything. "I've noticed..." continued Halberd. "The thrill of the air dancing to and fro. The trembling of the wind. I can see the vultures flying overhead...gah ha hoo hoo hoo! The battlefield is near."

Twenty minutes had passed since Halberd's premonition. Through the vast rural plains of Aeros there ran straight gravel roads. On top of them lay timber crossties and rails laid by the Reincarnators, forming their railway lines which

extended into the distance without end.

The undulating landscape had been either dug out or filled in, the railway lines trampling the ancestral wheat fields of this place. Even the fields that had not been filled in with earth had been abandoned, left to go to seed.

This infamous transcontinental railway, which had served as a symbol of the Reincarnators' colonial policies, now lay in miserable destruction before Dill's eyes.

"That's one of the NR freight trains."

"Looks like it had an altercation with that castle."

"Were even the elite railway police powerless to stop it?"

The eighty-car freight train lay strewn on the ground like entrails. Nearby was the crater of a footprint left by the castle giant. Apparently the train had unluckily crossed paths with the giant along its route, and the giant had kicked it off the tracks.

The convoy stopped in order to investigate the wreckage. There were spears and arrows sticking out of the overturned carriages, and they had not come from the heroes of Krios. They were equipment carried by the regular army of the Terean Empire.

Rick walked up beside Dill, picked up a broken arrow, and muttered thoughtfully to himself. "Those slow coaches, who always arrived late to the party during the Holy War...or so we used to call them. Well, looks like they've been carrying on the fight in their own way."

Dill had heard rumors that since the arrival of the Reincarnators five years prior, the remnants of the regular army had remained in the former territory of Terea, carrying out acts of guerrilla warfare. The freight train that had been trampled when the walking castle suddenly appeared would have been ideal prey for them. Anything of value had already been carried away.

"I would have been grateful if they'd worked to slow that castle down even a little..." Dill looked out over the plains in the direction of the giant's footprints. He couldn't even see the silhouette of Castle Krios. The distance between them had only continued to widen.

"Let's be frank...you were the first one to suggest that. Stop screwing around and admit it. There's a way for us to close the distance between us and the castle, isn't there?" Dill seized the Manager, Toiler, and put the screws to him.

The scam artist hemmed and hawed. "Well, regardless of the fact that I can't say for sure that there is no way..." Rust-colored eyes glared down at him. "...Um, there is a way. It's a terribly dangerous method, though."

“Understood. Let’s go with that.”

“Eh? Don’t you even want to know what it is first?” said Toiler, playing the fool. Dill pulled him closer still and glared at him.

“Let’s go with that. We’re running out of time.”

Another hour passed. The Halberd Brigade and the Reincarnators had deviated from the path taken by Castle Krios. In the direction they headed there awaited the mountain range delineating the edge of the plains of Aeros. Long ago, the exploration of this mountainous region in eastern Terea, with its rich veins of iron ore, had triggered the collapse of the Bronze Route as iron replaced the copper transported along that highway. However, even that time of prosperity was now long past. These eastern mountains no longer produced iron for the sake of the Terean people.

In the blink of an eye, the new masters of this land had transformed the region into a mining district. Barbed wire and chain-link fences suddenly cordoned off the heart of the mountain range. Security towers bathed the sky and ground with their searchlights around the clock. People were crammed into forced internment camps—referred to as “company housing”—like livestock. This was the Reincarnators’ industrial plantation. This was the end result of their civilization having fallen away from the principle of equal competition.

“I wonder if you can see it. There it is.”

Dill, who had watched Tereans in work clothes move between the company housing and the plant, turned his gaze. Where Toiler pointed there was a building heavily guarded by chain-link fences. After the service entrance was opened, a line of trucks that had been waiting outside proceeded into the building one by one. One truck, two trucks, three trucks... It wasn’t a particularly large building. The walls were thin, and it was under three stories in height. Six trucks, seven trucks, eight... The building was clearly not large enough to admit all of the trucks driving into it.

“Looks like there’s no doubt about it—there’s a stationary teleportation gate inside... However, if you have such a thing, surely the Reincarnators don’t need a railway system?” In response to Dill’s question, Toiler smiled ambiguously, as if to indicate that a closer look would give Dill his answer. Toiler beckoned to Dill and his comrades standing behind him, and they approached the chain-link fence.

They left their trucks and bikes behind. Dill had been told that if one passed through that stationary, long-range teleportation gate, they would be transported instantly to the Tower Capital. If that was the case, surely these vehicles were unnecessary...assuming that things went as well as that.

"Now, we only need to make it to the gate...but beyond this point is private property, and it happens to belong to people who aren't too fond of our Project. In other words, the moment I touch this fence, we'll immediately..."

"It doesn't matter," interrupted Dill. The jocular Toiler looked like he intended to keep talking, but his fellow Manager Starlight clapped a hand on his shoulder, and he desisted. Dill had long since taken the role of leader in this band. "This land originally belonged to the people of Terea. We have a right to stride straight through it."

"Master...I just have a suggestion," said Sid, as if he had been bottling up his words for some time. "Let's free the people imprisoned here! Let's create a commotion. That will surely make things easier for us as well."

Dill smiled with satisfaction, and nodded. "I was about to suggest the same thing."

"I don't know about this..." Toiler clutched at his head.

Halberd hefted his lump of iron and exchanged a glance with Dill, who stood right in front of him. They aimed for one of the observation towers. Everyone else finally placed their hands on the chain-link fence.

A shrill alarm rang throughout the facility. With that as their signal, Dill jumped. With a noise like thunder, Halberd's lump of iron slammed into Dill's feet. Dill kicked back, and soared skyward. He flew in a straight line toward a window at the top floor of the tower and crashed through it.



“My name! Is Dill Steel-Link! Killer of Reincarnators!”

At the same time as Dill’s fight inside the observation tower began, Halberd and the others toppled the chain-link fence and ran to engage the Plantation security troops in battle.

“You’re from the Project, aren’t you? I thought you might show up around this time, you damned war criminals.” Reincarnators emerged wearing silver fireproof suits and began to pompously spout abuse at the Project members. “What is a band of wayward criminals with barbarians as business associates doing here? This land belongs to the Nikko Group! A first-section-listed company on the Tower Capital Stock Exchange, one of the honored few! And we at Fireworks Corp, tasked with their security, have permission to slaughter any intruders without warning! If you don’t want to meet a painful end...”

“Listen! People of Terea!” The speaker system in the observation tower rang out at full volume. The owner of this voice was, naturally, Dill Steel-Link.

“That’s impossible! Are you telling me they’ve *already* taken control...of a first-section company?!”

“The Ex Machina, who reign over the wide heavens, certainly didn’t leave you all to die here! My name is Aegisthus! Hero of the Holy War, Aegisthus the divine shield, has hastened here to liberate his Terean brethren!”

A commotion rose in the laborers’ quarters. An override of all locks in the facility, to be used in case of fire or other such emergencies, had been triggered in the control tower.

“This is bad... The barbarians’ cells are open! To think our fire safety procedures would backfire on us! Hurry up, people! Restore corporate governance to this facility! You, and you—take care of suppression of their quarters! I will...”

“You can do me the favor of being my opponent.” In front of the security leader, still clad in his fire suit, stood Repeater with her arms crossed. With the man before her fuming, Repeater raised her fists to fight in an almost graceful motion, then beckoned to the man with her outstretched left hand, taunting him.

“Oh...does a wayward criminal...dare to think that she can win against an elite, handpicked Flinter such as me?!” The security chief let his Skill burst forth all over his body, surrounding himself with ever expanding flames. Had he not been wearing his fireproof suit, his own body would have been at risk, given the intensity of the heat. The chief, who was now transformed into a searing humanoid inferno, reached toward Repeater to burn her to cinders. However...

“Too slow.” Right, right, left, right, left, right.

“Ack...! Huh...?!” The flame-wreathed security chief was sent flying back after receiving a high-speed flurry of six blows. The velocity of Repeater’s fists was such that they snuffed out his flames. The security chief slammed into the ground headfirst, knocked out cold.

“This is the difference that real-world experience makes, you self-styled ‘elite’... You weren’t even worth taking out my anger on.” Repeater shook her arm to extinguish the minuscule fire that had flared up on her fist and turned her back to the unconscious man.

The uprising grew, and soon a number of other observation towers had fallen under Terean control. Dill turned to head toward his original objective, the hangar.

“So you’re finally here, noble hero.”

A number of Dill’s allies had already arrived. Starlight, who came to greet him, indicated a device situated inside the hangar. “We decided to ally with you because we were afraid of ending up like *that*.” Starlight pointed at a cylindrical tank. It was filled with a fluorescent blue fluid, inside which floated several spherical objects. Their size was just about the same as...a human head...

Indeed, the things that floated in the tank were none other than actual human heads.

“This is a teleportation device that can be maintained for long periods of time, at a large scale, and over long distances... Didn’t you think it seemed too good to be true? Well, you would be right. This machine is kept running by cutting off the heads of Jumpers like me while they are still alive and forcing them to discharge their Skills through electrical stimulation. Because the maintenance cost is insanely high, this method of large-scale teleportation has not proliferated, so railway companies like NR can still make a decent living.”

The Reincarnators from the Project operated the machine, preparing for their passage through the long-range portal. Starlight left everything to do with the device to his subordinates and simply stood beside Dill.

“You needn’t stand so stiffly, noble hero. In any case, it will take time to open the portal for our passage. Five minutes...maybe ten... Since we have the time, I think I might have a smoke. Would you like one too? Ah...right. Understandable. You’ve got kids, after all.”

After tossing the cigarette he had offered to Dill back into the sparkling

lining of his coat, he exhaled smoke from his own with obvious pleasure. “Well, then...how about we take a moment to reminisce? I don’t want you to be bored, noble hero... Have you ever killed someone from your own country?”

Dill neither affirmed nor denied Starlight’s question.

“...I see.” Starlight went on. “I never have. Before I reincarnated, I was in an organization similar to what you might call an army. Once, I was ordered to do it, you see. Ordered to fire upon civilians... That wasn’t the sort of thing that organization should be doing, but...well, those were strange times. It was obvious that I should refuse, and I did. That was how I ended up drafted into the Project, but I have no regrets.”

Starlight took his cigarette, shorter now, and hurled it into the interior of his camouflage coat, where a teleportation gate sparkled. “I’d say that the one advantage of becoming a Reincarnator is that I no longer need to carry an ashtray around. By the way...”

Dill drew his sword and pointed the tip at Starlight’s neck. At the same time, Starlight started to draw his tonfa and dagger from inside his coat, but wasn’t able to do so fast enough. He ended up in a half-hearted battle stance. They had started moving at the same time, but Dill was faster by far.

With a blade thrust against his throat, Starlight smiled wryly as he leaned back a little. “I expected as much from you, noble hero. I was just about to say, ‘By the way, don’t you find it odd that everyone here besides you is a Reincarnator?’”

“There’s nothing odd about it. I never trusted you people from the beginning.” Dill glared at Starlight with his rust-colored eyes. Starlight’s throat slowly moved up and down. And then, an unexpected voice interrupted.

“Manager?! What are you doing?!?” It was one of Starlight’s subordinates—all of them turned to face Starlight and Dill. They readied their guns and pointed them—at Starlight.

Even Dill was shocked.

“That’s right. I acted alone. We didn’t plan this. The fact that no one else from Redguard was here besides you, noble hero, was merely a coincidence. I did indirectly ask them to bring up the rear, though.”

“Tell me why. I’m willing to hear you out.”

“I’m grateful, but...nah, it’s no big deal. I mean, well, I just happened to... I suddenly got scared, I guess. I started to wonder if it would really be all right to take you to the Tower Capital.”

“You’re chickening out now, after coming all this way?!?” cried Spiralblade,

one of Starlight's subordinates, raising her voice in anger and grabbing a hold of him. "Stand aside, Steel-Link! It's up to Reincarnators to deal with a Reincarnator's crime! We came with you because we believed in you. You took us, a gathering of complete scum, and trained us, gave us a sense of order, and turned us into soldiers! Are you really going to spoil this whole operation based on a whim? That's not how you taught us to act!" The massive chainsaw Spiralblade levitated with her psychokinesis spun viciously for a moment right next to Starlight's neck. Sparks scorched Starlight's cheek, but he did not flinch, simply staring back at Spiralblade coldly.

"That's right, Ryoko. This is just a whim... The moment I saw the Tereans rallied by Steel-Link overthrow the forces of Fireworks, I realized that I had underestimated the man. Taking him to the Tower Capital would be worse than leaving that crazed Yuujin to his rampage. I don't have a firm basis for thinking this, I suppose—it's just a hunch. If you understand, take your hands off me. Do you need me to teach you some manners again?"

"You were good enough to teach us that in the army—and that means we don't respond to such threats or violence! You're not our boss anymore—you're just a traitor! I think I'll cut off that head of yours right now!"

Starlight and Spiralblade glared at one another. The doors to the hangar then opened, and the men of the Halberd Brigade, along with the other Reincarnators who had lagged behind, finally showed their faces. None of them could quite grasp the situation, and an ominous tension took hold of the Terean forces and the Reincarnators.

"Don't come any closer." A voice echoed off the four walls and the ceiling. At this single utterance from Dill, its time and location carefully calculated, everyone turned their gaze toward him. "Both sides, put away your weapons. Reincarnators and Tereans, you *all* need to listen. This is a matter of crucial importance to our alliance."

"First, please explain what happened." Sid was wary and had his hand on his scabbard. He made his query still in the form of Orestes.

Spiralblade, who, contrary to Dill's words, would not lower her chainsaw, answered curtly. "Sorry, little boy. Our boss got a little careless with your papa. Now he's decided he's scared to take Steel-Link to the Tower Capital after all, or something like that. Don't worry. Not one of us agrees with this idiot."

"He's not actually my papa, though..." Sid murmured, but too quietly for anyone to hear him. Starlight made no excuses for himself. Next, Dill turned to look at Halberd.

“...Halberd, most favored by the god of war. How would the laws of Terea punish a case of treachery like this?”

“Hmm, well, it would be up to the commanding officer’s discretion, but if it were me I would consider it a capital offense. After all, taking his head could really firm up the commitment of those who remain.” The Reincarnators steeled themselves. Before a sense of mistrust overtook them, next Dill addressed the Manager called Toiler.

“Now then, according to the laws of the Reincarnators, how would you sentence him?”

“...We would not kill him. Whatever penalty we ended up giving him, first we would conduct a trial.”

“Obviously we don’t have time for that. In a military setting, where time is of the essence, what would you do?”

“Well, in that case...I suppose we would at least detain him. I’m not a soldier myself, though...”

“I see. Understood.” Dill turned his gaze away from Toiler and looked out over the crowd again. Starlight looked down silently.

Spiralblade looked unsatisfied. She seemed to still want to take off his head at once. But apart from them, the Reincarnators seemed resistant to the idea of giving Starlight a harsh penalty. Opinions among the Terean forces were more diverse.

“Well then, I’m going to give you my opinion now, and I want you to act in accordance with it. I think Starlight should be released and fight alongside us again,” Dill finally said.

“Huh?!” Spiralblade was incensed.

“Master!” reproached Sid.

There was commotion amongst the Reincarnators, and a number of the mercenaries in the brigade grinned in amusement. Spiralblade pressed upon Dill. “Hey, you! What do you think will happen to discipline in this alliance if we let this slide?! I don’t know if you’ve grown attached to this guy or if you’re just a big softy in general, but if we show traitors leniency, it’ll set the wrong example for the others! If we don’t have discipline, we won’t have an alliance for long. That’s why we left the Project, gathered only those who shared our concerns, and pursued Yuujin this far!”

“So tell me...what was the reason you pursued that traitor?”

“That’s because—”

“Was it not to protect your brethren, who wait in the Imperial City?” Dill

didn't allow Spiralblade, who was about to answer, say anything further. If she was allowed to say a word, she would never stop. "Why do people take up arms and fight? Is it not to defend those who cannot fight for themselves? To drive away the enemies who swarm around their dwellings—or else go out on the hunt and bring back their quarry. It's always the same—the reason we fight transcends eras, kingdoms, and ideologies. It is *always* done for the sake of the weak. The Halberd Brigade and the Project all fight for the same reasons. Even Starlight's attempt to slay me, Aegisthus, was fueled by those reasons. That's exactly why Starlight deserves to be trusted." Dill continued speaking. Without hesitation, he continued to string words together, not allowing anyone else to barge in. His words continued to build on top of each other, carrying on without even giving anyone time to question them.

"The hero, Prodotis, has resurrected in the present day with an outrageous ambition in his heart. He has no concern for the innocent civilians trampled beneath the Titan's feet, nor for the memory of the Tereans who lived here. He represents a challenge to all who live in this age. The lands trampled by the giant, the towns, and the people...all had names and a reason for existing. Can we really allow a ghost from the past to crush the lives of those in the present? Can we simply sit and wait, without resisting, while a wave of atrocities passes overhead like a storm?"

Hathaway, the adjutant, and Rick, the poet, cried "No!" Several Reincarnators were spurred on by this and followed suit.

"We now live in a different age. Whatever past achievements these ghosts may boast of as they crawl up from their graves, it means nothing to us. History is never forged by old men, but by the hands of the youthful... Now, let us carry on. Let us go to win back the age." Dill suddenly seized his scabbard and drew his sword. He pointed its sharp tip at the stationary teleportation gate.

At that very moment, the wavering portal finally stabilized. A wide rectangle cut off the backdrop of the hangar, for a moment sparkling with stars before shifting again to show the scenery of a city.

To both the Tereans and the Reincarnators, this was their familiar hometown. The Mainland...*Tokyo, the Tower Capital*. In bygone days, it was known as Aspro Terea. A gray city, with cloudy skies overhead. The mercenaries of the brigade were moved by this dramatic display, and more than a few of the Reincarnators were too.

A shiver went through Starlight as feelings of righteous indignation and solidarity crept into his heart, and they felt right.

“Starlight, shepherd who guides the Reincarnators and always thinks of his people. Let’s go forward together.” Dill smiled and extended his hand to Starlight. This performance had been executed flawlessly. The bridging of the gate a moment ago, with its impeccable timing, was most likely just another part of that performance.

“Looks like my attempt to kill you just ended up being part of your production to strengthen our unity, noble hero... Very well. I surrender. I will still watch from a front-row seat to make sure you don’t get up to any trouble.”

The sky above the Tower Capital was today, as ever, suffused with bluish clouds, the mark of artificial rainfall. The towers standing in rows across the city were of various sizes, but they could be separated into two clear categories. The smaller towers were tens of meters tall. The larger towers were far taller, tall in the extreme—some close to a thousand meters in height, piercing the artificial clouds.

A city of towers, spanning as far as the eye could see. It truly earned the name of Tower Capital. Ruling over these crowded spires was one blue tower. Its reality was uncertain—it was like a mirage given form. Its half-real construction faded into the rain, which from time to time caused the surface to pulsate. At its base were three large towers, gathered around it like a bundle of sticks. The dimly glowing blue spire was even taller than these large towers, so tall it surely would have collapsed under its own weight if it had been constructed normally. The fact that it only half existed in this world seemed to somehow allow it to stand.

“Welcome to the Tower Capital,” murmured Starlight, as the rain beat down on him. Dill’s attention was first stolen by the unfathomably enormous blue tower. Then he searched the scenery for something recognizable, something built from the familiar white chalk of Aspro Terea...but no such building was to be found.

No—he found one. He found Ex Machina Envy, worshipped by the people of Terea as the goddess of their kingdom, whose temple was also used as the royal mausoleum. The underground labyrinth of the white-armed goddess, who was practically buried between some of the smaller towers, was still sealed away.

More familiar still were the civilian houses, which he found with some difficulty in a half-demolished state, sitting just below the far-off horizon. Even

those crumbling houses were in the process of being removed by heavy machinery, seemingly to be replaced by small towers.

So this was the Tower Capital. His former home. The supposed location of Iris's body. Dill was so expressionless it was unsettling—the actor's mask concealed everything. From the long-range portal behind him, the Halberd Brigade and the Reincarnators emerged in turn. Here, on the other side of the portal, was the roof of one of the numerous small, gray towers in the Tower Capital.

The wind blew forcefully. Machinery roared overhead, even though they were already so high up. A fleet of machines approached, rotors whirring. For the first time ever, the Tereans in Dill's band saw the machines with spinning wings known as helicopters.

The armored helicopters all had the same emblem engraved on them—a snowflake. This was their company logo. They belonged to the largest public security company in the Tower Capital: Panopticon Security Complex.

The Tereans silently raised their weapons.

CHAPTER 4 — BATTLE FOR THE IMPERIAL CITY

The Tower Capital. Reconstruction efforts had not yet extended to the neighborhoods around its perimeter, most of which still retained the appearance of the old white city of Aspro Terea. Through these streets that could do nothing but wait for their own destruction now strode a giant god. The earth shook. Using its five arms and its head, the Titan held up the very ground beneath the ruins. With each footstep it rent the earth apart and flung another house into the air.

People fled wildly along the city streets. Through their armistice with the conquering Reincarnators, these Tereans had been positioned as nationals of the New Terean Republic, with their citizenship rights formally recognized. However, they were not granted the right to bear arms or to maintain a militia. Consequently, they could do nothing but run.

The armored helicopters crisscrossing the sky above the city had been deployed by one of the Reincarnator companies holding some kind of authority within this region. With the objective of stopping the walking castle of Krios, or even just driving it away, they launched a series of daring bombardments against it. No consideration was given to the Tereans caught up in the blasts as they fled through the streets below.

One of the helicopters broke away from the formation in an attempt to get close to the giant—likely the pilot intended to destroy himself along with the ordnance fitted to the helicopter. This tactic was hardly surprising, given that the Reincarnators could replace their bodies at will.

The helicopter's self-destructive assault came very close to success, before it was suddenly pierced by a flying, rod-shaped object. The explosives on board ignited, and it was blown to smithereens.

“Bah hah hah hah hah! What fun! I haven’t taken prey out of the sky since I subdued the great serpent, Python! Come, come, all of you—come at me!” Standing in the ruins of Krios, in the remains of a temple that had lost its roof, the boy hero hurled another spear, bringing down another armored helicopter. “My name is Nefritis! Nefritis the star-feller, one of the Seven

Generals of Krios!"

After throwing all of the spears he had available, Nefritis raised his empty hands in the air. Flames burst forth from them, reforming into a long, thin rod. The fire was condensed and solidified into a burning spear.

Nefritis, slayer of monsters, hurled his spear of flames. The weapon left a glowing red trail as it soared through the air, then transformed back into a raging blaze at the moment it struck its target. The armored helicopter was engulfed in a massive fireball and plummeted toward the ground.

The spear of flames was not produced by the hero Nefritis's own power—this was a Reincarnator's Skill. The heroes who had been resurrected from their constellations four days prior had received new abilities, pseudo-Skills, from their king. The Seven Generals of Krios were connected to Prodotis via his wide-ranging telepathy, and thus were able to obtain Prodotis's ability to manifest solid objects of flame simply by praying or willing it. Even more frightening was Prodotis's overwhelming ability to process these requests and activate his Skill remotely.

Nefritis was joined in his defense of Krios by the three warriors Itimenos, Papus, and Diros, who readied their own spears and arrows of flame and one by one shot down the helicopters flying overhead. The onslaught of the heroes, who had been granted an inexhaustible supply of weapons, could not be stopped.

The castle shuddered, and dust rained down from the stone ceiling. A helicopter must have crashed somewhere in the castle. Nue Kirasaki closed her crimson eyes and focused her hearing...and found she could not detect footsteps.

