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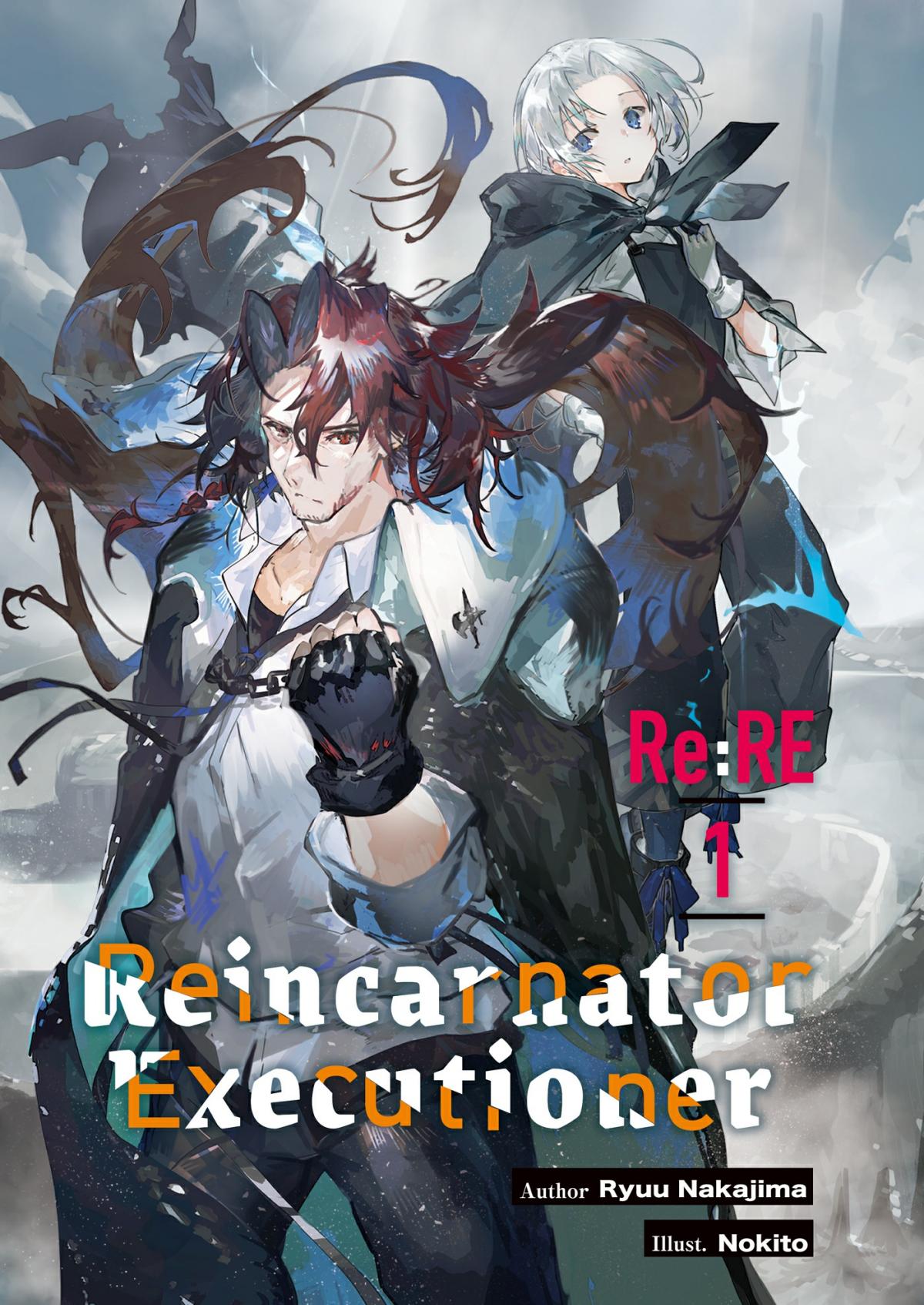
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Reincarnator Executioner

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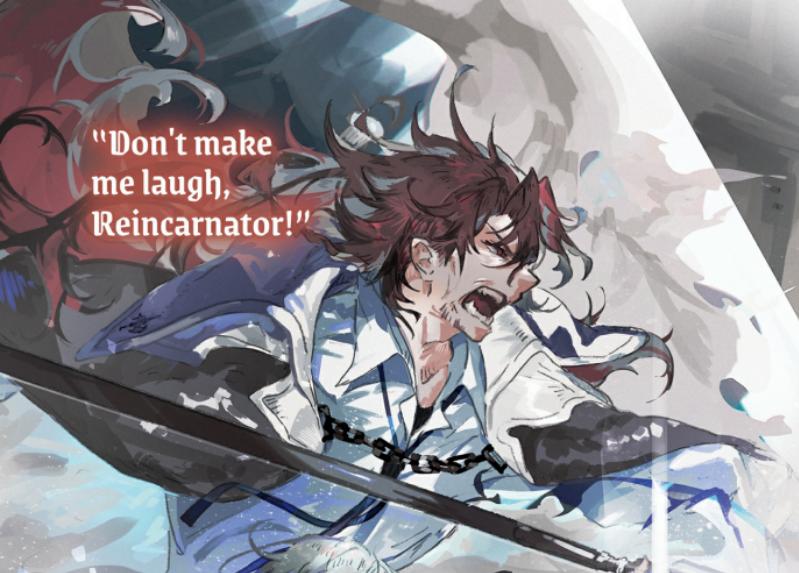


Reincarnator Executioner

Author **Ryuu Nakajima**

Illust. **Nokito**

Ré:RE
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The world of mythology
is so vast that, even
given a thousand
nights, I couldn't tell
you all of it."