Beneath the ruins of Castle Krios, within the bedrock held aloft by the five-armed Titan, there ran a hidden labyrinth. Aboveground, the walls that once surrounded the castle had been destroyed in the war of the Silver Age, lost without a trace, but it seemed as though the Tereans had overlooked what lay underground in their destruction. Nue advanced through the underground maze where the resurrected heroes had taken up residence.

Nue had been staying quiet for the few days she had been kept confined here. She couldn't afford to make a halfhearted escape attempt, only to end up under closer watch or thrown in a cell. Nue had resolved not to give Prodotis a reason to revise his original intention to entertain her as a guest, instead simply waiting for an opportunity.

Now, it was finally time to act. It wasn't that a chance to escape had arrived—there was simply no time left. Castle Krios had reached the city of Reincarnators, the Tower Capital, and the ancient heroes were now beginning something that could not be undone.

I have to stop them. From time to time, she had heard the heroes mutter the words “engine room.” *I have to go there and bring this castle to a halt. If I don't...some ill fate will befall our world...* So the girl's Titan instincts told her.

The closer they drew to the Tower Capital, the fiercer the Reincarnators' efforts at intercepting the castle became, which was something of a blessing. From the castle's surface, the heroes fought through their defenses. It would seem that Dill and his comrades had managed to defeat the hero known as Falaina, and the Seven Generals were now six. Including Prodotis, they still numbered only seven people. No matter how superhuman these heroes were, there had to be physical limits to their security.

Nue proceeded through the deep darkness of the underground passage without so much as a torch to light her way. This was only made possible by her Titan senses. The pupils in her red irises lengthened vertically, so right now Nue looked more like a nocturnal beast than a human. She spontaneously placed her hands on the floor, breaking into a four-legged crawl.

“Time's up.” The voice came suddenly from right next to Nue.

“The recast time on your stealth was...about ten minutes, right?”

“That's right. Have we received any directions from the company?”

Two speakers were present, appearing without any warning. They wore indigo bodysuits, so dark they were nearly black, and their full-face helmets were the same color. These were clearly Reincarnators, but this equipment did not match that of the Project members.

Digging her claws into the ceiling and hanging upside down, Nue fixed her crimson eyes on the men's backs and held her breath. She had leaped up to the ceiling in an instant.

“We've received a request. The economic damage is already tremendous. Retaliate immediately.”

“Roger that.”

“Let's get as far inside the structure as we can and self-destruct at our own discretion... Hold on.” The Reincarnators, who had started to move away, stopped in their tracks—and then they turned around.

“Life signs detected. Engaging now.” Nue made to leap at the Reincarnators in a preemptive attack—but then she paused. The man's gaze wasn't turned

upward. He was instead looking at the far side of the dark corridor, where a hero had appeared with a bow in hand.

Nue resumed running along the ceiling. Wickedly sharp claws extended from her fingers and toes, digging deep into the structure and allowing her to crawl upside down without any issues. Unsurprisingly, the Reincarnators did notice Nue bounding overhead, but at that point their engagement with the hero had already begun. The hero's arrows of flame and the Reincarnators' muzzle flashes flooded the corridor with light.

Nue ran with wild abandon. After confirming that the sounds of battle were now far behind her, she released her claws, which had sunk deep into the ceiling, and touched back down on the ground before continuing to run on all fours. Two explosions sounded behind her—as if she cared.

Engine room. Engine room. The engine room! Relying on fragmented information she had overheard during her confinement, Nue ran. *Hurry. I have to hurry.*

“...There it is.” A hero was approaching her, and a fuzzy light suddenly illuminated the unlit basement. Nue started to enter the room as if drawn inside—and then someone pushed her from behind.

“Let go! Grr...grraaah...!” Whoever had attacked her from behind was silent. Nue’s hands were both pulled behind her back before she was pushed down against the floor; her bones creaked. Should she dislocate her shoulders, or possibly multiply her arms and retaliate? As Nue considered her options, flowing locks of blonde hair fell across her face, brushing against her nose.

You smell nice, Nue thought. The sharply drawn pupils in Nue’s crimson eyes suddenly dilated, wide and round. She realized that the assailant leaning against her back was actually being quite gentle, and her arms were only under such stress because she was fighting back. The person holding her peered at her from her side and held a finger up to their lips, gesturing for silence. Nue realized her assailant was a woman.

As Nue stared at her face in shock, the woman tilted her head slightly and smiled. Then she slowly stood up and away from Nue. She was free.

“...Why?”

The woman did not answer, instead furrowing her brow in distress.

“Can’t you talk?”

The woman simply nodded. This was such an ordinary gesture that, under the circumstances, Nue almost felt deflated. The woman looked to be about thirty years old—around the same age Nue’s mother had been when she died. Her

expression was kind and yet forlorn, a strange contrast to the battle garb she wore.

Achtida. The only woman among the Seven Generals of Krios. The heroine placed a hand on Nue's shoulder and encouraged her to leave the room. She seemed to be indicating that she would overlook Nue's intrusion.

"What are you all hoping to achieve?" Nue did not comply with the heroine's suggestion, instead remaining rooted to the ground. She stared straight back at Achtida. The heroine was flustered, and her eyes darted around the room. This was understandable. Even if she wanted to answer Nue, she couldn't. "...Prodotis said he would destroy the people of Terea. I may be a Titan, but my papa and my friends are Tereans, so...I can't let you get away with that."

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ρύντωλύω." Achtida's voice finally emerged, as if she had forced it out. Nue couldn't make out a single word.

"Let me go. I have to protect those I care about," said Nue firmly.

Thud. The sound of footsteps. "Just as I thought. You managed to sneak in here, didn't you, Titan girl? I thought it was only a matter of time."

Thud. Another set of footsteps rang out. "Watch your mouth, son. The princess is my guest. Do not bring shame on your father."

One of the men speaking was the hero, Prodotis the Silver. The other was his son, Kranos, slayer of champions, one of the Seven Generals of Krios. "You must have come to observe our engine room, Princess. I do not mind, of course. I, Prodotis, even invite you to gaze upon the remains of the god of Krios."

Prodotis stepped past Nue and proceeded toward the back of the room. As the hero walked by, torches ignited themselves around him. Looking at the scale of the room and its decorations, it might have been more appropriate to call it a temple. The ceiling sloped down as Prodotis moved farther into the room.

At the very back of the room, there was a brain. Not an entire brain—it was only a small part, exposed by the removal of skin and cranial bone from the back of the head. This was the brain of the five-armed giant holding up this very castle, and it was connected to the base of Krios.

"Watch closely, O Princess. This will be our final leap through space...so let us display the scenery outside as well," said Prodotis as he descended to the lower level of the room and placed his hand on the exposed brain. His hand shone with the light of his Skill, and an image very like the holograms that the Reincarnators had used during the battle of Vulcan appeared on the wall.

Although it was similar to a hologram, it possessed a different texture. This, too, was most likely the work of Prodotis's Skill.

The image seemed to show the point of view of the giant holding up the castle. As its head was turned down and the view above its head was dark, obscured by the castle, nothing could be seen clearly besides the streets of what had once been Terea at its feet. The sky above was blanketed by rain clouds, so the giant could not see very far.

"I bid thee open, Styx, river of the underworld." A small black vortex swirled in front of the giant. As the vortex revolved, it expanded in size, and its rotation twisted the space around it, pulling it in until its diameter exceeded the giant's height. As Prodotis poured his Skill into its brain from within the engine room, the giant did as he commanded and stepped into the colossal teleportation gate. Their surroundings were enveloped in darkness, and several hundred stars rushed past them.

Finally, the darkness cleared. As the giant passed through the destination gate, a tower of stone fell beneath its feet with a mighty crash.

Here, rain poured incessantly. This was the very heart of the Tower Capital, and now a nightmare from the past trampled upon this city of advanced science. The roads caved in, and torn power cables sprayed sparks everywhere. The sides of rain-polished buildings reflected the image of the five-armed giant and the ruin atop its head. It was as if two worlds had collided.

The chaos at the giant's feet was not displayed inside the engine room of Krios, and no heed was paid to it.

"Grrrrah! Gah..." Nue pounced at Prodotis, who was engrossed by the images of the Tower Capital, but Prince Kranos caught up with her in an instant and knocked her down with the shaft of his spear.

"I won't allow you to stand in my father's way... Do you even understand why we revere you, girl?"

"Ow...! Oww, that hurts!" The hero Kranos seized the sobbing Nue by her hair, then forced her to look up at the ceiling.

The lights that had been ignited by Prodotis's appearance finally rendered the top of the room, which had previously been shrouded in darkness, clearly visible. From the ceiling there hung the half-mummified remains of a colossal woman. In place of hair, there were countless pipes buried in her head. Her arms transitioned into birdlike wings halfway along their length.

Nue screamed.

"Long ago, with the blood he wrested from Ex Machina Coward as his

model, father created Ichor within her body, allowing Krios to produce many heroes. Although you belong to a different tribe, you, too, are a Titan. You should be able to serve the same purpose that the princess of the Erinyes, the goddesses of revenge, once served for us.” A twisted hatred burned in Kranos’s eyes as he looked down at Nue.

King Prodotis did not turn around, but simply continued gazing at the image of the Tower Capital projected on the wall. Achtida, who waited at the entrance to the room, did nothing besides look distressed, timid, and bewildered. She would not help Nue.

“Another newcomer...wait, no.” Prodotis singled out the shadow of an aircraft flying across the giant’s field of view. A snowflake was painted on the side of the helicopter—and a face with rust-colored eyes leaned out of the helicopter, and glared into the giant’s dark eyes. “It looks like there are familiar faces here too.”

The helicopter bearing the snowflake insignia cut through the ceaseless artificial rain as it flew. After taking one look at the emblem, the other armored helicopters that had gathered to intercept the walking fortress that had appeared in the Tower Capital’s city center moved aside.

“Looks like you have quite the reputation.” Dill left the door to the helicopter open and leaned halfway out of it to inspect the situation outside.

“Indeed. Our parent company, Panopticon Security Complex, is the leading company in this society of suppression and surveillance. They must be afraid of getting in our bad books.” The pilot, who wore the Panopticon logo, shot a silent glance at Starlight, who was currently riding with Dill. Starlight shrugged his shoulders. “Did I touch a nerve? It’s this guy’s fault that your previous company went under. Although at that point I had long since been dishonorably discharged.”

The Panopticon pilot showed no reaction, but Dill showed interest in his place. “Were you in the army?”

“Well, something like that, I suppose. It was actually quite different from what you’re thinking, but...it would take too much effort to explain. Yeah. Close enough. We protected people, so it’s basically the same.”

“Starlight. I’ve started to trust you once again, and you...”

“Cut it out. Don’t lie to my face. I might throw up.” Still looking squarely at

each other, Dill and Starlight fell silent. The helicopter's rotors were noisy. The giant, along with their destination—the castle atop its head—was now close. Dill, leaning out of the helicopter, glared steadfastly at the giant's vacant face. Soon after, the helicopter began its ascent.

The two men stood silently at the same door of their vehicle. Without needing to signal to each other, they both crouched low. The helicopter increased its altitude...and finally reached ground level of the ruins of Krios! They both jumped out simultaneously and landed, immediately scattering without a moment's pause. Barely a second later, a spear of flames landed at their feet and exploded.

"What do we have here? Looks like this time there's someone who can fight!" They were greeted by a diminutive hero—the blue-eyed Nefritis. Behind Dill, a series of Panopticon helicopters rose into view and deposited their passengers upon Krios.

There was no way the heroes would overlook this invasion. Nefritis summoned another spear of flames and hurled it at one of the helicopters—but the spear was stopped in its path by a curtain of phosphors and turned aside. Sid, who had already touched down on Krios, raised his hand wreathed in phosphors, a triumphant expression on his face.

"Might I suggest you not get in our way?"

"Oho. There are too many of you to choose from! You look to be the youngest here—you will be a suitable opponent!"

"You're pretty impudent for such a shrimp. Weren't you ever taught to respect your elders?"

"You talk a good game! How wonderful! What fun!" The boyish smile vanished from the hero's face. "Have at you! My name is Nefritis!"

Sid, not wishing to be outdone, announced his own name. "My name is Orestes! I will be your undoing!" The two heroes, new and old, crashed headlong into one another and crossed their weapons.

"Stand back, you moldy old mummies! The man before you is the hero of the age, Dill Steel-Link! At the hands of Steel-Link, the likes of you are nothing more than..." Dill, who was about to follow Sid in announcing himself, was baffled by this cry from the Reincarnator Blusterer.

The mail-cloak Rick arrived and scratched the back of his neck sheepishly. "Sorry, guys, so sorry. I was telling stories of Steel-Link's glory in the helicopter, and I guess I got carried away. I'm good at talking, after all."

"I'd rather you saved them for later. I'm going to keep heading straight for

Prodotis—can I leave things here to you?”

Rick, who understood Dill well, agreed readily and twirled the crossbow he held in his hand. “Roger! You run in there, cloak jangling, snatch Nue up, and then come back, Steel-Link! We’ll do something about the three dreaded stars staring at us right now.”

“...That’s right, damn it! We’re more than enough to take you small fry on! Isn’t that right, Steel-Link?”

“Thanks...I’m counting on you.” With a swish of his chain mail cloak, Dill crossed the courtyard of Krios. Meanwhile the heroes’ weapons all flew wildly across the battlefield—a maelstrom forged of flame, the Skills of the Reincarnators from the Project, Rick’s crossbow bolts, and covering fire from the Panopticon helicopters hovering overhead.

Those who had been selected earlier to join the infiltration party managed to meet up at the entrance to the underground complex.

Sid, however, was not with them. Nefritis’s spear of flames knocked Sid’s sword aside. Without losing momentum, the searing tip approached Sid’s face. The hero Orestes dodged the spear by a hair’s breadth. He smiled broadly, showing his white teeth, and with the shield he held in his left hand he delivered a cross counter to Nefritis’s jaw. In imitation of Aegisthus, he utilized his shield in an offensive defense.

“Orestes—” Dill opened his eyes wide, then narrowed them sharply. “...I’ll leave Nefritis to you! When you’ve finished him off, come and join us.”

“Yes, Master!”

Dill did not turn back again. Instead, he headed toward the circular amphitheater in a corner of the ruins of Krios, which had been constructed to be almost nestled against the now-ruined temple.

“I won’t allow you to stand in the way of father’s supremacy. You accursed insects!” A hero armed with a shield and spear of flames emerged from the shadow of one of the temple’s pillars, glaring at the intruders from beneath his solid silver helmet, his face contorted by rage. He was the last and mightiest of the Seven Generals of Krios. Kranos of the shining helm, son of Prodotis.

“A man with unbridled hatred. A valiant warrior, said to even surpass his own exalted father. Just how true are the legends of the shining Silver Age...?!” Grinning from cheek to cheek, Halberd kicked off from the muddy earth and lunged toward Kranos.

“Legends? Don’t be foolish... Behold *Prometheus*, the gods’ favor that illuminates all.” Kranos’s body was enveloped in flames that blazed like the sun.

The flames proceeded to condense, forming a glowing suit of full-body armor. As the rain that covered Tower Capital fell upon the armor, trails of white smoke rose up from its surface.

Kranos now stood nearly as tall as the giant, Halberd, himself. He thrust forward his spear of flames, which burned with such intense heat that it stifled the air around it, and it collided with Halberd's lump of iron...pushing it back. Following through with a single blow from his shield, he knocked Halberd to the ground.

"This is the true extent of the new power father has obtained. All people will be illuminated equally as his mercy rains down upon them. My valor is only a shadow of that possessed by the great hero Prodotis." Kranos's voice resounded through a gap in his helmet. As he brought down his spear to deliver the finishing blow to Halberd, Starlight darted past it. Kranos made to hurl his spear toward Starlight—but he failed. Halberd's lump of iron, transformed so that a hook now protruded from it, had slipped into a gap in Kranos's gauntlets of flame and pulled his arm back. Halberd smiled triumphantly.

"You are truly foolish." The armor on Kranos's right arm transformed back into shapeless fire. With the hook released and his arm freed, he proceeded to hurl his spear as he had originally intended. The searing spear pierced Starlight's back, exiting through his flank and pinning him firmly to the ground. A groan of agony escaped the Reincarnator's lips as the heat from the flames that formed the weapon scorched Starlight's wound.

"Now you've done it. This time...I'm not even prepared to respawn and deploy again...!" Starlight struggled, paying no mind to his widening wound, and opened his camouflage coat on one side. With some effort, he made enough space for one person to pass through.

"Go, noble hero." Starlight's coat swelled up from inside, and Dill leaped out of the gate Starlight created and ran straight for the circular amphitheater next to the temple. There was an opening in the low stage, surrounded by audience seating—without a doubt the entrance to the hidden labyrinth beneath Castle Krios.

"Another company has already finished mapping a route through the underground. I will guide you to the deepest segment." Red Lotus, one of Starlight's subordinates, ran after Dill, took the lead, and entered the opening in the stage. Dill took one look behind him. No one else followed. Halberd, Spiralblade, and the wounded Starlight fought to hold back the valiant general, Kranos.

“Go right on by if you wish, foolish Terean. You will not change your fate. Although it looks like I’ve given you the undeserved honor of being killed at father’s hand.” Kranos no longer pursued Dill. Armed once again with a spear and full-body armor wrought from flames, he approached Halberd and his allies to deliver certain death to them.

The giant sneered. “Why so subservient, O Kranos the fierce? Surely you are no less of a hero than your father. Whether we fall at your hands or his, the honor we receive will be the same.”

“...Is it truly the same? My father is not a mere hero of men. He is someone who aspires to godhood.”

“Ga hoo ha ha ha...! Very good! Only a real hero could spout such grandiose words with a straight face! Now, let us introduce ourselves! My name is Halberd! Descendant of the Gigas clan, and the commander who defends Terea!”

Beneath his helmet, Kranos let out a sigh. “Kranos, of the Seven Generals of Krios, son of Prodotis. Here I come!”

Even as the battle on the surface commenced, Castle Krios continued walking. The Tower Capital was hazy from the constant rain. Helicopters hovered in the sky like storm clouds. Prodotis paid none of this any mind from the engine room, but instead fixed his attention in the direction of the giant’s progress. Nue was made to sit nearby with her hands bound behind her back. The rope digging into her wrists glowed red and was faintly warm—a rope of flames, created by Prodotis’s Skill. The more effort she exerted in her struggle to free herself, the hotter the rope became. If she attempted to tear it apart, it would surely burn straight through her wrists.

She had never seen a Reincarnator who could use their Skill this precisely. This was surely the work of a genius. A man talented enough to be called a hero, given someone else’s tools, would surely exceed the original user. The strange science hidden beneath the sands of Krios had probably also been born of Prodotis’s genius.

“Hey. What are you trying to do?” This was Nue’s final act of resistance. To speak to Prodotis, distract him, and delay the hero from his objective for even a second.

Surprisingly, the hero answered. “That is very simple, O Princess. To bring

an eternal spring upon the world of men. To free mankind from the fate of inevitable death.”

“...That’s impossible. It can’t be done.”

“No, it can. You Titans are older gods than the Ex Machina, but even you are not the race that created this world. In the primordial, chaotic age, people were born of chaos and possessed life eternal and undefined...” Prodotis spoke as far as that, then stopped. He looked at Nue suspiciously. “Princess. We seem to be speaking at cross purposes. Were you not the one who told me this in the first place? Chimera the indestructible, wise princess of the Titans...was it not thee who introduced my father, Geryon, to the princess of the Erinyes? I thought therefore that Krios would receive thy assistance in this century too...”

“Wait. That doesn’t make sense. I may be a Titan, but we don’t live *that* long. In fact the Kirisaki tribe has been short-lived for generations... Who are you talking about?”

“Was I not resurrected...by the hand of the goddess Chimera?”

Nue shivered. Her bright red eyes wandered across the room. Prodotis fell silent, deep in thought. She realized she would not receive an answer. Looking at his thoughtful expression, it was clear that this hero didn’t have the answer either. Prodotis had not abducted Nue—he had simply clung to a familiar ally upon being resurrected after hundreds of years.

“It matters not,” Prodotis said, having lost interest all too quickly. “In any case, the course I must take does not change. The Ichor I created long ago, mixed from the blood of the Ex Machina and the Titans, was nothing more than a prototype. This time, I will use the blood of Reincarnators. That is the reason I have traveled all this way.”

As Prodotis gazed at the image of the giant’s vision projected on the wall, a hazy blue light emanated from it. Within the vision stood a half-real pillar—the Capital Tower. The great lighthouse that wandered ceaselessly between reality and unreality. Beneath it were three tall towers, each around one thousand meters in height, bundled around its base. By reading the memories of the Reincarnator Hero, Prodotis had already learned that one of those three served as a plant, producing the blue blood that ran through the veins of the Reincarnators.

The giant supporting the castle approached the tower with a mechanical gait. Prodotis continued to direct it to do so. Its never-ending march—finally stopped.

“What?” Prodotis peered suspiciously at the screen, whose view of the tower had become dark. It was suffused by toxic-looking cyan smoke, as if the blue of the Capital Tower had seeped into it. The giant still stepped forward as though it

wished to proceed. “The castle is being pushed back... Perhaps this will not be so simple after all.”

The wall of smoke displayed on the screen began to form a meaningful shape. “...No way. Why?” Nue gasped.

The smoke now had the shape of a human. Sleeves with decorative pleats, recalling a nostalgic style, adorned an otherwise plain dress with no other obvious embellishments. Meticulously groomed blonde hair flowed down her shoulders, closely resembling her father’s. Upon close examination, freckles could be seen dimly scattered on her deathly pale face. The girl looked down, devoid of life like a doll.

“Iris.” Nue knew the girl’s name, but she was not the one who had murmured it out loud. Dill, who stood at the entrance to the great room, was transfixed by the image of Iris Earhart on the wall. A Reincarnator accompanied him, standing next to him. *Why?* His companion was not unfamiliar to Nue. In one hand he held a gun, in the other a flaming hand axe. The Chief-class Reincarnator, Red Lotus, had been under Starlight’s command in the battle of Vulcan, and had been one of the enemies who had attacked the transformed Nue.

“So you have arrived, heroes of Terea. I told my son in no uncertain terms not to let anyone through, but given how outnumbered we are, I suppose this was unavoidable. The father will clear away the son’s mess.” Prodotis spoke indifferently, having no way of knowing Dill’s circumstances. Pulling a weapon toward him from a corner of the room with his psychokinesis, he spoke vacantly. “Why... You intend to come out?”

As Prodotis spoke these inexplicable words to himself, Dill recovered from the shock of seeing Iris. “Nue! I’ve come to rescue you! We’re going home together.” Dill started running, his heels kicking up the hem of his chain mail cloak, jangling with every step.

“*Galatea*, the statue that houses shadows.”



The outline of Prodotis's body blurred and split in two. As Dill drew closer, the haze expanded, and the protruding outline took a step forward. He now faced two mirror images. The only difference between them was that the one stepping forward had black hair.

"My name is Eugene, the hollow shadow... Do not stand in our way, Dill Steel-Link. I want to see the future Prodotis, a true hero, will create!"

The spear held by Dill collided with the spear held by Eugene, Hero of the Reincarnators!

"Your ideology is puerile, based on delegation to others but yet envious of their power. You're just a wraith who can do nothing with his own strength... It is pitiful to see how far you've fallen, Reincarnator."

"Hold your tongue!"

How many times had this very battle played out? Crossing their spears, slamming their shields against each other, with Hero's Skill running wild, the two clashed yet again.

"To obtain the blood of the Reincarnators, I must cast away the fog outside. Let us go, Princess." With a struggling Nue in tow, Prodotis opened a teleportation gate and disappeared.

Three battles unfolded atop the surface of Krios as the rain poured down without end. One took place in the circular amphitheater, between Kranos, son of Prodotis, and a group led by Halberd. Another raged in the courtyard where withered trees stood, between Nefritis and Orestes—a battle to the death between the two heroes. Finally, there was the conflict fought on the largest scale at this moment, against the trio of stars and the pride of Krios—Itimenos, Papus, and Diros.

An arrow loosed by Diros, the swift marksman, burned with the flames of his Skill as it headed straight for Rick Wake.

"Seriously?!" The crossbow bolt Rick had just fired collided with Diros's arrow in midair and burned to a cinder. If Rick hadn't followed with a somersault, tumbling into a nearby puddle of mud, he likely would have met the same fate. For the duration of the battle so far, every bolt Rick fired had been struck by another arrow crossing its trajectory, knocking it out of the air. Diros's bow, drawn with a demigod's strength, fired arrows with force exceeding that of the bolts fired from Rick's mechanical crossbow. The battle was one-sided, and Rick was losing.

"This is total bullshit, hero!" If Rick maintained his straightforward

offensive, he realized he had no chance of winning. *In that case...* As Rick scrambled to his feet with his head covered in mud, he suddenly dropped to his knees, crossbow already at the ready. His eyes met those of Diros, who stared steadily in Rick's direction while nocking his next arrow.

"Eh? Damn, he's fast..." With a strained half smile, Rick could do nothing besides pull the trigger.

"Rick, look out!" An explosion erupted around the hero, consuming everything within a five-meter radius. This display of pyrokinesis had come from Blusterer, a staff member of the Reincarnators' Project.

"Blusterer, old pal! Nicely done!"

"Kazama! This again?!"

"Huh?" A Reincarnator who had tried to challenge Diros at close range was caught up in Blusterer's explosion, and as a result had been burned to a crisp. "Shit, I overdid it again! But I couldn't help it! This is our home turf! My power output is just too high in this rain, *senpai!*"

Indeed, throughout the battles taking place since their arrival at the Tower Capital, the power of the Reincarnators' Skills had been elevated. A short distance away, Repeater, who fought with the hero Itimenos, delivered a flurry of eight blows to the hero's shield—a greater number than usual. The Manager Toiler's psychokinetic limbs, usually unseen, had now become visible to the naked eye. From each of these thick, jellylike arms, each nearly two meters in length, there sprouted ten protrusions which looked more like tentacles than fingers. It was not clear whether this was the true form of his unseen hands, or if their properties had changed due to the strengthening effect of the Tower Capital's rain, but Toiler now fought on equal footing with the hero Papus, who commanded two writhing monsters.

"Wake, I'd like to go and assist Orestes. Can I leave this front to you?" It was one of his mail-cloak comrades, Whitehead, who had approached him and spoke. Rick nodded.

"Sure. Though I have to say, the way things are going, it looks like we might not be able to deal with these heroes..." Flames illuminated Rick's cheek where his eagle tattoo was displayed—flames born from an arrow loosed by Diros. The arrow glowed even more brightly and accelerated as flames spouted from the tail of the arrow. If this arrow met its target, it would surely be lethal.

Rick and Whitehead both dodged the arrow, chain mail cloaks sweeping through the air. They both then witnessed the moment that the arrow they had just dodged changed its trajectory in mid-flight, the flames spouting from its tail

feathers carefully adjusted. The arrow traced a wide arc in the air, then turned back. Once again, its target was the two mail-cloaks. Then, from behind, they heard Diros fire another arrow.

“Shoot it down!” Rick prepared to fire at Diros’s second arrow, while Whitehead lifted his spear to strike down the one that had turned back toward them.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me...” Rick fired three bolts in quick succession, but these did not neutralize the hero’s flaming arrow, instead being consumed themselves. Behind Rick, Whitehead thrust his spear toward the other projectile with similar results. With a metallic ringing sound the spear flew from his hands, and the arrows continued their pursuit.

“Dodge!” Though awkwardly, they managed to evade the arrows tailing them. With flames spouting from the fletching to propel them farther, the arrows turned back on themselves once again and began tracing new trajectories. Rick then turned to see Diros fire three arrows at once.

As Orestes drew his sword and shield closer in, tightening his defenses, the hero Nefritis toyed with him, maneuvering in three dimensions and striking at him from all directions. The boy hero’s scarlet cloak billowed behind him each time he skillfully feinted, deceiving Sid’s eyes.

This time I’ll hit him! With that determination, Sid unleashed another thrust—but in vain. The strike only pierced the boy’s cloak, and it had left Sid’s flank wide open in the process.

“Over here!” Nefritis swung his flaming spear around and drove toward Sid’s exposed flank, the tip carried forward by centrifugal force. Before Sid’s phosphors automatically activated to protect him, the spear sent him flying.

As Sid spun through the air, he saw Nefritis crouch down, then leap forward to follow up with another strike. With his sense of equilibrium in total disarray, Sid focused on gathering his phosphors at a single point, then detonated them. The resulting reverse thrust slowed him down. Sid, now suspended momentarily in midair, deflected a blow from Nefritis’s spear by striking the side of the shaft with his shield.

The face of the hero, slayer of serpents, was now right before his eyes, and the boy was grinning. “Do you have any secrets, I wonder? Let me drag them out of you.” In opposition to the motion of his arm as he drew back his spear,

Nefritis unleashed a reverse roundhouse kick. His heel, clad only in a sandal—practically bare—nevertheless sliced through Sid’s bangs as it grazed his forehead. Sid bent his neck back to dodge the kick.

“Don’t count me out yet!” Another explosion from Sid’s phosphors propelled him forward in midair, toward Nefritis.

“Yes, *that’s* more like it!” Nefritis cried out between movements, abandoning his spear and shield. He then seized the sword meant to skewer him with his bare hands, clambered atop it like a gymnast mounting a high bar, and continued running along the length of it. Nefritis’s feet fell on Sid’s hand, shoulder—and then finally Nefritis reached his opponent’s head, trampling him underfoot. Nefritis then stomped on Sid with his entire strength.

After receiving an impact like a bolt of lightning from above, Sid’s head dropped down. He was knocked out of the air. Nefritis, conversely, rebounded with a graceful backward somersault before touching down on the ground. The boy hero proceeded to spin on the spot. His scarlet mantle followed his motion. “Hmm...what fun! The age I lived in had no shortage of stupidly huge Titans and outrageously strong heroes, but the people of this age have their own kind of ingenuity—and that’s a lot of fun too!”

Sid rose to his feet. He was a sorry sight to behold, with muddy water dripping from his head. He felt dizzy. As much as he tried to stand up straight, he couldn’t help but stagger. When he’d crashed into the ground, the impact had sent his phosphors flying, returning his body to that of a small boy.

“What’s the matter with you? You look like even more of a pipsqueak than me! The more I see of this age, the less I understand it. How interesting! What fun!” Undaunted by the rain overhead, Nefritis let out a peal of laughter. “O world, you never cease to fascinate me. Ah, it’s too much to bear! I want to defeat you and embark on a new adventure at once! Now then, do you have any tricks left up your sleeve?” Borrowing Prodotis’s Skill, Nefritis armed himself once again with a spear of flames and stepped toward Sid, laughing.

Sid had not yet fully recovered. Enrobing himself in phosphors, he once again assumed the form of Orestes, but its outline was unstable and soon fell apart. The tip of the sword he held readied would not remain steady.

Let’s try that. In the back of Sid’s mind he pictured the cloning ability displayed by the Reincarnator called Hero during the battle of Vulcan. The basic principle of this technique was, most likely, imparting substance to a telepathic illusion via psychokinesis. Since Sid was also a Play Actor, surely he could...! Nefritis brought his spear down upon Sid before the boy could even finish the

thought. Still staggering, Sid assumed a stance to intercept the blow. Because he was genuinely struggling to stand and not at all bluffing, he naturally drew Nefritis toward him. In time with Nefritis's approach, Sid concentrated on placing a clone behind him.

Nefritis, taking a step forward with his spear held overhand, changed his footing and quickened his pace. He crouched low. This was a sudden change in fighting stance, and he had also moved the spear to his left hand. *Now, what will you do?* Nefritis thought, his blue eyes sparkling with a smile as he tested Sid.

Sid's timing was thrown off by this. He shouted, abandoned his plan, and went to collide with Nefritis instead—stepping deep into his opponent's striking range without fear. As he stepped even deeper than intended, though, he collided with Nefritis faster than he had anticipated, leaving him demoralized.

"N-Now...is the moment!" This cry came from behind the hero Nefritis, over his shoulder. Aggregated phosphors there took a form resembling a human and stood still—then crumbled.

"You failed, didn't you?" Nefritis showed Sid a grin full of white teeth, as if ready to bite. The hero let go of the weapon whose control he had fought for and crouched down, shrinking his already diminutive stature; he slipped past Sid's flank in this way. "Prometheus," Nefritis murmured, activating Prodotis's long range Skill. The boy hero gripped a fresh sword of flames and slashed diagonally across Sid's back.

"Ah!..." Sid couldn't react in time. Attempting to use an unfamiliar Skill had depleted his strength more than he had anticipated, and his thoughts raced. *Here comes the pain. This is bad... This is the deepest wound I've sustained so far. Will I faint? I don't have time for that. Here comes the follow-up strike. Get away, put some distance between us. This really is bad. I've already leaned too far forward to avoid it so I can't correct my stance. But wait! There's still a way! I just need to send the enemy farther away—turn around and counter his attack. Twist your body around...but it hurts... I can't... This is bad. I won't make it. This is bad, this is bad, this is really bad! Am...I going to die?*

Turning his head, Sid saw Nefritis raise his sword for an overhand strike. He was about to deliver the killing blow. What remained of Sid's failed clone seethed behind him as it began to dissolve into the rain.

"I can't watch this anymore." A girl's voice rang out, and the sound made Nefritis freeze in the very moment before bringing down his sword. An immense number of phosphors suffused the vicinity. As the rain fell upon them, they evaporated with a hiss, only for new ones to appear and take their place. Sid

heard the sound of footsteps behind him, and from his position lying on the ground he saw a pair of sneakers next to his ear.

The figure's outline was hazy, looking as if it might dissipate soon, returning to phosphors at any moment. It was only due to her remarkable talent for using her Skill—and her unwavering will—that she managed to maintain a shape.

“Why...are you here?”

The girl, wearing a stadium jumper over her school uniform, smiled back at Sid, though her face was crumpled up. “You looked ever so pitiful, and I was worried that I came back as a ghost... That's just a joke, sorry.”

“...Rei!”

“The truth is, I've been trying to manifest this whole time, but it just happened to actually work right now. I guess it's thanks to this rain, which contains Liquid Computer. This may be a fake body that I made with my Skill, but I've managed to recreate my true appearance. Right now...I really feel like I'm in great shape...!”

Rei, the Reincarnator girl, smiled wickedly. Her eyes were trained upon the ancient hero trapped in her cage of phosphors. “You've got rotten luck, don't you?”

With a strained smile, Nefritis responded. “Young lady—now, now, young lady. Let's discuss this...”

“No can do. You bullied my kid brother.”

Since when am I your little brother...? Sid didn't even have time to speak his thoughts before Rei pointed her thumb down, detonating the phosphors. The blast wave swept across the surface of Krios, leaving behind a small crater—but Nefritis's body was nowhere to be found in the wreckage.

“Bah hah hah hah! What fun, this is just too much!” Nefritis, holding up two shields of flame, had leaped clear of the blast wave, though not without suffering burns all over his body. The place where Sid and Rei had been was now right beneath him—but they were no longer there. Casting off his shields and readying a new spear, the hero stopped for a moment. *Were they caught in the blast? Unthinkable. Where has the enemy—*

“Here I am.” A voice came from behind Nefritis, who had foreseen this, and he wheeled around in an instant to drive his spear into the source of the voice. There he found a small teleportation gate, floating in the air at ear level—and nothing but the gate could be seen.

“My name is Orestes!” Deactivating the phosphors that hid his form, Sid slashed at Nefritis. Burning motes of light coiled around his sword, almost

doubling the length of the blade. This was not Sid's own Skill; this power belonged to Rei.

There was a metallic ringing sound, making it difficult for Sid to imagine that his sword had just cleaved flesh. The blade of phosphors had indeed sunk into Nefritis's body, but had stopped cutting halfway through his arm.

The hero's muscles, diligently trained, were as hard as bronze—and it was no ordinary blood that flowed beneath his skin. But Sid was not afraid any longer.

"Your wounds won't heal, will they?" A lopsided struggle ensued between Nefritis's arm, which was ultimately flesh and blood, and Sid's burning blade, wreathed in phosphors. The flames from Rei's Skill seared Nefritis's bronze skin, and the blade slowly sank deeper into his arm as Sid added insult to injury, with words of merciless venom.

"Don't tell me you're weaker than Prodotis and Falaina?"

"...Kya hah hah...ah hah hah hah! You said it! Indeed, I am not the same as King Prodotis or Prince Kranos. I am but a warrior of a bygone generation who was made a hero by the power of the Nectar. Although I may lack the regeneration granted by the Ichor..." Nefritis here seized Sid's neck with both arms, including the one with Sid's sword buried in it. "The rest of the Seven Generals lack the godlike strength granted to me by the Nectar! In terms of brute strength, I can equal even the white whale Falaina! Now, let's compare our power, pipsqueak!"

"Who are you talking to?" The Reincarnator girl smirked at Nefritis. The form of Sid Nefritis had seized became a swarm of butterflies and vanished. All of this had been no more than a visual deception created by telepathy—an imitation of the Skill utilized by Puppeteer, a Manager in the Reincarnators' Project.

"My name..."

"...That isn't playing fair!"

"...is Orestes!" As Sid ran, he thrust out his shield, entwined with phosphors, and smashed it into Nefritis. Nefritis weathered the blow from Sid's shield on his cheek and withstood it for a full second with only the strength in his neck...and then he went flying.

Phosphors spouted from Sid's elbows. This was his adaptation of Repeater's high-velocity flurry of punches.

"Sid!"

"Got it!" At Rei's direction, Sid leaped into the air. Phosphors collected at Sid's back. The flames took the form of insect-like wings, which multiplied,

forming two pairs, then four. The propulsion generated by the wings pushed Sid's acceleration faster.

Nefritis, slayer of beasts, perceived his imminent defeat. He realized at that moment that this hero of a new age was about to strike him down. As Nefritis stood up, he did so knowing that Sid was about to claim glory from him.

The boy hero's lips curled up in a smile. His blue eyes glittered with delight. "Achtida! With me!"

"Αλήθεια‡τετράγωνον»χιστός±λύωλύωθ' φάκελόγοςΦσείωφάκε" The only heroine from amongst the Seven Generals of Krios released the arrow from her taut bowstring. As Sid slashed at Nefritis, advancing with his wings of phosphors trembling, a dazzling light flashed past the side of his face.

“—Sid!”

Sid, shot through by an arrow of flames fired with unerring aim, whirled wildly as he flew away from his target. Rei's phosphors formed something like a net to cushion his fall; this slowed him down somewhat, but he continued to tumble until he was nearly at the edge of Krios's floating landmass. Rei followed him with phosphoric teleportation. She threw herself forward, catching the boy as his transformation had come undone.

“Are you okay?” The arrow of flames piercing Sid's chest disintegrated as soon as Rei touched it. The wound was deep—however, Rei's Skill had unlimited potential. The rain of the Tower Capital also assisted her powers.

With damp footfalls, the two heroes approached. Rei and Sid, who was resting on her knee, were pressed against the cliff face of Krios.

“What fun! This time, it's two against two... Achtida, it appears you are to be my salvation in this century as well.” Achtida, the heroic archer of light, nodded in response. The quiver upon her back bristled with arrows of flame, produced by Prodotis's Skill from afar so that she would never run out of ammunition. The archer-saint of Krios nocked her next arrow warily.

“Sid. It's okay. As long as I'm here, you won't die...” Phosphors gathered and continued to swarm around Sid's wound. The gash, which should have been fatal, closed up with abrupt ease. Sid looked up with a blank expression as he slowly regained consciousness.

“Girl...that really isn't playing fair, you know?” As he spoke, Nefritis suddenly realized something. “What on earth did it cost you to do that?”

Rei did not answer; she had no obligation to do so. But even Sid had to wonder. No matter how talented she might be, wasn't this a little over the top? Just as the Project's Hero, as a Play Actor, had apparently resigned himself to his

unstable mental condition, Rei, who had the same Skill, must be taking equal risks when she used her abilities...

Rei did not answer. Perhaps she didn't know the answer herself.

"Don't you know? Just as I drank deeply of the blood of the gods and toiled alongside Lord Prodotis to create his own concoction of blood, I know there must be some mechanism in place to make this kind of power possible... I just don't understand you Reincarnator folk! Well, one day I'll figure you out. Achtida, I will go with you until my adventure is at an end."

The heroine Achtida smiled subtly, but lowered her eyebrows as if she felt troubled. Just like Falaina, it appeared that she was unable to speak in a manner intelligible to those present. Sid and Rei, Nefritis and Achtida—they were about to resume their battle.

At that very moment...

"Huh? What's this?" Blue smoke rose up around them. Castle Krios, which had continued its mechanical advance up to this point, had suddenly stopped walking. In the direction it had been heading, there stood a half-real blue tower that pierced the sky. In front of that tower had appeared a young girl, even more colossal than the castle, who now looked down at the heroes.

The girl was only one of a group of girls. Holding each other's hands, they formed a circle, creating a perimeter around Krios and trapping the castle. From out of the blue mist, eight of these girls emerged without a sound. They were all alike in complexion, deathly pale, and their faces were all turned down, expressionless.

They stood as tall as mountains, and though their outline was somewhat uncertain like phantasms, they seemed to be made up of the same half-real smoke as the skyscraping Capital Tower. Prodotis, king of Krios, who had arrived at the surface via a teleportation gate, observed this without any expression.

A song rang out overhead.

Bird, bird, bird in a cage... The girls' lips were not moving at all, so the source of the song was unclear. On Krios's back, the heroes embroiled in battle, the Terean mercenaries, and even the Reincarnators—all felt fear in their hearts.

"So that...is 'Lily'..."

"The girl in front...is that Iris? Steel-Link's daughter...?"

This unfathomable situation resulted in a standstill between the combatants atop Krios. Only one among them—Prodotis the Silver—continued to move undaunted. He stood before the blue tower, and then walked toward the girls formed of smoke.

“I take it you are the defenders of the tower of blood. If I vanquish these girls, will my path open?”

“Grr-grraaah!” Bound by a rope of flames and dragged alongside Prodoris, Nue bared her fangs. The ropes, which burned hotter in proportion to the force applied to them, dug into Nue’s slender arms—and burned clean through them.

This had been Nue’s intention all along. In exchange for the loss of both arms, the Chimera was freed. Crimson blood sprayed everywhere. The instant her blood touched the ground, it congealed and darkened, and black feathers crawled out from the stumps of her arms like a swarm of insects.

Metamorphoses. Book Four. Harpy.

“Dill fought for Iris’s sake for all this time! Don’t you touch her!”

“*Helicon, the mountain of song!*”

The harpy flew, beating her wings, upon which countless eyes blinked—and then fell. Gravity imparted by Prodoris’s Skill pushed down hard on Nue, causing her to sink to the ground. Unable to withstand the additional weight, the eyes blinking across the surface of her wings began to burst open with a series of popping sounds. Nue screamed until she was hoarse.

“It appears that you are not the immortal Chimera, Queen of the Titans, that I once knew. To be held down this easily...you are most regrettably frail.” Tears of frustration poured out of Nue’s eyes as she groaned in agony.

“A frail girl such as thee belongs not on the battlefield where young men cry out their names. Until this comes to an end, thou shalt be protected by my power—Now weep within *Phalaris, the boiling armor!*” Teleportation gates manifested all around Nue. Via psychokinesis, Prodoris pulled out from the gates a number of seasoned armaments that had slumbered for centuries beneath Castle Krios. Helmets, shields, swords, and spears floated in the air, surrounded Nue as if to protect her, and they left her trapped inside.

As the armaments layered atop one another and the last gap between them was closing, Nue felt the tremors of footsteps. Castle Krios was shaking, along with the ground beneath it. Nue, whose vision was entirely blocked, could not even guess at what was happening, but she was able to glimpse Prodoris’s expression before she was entombed.

“So my giant has been thwarted. Tereans, have you done it again...?!” The

ancient hero's face was twisted with loathing. Opening another teleportation gate, the hero disappeared.

That was the last thing Nue saw.

The sound of clashing swords reverberated throughout the labyrinth underneath the castle. Two shadows cast on the stone walls battled for dominance. Dill pulled back one side of his body to dodge the spear Yuujin thrust toward him, and as he pulled back he seized the spear and wrested it away. Yuujin immediately let go and went to draw out a new spear with his Skill—but for a moment, just one moment, he was wide open.

Dill stepped toward Yuujin, coming within striking distance. Tossing aside his spear, he grabbed Yuujin by the chest with his bare hands instead. "Give up. You will never defeat me now!" Dill said before bashing Yuujin, who was about to unleash some kind of Skill, with the shield he still gripped in his left hand.

Yuujin floundered. However, Dill would not let him go, nor did he stay the hand he'd used to strike him with his shield. This was the conclusion he had reached after many battles with the Reincarnator known as Hero—all Skills were meaningless if they could not be used. Since Yuujin's Skills required him to exert his mental will, interrupting his concentration would cause them to fail. If Dill continued to rattle his brain physically, again and again, there would be no way for him to use any Skill whatsoever.

"My name...is Dill Steel-Link! That's the name of the man who already killed you once!" Dill drew his arm back a little farther and struck at Yuujin with his shield once more with the intent of delivering the *coup de grâce*. Yuujin, a mere phantasm created of psychokinesis, crumbled to pieces. The fragments of his being dissolved into flames and failed to catch on the floor, or otherwise floated up as embers.

Suddenly, a wind that could not have blown underground rushed across the room. The flames left behind by Yuujin's image all moved in a single direction. Aiming in the same direction, Dill picked up his spear and hurled it.

"So playing dead...won't work...!" The flames were suspended at the end of the spear that pierced them, and once again they condensed to take a humanoid shape. It was Yuujin himself—a being who had lost his physical body and had only been granted a transient form by Prodotis's Skill. His definition of a body was different from what it had once been.

Dill unsheathed his sword and slashed at Yuujin, dodging a counterattack from his spear and turning into the corridor. As they exchanged blows, he shouted to someone behind him.

“Do it now! I’ll keep him busy!” Dill spoke to the Reincarnator who had followed him underground. Slipping past the combatants, he went to the far corner of the room, stood before the exposed brain of the giant, and readied his shotgun, which glowed red from the intense heat of his Skill.

“No, don’t! Don’t keep me from seeing the world a true hero will create!” wailed Yuujin.

There was no way the Reincarnator would listen to him. He pulled the trigger, and the buckshot buried itself deep in the giant’s brain. The shotgun pellets, heated to the point of combustion by Red Lotus’s Skill, set the entire brain aflame upon impact.

“Kujo! Please...I’ve finally found hope here! Prodotis will...”

The Reincarnator fired his shotgun again. Two shots, three shots, four. The flames spread. The footing of the giant supporting the castle wavered. It was clearly suffering. Yuujin swung his spear around in an attempt to push Dill away. Dill coolly weathered this attack, which was barely more than a child’s tantrum. He deflected the spear with his shield, stopped it dead with his sword, then kicked back at Yuujin. Yuujin—the man once called the Project’s Hero—was defeated easily.

“How wretched you are.” Dill spoke a decisive parting shot as he held the tip of his blade against the back of Yuujin’s neck. Yuujin groaned.

“Believe me, I know...” Yuujin said. “Having been defeated by you twice already, I know I cannot match you! That’s not the point. Having lost my own body to become a Reincarnator, and then having the Project tinker with my very soul that remained, I can’t even be sure I’m *myself* anymore! Is...there anything else left to me now? The only proof I have left of my identity is this ideal, this drive to seek out heroes...”

Red Lotus, who had unloaded all of his ammunition, paused. As a fellow Reincarnator, he perhaps empathized with Yuujin. Finally, Red Lotus spoke. “For us Reincarnators, it was the Project and the Tower Capital that made us who we are. I believed you were a true comrade who held the same convictions I did...but you’re really nothing more than a traitor. Steel-Link, please, go ahead.” Dill nodded, and brought his sword down—but it was deflected midswing.

“The divine peak from whence the light pours down. The seeker who roams the face of the earth.”

“Ahh. Ahh...” Yuujin began to shed tears at the sound of this new voice.

“The indivisible salvation. The one who would fight for the throne of heaven. Passed down by the tongues of countless bards, my name is...”

Dill stepped back and reassumed his fighting stance. Raising back his chin, he glared at the newcomer with his rust-colored eyes.

“The hero Prodotis, the silver mountain!” The hero of Redguard now stood before Yuujin, guarding him behind his back. His long silver hair reflected the color of the surrounding flames like a polished mirror, turning it a deep red.

“Eugene. O weak one, there is nothing to fear. You have become my shadow. My fame, my valor, and my name—you will share it for all eternity. Now, return to me. Let us walk together... Gather now, *Epimetheus*, the returning favor!”

Yuujin’s body crumbled into flames that rose into the air. These flames were all drawn into Prodotis’s body, leaving no trace of the man called Yuujin ever having existed.

“How dare you vandalize my castle, people of Terea?” The air around Prodotis seemed to creak with tension.

Dill held firm against this commanding presence. Although he had a common man’s body without the blood of gods in his veins, the great heart he possessed as an actor made this possible.

“Have you forgotten, ancient hero? Have you forgotten who it was that defeated you so long ago?”

“...Just so. After fighting the slave hero, Sclavos, who represented the forces of Terea, in single combat and barely achieving victory, I was greeted with a stone thrown by one of you nameless Terean worms. What an undignified end...what dishonor! Defeating Sclavos—a flawless warrior—had left me exhausted, and my life was cut short by a mere pebble. I know not even who threw the stone! The Tereans passed down a distorted version of my story to later generations, heaping praise upon me in order to conceal their own cowardly acts!”

“A humble man of Terea is about to slay you once again.”

“I will wait and see. I, Prodotis, will judge if your prowess is as valiant as your tongue.” The floor sank as the hero took a step forward, and cracks raced across its surface. In the next instant, Prodotis was already right in front of Dill. Dill reflexively raised his shield to block a powerful thrust from Prodotis’s spear, but saw the point emerge through the back of the shield. With another step that cracked the floor beneath him, the hero pushed his spear all the way through.

Dill dodged to one side. With a metallic shriek his shield was torn apart—its left side, where the spear had pierced, was entirely gouged away and sent flying.

“Steel-Link! Get down—”

“Hey, idiot—”

Dill had no choice but to obey the voice from behind. Red Lotus, who had reloaded his shotgun, aimed at Prodotis and pulled the trigger. He was far away, and the scatter shot had the property of losing force as it traveled, but on the other hand, it spread out wider, becoming a curtain of gunfire that was difficult to avoid.

“How pitiful,” lamented Prodotis from behind Red Lotus. “Have you forgotten that I, Prodotis, can accomplish anything that you Reincarnator folk are capable of?”

The teleportation gate closed behind Prodotis. Prodotis thrust forth his spear, skewering the Reincarnator with the burning head of the spear. Prodotis had utilized the same Skill that Red Lotus used, which induced combustion.

“Steel-Link, I’ll leave the rest...” *To you.* Red Lotus was unable to speak the final words. The flames of Prodotis’s Skill were stronger than any that Red Lotus could produce. The flames roared as they engulfed the Reincarnator, incinerating him until there was nothing left but blackened cinders, whereupon his body crumbled away.

Dill didn’t need to be told not to waste this opportunity. He drew a javelin from underneath his chain mail cloak, and threw it. His target...was not Prodotis. It was the giant’s brain behind him.

“...Impudent cur.” Although irritated, the hero answered this gambit. Tossing aside the incinerated corpse, he held out a hand. A vortex appeared ahead of Dill’s spear, which vanished into another dimension.

All the while Dill had been running, drawing closer to Prodotis to deliver a lethal attack. Prodotis had seen through this strategy, though. He exerted his will and activated his Skill.

“*Lerna*, the devouring swamp.” The floor of the room was suffused by pitch blackness, then by a teleportation gate. This was the trap used by the Reincarnator known as Pitfall, but the time required to activate it was shorter by far. Dill was given no window in which to respond. The swamp was so large that it began to swallow Prodotis’s feet as well.

“It would be easy to defeat you—but first I will change the setting.”

The battle on the surface was approaching its climax. The artificial rain that never ceased falling began to pour down even harder. The half-real tower, unperturbed, simply continued to loom high above Krios. The group of eight colossal girls watched over the tides of battle impassively.

What were the names of those who slew and those who were slain in this conflict? Kranos, slayer of champions and the eminent son of Prodotis, butchered Spiralblade and Sinker, while Papus the wise seized and killed Fleetfoot. Hovering in the sky above, the helicopters sent by Panopticon continued to obstinately rain gunfire upon them, but the ingenious Itimenos dropped them one by one with a series of thrown spears, fighting off the Manager Toiler with his other hand. Finally, one of the two archer-saints Krios could boast within its ranks—Diros of the swift arrow—pierced both Blusterer and the mail-cloak Rick with his darts.

“My name is Aegisthus! The shield raised high above the heavens, the defender of all Terea!”

“My name is Prodotis! The sun that shall never fall, he who burns with everlasting life!”

The two heroes, emerging from the other side of the teleportation gate, competed as they announced their names from the moment their weapons crossed. Rick overheard their great clash.

“Rick! Are you okay?!” Blusterer, who was shot through by the hero Diros’s arrows at the same time as Rick had been, approached at a crawl. His right leg, pierced by Diros’s homing arrows, was torn to shreds, and it would no longer bear his weight.

“Hmm...I’m not feeling great.” Rick’s wounds were even more severe. The last arrow that had hit Blusterer had carried on and punctured Rick’s abdomen. “Blusterer, old fellow...do you have some kind of medicine that can heal wounds instantly or anything like that? I had some of the blood of Prodotis, so I drank it all, but I don’t know if the regeneration can keep up... I think I may be dying.”

Blusterer opened his mouth in shock, then shook his head from side to side. “Rick...I’m sorry, but our Liquid Computers don’t work like that... If you do use one, your wounds *will* heal, but...!”

“My personality will be overwritten, right? That makes sense, I suppose. If they only healed wounds, we would have stolen them for our own use long ago.

Is that what you people call ‘copy protection’? I suppose it must be... I guess I’m done for, then.” In fact, Rick was right. Blusterer did not attempt to correct him, and Rick smiled in resignation. “While we’re sharing information, perhaps you can tell me—bodies used by Reincarnators don’t last more than five years, do they?”

“...How did you...?” Blusterer didn’t directly confirm or deny this, but his expression said everything. Rick gave him a wry smile.

“Blusterer, you’re being far too obvious about it. So I was right. When we use the blood of Prodotis, for each vial used our life is shortened by a year. It’s difficult to imagine that the blood of Reincarnators, the same kind of substance, poses no risk to the body...in other words, the reason attacks became more frequent this year was...” Rick suddenly paused. His eyes sparkled, taken in by the battle between Dill and Prodotis.

“Ahh...Steel-Link! You really are...so damn cool...!”

Prodotis’s spear of flames just grazed Dill’s shoulder, and part of his chain mail cloak was torn away in a spiral pattern. Moreover, the ground was carved away in the same pattern, far into the distance. But still, this was meaningless. The blow hadn’t struck its target.

After dodging the thrust, Dill took a step toward Prodotis, obscuring his vision with a strike from his shield. It was equally easy for Prodotis to block Dill’s blows or to ignore them. However, having his field of vision blocked off was disconcerting. The hero found this disagreeable and stepped back.

Dill followed after him, taking another two steps closer. He delivered a blow from his spear, hitting Prodotis’s collarbone, but it bounced off the hero’s skin, which was as hard as bronze. Even the shallow wound he made there was immediately cauterized by the Ichor that spouted out of it. Dill simply couldn’t damage him. In spite of that...

“I cannot understand it. I see no fear in your eyes. Do you not understand that you have no chance of winning?” Prodotis focused the power of his Skill into his empty left hand and threw a punch at Dill, flames fanning out nearly as far as Dill’s face. That, however, was merely a feint. After stealing Dill’s attention with this flamboyant fire show, Prodotis’s real attack came piercing through the flames.

Dill was no longer where the attack was aimed. He slipped past the flames

that he should have feared instinctively, wheeling around Prodotis to exploit his blind spot, and swung his own spear around. The head of the spear struck Prodotis's flank, but as expected, it bounced off. A few drops of searing blood seeped out of the cut, and that was that.

"I am certain that the name of Prodotis has been passed down together with tales of my valiant exploits. I have even been honored as a child of the Ex Machina. That being the case, why do you dare stand against me? Do you not know of my trials? Do you doubt my strength? It is *Prodotis* that stands before you, the very man who paved the way from the Silver Age to this one"

"Yes. I know." Blocking Prodotis's spear with his shield, Dill answered bluntly with half of his face obscured. A solitary rust-colored eye stared back dauntingly at Prodotis. He welcomed this being of myth as an equal—and an enemy that must be defeated.

"In that case, child, step aside from the path that Prodotis treads. I have returned. I have come to bring about a new age whose founding was delayed by the betrayal of Haos long ago. In the Silver Age, I did not even realize half of my ambition."

"I refuse. You are indeed great...but you are a man of the past! Those who live in this age will decide their *own* fate! Prodotis...you are standing in *our* way!"

"What nonsense." Prodotis wielded his spear, and Dill blocked it with his own. Prodotis had determined that he would no longer use his Skill; instead, he resolved to crush Dill's spirit in a pure contest of strength. He spoke as if addressing a tiny child. "Is it not everyone's true desire to live, and to stay in good health? I say that Prodotis will grant you that. I do not seek to claim those things only for myself. I will even grant eternity to you foolish Tereans. The sin of the Tereans so long ago was standing in the way of my ambition. If I can achieve that, their sin will be wiped away. In spite of this, why do you refuse? Why do you continue to impede me? What right have you to do so?!"

"That's the logic of a god. We humans, on the other hand, are born fated to die—am I wrong?!"

"I say that very distinction, resolving to let your life end just as you were born, is infantile! It is time to tear off your swaddling clothes! Stand on your own two feet. Immortality is not an unreachable star in the sky—the mystic rites of the Titans, together with the blood produced by the Reincarnators, have rendered it possible! We *can* live forever. Just like the gods!"

"You are certainly a hero. But you are not a god!"

Prodotis dominated the battle of brawn—or he almost did. He was about to gain the upper hand decisively, but then Dill pulled back. Just for a moment Dill relaxed his body, removing the weight he had applied. Prodotis, throwing his entire weight behind his charge, was carried forward by his all-too-powerful momentum, creating an opening.

Dill moved to Prodotis's flank as if to walk right past him—then with his entire body weight behind his spear, he held it close and slammed it into Prodotis's side. In exactly the same place he had struck him earlier, he pierced Prodotis once again. But...the spearhead would still not pass through it. The hero's skin was much too hard.

"I took that deliberately, in order that you might finally understand. O son, you are no match for me." Dill leaped away as the hero's hand moved to grasp his throat. Then he wheeled around once more, resuming his assault.

All eyes were fixed upon Dill. Even as the people below fought the heroes of Krios, they listened. Dill cried out to them. "Reincarnators! Unbounded travelers who transcended your own world, challengers who have vowed to recover from whatever may befall them! Look—the Tower Capital you've built is burning! These wraiths from the past have come to trample over everything, returning the fruits of all your wisdom and labor to nothingness!"

The voice of the seasoned performer was powerful and traveled wide, resounding far into the distance. However, what would that amount to? Prodotis had been born with a greater talent for eloquence than that. In combat as well, Prodotis still had the advantage. The speech was pointless—all of this battle was. Nevertheless...

"Reincarnators! Do you lack the wisdom to stand against this storm? Are you telling me that all the great people you know would declare that this was the end, that they would simply give up, when faced with these circumstances?! Even if that should be the case, do you not have a shred of courage left, deep in your hearts, to resist this hardship?!"

Dill's attacks could not deal Prodotis a decisive wound. With the exception of the already fallen Falaina, the remaining members of the Seven Generals of Krios had each taken the advantage in their battles. There was no chance of victory. Nevertheless...Dill's soliloquy would not end. Prodotis could not manage to kill him.

"Look around you. At your side are those comrades who sailed with you across the border of your world, along with those you met in the new one. First we crossed swords, and now we have joined hands, united against a common

enemy. We are no longer alone. Just a few days ago, we counted each other the most hated enemies in this world. Our numbers may now be few, but this alliance of twenty was formed by overcoming this supreme antipathy. One could not ask for a stronger army than this! In our future a thousand, ten thousand—a million—*ten million* allies await us. The time for us to attain these new, powerful allies, is now—this very moment!"

Dill's words had departed from his first-class repertoire of plays, morphing into something closer to the political speeches the Reincarnators were familiar with. Dill Steel-Link was not a hero. He was a performer—an agitator.

With a different script, he could enact a different role. At this moment, Dill was playing the role of the Reincarnators' heroic ideal. "This battle will become part of history!" he cried. "And I believe we will win."

Prodotis's spear punctured right through Dill's shield and pierced his shoulder. Dill stood firm, glaring straight back at Prodotis. A great cheer went up—a wildly exuberant cheer.

The hero was stunned. *Why is this happening? I am the one overpowering him...* No. That was the very reason they were all cheering. It was the very fact that Dill kept standing back up, no matter what, that had spurred the onlookers on to such exuberance. Realizing this, Prodotis turned around.

Then the tide of battle began to shift.

"Papa...!" murmured Rei. The Reincarnator girl wiped away the tears that welled up in her eyes—tears that should not have been able to exist. At this point, the very reality of Rei's being was ambiguous, constructed by her Skill without a body of her own.

"You're wide open!" There was no way the boy hero Nefritis would overlook this opportunity. He was under a misapprehension, however—Rei was looking straight at him. The tears she brushed away turned into phosphors, serving as a new source of fuel for her Skill.

"This really isn't your lucky day." Rei thrust out both of her arms, and the unseen hands of her Skill followed her movements. These invisible appendages seized Nefritis, trapping him. The hero's body, which was as hard as bronze...started to creak.

"Wha...?! I thought you were ridiculously powerful before, but...are you even stronger than you were a moment ago?!"

"Yes, I am. After all, I've never been this excited before!" she said.

Reincarnators lacked bodies of their own. For that very reason, their condition was tied directly to their mental state and their morale. Dill, a master agitator, had for the first time ever delivered an oration aimed at inspiring the Reincarnators. That fact had moved Rei's heart more than anyone else's. The first time Rei stood in front of Dill, he had rebuked her and ordered her to relinquish Sid to him. The very same man was now speaking for her sake—for the sake of the Reincarnators assembled there. As far as Rei was concerned, Dill's oration was a message directed straight at her. Of course, she understood that his real goal was to make better use of the Reincarnators allied with him, for the sake of victory.

Rei didn't mind being used. If Dill had expectations for her, she wanted to live up to them. When she became a Reincarnator, she experienced the negation of her own existence down to its very foundation. Now, at this moment, Dill had acknowledged *her*. She was truly fighting alongside him. The guilt that once held Rei in fetters had vanished. The hesitation she had felt toward using her inexplicable talents—this, too, was gone!

"I'm sorry, but I won't let you lift another finger. Now keep quiet while I crush you...!" Rei exerted force with both of her hands, and her Skill seemed to gush forth without limit. Her psychokinetic arms, now made visible, were clasped together as if in prayer, keeping Nefritis trapped. Then, they began to exert pressure on him from both sides. There was nothing the hero of the Nectar, who took pride in his supernatural strength, could possibly do to stop this.

One of the other heroes, Achtida with her heavenly locks of hair, gasped in shock and tried to come to his aid. But she could not—Sid would not let her.

"Behold me! Your opponent is me, Orestes!"

Achtida's beautiful face was twisted in bewilderment as she turned to face Sid once more. She reached for the quiver at her back, where the favor of Prodotis granted from afar gave her an unlimited supply of arrows; from this quiver she plucked out four arrows at once and nocked them all to her bow. She drew back her arm, and her bow stretched to its limit—but by then, Sid was already right in front of her. The youth advanced without fear, and already he was close—far too close for a bow to be effective.

"Achtida!" cried the imprisoned Nefritis. With his urgent expression, his visage no longer seemed like that of a young boy. The hero turned his sharp gaze back to glare at Rei again. "...Let go, little girl. Our playtime is over. I won't let you lay a finger on my woman...!" Nefritis threw out his arms, and slowly—very

slowly—but surely, began to part Rei's clasped hands! Rei cried out and fought back.

“I’m not playing. I’m deadly serious too!” she cried.

Nefritis snorted in laughter. “How could you be serious? Aren’t you Reincarnators immortal? Knowing you’ll just be revived should you happen to die, how could anything be serious to you? Nothing you wretches do, divorced as you are from death, will ever be anything more than play.”

“You’re wrong!” Tears began to stream down Rei’s cheeks once again. Nefritis’s words echoed the ones Dill had once spoken to her. “Even if we can come back, if we lose what’s precious to us...what’s the point?! I’ve finally found it...something worth knowing more about. Scenery I could gaze upon forever. A promise that lets me look forward to tomorrow! People who are precious to me! The place I belong! Redguard!”

“In that case...just try and deal with me, Nefritis!” The upper half of Nefritis’s body was already free, sticking out from the gap between the psychokinetic hands. His blue eyes were glowing. Finally, the boy hero pushed the hands apart as wide as the span of his own arms and leaped out from between them.

Using Prodoris’s Skill, he created a flaming sword and in the span of one...two...three steps, he was already right before Rei’s eyes. He raised his blade high above his head, then slashed down with it, tracing a burning arc in the air.

With her eyes closed, Rei knelt down on the ground, clasping her hands together as though praying. She did not move. From the hero’s left and right, new psychokinetic hands pressed down on him.

“Kya ha ha ha! You really are a one-trick pony... Wha—?!” Nefritis tried to resist with brute strength like he had before, but then stood still, dumbfounded.

There were more arms than there had been mere moments ago. The palms of the translucent hands—one pair, two pairs, three pairs—enveloped Nefritis in succession, layered on top of each other. Like a budding flower, each successive layer was larger than the last, and new hands continued to gather on top, over and over. The blossom of hands held Nefritis in a deadly embrace, beginning to grind him to a pulp. First, he dropped his sword of flames, and it was seized and crushed. Then came his greaves, his bracers—finally Nefritis’s own bones started to creak as the hands pressed in on him.

“What in the world? After all I’ve seen and done, the one who fells Nefritis, slayer of beasts, shall be this little girl...?! I don’t understand... I can’t

understand! This makes no sense! Is this era truly so strange?!”

Even as Nefritis was crushed to a pulp, he looked at Rei, who still stood in front of him, and grinned. It was a boyish grin with a certain amount of charm. “Well...at least I got to see something interesting!” he said.

Rei concentrated fully on her Skill, sweat running down her brow, without stirring from her pose of prayer. There was no one to see Nefritis’s smile. That is, except for one person—Achtida, who had no regard for her own safety.

“Eh...?!” Sid was shocked. His face was drenched in blood—Achtida’s blood. The heroine had not even tried to block his sword, infused with the power of his Skill, and it had run through Achtida’s belly up to the hilt. Achtida was much too frail to be counted among the heroes. Although she shared their skin, hard as bronze, Achtida was not so stalwart as the giant Falaina. The wound she had sustained was mortal. But in exchange, she had bought time enough to loose her arrows to save Nefritis.

The four arrows, fired simultaneously, accelerated as the flames of Prodotis’s Skill erupted behind them. However, there was a discrepancy in their velocities. The swiftest arrow pierced Rei’s shoulder, throwing off the focus she had exerted on her Skill.

The flower of hands that restrained Nefritis started to come apart. A moment later, the rest of Achtida’s arrows struck the hands themselves and exploded. The blast pushed Nefritis out of his prison.

“Achtida?! How could you—what are you doing?! Do you mean to leave me on my own...again...?!” The boy hero was sent flying over the edge of the cliffs of Krios and plummeted toward the rainy Tower Capital. A fleet of helicopters could be seen descending after him like vultures.

“No way...! Are you really happy to leave things like this...?!” Sid asked Achtida, who had fallen to her feet, and looked as if she might expire at any moment. The heroine smiled, however. The title of hero didn’t seem to suit her after all—her smile was troubled but kind. Achtida of the arrows of light, one of the Seven Generals of Krios... Sid knew nothing about her besides these epithets. He knew not why she had gone so far to protect Nefritis. He knew not what she fought for. What meaning was hidden beneath that smile? The heroine was waiting—waiting for Sid to behead her, to deliver the final blow.

“How can I kill you after seeing what you just did...?!”

Achtida, looking all the more troubled, frowned and tilted her head down. Rei was coming, holding one hand against her shoulder. For the most part, her wound had already been filled in by phosphors.

“Λύω Τιλύω αἰφνίδιος! λύω λύω τραύλισμα θλύω κλίμα% λύω φάκεκατά άσκοπος → λύω σιαγών>...”

The heroine stood back up. She still held her bow and arrow in her hands. She nocked her arrow of flames and aimed it at Rei.

“That’s...that’s not fair. Not like this. Not like this...!” Sid sobbed. He sniffled. All the while, he raised his sword. Neither Rei nor Achtida would back down. At this hour, what were the names of those who slew, and those who were slain?

“I’m... My name is Orestes! Disciple of the hero Aegisthus...!”

With that, Achtida was dead.

It was only some time after they became comrades in the brigade that Rick realized that Dill Steel-Link was in fact *that* Dill West. Twenty years ago, in a small theater in the Imperial Capital, they had performed together onstage, and Dill’s performance had been burned into his memory. Out of all of the players onstage, only Dill had belonged in another league. A silent song seemed to accompany his every gesture. He drew every gaze toward him. Rick, a roving musician at the time, had felt overwhelmed.

Today, Dill no longer had the fresh brilliance he had possessed back then. Those unconscious gestures that could only be ascribed to talent had been lost to him in his maturity.

However, the man whose wellspring of natural ability had dried up had dedicated many years to compensate, applying theory and rigorous training, and he had finally once again filled up that empty vessel. The manner that had come naturally to him in his youth was now enacted intentionally, once again gaining him the favor of the gods of the arts.

Dill Steel-Link had leaped down from the stage, holding a real sword, and now fought against real-life heroes.

“Blusterer, my chum. Hey. You saw that, right? Right?! Do you get it now?” said Rick the mail-cloak, headed toward death and glowing with a feeling of hope that seemed out of place for a man in his final moments. The bard’s voice was raised in jubilation. “Our heroes are immortal. They don’t require a script. In the distant future, the very thing Dill’s doing right now will go down in history as a script for future plays. To pass that story down, I must... But damn it all, don’t tell me I won’t be able to see that through... Seriously...that can’t be

right...!"

"Rick, try to stay still..." The Reincarnator Blusterer tried to hold Rick down. The bard brushed his hands away.

"Either way, I'm gonna die! Sooner or later, we humans all do! If we distinguish ourselves in our short lives, we may be called heroes and live on for eternity as our names are passed down! So why are we just scattered on the ground here like potatoes?! Get a clue already—use my body!"

Blusterer didn't speak; he only shook his head. Rick drew closer to him. Pointing at Dill, who fought all by himself against the hero Prodotis, legend of Redguard, he said, "Look. Steel-Link is waiting for you. I can't imagine that even he will be able to stand victorious over a hero—not by himself. By now you must at least have learned that the heroes of the distant past are made of different stuff than the people of today. That's why Steel-Link rallied us to action, waiting for the support of his comrades, and to buy time, he drew the attention of Prodotis all by himself. We have to go and help him!"

"But...I can't do it. I can't just take a friend's body..."

"We ain't friends." Rick smiled. It was a tender smile. "You're too simple. You're foolish, you talk too much, and you give answers to questions no one asked, making it way too easy to gather information... You might as well. Everything you've told me, I've passed on to Halberd and Steel-Link."

"You're kidding..." Blusterer looked like he was about to cry.

"I'm serious. The information I was most grateful for was the truth about the Liquid Computers, the factions within Panopticon, and the geographical data you gave me when I asked for the names of sightseeing spots in the Tower Capital... I also enjoyed hearing about popular music, the instruments of your world, your favorite shops...and that totally lame, hilarious story about the time you were dumped by your first girlfriend... As well as...as well as..." The two men laughed heartily. At the same time, Blusterer wept.

"...All right, then."

"I'm counting on you. To help Steel-Link. He's my pal too...although I really didn't measure up to him."

The man who stood back up twirled his crossbow flawlessly. It was different from performing the same flourish with a pistol. This weapon was heavier and bulkier by far. Although spinning a mechanical crossbow was merely a useless

trick, it did take some finesse. Blusterer had never executed this maneuver before in his life, but his body remembered it. The crossbow he held in his hand fitted it well, as if it were an extension of his body.

Two men had fallen. One got to his feet. Blusterer started walking. The chain mail cloak hanging from his shoulders rang fearsomely. The Liquid Computer he had injected was starting to repair his body.

“Rick! Can you still fight? Have your wounds from earlier...” Evading the hero’s arrows that pursued him, the mail-cloak Whitehead came running over, but halted in the middle of asking his question. “Who are you?”

“I’m that asshole archer’s enemy... Could you make an opening for me? I’ll be the one to take revenge for Rick.”

Anger and hatred, sadness and grief, passed through Whitehead’s eyes with dizzying speed, then disappeared. The old veteran took in the circumstances.

“All right. But take off that cloak.” Whitehead advanced on Diros, the archer-saint. The hero noticed the man’s approach immediately and nocked another homing arrow of flames. Blusterer removed his chain mail cloak and concentrated; his body followed his command and readied the crossbow. Without thinking, he loaded it and took aim. Muscle memory compensated for his own lack of experience. All that was left was to pull the trigger.



From here on out, it was all up to Blusterer. The Flinter imbued his crossbow with the flames of his Skill. This was his first time trying this. Usually he unleashed his Skill relying on power alone, with his high incendiary output making up for his careless aim. Allies were often caught up in the blast, which had prevented Blusterer from rising through the ranks quickly. His position in the Project was at the bottom of the staff class.

The hero Diros, of the swift arrow, loosed his arrows in succession with such speed that the mortal eye could not follow them, intercepting Whitehead's charge. Whitehead held his shield and spear out in front of him and forced his way forward. With each arrow, his shield, his spear, and his chain mail cloak were worn away. This was a reckless charge, ill-suiting a man as seasoned as him.

"My name is Whitehead! One of the eagle's wings! The lighthouse keeper who sends ships off to sea! I am Whitehead, fated to die!"

Under the cover of the rain of arrows that beat against Whitehead's shield, the hero Diros mixed in an arrow with different characteristics. With repeated bursts of flames, it autonomously changed its own trajectory, circling around the old veteran and flying at him from behind. Whitehead, who already had his hands full with the torrent of arrows coming from in front of him, failed to notice it.

"Not on my watch." The crossbow bolt had already been fired. The bolt, propelled forward by pyrokinesis, made contact with Diros's arrow in a burst of sound that split the air apart. The hero's arrow was shattered. Then came a second bolt, flying over Whitehead's shoulder, again with additional thrust thanks to Blusterer's pyrokinesis.

Diros reacted swiftly. He nocked another arrow of flames and drew it back so far it looked like the bowstring might snap. His treasured bow, carved from the bones of a great serpent, withstood the force. With a roar, his lethal arrow was loosed!

With mechanical accuracy, the hero's arrow matched its trajectory with Blusterer's bolt, crashing into it head-on—a recreation of his duel with Rick. However, this time...it was Diros's arrow that shattered. The bolt, with the raging pyrokinetic flames condensed around it, consumed even the hero's arrow and continued flying without even losing speed.

But Diros was not the sort of hero to flinch under these circumstances. Diros fired a second arrow, then a third in quick succession, striking Blusterer's bolt head-on with unwavering precision. Each one was wreathed in the flames of

Prodotis's Skill, roaring mercilessly like the breath of a dragon.

Blusterer's flaming bolt finally arrived right in front of Diros. Diros nocked four arrows at once, dropped his stance until half his body lay on the ground, and waited, his bow drawn with unnatural strength. The hero then unleashed that force—the string of his legendary bow, woven from a dragon's beard, groaned and started to fray. An explosion erupted on the surface of Krios in a blinding flash of light. When the light had died down, the name of the man who stood there was...one of three warriors who, while enraged by the cowardly tactics of Haos, King of Terea, in the Krios campaign, had died a hero's death. It was said that each time he drew his bow, the arrow loosed ran through ten men, shattering the Terean battle lines. He was the archer-saint, Diros of the swift arrow.

The hero smiled. Through his resurrection in the present day, he—like Falaina and Achtida—had lost the power of speech, but the meaning of his smile was clear. *Bring on the next battle. Bring on the next glory. The legend will now continue once again—*

“Look down. You've lost,” spat Blusterer.

The hero looked down at his body. He was pierced by Blusterer's crossbow bolt. It had entered through his back, the tip emerging through his belly. It still glowed with the light of Blusterer's Skill. “Did you forget? That was the *first* arrow. I controlled it with my pyro, and hit you from behind... Yeah, that's right! I stole that idea from you. You damn moron...!” Tears rolled down Blusterer's face. Diros tried to pull out the crossbow bolt, which had pierced his bronze skin, but hadn't passed all the way through, remaining lodged in his body. The light flickering around it unsettled him.

Blusterer's Skill was still active.

“You know, my problem always was that my Skill had too much power and I couldn't regulate it at all... But that no longer matters. I shoved everything I had into that arrow. Rick landed that blow for me. That guy was really talented. I couldn't use my Skill this well in my last body...but the moment I took over his body, I was able to...use it so well... Ah, damn it!” Blusterer wiped the tears from his eyes, then looked up. Diros had given up on pulling out the stuck crossbow bolt, and with the intention of at least taking Blusterer with him, he had readied his final arrow.

“That's enough—fly away now!” Blusterer said. The hero drew his bow. The light around the bolt Blusterer had stuck in him reached a critical point and detonated. The hero's bow could not withstand this final draw—the dragon's filament snapped, and the arrow clattered to the ground.

Diros died, blown away without a trace.

The tides of battle shifted once again. Out of the Seven Generals of Krios, two—Achtida and Diros—had just died, and Nefritis, the boy hero, had fallen off the face of the battlefield. The side of Krios, who had overwhelmed their opponents with the quality of their warriors, now found that they were unable to stand up against the difference in quantity. Prodotis, the enemy commander, had not only met Dill in battle, but the young Orestes, the Reincarnator girl Rei, and now the Reincarnator Blusterer. He had no strength left in reserve.

One man did not miss this opportunity. He headed toward a burning tower of iron, the many-layered prison of armor constructed by Prodotis's Skill. On his way, he passed in front of the group of enormous girls who instilled in him an ominous feeling. Ever since they had suddenly appeared out of the blue smoke, they had not moved—but they were still, without a doubt, something sinister that should not exist in this world.

The same could, however, be said of the Titan girl he was about to free—Nue Kirasaki, the Chimera. Hathaway, the mail-cloak, slipped his fingers between a gap in the burning metal and wrenched it apart with all his might.

"Dill...?!" The girl, who had raised her head upon seeing the light stream in, looked up at him as her expression changed from relief to fear. "Have you come...to kill me?"

"No. I've come to save you." Very recently, back on the streets of Vulcan, Hathaway had indeed cornered Nue and tried to kill her on Halberd's orders. Therefore, he had expected this reaction.

Paying this no mind, Hathaway thrust his arm through the gap to tear away the next piece of armor. Glowing red from the heat of Prodotis's Skill, the metal burned him, and the brigade's adjutant grimaced in pain.

"Why... What are you doing? Weren't you supposed to kill me, to stop me getting in Dill's way?"

"That's right. You are dangerous. Your power is to be feared, as is your lineage. But..." Unable to stand the pain, Hathaway withdrew his hand once—but then he immediately resumed his work. "With your power, there's a chance that you could stand against a hero in battle. Unfortunately, I am just an ordinary man. I once fought Steel-Link for the position of Lord Halberd's adjutant, and he wiped the floor with me. However, in the end, with a word from Apollonius I

was made adjutant. At the time, he quipped that a man like Steel-Link would be wasted in such a position. That it was no job for a man who would be a hero...! And in the end, he was completely right.” After casting aside a particularly hefty piece of armor, Hathaway moved onto the next. His own gauntlets started to melt and warp from the heat, and the palms of his hands were burned red. That Nue had not been roasted to death inside the prison was probably the result of some fine-tuning of Prodotis’s Skill.

“Move over. I’ll use a lever.” After having Nue move away from the opening, Hathaway plunged in his slender sword, still in its sheath, and put his weight on it. Sweat ran in beads off his brow from the heat. His beard, which he had carefully combed with oil, was a total mess. “Are you listening? Let me just say that I hate Steel-Link. Enough that I once thought of killing him. However!”

The part of his sword that had acted as its fulcrum was overcome by the heat and bent in half. Hathaway threw away his rapier and continued his work with the other sword he wore at his waist.

“I am only Lord Halberd’s dog... Ultimately, everything I do ought to be on his behalf. If Steel-Link is useful to Lord Halberd, I must help him. Right now, your strength is needed. By me, by Lord Halberd...and by Steel-Link.”

“If I escape from here, I might kill both of you, you know.” Red eyes peered out of the depths of the darkness, looking up at Hathaway as if to test him. He simply shook his head.

“You won’t. In the battle of Vulcan, you saved the civilians. If you hadn’t blanketed the sky in feathers, the lightning of the Reincarnator Shiden would have claimed a great many more casualties... Ah, so this sword is no good either. In that case...” Hathaway’s auxiliary blade snapped, leaving him no choice but to try prying apart the gap in the armor with his hands once again.

“That’s enough already. I can get out now. I’m a monster, after all.” The interior of the armored tower then flooded with black feathers. As Hathaway backed away, he saw the feathers seep out of the gap in the armor, and the surroundings turned a shade darker.

The feathers stuck to the outside of the iron prison, dampening the heat. A slender arm crawled out of the tiny opening. Then Nue’s upper body. Then the rest of her emerged, and without touching the ground she rose into the air. The feathers that were stuck to the prison peeled away, floated up, and gathered around the girl’s arms. *Blink. Blink, blink, blink.* Each black feather parted somewhere around the middle. A crimson eye emerged and started blinking.

“Am I scary? Do I creep you out?” asked Nue, her face expressionless.

Hathaway answered calmly.

“Yeah. You’re scary, *and* you creep me out. What about it? Now go. Save Steel-Link.”

“Okay.” Chimera beat her eldritch wings and flew.

In that hour, the names of those who challenged the hero Prodotis: Orestes, who did not know fear! Rei, whose power rivaled the omnipotence of the gods! Blusterer, who fired darts from afar—and finally Dill Steel-Link, who rallied their morale!

Dill and Sid caught the hero in a pincer attack, from in front and behind, striking at him together, their movements perfectly synchronized! This mirrored interplay was an expression of both Sid’s Skill and his admiration for Dill. If Dill moved to the right, Sid advanced along the diagonal that passed through Prodotis in the same direction and swung his sword in tandem with Dill. Their thoughts melted together through telepathy, their individual wills evaporating and drifting away.

Prodotis spun around, sweeping his sword in a circle around him. The flames from his Skill leaped off the point of his blade in a spray of embers, extending the range of his weapon.

Dill and Sid, through their shared vision, saw through this move. First they evaded it, then they struck back—Dill at Prodotis’s chest and Sid at his back, running him through with blades charged with phosphors. The heat of the phosphors began to burn through Prodotis’s bronze skin.

Retreating to their rear, and supporting them with her phosphors, was Rei. With her eyes closed, kneeling in prayer, she did not move. Abandoning any thought of defending herself, she focused entirely on lending Dill and Sid’s swords the light they needed to cut the hero apart.

Prodotis himself would have liked to prioritize eliminating Rei, but Dill and Sid stuck fast to him, preventing him from advancing on her. The hero, impressed, pondered for a moment, then carried out his solution.

“*Galatea*, the statue that houses shadows.” The outline of the hero split into four, and the very next instant, four images of Prodotis, all identical in appearance, came into view. These were true reflections, a feat Dill and Sid would never achieve no matter how much the resonance between them deepened.

Prodotis, toppler of fortresses, dispassionately issued his commands. He did not use his four clones in the same way, but sent one at Dill and the other three at Sid. Thus, Prodotis's two opponents could no longer employ their mirrored coordination—their circumstances were too different. Sid had no choice but to shut off the resonance between them and handle the three clones on his own.

"Sid!" Dill tried to run to Sid's aid, but he faced an enemy that had already outmatched him one-on-one. The clone stood in his way and would not let him pass.

Sid defended against the fierce assault of the other three clones of Prodotis. His sword imbued with phosphors was shattered, and his shoulder and thigh were pierced by the hero's spears of flames. The images of Prodotis immediately brought their spears down to deliver the final blow without a shred of conceit. Prodotis had long since recognized them as formidable foes, not to be trifled with.

Sid would not give up. Holding up what was left of his broken sword, he stood firm against the heroes.

And then, the three clones suddenly keeled over sideways.

"I'm not the one who hit them." From a distance, Blusterer declared his victory. "Those bolts belonged to Rick Wake." A wild light flickered around the crossbow bolts lodged in the heroes' bronze skin, and the pyrokinetic Skill imbued within them turned critical and exploded. Blusterer executed another twirl of his crossbow. The clones of Prodotis had vanished without so much as a trace.

"I suppose you're the real Prodotis?" Dill, who had engaged in a one-on-one battle, questioned the single hero that remained before him. In the middle of their fierce duel, as they locked their weapons together, their faces drew near as if they sought to devour each other. Dill's rust-colored eyes glowed dimly.

"Nay. I have just *become* the true Prodotis. Those were all equal manifestations of me. You have already killed me thrice... I confess myself shocked."

"Then you're about to be even more shocked. Orestes!"

"Yes, Master!" Charging out of the flames from the blast, it was Orestes who leaped forth.

"...You're unharmed!"

The wounds Sid had sustained were staunched by Rei's phosphors of prayer. The form of the youth Orestes was a temporary body to begin with, created by their shared Skill. That being the case, it could be repaired by the same Skill. As

long as Rei's prayers were focused on maintaining the body of Orestes, Sid could never fall.

Prodotis could not evade the slash that came from behind. Dill, who crossed weapons with him from the front and tested his strength against the hero, would not allow him to escape.

The hero braced himself and tensed the muscles in his back. There was a strange bursting sound, and the muscles on Prodotis's back swelled up, hardening his bronze body until it was as strong as tempered steel. There the blade of phosphors hit home. But...it was Orestes who fell to his knees.

"Huh...?" Bouncing back, and falling to the ground, Sid looked at the broken sword in his hand in shock. It had already broken once before—but the blade, which he had repaired with his phosphors, was shattered once again, even though Rei thought only of supporting him and strengthening that very blade.

"Father!" From far away, the hero Kranos, who fought against Halberd's party, cried out with tears streaming down his face. "You are the very sun, the very image of a hero. Please make use of our strength. I, Kranos, will wring the necks of these lowly curs with my bare hands!"

Prodotis accepted his suggestion. The armor of flames Kranos wore disappeared. In the same fashion, the flaming weapons carried by the other heroes of Krios—Itimenos and Papus—also went up in smoke.

"*Epimetheus*, the returning favor." The weapons of flame, which the Seven Generals of Krios had treated as their own power, were fundamentally shared with them by just one man—Prodotis. The power that had been diffused among them was now concentrated within the King of Krios. The hero's body glowed.

"*Labýrinthos*, the maze that isolates." Red lines floated above the ground. A series of random refractions followed, sketching out a maze of flames. With Prodotis at its center, the burning geometric pattern expanded outward. Dill, Sid, Rei, Blusterer, as well as the mercenaries and Reincarnators fighting farther away, were either burned by the walls of flame or cut off from each other by their sudden appearance.

The extent of Prodotis's Skill was so wide that his opponents despaired. In no time at all, the maze of flames spread across the entire face of Krios. There was a limit imposed on the scale of any Skill, measured by the volume of blood flowing through its user's veins; but by linking his consciousness with the Titan holding up the castle, Prodotis had overcome that limit by force. If Prodotis gave it an order telepathically, the giant would activate its Skill. The giant had a volume of blood several hundred times greater than a normal human.

“I have stopped at nothing to transcend my humanity and to claim the secrets of the gods. Long ago I took the blood of the Titans, and now I will take the blood of the Reincarnators. Behold. *This is Prodotis.*” The opponents Prodotis spoke to, despite being separated by the walls of flame, nevertheless stared at the hero in the center with exactly the same gaze. “Those insolent eyes with which you look upon me... Very good. Those are the same eyes with which I glared at the gods. Now prove to me, Prodotis, just who you truly are.”

From three separate branches of the labyrinth, Dill, Sid, and finally Blusterer all rushed at Prodotis. Although no one could see her, this timing was most likely coordinated by Rei’s Skill.

There was no reason for Prodotis to engage each of these opponents at once. The flames making up the labyrinth shifted, throwing up walls in front of his challengers. Slipping through the walls of flames, the hero stood in front of Dill alone.

“I have perceived that solidarity is the strength of this age’s people. Therefore, I will sever that connection.” Prodotis walked toward Dill. At Dill’s back was a dead end. “There is no race in existence that can best a hero in single combat. Henceforth, I will kill you one by one until not a single man remains.” He swept his spear of solid flames vertically and horizontally—a simple attack, devoid of artifice. However, for that very reason, it left no opening and carried immense force. Dill, who possessed no special blood, had already lost in the contest of strength and was easily cornered against the wall. The chain mail cloak at his back began to heat up, roasted by the flames.

Still, Dill would not stop glaring at the hero.

“I like your eyes, Dill Steel-Link. Do you have some plan to break out of this predicament?”

“No.”

“I should think not. These flames are not as simple as they appear. They form a barrier that can inhibit a Reincarnator’s Skill. No one will come to your aid. With the next blow, whether I strike your spear or your shield, I intend to cut you down with it. What do you think of that? Do you not fear death? Do you not wish to live forever?”

Dill grinned. “Now then, immortal gods—I have finally come to understand. The life of one who must die is greater than the life of an immortal. Although bound and tormented, my body broken and death nearly come for me, I do not consider this a loss. The secret of life truly lies in these moments just before it leaves you.”

“What words are these?”

“Lines from a play—the heroic play *Prodotis*. We Tereans were brought up learning your words.”

The hero opened his eyes wide. “O son. I do not wish to kill you.”

“What an honor. But the son will always surpass the father.” Dill readied his spear, and Prodotis, begrudgingly, readied his own.

Pop. Pop, pop, pop. Dill and Prodotis stayed staring at each other without moving, but from the sound and a sense of unease that crept over them, they knew something strange had occurred. The rain above the Tower Capital, which never ceased falling as the battle raged, had abruptly stopped. In its place, snow—black snow—was falling. And the snow was blinking.

Each falling particle had a crack around the middle, out of which peered a crimson eye. The black feathers bunched together in midair, blanketing the sky above them, and from that carpet came the rain of blinking feathers.

“It looks like my children have grown impatient and come to greet me.” The burning labyrinth was losing its ferocity, almost as if it writhed in pain. As the feathers falling from the sky rushed into the flames, they dissolved into an ominous black liquid which ate away at the flames rather than fuelling them. This black water and the flames of Prodotis’s Skill had entirely incompatible natures.

A wind blew, snuffing out the flames near Dill and Prodotis. They heard the beating of wings, and they saw the blinking of countless red eyes.

Nue alighted and stood beside Dill. From the other side, Sid stepped over what little remained of the flames, accompanied by Rei.

Dill started to speak with the sonorous tones of an actor. “Behold, O hero. The Silver Age you built has followed through to this age, and now you try to open a new one. You have already achieved such great works. Are you still so unsatisfied that you wish to live forever?”

Prodotis gasped. This feeling, this foreboding...it was the air of a new age dawning. *What a nostalgic feeling*, he thought. Even measured by the time Prodotis had lived, it was long ago—more than thirty years—and in terms of time that had passed in the world, it had been centuries. At that time, Prodotis was still young and still a mortal man, fated to die.

“The Golden Age, the age of heroes, has already passed. What comes next

will be an age of dusk—an age of nothing but rusted iron. Or so they say.”

Under darkness, with men clad in armor before him, the young Prodotis paced back and forth while delivering his speech. “What a foolish statement. They act for their own convenience and have confused this with prudence and resignation, because it gives them an excuse to live in sloth. Were the heroes of the Golden Age simply chosen by the gods? No. Those who did great deeds and won themselves acclaim came to be called heroes after their time. The blood of gods that flowed through their veins was no more than a tool to assist them in their endeavors.”

At this time, what were the names of those who held their breath amongst the grass on that moonless night, listening to Prodotis’s voice? There was Haos, prince of Terea, with his radiant blond hair; Papus, lance corporal of Krios; Falaina, scion of giants, who had come from the south bringing aid. All of these men would one day be called heroes.

“On this night, we shall surely topple the proud fortress of Westa of the Eleven Cities and obtain the blood of the gods. The Boreans declare that a mere human striving to approach godhood is an act of insolence, but this is only to maintain their monopoly over the Nectar—and therefore their supremacy.”

Prodotis turned to look at his friend with the blond hair and extended a hand to him. “O Haos, of noble visage, please fight alongside me in the vanguard. There are no heroes in our ranks and the forces we command are inferior in number, but if we—men of the same age with our fine pedigree and our overwhelming courage—lead the forward charge, I have no doubt that we can rally our soldiers and secure victory. Above all, there is no one with whom I would rather share the acclaim that toppling Westa will bring.”

“Things have not turned out as we might have hoped. Although we broke through the castle walls and invaded the temple of Ex Machina Optimism...the gods’ blood we obtained is only enough for one person. It looks as though the Boreans’ claim that the Golden Age has ended was no exaggeration. Even the martial kingdom of Westa possesses only this minuscule amount of the gods’ blood that creates heroes. Those coming from Westa in pursuit of us will soon catch up. We mere humans can no longer repel them. Therefore, my friend, please listen closely to me. It is you who should drink deeply of the Nectar and become a hero. I will give up my claim upon it for the sake of friendship.”

“My friend! It has been some time. Welcome to Krios, the city of gold! Now we are both kings. It saddens me that I cannot easily come to greet you, but now the dawn has broken on that sorrow. Please accept my hospitality, befitting of a king greeting a king... What? Compensation for the Nectar? Do you still concern yourself with that? That was a gift. You needed it to inherit the throne of Terea, and at that time I saw no other course of action. Beside, O Haos—since then, I, too, have become a hero. By my own method different from yours, that is...”

“My friend, the time has finally come. This great battle will decide who is stronger—the people of Borea, who claim the right of godhood as their own, or our Alliance of Krios and Terea. The heroes amongst the enemy’s ranks, born of Nectar, or our artificial heroes born of Ichor. In both quality and quantity, our two armies are no longer comparable. We shall surely win. From this day forth, this new age will be ruled by two kingdoms, Krios and Terea... By the way, my friend, this may seem sudden, but I have something I wish to confide in you. What lies ahead for my artificial heroes...do not be shocked by the secret rites of immortality, which will return humanity to its primordial state. We were once gods.”

What was the meaning of those days, dreaming of a new dawn for humanity and running headlong toward the horizon? The moment Prodotis revealed his plan to achieve godhood, his closest friend grew fearful and betrayed him. His father and his royal consort, upon whom he had intended to bestow eternal life, had been unable to last until the completion of his secret rites and had departed from this world before him. All that was left to Prodotis was his anger toward Haos—and his hatred toward the Tereans.

But even that had been taken from him—at the scene of his single combat against the representative of the opposing army, a stone thrown by a reckless spectator had felled him, ending his life all too soon.

A dishonorable death. Prodotis’s dream had ended without him ever accomplishing anything. When he next awoke, inexplicably several hundred years had passed. In this age, where neither the subjects of Krios he had sworn to

protect nor Haos on whom he had sworn revenge still existed—for what purpose had he been brought back to life?

In this moment, though, Prodotis finally understood the reason for his awakening. Many foes had appeared before Prodotis, only to leave the battlefield again—Tereans and Reincarnators both. In each instance, there was not one hero among them with Nectar or Ichor in his veins. Although the great warriors of this age were known by that same title of “hero,” those who bore it were of a different nature entirely.

“Acknowledge your defeat, Prodotis! We won’t take your life. You are, after all, our hero.” While rallying the fighting spirit of his allies around him, from time to time Dill Steel-Link himself charged forward to swing his sword at Prodotis. Perhaps this declaration of his enemy’s defeat was part of Dill’s propaganda.

Prodotis shook his head and gave his answer. “Nay. I wish to gaze upon you all for just a moment...just a moment longer...” The rain had stopped. The titanic girls surrounding the castle had vanished. The sky was now covered by a blanket of black feathers, and the countless crimson eyes embedded in them gazed down upon Prodotis. They continued blinking, as if hurrying the hero to his demise. Prodotis had already lost the will to fight.

“Father! Father!” *A voice draws near. Kranos. My son.* All alone, he had knocked aside the enemies gathered against him, opening up a path of blood. His desperation contrasted sharply with Prodotis’s quiet acceptance of his defeat. “I beg you—I beg of you, please! Please fight! Krios needs you, father. I don’t want to be left alone again! After you perished in that dastardly attack from the Tereans, I fought for the return of your remains. Each time one of the Seven Generals fell, I stole back the body and launched it into the sky until finally, I was the only man left in Krios! Father, are you saying that you would have me taste that same torment once again?!”

In Prodotis’s heart, pity welled up for his own flesh and blood. Turning between Kranos and the Tereans before him, he hesitated.

“*Pergamon*, the revived fortress.” Beyond the ceiling of black feathers in the sky...something occurred.

“Prodotis, what are you trying to do?”

“I no longer have any particular interest in fulfilling my ambitions. However, as a king, I cannot abandon work once undertaken either. Therefore, I think I shall leave the fate of the world in your hands. Soon, *Prometheus* will activate at its greatest scale yet seen, and surely all people in the Aeros Region—if not all

the world's people—will be forcibly made into heroes. Try and stop me before this is done.”

After speaking thus, the hero suddenly delivered a kick to Dill's midsection. Dill guarded against this with a newly procured shield, but it was no use. Prodotis's foot stomped straight through the shield, destroying it and sending Dill flying.

“*Pygmalion*, carving out the rhythm.” Beyond the black feathers covering the sky, there echoed the sound of something being chiseled away, as loud as a thunderclap. Though no one there could see exactly what was happening, they knew that something had been set in motion.

“What's going on?” The Reincarnator Repeater was next to stand against the hero Prodotis, but seeing her allies easily beaten down, she looked up at the ceiling of black feathers, adorned with their crimson eyes, and the fading fruition of all the Reincarnators' science—the Capital Tower. In front of Castle Krios, the looming, half-real Capital Tower began to fade even further out of existence. “What the hell's going on?” Repeater echoed her own words.

Prodotis was already in front of Repeater. “I want to thank you Reincarnators. If you had not appeared, my efforts to discover a path to godhood may never have reached this stage.”

“Stop fooling around! We're the invaders here...”

“I welcome you to Redguard, then.”

“I said...stop fooling around!” A high-speed flurry of six punches followed. The hero did not evade these, or even try to guard against them. He simply nodded to Repeater briefly, then walked right past her. Repeater felt a sense of foreboding and ceased her assault. She had broken into a cold sweat, and her right arm, which had landed a solid hit on the hero's bronze skin, was now broken.

“*Antikythera*, the computer of the stars.” The sky suddenly brightened as light streamed in through the gaps in the ceiling of black feathers—proof that some intensely luminous body had come into being high in the sky.

The dome of feathers started to peel away in pieces and fall out of the sky. As the charred remains of the feathers poured down upon the ground, the hole in the ceiling began to widen faster and faster.

“Finally, *Ixion*, the wheel of eternity turning backward.” The surface of Krios was then assaulted by a wave of heat, and the ceiling of feathers vanished without a trace. Floating in the sky where it had once been was a single luminous mass—a sun formed via pyrokinesis.

The streets of the Tower Capital, which had been protected by the artificial clouds in the sky, now baked under the light of the new sun. The city was overflowing with neon signs and LEDs, but their brightness was drowned out by the glow from the sky, and they appeared much paler in comparison to it. The windows of high-rise buildings drew their blinds closed as if in shame. The Capital Tower, symbol of the city of the dead, was in the process of evaporating, and it was about to be absorbed into the fabricated sun.

“All the power of my Skill is now focused on maintaining this miniature sun. At this moment, I cannot use any other Skill. Children, this is your final chance —your *only* chance. The world will soon be enveloped in my favor.” Prodotis held his arms out languidly, welcoming those who challenged him. “I will be content with either outcome. Either I will win, make you the new people of Krios, and we shall reign together over an eternal kingdom. Or else you will slay me, and I will depart this world, comforted by the thought that I can trust you to inherit my legacy.”

“I just want to confirm one thing. My daughter, Nue Kirasaki...the young Chimera, princess of the Titans. Are you willing to give her up?” Dill inquired, and Sid gulped. Sid moved in front of Nue, who was still nearby, positioning himself to protect her.

Prodotis’s attitude was the key to this exchange. There were signs of a potential compromise—and the answer to Dill’s question would decide everything.

“...Chimera is a special Titan. She will be a perfect specimen for me to develop my new blood. With that girl’s sacrifice, my new device will be perfected.” Prodotis gave his response, concealing nothing.

Dill and Sid had already kicked the ground and started running, and Rei’s phosphors streamed from the soles of their boots—negotiations had broken down!

“My name is Aegisthus!”

“I am Orestes, son of Aegisthus!”

While announcing their own names, the pair slashed at Prodotis, who blocked their strikes with a mundane spear he had picked up and returned their introductions.

“I am the son of Geryon. My name is Prodotis!” The hero’s single spear stopped Dill and Sid’s swords and pushed both challengers back easily. There was no assistance from his Skill—it was the hero’s sheer strength that repelled them.

Prodotis stopped as he was about to give chase. Indentations appeared on his bronze skin, as if a hand had seized him—the unseen hand of psychokinesis.

“Hnngh...ungh! You won’t call this cowardly, will you? In our world, we have a saying—to pass up an opportunity is a sure sign of a lack of composure... Whaaa?!”

Prodotis, with his superhuman strength, wrenched apart the Manager Toiler’s unseen hands, As if that wasn’t enough, the hero seized part of one of the psychokinetic hands resembling a finger...and snapped it.

The feedback from Toiler’s Skill caused his own finger to twist horribly. As the Manager collapsed to his knees, Meteor stepped in to take his place—followed by Repeater, holding a gun under her left arm.

“Eat this! Have a taste of civilization!” Having given her broken right arm only the most perfunctory treatment, Repeater fired her gun wildly. At that same time, Meteor’s psychokinetic missiles, made visible by their sheer power, left trails behind them as they rained down upon their target one by one.

“What use is a hero?! In our modern age of freedom and equality, such figures are no longer needed! When all is said and done, you’re nothing more than...”

A spear flew out of the rising dust and skewered Meteor straight through the head. A moment later, a shadow leaped out in front of Repeater, who had been standing next to Meteor.

Click. Click. Left holding her empty gun, Repeater could do nothing but look up at the hero who appeared before her—this man of tall stature and elegant features. His silver eyes were turned in her direction, but were not looking at her in any real sense. The indifference he showed was worthy of the gods, as was his arrogance. He truly did belong to a different breed of mankind.

“Right. I thought you would come.” The hero turned his back to Repeater and with his bare hands he stopped Sid’s sword, foiling the strike that had been aimed at his back!

The blade bit into his bronze skin, then poured phosphors into the wound like poison. Prodotis twisted his arm in an attempt to break the blade as it slowly sank into his flesh, but in order to evade Dill, who appeared at his flank, he was forced to desist and take a step back.

I was just bait. The unyielding Repeater’s knees buckled, and she crumpled to the ground. Her right arm, which she had numbed with painkillers, felt like it belonged to someone else.

The battle continued. While parrying Dill and Sid’s attacks, Prodotis pulled

his spear from Meteor's lifeless corpse and held it at the ready again. The ancient technique with which he wielded his spear was simple, but still exhibited immense power with the awesome strength of a hero behind it.

Prodotis shattered the earth beneath his feet with each step he took. When he swung his spear, the air grew hot from the friction it generated. This hero had never needed anything like a Skill from the very beginning.

Pushing back Dill and Sid in turn with kicks and strikes from his spear, even as they coordinated through the resonance between their minds, he evaded a homing bolt from Blusterer aimed at his blind spot, then seized and broke the arrow as it flew past him. He pierced Toiler's invisible arms with his spear as if he could see them, and knocked an arrow fired by Whitehead out of the air.

Prodotis was strong. The hero's senses, now cut off from his Skill and no longer scattered amongst the vast array of options that went along with that, were now clearer and sharper than before. The world in Prodotis's eyes was now very simple—he needed only to handle the next attack, then the one after that, and then the numerous attacks that followed. Or, he could submit himself to a few blows, taking them on the chin. He needed only to repeat this again and again. He would study his enemies' movements and take appropriate countermeasures. Even now, Prodotis was growing as a hero.

The sunlike orb in the sky grew steadily brighter. Prodotis's scheme was on the verge of being fulfilled.

"Did you see that, foolish Tereans? No matter how many of the Seven Generals you defeat, it's no use! As long as the golden kingdom of Krios still has my father—as long as it has Prodotis, the silver mountain, we can always recover no matter what!" Even as Kranos, Prodotis's son, wept, still he smiled. No sooner had he said this than he slashed at Halberd before him with a sword of steel, bringing his opponent, far greater in stature, to his knees.

The giant, who had weathered a long battle with the hero, posed him a question, his shoulders heaving as he panted for breath. "Have you never thought...of surpassing your father? All you do is worship him and sing his praises. You may call yourself a hero, but you fall short in my reckoning... How disappointing. Gah...gah hah...ga-hoo!"

"I have no need to surpass him. Father will live forever. He will naturally remain above the likes of me and continue to climb to even greater heights. My

only mission is to help him in that journey. He will become a god, surpass the gods...and create his own! Worms such as you cannot stand in the way of his supremacy!” Giving into passion, Kranos brought his sword down upon Halberd, and the giant blocked it with his lump of iron. The complex machinery within was overwhelmed by the hero’s preternatural strength and the weapon was cut in twain. And without losing any momentum, Kranos’s sword carried on toward Halberd’s left arm, which held up the iron lump—and cut it clean off.

“Lord Halberd!” cried Hathaway, his adjutant. But Papus of the Seven Generals would not allow Hathaway to run to Halberd’s aid. “Is this the end for us?”

Meanwhile, Mace fought the hero Itimenos. All forces who were available to join the effort to strike down Prodotis had already been committed. Mace readied what was left of his club, which was broken in half, and muttered, “As an employer, he was generous with his money. I made quite a lot in his brigade...but, in the end, I never had the time to spend my earnings on debauchery...oh?” Mace strained his ears, listening to a faint sound through a gap in his chain mail hood. The hero in front of him had noticed the sound a moment sooner and stayed his hand, seeming to perk up his own ears.

“Is that...singing?”

“The *Metamorphoses*, is it not? That takes me back. That form...would be the Siren, wouldn’t it?” The Siren—a monster of the sea which lured sailors off course to bind and kill them. Nue Kirasaki had gone through yet another transformation. While Dill, Sid, and others had fought against Prodotis, Nue had lain low and prepared herself. When that transformation reached its intended result, she took flight once again.

At first glance, this form didn’t appear too different from that of the Harpy. Her arms had changed into birdlike wings, allowing her to fly through the air. But now, from her haunches there hung a fish’s tail. The cacophonous blinking of her black feathers had finally ceased. The eyeballs with red irises spilled out of her feathers, and the empty sockets transformed into lips. Nue was now an aberration with countless mouths.

The lips buried in her wings each began to tremble, emitting a low-frequency sound. This same sound also flowed from Nue’s own lips.

“The blood of transformation, different from either Nectar or Ichor... Though

a Titan, you are also not far from the primordial race. Thy being is the key, O Princess Chimera.”

Nue’s song had no words—it was more of an amorphous moan. Those who heard the waves of sound flowing across Krios were unconsciously drawn to its source. All thoughts of battle left Sid as he began to go to Nue, but Dill grabbed his shoulder and shook him to his senses.

“Focus. Nue is laying a trap. We need to wait for her signal.”

“...Yes, Master.”

“The rain has stopped, and the power of Rei and the other Reincarnators has waned. It’s up to us now. Pull yourself together, Orestes!”

“Yes, Master!”

The primeval song continued. Prodotis watched closely. There was no need for the hero to be hasty—time was on his side. The sun orb continued to grow. Soon the Chimera girl would be engulfed by it, and his favor would reach its perfect apex...

“What?!” At first, Prodotis thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. But this wasn’t the case—the sun orb was moving. “So her power is not only to seduce human hearts and draw their bearers to her, after all... Objects too, and in the end, even celestial phenomena...!”

The hero set forth to solve this new problem. The sun orb was descending, drawn to Nue’s song, and Dill and Sid slid into Prodotis’s path. Prodotis swung his spear to mow both of them down, but the pair raised their own weapons and withstood his assault. Dill’s sword, the first to receive the hero’s blow, shattered into tiny shards.

“Master! Take this!” Sid pulled a spear and shield toward himself with psychokinesis, then handed them directly to Dill.

In that brief window of time, Prodotis had already unleashed another attack. Sweeping his spear up from the ground as if scooping up the earth at his feet, he delivered a low strike. Sid...stepped *onto* the spear! Once again, his fearless advance had thrown off his enemy’s calculation of when he would be, and the head of the spear he had stepped on sank deep into the mud!

Prodotis decisively abandoned his spear and turned his gaze away from Sid. He had a premonition—almost a kind of trust in his enemy’s skills—and guessed where the next attack would come from.

“My name...is Dill Steel-Link!”

The hero blocked Dill’s spear with the palm of his hand and seized the weapon. Though the iron spearhead had pierced his flesh, this fixed the spear in

place—and contrary to Dill’s expectations, this worked in Prodotis’s favor. The wound was healed by the Ichor that gushed forth, presenting no obstacle to his next move.

Prodotis turned his wrist with the intention of breaking the spear while he still held it, but Dill’s left hand came forward with his shield aimed at Prodotis’s face. The shield roared as it parted the air, but the hero pushed it back with a fierce headbutt.

The impact that transferred through the shield left Dill’s arm numb, and the head of Dill’s spear succumbed to the strength of the hero’s grasp, snapping in two. Dill threw away the broken spear and grappled with Prodotis using his bare hands.

“Orestes!”

“Yes, Master!” A phosphoric blade sliced at Prodotis, whose movements were now limited by Dill. Phosphors pushed Sid from behind, exploding from the soles of his boots—even in her weakened state, Rei was giving her all to support him.

“Go get him, Sid!” cried Rei, who, unwilling to dedicate any more power to maintaining her own body, had become as insubstantial as mist.

“My name is...Orestes!” They collided with a fearsome smashing sound. The blade failed to overcome the hero’s flesh, though, and shattered into smithereens. The fragments and phosphors sparkled in the light of the sun.

“There’s more where that came from!” Even with his weapon shattered, Sid’s charge did not end. Following Dill’s example, he grabbed onto the hero and began to push him back. Prodotis’s body, which felt as heavy as lead...little by little...began finally to move. Between the two of them, Dill and Sid managed to push the hero away. But what was their ultimate aim?

The Siren’s song resounded throughout the air—and now it was Prodotis who was being sucked in. The pull of Nue’s song lifted the hero into the air and drew him toward her—he flailed with his arms and legs, trying to grab hold of the earth. Prodotis looked down and saw the present-day heroes—Aegisthus and Orestes, now unarmed—each move to the left and right of him. And then, they threw their fists toward him in perfect synchronization.

“Ohh...” The heroes drove their fists into him as one. His bronze skin didn’t sustain so much as a scratch, but his body was pushed back, higher into the air. And...he did not fall back down. Prodotis, in a state of weightlessness, continued to rise skyward.

“Ohh...!”

As Prodotis was blown back, he bent over backward to see where he was headed. His destination was the very flaming orb he had birthed into existence—and just beyond it, appearing like a dark spot on the sun, was the black-winged girl. She continued to sing.

Prodotis willed the Skill that had generated the sun orb to stop—but he couldn't do it. All around the hero was a barrier of glowing phosphors, shutting off his telepathic link to the castle giant. This was an imitation of the maze of fire Prodotis had revealed, as well as an adaptation of it.

His flight continued. The sun grew closer. The hero, whose body no spear or Skill could destroy, would most likely be consumed by the sun he had created himself. And the spectacle of it...was more beautiful than he could have imagined.

“I seem to remember that, long ago...among the heroes of the Golden Age, there was one who was destroyed by the sun. Were the Ex Machina, or even the Titans themselves, ever such powerful or gargantuan foes? The honor of Prodotis’s death goes to... The name of the one who slew me is...!”

What had been his true purpose in seeking eternal life? What was the true reason for his rage, at his friend’s betrayal or the stones thrown by the Tereans? He no longer had time enough to ponder these questions. The hero spread out his arms and welcomed his destruction.

The light swallowed everything.

CHAPTER 5 — REINCARNATOR EXECUTIONER

“F-Father...?” Looking up, he saw the sun orb begin to shrink. “It’s not true. I don’t believe it.” At the hero Kranos’s feet lay Halberd, on the brink of death after losing his left arm.

The sky was crowded with vehicles. Panopticon’s helicopters had been hovering there for a while, but they had increased in number. There were also units without the snowflake emblem, seemingly affiliated with a different company. Inorganic camera eyes protruded from the helicopters, observing the dwindling sun.

“This...cannot be.” Kranos stood rooted to the spot. The gazes of the mercenaries of the brigade and the Reincarnators shifted. The other remaining members of the Seven Generals, Itimenos and Papus, stood ready to defend their master. Having lost the power of speech upon their resurrection, they had no words with which to admonish the listless Kranos. They were both covered in wounds, but the battle was not yet over.

“Well done, everyone. We’ll take it from here,” came a sudden voice. On the surface of Krios, there appeared a distortion in the air resembling electronic noise, out of which rose a cloud of fog. From out of that fog stepped a Reincarnator—Foghorn, a Whisper and a Manager-class member of the Project.

From out of the fog hanging above Krios there followed more Reincarnators, then more still—a vast number. There looked to be dozens of them, perhaps over a hundred. All of them belonged to the Project. These Reincarnators surrounded the heroes of Krios, the mercenaries of the Halberd Brigade, and finally their fellow Project members who had participated in the effort to suppress Prodotis and his allies.

“Now, what do we have here? You certainly took your time getting here, didn’t you? Did you meet with some kind of accident? I hope you’ve brought a written explanation of why you were late.” Toiler, also a Manager, joked in a voice dripping with sarcasm, but the color of his face was grim. He was now forced to acknowledge that there had been some undesirable political activity within the Project and, by extension, Panopticon, its parent company.

Foghorn ignored the scam artist's jests and repeated himself. "We'll dispose of those who remain. Every Project member below Manager-class is to evacuate. Your next appointment is scheduled to arrive from head office shortly... Be assured that we are very grateful for your service up to this point." Though a very roundabout way of putting it, Foghorn was in fact delivering a death sentence.

The first to assert himself was Blusterer, who now occupied Rick's body. He hefted his crossbow and aimed it right at Foghorn. Next, Repeater, with her broken right arm behind her, held out her still-functioning left hand, assuming a martial arts stance. Toiler forcefully bent back the finger that Prodotis had broken, setting it back in place, and prepared to use his psychokinetic hands.

Dill and Sid, along with the mail-cloak called Whitehead, also took up arms and assumed a circular formation with the Reincarnators at their backs. Nue, who beat her wings in the sky above, descended to meet them. The Siren did not touch back down on the ground, but instead floated above the circle as if protecting it, glaring at the enemies surrounding them.

Some distance from Dill and the others, the giant Halberd could no longer stand. Two of his subordinates, Hathaway and Mace, stood in his defense, but the weapons in their hands were not their usual armaments. The final battle was about to begin.

Sid suddenly turned in shock, looking at Dill beside him. He now knew Dill's thoughts without them needing to exchange a word, as their minds resonated. Dill kept a stern expression and didn't move a muscle. Eventually, Sid just nodded.

Behind them, in the center of the circular formation, they saw the signs of teleportation. Who should emerge but the Manager Starlight, who had remained unseen for some time.

"Manager, where have you been?" asked Repeater, with unconcealed scorn on his face.

Starlight answered bitterly. "The first blow I received also cut deeply. It was no use. I performed some first aid, but I was in no state to continue fighting. To make up for that, let's say...I'll at least let you get away, our noble hero. I'm reluctant to do that, but I'm even more reluctant to let those in the Project who just watched from the sidelines do whatever they want... If you're quick, one more person, maybe two, might be able to escape through my gate. I must warn you, though, the range between my gates is short. I can't guarantee that you'll be able to lose your pursuers once you've teleported. Well, in any case...we have to

make the best of this mess. Reincarnators gathered here, I call on you to support him. Surely you have no objection to that?”

“No. But I have.” It was not a Reincarnator’s voice that answered. “My name is Dill Steel-Link. Reincarnator Executioner.”

What were the names of those who slew and those who were slain at that moment? Dill caught Blusterer, Sid caught Repeater, and Whitehead caught Toiler, all by surprise, running them through with their respective weapons.

There was no way they could have reacted in time. They had already readied themselves for the final showdown, thinking themselves in the same boat as the mail-cloaks.

“Steel-Link, you bastard! You’ve got to be...kidding me!” As Repeater crumpled to the ground, she glared up at Dill with her gruesome visage. “Don’t tell me this is your way...of protecting us?!”

Sid took his sword in an overhand grip and delivered the finishing blow to Repeater. Starlight, standing in the center of the circle, saw all of this happen and said, his voice trembling, “You people...are insane. Even more insane than we thought...!”

“Did you forget, Reincarnator? Did you forget your enemy’s name? The mission of Terea’s hero, Aegisthus?” Without giving Starlight so much as a glance, he thrust his spear into the Manager behind him, then drew it straight back in front of himself.

“I knew...we shouldn’t have brought him with us...!” As soon as Starlight finished speaking, he expired. Dill tossed the corpse aside and glared at the Reincarnators surrounding him. “I’ll tell you my name as many times as I need to. My name is Dill Steel-Link. By another name, I am the hero Aegisthus. Killer of the dead, a calamity to Reincarnators everywhere. The blade bequeathed to the world by the Ex Machina. I can never forgive your barbaric act of destroying the city we once called home, Aspro Terea of the white walls. This is the day you bastards meet your ruin. I will kill every Reincarnator I see—no matter how many times you’re revived, I’ll kill you again. I swear I will, until I retrieve Iris’s remains! My name is Dill Steel-Link! This is the name of Redguard’s fury...!”

This announcement was being broadcast live—a news helicopter hovering above filmed the man in his rage. His voice and image rode on radio waves to be disseminated throughout the world.

Dill’s image was displayed on a screen installed in a street that Nefritis of the Seven Generals crossed as he fled along the ground of the Tower Capital. In the

office of Electra, puppet leader of the New Terean Republic, his voice was heard on an old-fashioned radio by former soldiers of the Terean regular army, now engaged in guerrilla warfare as they circled a railway line laid by New Rail in the Aeros Region. He was heard in a truck commandeered by the Titan chieftain Lycaon, accompanied by a lump of flesh with a crimson eye. He was seen on television by the Tereans in the recreation room of their prison, interned there after Fireworks Inc. had suppressed their riot.

And finally, he was seen upon the Acropolis of Vulcan of the Eleven Cities, on a gigantic monitor that had just been created by the hands of the city's god—right before the eyes of a woman with short, milky-white hair who stared fixedly at the screen.

The image of a man with rust-colored hair, daring to join a battle he had no hope of winning, displayed for all to see.

“Yes. Absolutely no problem whatsoever. There were a few unforeseen changes in our circumstances, but if anything they worked to our advantage. We will also be deploying the new model of biological drone. We'll monitor its performance and collect data. Yes. Yes. Of course.”

The last of the Project's Managers, Foghorn, held his holographic terminal up to his ear, conversing with another man who was far away. Just ahead, where he was looking without paying particular attention to anything he saw, heroes said to have been resurrected from antiquity were put to rout as they spouted something about cursing the world. Yet another point in the Reincarnators' favor was the fact that the heroes seemed to have no desire to fight alongside Dill Steel-Link and his allies. Their enemies would split up if allowed to flee and remain at large for just the right amount of time. After that happened, a detached force of Reincarnators could hunt them down.

The streets of the Tower Capital had sustained profound damage, and it would be necessary to take retaliatory measures. However, this was not the duty of Foghorn or the Project at large. Therefore, he could simply leave it to others.

“But, well, certainly...it is regrettable. Our Yuujin plan went off the rails, and our Shiden plan has been delayed. There seems to be a concomitant cost to the creation of new types of Skills. Other companies have also expressed their intent to participate in this field, so there will be an arms race...no, no,” Foghorn said into the communicator, continuing his conversation with the person on the other

end of the line. “It isn’t all bad. This time, we were at least able to confirm that such a thing existed. Yes. Naturally. We will definitely make that arrest. Our company’s hold on the initiative will not falter.”

Now, in the spot where Foghorn was looking, a man known as Whitehead had just fallen. To protect Sid, he had taken all of the Reincarnators’ gunfire himself, turning him into little more than a sack of flesh leaking blood. Foghorn hadn’t gone so far as to remember all the mercenaries’ names, but he would remember that one.

The collapse of their enemies’ forces was near. That was the only natural outcome.

The subject of Foghorn’s long-distance conversation relaxed somewhat, turning toward small talk. “Even so, I just don’t understand. Even if the intruders had made it to the city center, at that stage wouldn’t Lily have been prepared to wipe them out along with the whole Harbor District? Not that we have any right to know about matters outside of Panopticon jurisdiction, of course. A vulnerability of our cyclical Reincarnation system has been exposed, though. To think such an unstable bunch of girls are in control of our whole system’s very heart...oh?” Foghorn looked up at the sky, blinking a few times. For a moment, his eyes—which had glazed over in the course of the formal conversation—began to sparkle.

“Ah, no...excuse me. It’s nothing important. Only, this is a rare sight... There’s a rainbow above the Tower Capital.”

“Aah...aaah! Lieutenant Whitehead...this is all my fault!”

“Orestes!” Dill shouted at Sid, who clung to Whitehead’s lifeless body. “Stand and fight!” Still sobbing, Sid tightened his grip on his sword. His concentration on his Skill, which was what allowed him to emulate Dill, fell into disarray, and the form of the youth Orestes was in tatters. Dill’s words were brief, and he would not pause to follow up. As they were in the middle of a battle, this was only natural. Although Sid understood this, he still thought his heart might break.

Nue continued to sing, and the gravity imparted by her voice caused bullets to plummet in midair. In the window this created, Dill leaped forward, cut down a Reincarnator, and using the corpse as a shield he proceeded to kill the next in his path. Then, he held the body up again to move to the next Reincarnator, and

then the next. Perhaps Dill genuinely intended to kill every last Reincarnator on this day.

But he had no other allies left. Halberd and the brigade, who should have been fighting some distance away, had been engulfed by the waves of enemies and could no longer even be seen. The heroes of Krios also seemed to have retreated, although Dill couldn't imagine that they would make it home alive.

There was no way the inexhaustible hordes of enemies would allow Sid to rest. Sid pushed back the Reincarnators who came to attack him, cut them down, then evaporated away the gore that might dull his blade using his phosphors before cutting down the next attacker. However, he had long since tired to the point where his Skill and martial prowess had lost their luster.

"Aah...Rei. Rei. Where might you be? Don't tell me you've died already...?" At some point he had even lost sight of the girl who had supported his spirit up until this point. Despair now weighed heavily on Sid's shoulders.

The next enemy came, and then the next. Incessantly they assaulted him, but Sid could only deal with them one by one. He was nearing his limit. *If anything, I wonder why I haven't reached it already. I mean, my spirit has long since failed.*

Clang. With a feeble sound, Sid's sword shattered at the hilt. The blade slid away, tumbling to the ground, and Sid's heart broke at the same time. His phosphors vanished, and Orestes became a mere boy once more.

As if the timing had been carefully judged, it was at that very moment that the fighting paused. Nue's song stopped as well. Both Dill and the Reincarnators were all looking at the same thing—the rainbow stretching across the sky. Its beauty was extremely out of place.

The clouds holding the artificial rain that would have otherwise fallen eternally over the Tower Capital had been swept away by Prodotis's Skill and evaporated by his sun orb. The resulting rainbow now stretched even farther across the sky.

Is this all it took? Sid felt incredibly foolish, embarrassed that he had been spellbound by a rainbow, if only for a moment. He assumed a thoughtless and desperate sneer, but Dill's reaction was quite different.

"*Iris...*her name meant 'rainbow.'" Right before their eyes was a young, blonde-haired girl holding hands with the others—it was Iris.

“Damn it...damn it, damn it, damn it! What’s the deal?! Why didn’t it work? Aren’t I a Play Actor too? Why?! Hey, why won’t you move? You have to listen to what I say! Listen already! If you don’t...”

She was beneath Castle Krios, in the engine room—in front of the castle giant’s brain. “If you don’t listen, no one will... No one will be able to return safely to their homes! Move, move, move, come on, move...! Use your Skill to send everyone home!”

Rei knelt before the exposed brain of the Titan holding up the castle and wept. She had been attempting to utilize the giant’s blood. Prodotis had controlled the giant via telepathy, and by granting the giant itself the use of a Skill, he had been able to expand the influence of his own Skill on a scale which would have otherwise been impossible. Rei had assumed that if she connected her mind with the giant’s, she could achieve the same miracle—but it seemed she had been mistaken.

Did the connection require some kind of recognition? Was this the difference in skill between her and the heroes? Was the giant simply fatigued from overexertion? She did not know the cause. Whatever the reason, the giant did not respond to Rei’s telepathy. She had abandoned her role of fighting alongside Dill and Sid and defending them, clinging to her last ray of hope as she descended into the basement...but it had all been in vain.

Rei couldn’t overcome this situation by herself. Above ground, Dill might already be dead, and her own body was beginning to fade away. Her body was only imaginary, lacking flesh, purely sustained by her Skill. Reincarnators were greatly influenced by their own emotional condition. At this moment, Rei’s condition was at rock bottom. Then she heard singing.

You may go in...

Now you may go.

Rei looked over her shoulder. There she saw a group of eight pale girls, each holding the other’s hands in a ring. Seven of them faced the interior of the circle, with only the one in front of Rei facing outside—a girl with blonde hair. She was still very young.

“Who are you all?”

The answer to Rei’s wary question was only their song.

Tell us, where does this narrow path lead?

This path leads to Tenjin’s shrine.

Please, now won’t you let us pass by?

You cannot pass, unless you say why.

What flowed into Rei's mind was not the words, but information. Now she knew the secret of the garden. First Hero, now Lily...why could only a select few make use of unique Skills? Hero's mind had wavered between bipolar extremes, even showing signs of having been fractured into multiple personalities. Lily was a circuit of Reincarnators in series, made up of eight girls.

Then what about Rei? Rei was the same—the girl named Rei Mishima had never existed in the first place.

We come to celebrate this child's seventh birthday.

We come to make a humble offering.

"I see...no wonder. I did think I seemed a little too strong." Before long, Rei would be torn apart to form the minds of thirty classmates, annihilating her own being—this was what Lily told her. It was as if Lily was attempting to recruit her—to incorporate Rei, who possessed qualities linked to the garden, into themselves in order to become a greater being.

Rei was resolute. She resolved to make a miracle happen.

"Okay. Take me with you...I just have one thing to ask in exchange."

We don't mind going, but we fear coming back.

Although you might fear it,

You may go in. You may go in.

The circle of eight girls became nine. The giant's Skill had been activated. Rei would not be coming back again.

"I had considered the possibility. Yours was one of the first bodies the Reincarnators obtained." The girl Dill had been searching for now stood before him, expressionless. The air around them was covered with suddenly rising smoke, so Dill couldn't see very far in front of his face. The rainbow, the blue sky created by the hero Prodotis, the hordes of Reincarnators he knew to be there—Dill couldn't see any of them. They were all enveloped by the smoke.

As Dill tried to approach the girl, his body made contact with the smoke. It responded with an unexpected resistance, although it was still soft to the touch. Dill pulled back at once. The smoke had *substance*, and it was also viscous, so as Dill pulled away, strings of fluid dripped from the parts of his body that had touched the smoke, reminiscent of melted cheese. This was the very substance—

the half-real ectoplasm—that constituted the Capital Tower.

Dill stepped forward with no further hesitation. “At that time, you were the only noncombatant they had. You were important to them and needed to be given a body before anyone else, but would not be sent to fight. Perhaps your body was selected to house some special Reincarnator...that’s what I thought. What Hero—Eugene—told me more or less turned my speculation into certainty.”

The half-real smoke coiled around Dill’s legs. With each step he took, Dill’s legs grew heavier. But his gait remained certain, unwavering. “I’ve finally found you, Iris. I’ve come to get you back. Now...come home with papa.”

There was a large amount of smoke binding Dill now, and his body would no longer move forward easily. This was the same phenomenon that had taken hold of the giant of Krios and stopped its advance.

Dill extended his hand through a gap in the substance all around him. Iris, the blonde-haired girl, did not react. Her eyes were turned down slightly, her face was expressionless, and she remained silent without so much as blinking.

“Iris. I just wanted to apologize to you one more time. I’m sorry for not being there to care for you. I pushed my family away. The truth is, I was afraid to stay with you. I’m...not a hero. I’m just a killer who took the lives of many on the battlefield. I didn’t want you to grow up as the daughter of a murderer.” With his hand outstretched through a gap in the sticky smoke, Dil struggled. So that his voice might at least reach Iris, he continued speaking. “I know there will come a day when I will have to atone for all the blood that I have bathed in—the blood that has stained me—with my life. It will be my just deserts. But I was afraid that you, Iris, might be caught up in my atonement...”

Dill’s outstretched fingers finally touched Iris. With his index and middle fingers, which just barely reached her, he traced the outline of her shoulders, caressing her and making certain that she was real. Then Dill let the knife he had concealed in his sleeve slip into his hand and gripped it before plunging it into Iris’s eye.

It put up no more resistance than a ball of cotton. The body that had felt so real only a moment ago turned to blue smoke and blended into the air.

“...That figures. There’s no way you’d go to the trouble of coming here in person.” Dill hung his head low in disappointment, letting the knife in his hand drop to the floor. “Iris, please forgive me. After coming all this way, I couldn’t bring you back...”

Uncle.

Dill's head sprang back up.

“Dill!”

“Master!”

At the sound of the children's voices, he opened his eyes. Dill was pinned down by a group of Reincarnators. His arms had been bound together roughly behind his back, and the right one seemed to be broken. Nue and Sid, who looked in his direction as they shouted to him, had been bound in the same manner and left on the ground covered in mud.

The sky above was cloudy. Prodotis's sun orb had vanished completely, and the Tower Capital was shut off from the sky by its artificial rain clouds once more. Nue, who called Dill's name again and again as she crawled through the mud like a caterpillar toward him, finally reached Dill and lay on top of him. She proceeded to cry her eyes out.

“I was wrong,” murmured Dill. “I should have made sure that you two were able to escape. I thought it was hopeless no matter what we tried, so we should at least be together until the end... I was wrong. I should have spared no effort to help you escape.”

Nue shook her head repeatedly. Sid sniffled and said, “Please don't apologize. Isn't this proof that you recognized my worth and brought me with you as a comrade...?!”

The feeling of adoration that welled up in Dill was so strong that he found it difficult to breathe. He wanted to hold his children closer and stroke their hair, but he couldn't do either. He didn't want to let them die—but in spite of that, he could do nothing but lie there and wait to hear from the Reincarnators.

“Yes. Yes. Everything is going smoothly. Hand them over? To the Republic? Absolute nonsense. There's no way we'd comply. Yes. Of course. However many hundreds of them may come, we will drive them all away...” As Foghorn spoke over his phone, he was surrounded by guards, never left alone for even a moment. But after a spell, Foghorn's raised brow furrowed, and he turned his gaze away. “...Although, it would appear that Lily is expanding once again.”

Once again, the castle of Krios was ringed by a group of colossal girls, all holding hands. Each of the girls had different facial features, but they invariably had the same stony lack of expression.

We won't let you do that, echoed a voice—a young girl's voice. Dill, Sid, and

eventually Foghorn all realized the true identity of this new voice.

“Rei! What are you doing there?” Sid cried.

“Lily is now...nine?!” said Foghorn. “You’re telling me there’s another one?”

Phosphors glowed all across the sky. The rain, containing Liquid Computers, had ceased. In its place there was a shower of light as if the stars were falling from the sky, each of them leaving a trail as it fell!

“We need antiair defenses...” Foghorn’s order was lost in the roar of the phosphors igniting. The rain of lights only avoided striking where Dill, Nue, and Sid lay. Nue tore at Dill’s bonds with her teeth, and Sid had already blasted his apart with his own phosphors.

“Rei! Please, wait! This is wrong...isn’t it?!” cried Sid toward the heavens. Perhaps, having shared a body with Rei, there was some voice only he could hear. “A happy ending where you’re the only one who has to sacrifice themselves...that just doesn’t sound right! I...I won’t allow it to happen. Please, stop messing around...!”

Dill came to Sid’s side and supported his shoulder with his left hand as they looked up at the sky together. Above their heads was a continuous layer of clouds that now glowed with phosphors. As they gazed into the sky, they saw the signs of another Skill begin to manifest. A great black circle with a rainbow glow around its edge opened up above them—a teleportation gate. It was followed by several more, stacking on top of each other. The chain of gates was slowly descending toward them.

“So you’re helping us escape. Rei...and Iris...?” As to whether this speculation from Dill was correct, no one there knew the answer to that question. At that time, in that place, none of them knew enough to make sense of what was happening. After all, Dill had not yet been able to visit the city of the dead in order to truly recover Iris.

“But...then what will happen to...all of you?” Sid asked, addressing Lily.

Come and find us, echoed the voice. The nearest of the descending stack of teleportation gates was already close.

“I will...” answered Sid, tears welling up in his eyes. “I’ll come and find you. Without trickery—without you by my side! Master will help me train, and I’ll do all I can to become stronger! With my strength—my *very own* strength—I will come...and save you...!”

Now the phosphors cascaded over Sid, and the light that touched him was warm.

In the northern region of Redguard stood Vulcan, the first among the cities in the region of Boreas. In the plaza of the Acropolis that sat on the summit of the hill, in the city surrounded by castle walls, the god of the forge was enshrined—Ex Machina Amputation. Life had been breathed into the idol for the god while it remained unfinished, and the half-made god had constructed himself a bed and lay down atop it, although he still lacked a lower body.

In just the past few days, the blacksmith god had created many things. He had repaired the city's streets, which had been ravaged by the incursion of the Project, and reinforced the walls encircling the city. But the greatest results had been achieved in the plaza where the god was seated. Many citizens of Vulcan gathered in the great plaza, all crowding around transfixed by an enormous slab of stone placed there—a wide, rectangular LCD television.

As if the design had been prepared beforehand, the television had been constructed swiftly in the interior factory of the god's temple. The recipient it had originally been intended for was no longer there, but for the sake of the people of Vulcan, the god of the forge had installed it in the plaza which served as the city center.

Images were displayed upon the stone slab. It received signals from the Tower Capital, a far-off land. Up until a short while ago it had displayed the image of their hero, the rust-haired Aegisthus. But now, it showed nothing at all. They had seen their hero stand up against a horde of foes, only to be caught and thrown to the ground. From that point onward, the image had changed to a kind of sandstorm.

Countless sighs circulated throughout the crowd. A particular woman whimpered at the sight, but it was only one of the many cries of woe that filled the plaza. Her hair, which had been so very long when she was a girl, was now cut short to spare her the work of maintaining it.

The mark left upon her finger by the ring she had worn for so many years was still distinctly visible. Cirulia Steel-Link realized that there was really nothing here for her anymore.

Cirulia was free now. Free from her husband. Free from having to care for children. Free from household chores. Free from any other work. Free from her parents. Free from any purpose in life. Absolute freedom—she had so *much* freedom. There was no one left in this town who knew Cirulia intimately. She felt as if she might collapse under the weight of all this terrible freedom and die.

Turning away from the crowd, Cirulia started walking—returning to her home where no one waited for her, even though there was nothing to be done there.

She reached her house. She opened the front door.

“So you’ve come back, you good-for-nothing.”

Cirulia Steel-Link found her husband and children inside.

CHAPTER 6 — RECONQUER:REDGUARD

Set into the wall surrounding Vulcan of the Eleven Cities were several gates. One of them was the Gate of Achaea, which faced eastward, and a large section of it was collapsed. The gate was said to have been caved in by the hero Falaina during the war of the Silver Age.

Looking up now at the eastern sky from outside the gate, the sun could be seen just making its way over the edge of the crater around Vulcan. Averting his eyes from the sun's brilliance and looking back, Dill realized that there had been a lull in the children's conversation, and he met the young boy's blue-eyed gaze.

"We'll be off, then," Dill called to the young boy. "I'm counting on you to mind the house, Sid."

"Yes, Master. Please leave it to Orestes."

Two months had passed since the battle of the Tower Capital. The once-shy boy now wore a completely confident expression on his face. For Dill's part, he couldn't say that he didn't feel even a shred of regret over this development.

"I'm sorry, Sid. I really should stay here, at least..." Next to Dill, Cirulia turned back to look at Sid, squinting in the light of dawn as well. Unusually, she was dressed for travel. On her feet were not her well-worn sandals or the high heels she had worn on the day of the festival, but a pair of flat-soled, practical shoes. Slung across her back was the sort of pack worn by soldiers in the regular army of Terea.

On this journey, Cirulia would also be accompanying Dill. She had given up on waiting. "If you find your allowance isn't enough, just speak to Adjutant Hathaway. I've entrusted that man with more than enough. If you ever feel like using the house, do so freely. You won't have any privacy in the barracks. Besides that..."

Sid stopped her with a smile. "I'll be fine. Please, Cirulia, *you* be careful. The people of the south aren't too fond of my master, are they?"

"...That's true. He's as selfish as ever, going to such a dangerous place. This good-for-nothing..." Contrary to her words, Cirulia took Dill's hand and pressed her shoulder against him. "But I've made up my mind. If I can't change him,

then I will change. If he's going to die, then I'll go and die with him." Cirulia prodded Dill with a finger. "If you don't like the sound of that, then make sure to protect me and yourself, all right?"

"Right, of course. I promise." The two adults briefly kissed each other on their cheeks. This was a familiar, natural gesture for them.

"Sid, are you sure you won't come with us? Even though everyone managed to return home from the Tower Capital..." For a while now, Nue had been in a state of restlessness. She had tried many times to convince Sid to come along, but couldn't finish her sentences and ended up falling silent. Sid's decision to stay in Vulcan remained firm.

"Not everyone, you know. The lieutenant, Rick, Rei, and many others didn't come home."

"That wasn't your fault, Sid."

"Even if it wasn't my fault, I might have been able to protect them if I'd just been stronger. So...that's what I want to do. I want to truly become Orestes, so I can fight even without Rei's power." Sid's expression was labored. Although he spoke bravely, he clearly still carried doubts in his heart.

Dill decided to throw him a lifeline. "While Aegisthus vacates Vulcan, we'll need someone to remain here and become a source of hope for Redguard. For now, no one besides Orestes can perform this noble task."

Nue did not seem very convinced by this. Blinking frequently, her red eyes looked like they might shed tears at any moment. "...Still...still I...hate this. It's really great that Sid has become so noble, but...but..." She sniffled. "Still, my mom, the other Titans, and even Dill...you always say the same thing, and I hate it..."

Cirulia, unable to simply watch Nue cry, prompted Dill by shoving his shoulder. After glancing at Cirulia with a wry smile, Dill crouched down and put his arms around Nue's shoulders. Lowering his voice, he spoke to her quietly, even though there was no one around besides the four of them.

"Would you like to take a trip together, all four of us? We can give up on going south and go somewhere without any people, without any Reincarnators, without war—a new land. Just our family, together."

Nue looked up at Dill. He wore a trustworthy smile. Cirulia smiled too. Sid's face was troubled, though, and Nue clearly felt conflicted. Nue proceeded to look out over the streets of Vulcan, then outside the fortress walls, at the camps pitched by the soldiers who had come in aid from the north.

"...You know we can't do that, you meanie!"

"I'm not being mean. I'm not joking either. I'm dead serious, Nue—if that's what you really want, that's what we'll do."

Nue's face cycled through a panoply of expressions. "...Aaahh! I can't decide! I'll say something funny instead!" She threw one hand up in a fist and held it there. "...Sid, I pass it off to you."

"Eh, me?! Er, um...raw eggs?" A few seconds elapsed. The adults burst into laughter.

"Hey, now. What's so funny about raw eggs?" said Dill, while doubled over, shaking with laughter.

Cirulia did the same. "You kids really are funny."

"I-I'm not funny at all! Only Nue is."

Nue looked at Sid, whose ears had turned bright red, and gave him a thumbs up. Her eyebrows were raised sharply to form a "V" shape. "Sid, good job! Nice try!"

This laughter seemed like a moment that might have gone on forever, but alas, it eventually settled down, then died entirely.

"Nue. You're all right now, aren't you?"

"...Yep. Shall we go?" Nue nodded grudgingly.

"Excuse me, everyone! Have...a safe trip!" Summoning up his courage, Sid waved faintly to them. His ears were still red.



“We’ll be back before you know it,” answered each of the three travelers. Then they turned their backs to Sid and started walking away. After walking a short distance, they heard Sid’s voice from behind them.

“Please come home soon, okay? I’ll...be waiting for you! I’ll be waiting all the while!”

“Looks like you’re done with your goodbyes. I’ll have you tackle your training now—immediately.”

After watching the party climb aboard the waiting horse-drawn carriage and ascend the slope of the crater, the man drew closer and spoke to Sid. His beard and hair were neatly combed with oil, and he wore a scabbard adorned with silver at his waist. He was the brigade’s adjutant, Hathaway.

“Yes, sir!” The forlorn face Sid had worn as he watched Dill and Nue’s backs recede into the distance was suddenly gone, and he replied manfully.

“The Halberd Brigade lost a great deal of its fighting strength in the battle of the Imperial City. We’ll have Orestes and Aegisthus bear the core of the Halberd Brigade reborn.”

“Yes, sir!”

As Hathaway was walking ahead of Sid, he stopped abruptly, turning back to gaze upon the relief troop camps spanning the outside of the wall. “Look over there. With the resurrection of the hero Aegisthus and our report of the assault on the Imperial City, Redguard has reclaimed its hope. The relief troops gathering here are proof of that. Burn them into your vision, Orestes. The man you aspire to be has moved so many and given them courage.”

In anticipation of a battle between Redguard and the Reincarnators, with all their forces amassed, how great in number were the relief forces sent by the Eleven Cities of the North, and what were the names of the generals who commanded them?

First in view was the encampment of knights who stood together in red armor. The knights that came in relief from Pallas of the Eleven Cities were a handpicked order of three hundred elites. They were led by the knight-commander Lance. An equal number of foot soldiers were also under his command.

Camped next to them were the mercenaries of Kynthia, who had braved many a harsh winter. Their native land was unsuited to agriculture, meaning

anyone born there had to become an outstanding hunter or mercenary just to survive. The Kynthian mercenaries, reared in that environment, did not bear uniform armaments like the knightly order of Pallas, but there was no doubt that each one of them was a powerful warrior. Their commander was Lionel, son of Vomos. Five hundred soldiers followed his command.

After these followed the forces of Enosichthon, who cherished their oars, and the battle monks of the divine city of Phoebus. The forces of Enosichthon were commanded by Ingram, master of a great fleet. The ships from Enosichthon, numbering forty, were moored at the port closest to Vulcan. The three hundred battle monks of Phoebus accompanied their grand priest, Scepter.

From Mars of the Eleven Cities, where they worshiped Ex Machina Invade, five hundred and forty soldiers had been sent in support. They were commanded by Tomahawk the Fifteenth.

Thesmophoros, Cypris, and Argeiphontes, the Three Allied Cities, had crowned Rufus, son of Noel, as their common ruler. The army commanded by Rufus was the largest out of all of the forces sent to relieve Vulcan, numbering one thousand three hundred in total.

From Olgia, where the grapevines were fruitful, the chief of their city, Kingsley, brought two hundred soldiers under his command. From Westa, Simpson Junior came commanding one hundred and fifty youngsters, but this number was the smallest among all the forces brought by the Eleven Cities. The fame Westa had known in the Golden Age was a thing of the past.

“What I’ve just told you are the broad strokes of the relief forces sent to us at this point in time. I’d like you to at least grasp the numbers of each force and the names of their commanders, even if it’s just for the Eleven Cities of the North. I’ll test you again tomorrow morning.”

“...Y-Yes, sir!”

While Hathaway had smoothly recited these facts about the relief troops, Sid could only stare in bewilderment as he listened. This was clearly too much information, but it seemed that he really did expect Sid to memorize them.

Hathaway, feeling that he was about to break into a smile, turned his back to Sid to hide his expression. “Amongst the relief troops, there are many who hope to be admitted to the Reborn Halberd Brigade. But we only want elite warriors. Eventually, in order to appoint a lieutenant who will administer a selection exam to these hopefuls and afterward take command of them, we will have to conduct a further selection. Naturally, as the one who would succeed Aegisthus, you will need to show prowess worthy of this class of lieutenants.”

"I'll do it. I'll become stronger," replied Sid, without a shred of hesitation.

"...Very good. An excellent answer, as expected. I can see why Whitehead thought so highly of you." Hathaway would actually have liked to have left Sid's training to Whitehead, in fact. They had lost many comrades—some good men, and others he hadn't been too fond of. There were only a handful of his comrades-in-arms left from the days of the Holy War.

Hathaway turned around and looked at Sid intently once more. Although many foundational members had been replaced in the brigade, the name remained the same, to be handed down to the next generation. Now Hathaway felt he understood the true meaning of the expectations Dill had placed on the young boy.

The young boy, prone to blushing, did not understand the meaning of the look Hathaway gave him and stiffened awkwardly where he stood.

"Let's go. Lord Halberd's speech is about to start. Listen well."

"Yes, sir!"

The main street in Vulcan overflowed with a great many people. It wasn't only soldiers who had marched with the support troops. The armies were accompanied by servants, merchants, and the soldiers' own families. The main street, which faced the market, had been densely packed since early in the morning, enough that people had trouble picking each other out of the crowd. That was why the chain mail cloak that the woman wore was overlooked.

She was still a young woman of around twenty, and the right third of her face was covered by a patch as if she had sustained a significant wound there. She held a spear in her hand, leaning on it in place of a cane. It was very rare for women to be warriors, but she seemed to be very familiar with the spear.

The people who walked past her noticed an overpowering smell of perfume coming from her, as if she'd intended to mask something.

"Whoa. Amazing...there are—*hic*—so many people."

"Mom, be careful." A young man lent the staggering woman his shoulder. He was perhaps sixteen years old. He stood about as tall as the woman, and anyone could see there was not a large enough difference in age for them to be mother and child. Besides that, his hair was rust-colored, unlike the woman.

"You're so kind, Dean. Just like your father...tee hee hee."

"...That's right, mom. We'll be able to meet him soon...Dill Steel-Link. Now,

hold on just a little longer. This is a nasty slope, isn't it..."

Vulcan, no exception among the Eleven Cities of the North, grew slightly more elevated the closer one got to its center. This was not topography that was kind to the sick. As the young man took care not to bump into the other people on the street while supporting the woman, a feeling of nervous irritation built up inside of him.

"The time has come! Redguard is about to embark on her greatest battle, the likes of which have not been seen in her whole history. This will be a second *Reconquista*, to wrest back control of our ancestral lands from the hands of the Reincarnators!" All of a sudden, there resounded a man's deep voice, which felt as if it shook the very foundations of the earth. The voice, sounding from multiple places throughout the city, layered echoes upon each other. The unnatural scratchiness in the voice was noise, introduced as it passed through the Reincarnators' machines.

"Halberd...so you're still alive. You'd have been better off dead—along with everyone else besides my senior," muttered the woman, looking up at the hologram of the giant that appeared in the sky.

The people gathered around the hologram all looked up to listen to the speech, but they were not startled. This announcement device, commandeered from the Reincarnators and reproduced by the Ex Machina, had since been used in this fashion every day and no longer seemed unusual to them.

With exaggerated gestures, the one-armed giant continued his speech. "In the holy city of Vulcan, we have already amassed the greatest fighting force in the Eleven Cities, and we double in number every day! Furthermore—ladies and gentleman, let me inform you of this crucial fact! Thanks to the efforts of the hero Aegisthus, we have succeeded in acquiring some unexpected reinforcements! They go by the name...of Titans! Those ancient tribes, whom we battled against in the first Holy War, have answered the call of Aegisthus and have joined our war as allies! I am sure that, very soon, Aegisthus will take command of the Titans and bring them back here, to Vulcan..."

"...Say what? Then that means Dill Steel-Link...isn't in Vulcan right now?! No way. Mom doesn't have much time left!"

This fatal misunderstanding left the young man rooted to the spot in shock. The woman showed no interest in the speech, but instead seemed carefree, following a horsefly that flew nearby with her eyes. Eventually she staggered off by herself into an alleyway.

"Mom?!" The people lining the streets were in his way, so the distance

between the young man and the woman widened before his eyes. On top of this, the woman moved swiftly. She slipped through the gaps between the people like a cat.

“Aha. Got you...” By the time the woman had come to a stop, she had long since lost sight of the young man. She found herself in a corner of Vulcan’s downtown that had once been under the control of the Reincarnators, having fallen entirely into their hands during the previous conflict.

In this dark, damp cul-de-sac, there was a swarm of horseflies that formed a column as they flew around in circles. Their sheer number was bizarre, and the buzzing of their wings was terribly loud. Taking a closer look, she saw the chewed-up corpses of several rats, dogs, and cats strewn upon the ground at her feet.

Undaunted, the woman started cackling. “Once upon a time, there was someone like that among the barbarians of the south...a sickening stalker of a woman who used bugs to sneak around and spy on others!”

As if understanding her words, the swarm of horseflies moved—and as if they had a common will, moving at someone else’s command, they assaulted the woman as a swarm. The woman flicked the tip of her spear with her finger, and held it at the ready. A flame ignited around the spearhead, and then she proceeded to plunge the flaming spear into the swarm! The flies burn and fled madly. One by one their fellows were caught up in the conflagration, burning up and falling to the ground.

“Ah ha...kya ha ha ha ha ha ha!” The fire burned for an unnaturally long time, though it didn’t take very long to annihilate the entire swarm.

Footsteps approached. Turning the corner, it was the young man who appeared. “Mom! You can’t go using your Skill in the middle of the streets...we don’t know who might be watching!”

“Don’t worry...no one’s watching...anymore! Tee hee hee.” The young man held the woman tight, and she remained unsteady, as if she were dreaming.

“They say that Aegisthus isn’t here. Until he comes back, you’ll need to hold on a while longer...” Sensing a presence, the young man looked up. “What was that just now? A Skill, but...something seems...”

Then, none other than Sid came into view. With the last remnants of Rei’s power, he had detected a distorting presence within the city and had run to investigate. Without thinking, he recoiled at the searing look of hostility the young man gave him upon their encounter.

The young man took up a weapon of his own and introduced himself. “My

name is Dean West. Son of the hero Aegisthus...and I will protect my mom.”

“Hmph...that was something of a blunder. The ‘eyes’ I sent to infiltrate there have unfortunately been destroyed.” A voice rang out in the darkness—an elderly man’s voice, croaky and difficult to hear properly. The old man wore a hood over his head, so he appeared as one with the darkness surrounding him. Peeking out of a gap in the hood was a protruding bull’s horn. Besides that, the only thing visible was a crimson eye.

A number of the same flashing red eyes hovered in the surrounding darkness. None of those gathered here needed a light to see.

“Grr...so there was someone with sharp wits there. The ‘eyes’ I went to the trouble of sending *there* may be of no use either.” One of the red eyes floating in the darkness belonged to the Titan chieftain Lycaon, who growled.

“I’m terribly sorry...”

“I’m not blaming you. So, have you any details?”

The old man’s voice answered. “Yes. The woman who crushed my ‘eyes’ wore a chain mail cloak. She was most likely Spear of the Halberd Brigade. I have some memory of her distinctive weapon...although, I didn’t think she warranted too much attention just because of that spear. In addition, she used a power resembling the Skills of the Reincarnators...”

Lycaon sneered. “That heresy is popular these days. Even the priests of Phoebus have meddled with it. More than that, I’d like to know about the state of the city.”

“Using a trick left over from the Reincarnators, Halberd gave a speech to the city. He spoke as he was certain of an alliance with you, my lord...”

“I don’t recall making such a firm commitment as that. That sly old dog...does he think he’s removed any obstacles to our alliance? Well, fine. Now, what about Aegisthus?”

“He has already departed. The young lady...Princess Chimera is also with him.”

“Hmm.” For the first time, Lycaon grunted cheerfully. The darkness shifted. Lycaon changed his stance. “Did you hear that? Rejoice. You’ll get to meet your big sister.”

The red eye Lycaon spoke to was positioned near the ground. The light of the eye could barely be seen underneath many tattered blankets. It was laughing.

“Geh geh geh...” Though it was low and hoarse, it was unmistakably a young girl’s voice. “Not...my sister. My mom. She’s...my mom. Geh geh...gah!”

“It doesn’t really matter... What are you doing? Are you playing?”

There was a rasping sound, as of the ground at their feet being scraped at. The hand extending from the pile of blankets was writing something on the ground with a wooden rod. “Name. My name.”

“Kirisaki...who?” Lycaon strained his eyes in the darkness. He had asked the question because he couldn’t see, after all.

The girl’s hoarse voice answered proudly, “It’s Nui. Nui Kirisaki. Written to mean a damp cloth, it’s Nui! Geh geh...I have a good head for names.”

“...You’re a curious one. Well, call yourself what you like. However, your true name is Chimera. Chimera the undying of the Twelve Titan Generals. Don’t forget that.”

“Geh geh...” Was this an affirmation or an objection? The hoarse voice’s true intent was unknown. No one delivered any further messages in the darkness. One by one, all signs of Lycaon’s brethren vanished.

They were a whimsical lot. Lycaon’s lips curled up in an ironic smile. Finally, a Satyr boy lit a fire in the grotto before departing, so quickly it was more like fleeing. His triangular beast-like ears, which merged with the hair on his head, drooped idly, and the red eye with which he looked at his father was full of fear. The light illuminated a number of armaments displayed in the grotto —relics left by their brethren, slain by Dill, Apollonius, and the other warriors of Terea.

The pupil of Lycaon’s red eye narrowed into a vertical slit. He bared his sharp canines and spat, “Hated Aegisthus, emperor of populism. Do you really have no choice but to walk into this obvious trap? The Twelve Generals you killed have restored their number to what it was five years ago. Reincarnators and Tereans...the time is nigh when the invaders will all be left in ruin, and the dominion of this world will be put back in the hands of the Titan gods.”

“An alliance with the Titans of the south, with whom you were locked in mortal combat until five years ago...? Is this really a good idea? At the very least, it seems they have reached an agreement through letters with Halberd, I suppose.” In a horse-drawn carriage, ascending the slope of the crater around Vulcan, Cirulia sat with her legs swinging as she questioned Dill—a girlish

mannerism despite her age.

“Something tells me it won’t be so easy.” Dill, underneath the same canopy, bounced Nue on his knee. “The commander of the south, Lycaon, is cunning. There must be a reason behind his demand for Nue and me to come as delegates to broker this alliance.”

“So you mean to tell me that you’re leaping straight into the jaws of the enemy *on purpose*? What am I then, a side order of salad for them?”

“I’m Nue, the main course! A Hamburg steak!”

“We won’t make things easy for him either,” Dill said.

“I’ll make you the dessert!” As Nue rolled her head around, pressing it against Dill, he calmed her down by patting her on the head. Nue seemed pleased by the attention.

“Our general took the initiative by announcing this alliance, making it *fait accompli* as far as our side was concerned. If Lycaon betrays our expectations, the Boreans will be incensed, and we will no longer be able to form an alliance. Militarily, it’s impossible for the south to fight the Reincarnators alone. This alliance is vital to both sides.”

Nue clambered atop Dill’s head, and for a moment, Dill’s words were interrupted. “Someone as calculating as Lycaon will not kill us based on mere emotion. I am at least prepared for some harassment, though—for his amusement.” Although Dill didn’t put it into words, he had left Orestes in Vulcan on the off chance that this “harassment” exceeded his expectations. This decision had been made with the agreement of Halberd and Hathaway.

“In that case, I’ll protect Dill! Nue is very popular over there, you know?! Oh, I can’t stand it...!”

As if to brush away Dill’s pessimistic thoughts, Nue climbed on top of his shoulders and threw him a smile. At times, Dill himself was amazed by the way the children, this girl in particular, had saved him.

“Yeah. I’m counting on you, Princess.”

“Ah heh heh! Praise me more! I’m a beauty! I’m Nue!” Dropping down from above his head, Nue once again curled up in front of Dill.

“Please excuse me for interrupting at such an enjoyable moment.” The canopy of the carriage was opened. It was Mace, acting as the coachman, who stuck his head in. “We’ve reached the checkpoint. You can jump to the south at once through the long-range gate, but are you all ready?”

“Yeah, we’re fine. Let’s head straight on through...” There was a tug on Dill’s sleeve. Nue looked up at him with her mouth half open and her eyebrows

raised. Her smile was boundless.

“Since we’re all here, let’s go in together—the three of us.” They were now in front of the Project’s respawn base, built on the gentler side of the slope of the crater around Vulcan. The withdrawal of the Project had left it abandoned, and it had been discovered once Foghorn’s stealth was undone. The fixed long-range teleportation gate was still functioning and, though it only permitted travel in one direction, it would dramatically reduce the length of their journey.

“...To be honest, I’m a little nervous. Once we pass through this, we may suddenly find ourselves surrounded by enemies.” Cirulia stooped slightly before the teleportation gate, which sparkled with the hues of a starry sky, outlined by its iron frame.

“Of course, we’ve already sent a few people through and have confirmed that it’s safe on the other side.”

“Even so...”

“Cirulia always worried about Dill just like this, right?” Nue, holding Cirulia’s hand, looked up at her. The three of them now stood together in a row, holding hands with Nue in the center. “It’s okay. Today, we’re together.”

“Yep. I suppose we are...” Nue’s hand was warm. Cirulia smiled, and then she exchanged a glance with Dill before they nodded to each other.

“Ready?”

“Yep.”

“Yay, yay!”

“Let’s go on the count of three!”

“Do we go on ‘three’? Or after we’ve finished saying ‘three’?!”

“Isn’t that an acceptable margin for error? If you’re so concerned, then you do the counting, Nue.” Cirulia gave Dill a glance, struggling not to laugh.

Nue flared her nostrils with enthusiasm. “Ready—on Captain Nue’s mark. One, two...”

“Three!” Dill and Cirulia said in unison with Nue, and they stepped forward at the same time. Nue, holding both their hands in the middle, was pulled forward and jumped into the gate after them.

There was a momentary sensation of weightlessness. The scenery changed, along with the weather. The humidity of the tropics washed over them. The south—the land where they had lost Iris. The land where they had met Nue.

“Y-You two tricked me?!”

The two adults let out peals of laughter. Nue soon laughed as well.

“Let’s go. This is the first step toward taking back Redguard.”

AFTERWORD

“Let’s make it two volumes.” After I was awarded this prize, during a revision meeting, one of the editors brought this suggestion. The unrevised manuscript was too full of words and details, swollen up like a balloon about to burst.

This was not something I had wished for, but if I had to produce twice as many pages, I would be able to go to places that I couldn’t have gone before. Characters I wasn’t able to include before would be able to appear. In fact, I found I’d been blessed by the opportunity to write about the interior of Amputation, the Tower Capital, Iris, and the Seven Generals.

The settings I had prepared to flesh out the world began to come out smoothly after that, and the history of my fictional world started to hang together almost too well. The characters began to speak almost by themselves.

Of course, there’s not really any kind of truly mystical, automatic writing process, and in reality I found myself stuck quite frequently, puzzling over my work many times. But it would always answer my efforts. If I really tried to rack my brains, the world would reward me with a proportional number of ideas. That’s how I thought about it, anyway.

Writing a novel really is fun.

I had a few more pages than I expected, so I hurried to append the epilogue in the final chapter as a little extra. So, to be honest, I’m still not sure whether or not I’ll be able to put the showdown between Dill and Lycaon, the encounter between Nue and Nui, or the selection exam taken by Sid and Dean into a book.

But writing this was fun. The story will continue, and it will expand even beyond the pages. It will even leave me, the author, behind. The characters are real. Just like children surpass their parents, they will surpass me.

Incidentally, today—the day I am writing this afterword—is March 11th, 2021. Ten years ago, I was in high school, attending a preparatory school in the Greater Tokyo Area. When the eerie morning earthquake warning shook the study room, I crawled underneath my desk, thinking to myself: *no way am I biting the dust here*. As I thought about how I would become a novelist, I waited for the tremors to subside.

Ten years have passed since then. Fortunately, I was completely unharmed, and no one close to me was seriously harmed either. However, given that such events happen, people never know when they may die. I etched into my mind the idea that I had to write my novel at once.

I still don't really think that my dream from ten years ago has been granted—I still haven't written nearly enough. Even now, my dream is still to become a novelist.

Bonus Short Story

DETECTIVE NUE'S CASE FILE

"The culprit...is in this very room!"

"It's you, isn't it, Nue? You still have fresh cream from the cake around your mouth."

"*Scrub, scrub...*all right, now *I'll* start my deduction. Sid, my assistant, come with me."

"Didn't you just destroy evidence, though?"

"Aaah! Look over there, Sid! The window...is open! The culprit must have been an outsider. Looks like this case will remain unsolved!"

"Didn't you just say the culprit was in this room...? But, regardless, that window is a fixed fitting."

"Guh...ah, I've got it! I get it now, Sid. Some little ants must have carried it away!"

"Even the strawberry on top of the cake? I wonder if our friends the ants even eat sour things..."

"It was a sweet strawberry, so it should be fine...oh."

"You incriminate yourself more and more."

"Being a great detective, Nue can guess the sugar content of a strawberry just by looking at it."

"Wow, that's amazing."

"Forget about that—let's go to the garden and inspect the crime scene!"

"I don't really mind doing that, but I *can* see you furtively hiding a spoon behind your back."

"Aaah! Sid, Sid—I've just found something incredible. What is a strawberry stem doing here? This is a vital piece of evidence!"

"It did look like that came out of your sleeve, Nue...though I should be asking you about those long sleeves anyway. Are you always hiding stuff like that up there?"

"For some reason you seem to be backing away from me, Sid. I promise I don't smell bad! If anything, today I'm smelling fruity."

"That was pretty much a confession."

“Hmm, let’s see...can we find any other suspects? How about the underside of this rock... Ah, I’ve found you! Little ants, this is an interrogation! Sid, bring me a *katsudon*.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“You did it, didn’t you?! Say you did it!”

“These are false accusations...”

“The mother of the culprit is in tears right now!”

“Are you talking about the ant queen?”

“If you confess, I’ll give you the sugar in the kitchen.”

“A plea bargain with an insect...I mean to say, if you take the sugar out without asking, Cirulia will be furious with you. Please don’t compound your crimes!”

“Confess! I don’t care what happens to Sid!”

“Wait, to *me*?!”

“I’ll punch and kick you!”

“Eeek, please stop! Ah, please, just stop! Don’t tickle me under my arms! Ooh, that’s enough! Stop fooling around! Wouldn’t it be better just to own up, honestly?! Even if you did eat the cake today, no one will be mad at you!”

“...Do you mean that?”

“I really do. Today is a special day for you, isn’t it? After all, Master and Cirulia have already gone out to buy a replacement cake.”

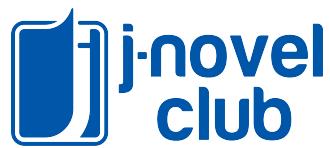
Nue looked up carefully. Her expression betrayed a slight feeling of guilt and embarrassment.

“The cake from earlier looked tasty, so I couldn’t bring myself to wait...and I ate it.”

“Then I’m sure the cake we all eat together will be even tastier. Look, Master and Cirulia have just arrived home.”

Dill and Cirulia then entered, carrying a paper bag, and a smile appeared on Sid’s face.

“Happy birthday, Nue!”



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by Ryuu Nakajima

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