"Every star floating
in the sky has its own
name, its own origin,
its own story.

Dill Steel-Link

Sid Faron

Nue Kirisaki

Re:RE

Reincarnator Executioner

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PROLOGUE

A man stood inside the burning house as the roof collapsed. The heat was intense, and red tongues of flame danced upon the walls and floor.

“I have...reincarnated,” muttered the man. His complexion was horrendously pale and his lips, parted listlessly, were practically purple.

“Success! There really was another world,” he cried, elated.

His arms and legs shuddered, then he curled up as if embracing himself.

A moment of silence.

He flung his arms wide, and burning walls blew away in all directions.

“This is my Skill! The power to start anew!” The man laughed raucously.

As the walls burst apart, his field of view expanded. A number of dark giants lumbered throughout the village at the crossroads—apes wearing iron masks and straitjackets. People sharing the man’s pale complexion rode upon the broad backs of these apes, dressed in pastel raincoats that deviated sharply from the scenery of the farming village around them.

Upon seeing this, the man appeared more than a little disappointed. After a moment, he let out a small noise of annoyance and started walking. He’d concluded his business in this area, so he was about to take his leave—but then he heard something that made him pause.

Turning back, he held his hand out toward a cupboard that had survived the fire; without a sound, a piece of furniture that would have taken two grown adults some effort to lift floated into the air. The man levitated the cupboard as if it was tied to his hand by a string, then hurled it into the distance.

This action revealed a small boy who had been hiding there, curled up with his hand clasped over his mouth. The boy’s blue eyes widened in despair.

“I guess I’ll stock up... It’s good to be prepared.” The man held his hand out again. The boy floated into the air, visibly suffering from pressure applied to his throat. “Fear not, barbarian. You will be enlightened.”

Writhing in midair, the boy struggled to move his lips in order to speak.

His eyes flashed with anger and hatred even as he shed tears of frustration. The pale man then placed his other hand on the boy's head and stroked it with mock affection.

"I'm going to give you an opportunity to have a civilized life—as my vessel." The man let out a deep laugh.

And then, a blade suddenly burst from the man's chest. Blue blood, a trait unique to Reincarnators, spurted from the wound.

The man looked over his shoulder with a shocked expression. He had been run through with a sword from behind, and a long-haired man in a coat woven from chains was glaring fiercely at him.

"The merciful father of orphans, Greigs, had a son, Dill Steel-Link..." the man in the coat announced. "Shut up. You don't need to say a word. I don't want to hear *anything* you Reincarnators have to say." The long-haired man, Dill, held the pale man's jaw shut, preventing him from speaking. "Listen well. If you reincarnate in the Imperial City, find the body of a young girl named Iris and bring it to me. My name is Dill, understand? I am seeking my daughter's body. Until I reclaim her from you Reincarnators, I will never stop killing you."

Having said this, he took the knife he had readied and, without hesitation, slashed the Reincarnator's throat.

Still brandishing the knife, Dill looked over his shoulder. The ground was spattered with blood, the blue mixed with red since the Reincarnator had only assumed the body moments ago.

"I'm sure that was frightening, but it's all right now."

The boy was on the floor coughing. Furrowing his brow, Dill crouched to bring himself down to the boy's level and offered the boy a hand.

"I'm a bandit who hunts Reincarnators. Although we met by chance, I am here to help you. Let's go. I can't save everyone."

The temple in the center of the village was in the process of being destroyed, the sounds of its ruin clearly audible. Lines of pillars were felled. Dust filled the air. Accompanied by their modified beasts, Reincarnators wielded their strange powers. Even if Dill were to challenge them, he would have no chance of winning.

"You murderer!" the boy suddenly shouted in a raspy voice. Dill found his outstretched hand swept away.

With his fingers trembling, the boy pointed to the man lying in a pool of

blue blood. Not only did the boy and the man share the same hair and eye color, their faces clearly indicated that they were close family.

“That man was my father!”

The dead who had one day returned to life in Redguard called themselves Reincarnators. Having no bodies of their own, they first appeared on battlefields, eventually making their way to towns and massacring the inhabitants, which only added to their collection of vessels. In the five years since that day, the Reincarnators had only continued to rise in power.

CHAPTER 1 — THE AFTER-MYTH

The Bronze Route—in the age spoken of in epic poems, this road had connected the Imperial City to the area where copper, the chief material in the production of bronze weapons and armor, was mined. As the veins of copper ore had dried up, the road had grown quiet.

The ancient road had become busy again in recent years. People and horses, all with exhausted expressions, now traveled up and down the road; every one of them had lost their homes and were now refugees, driven out by Reincarnators. Some could rely on distant relatives; others could only wander with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Regardless, they had to survive. That instinct propelled the crowd forward.

At an old, abandoned temple on the side of the road, people gathered to rest. In a fire built on the altar, a sacrificial beast was burned as an offering to the gods.

Dill was hurled backward by the force of a blow, his sword broken. Suddenly finding himself tumbling on the ground, he struggled to stand back up; supporting himself on his shattered blade, he tried to bring himself up to his knees, but there was no strength left in his legs. He keeled forward and glared up at the god, his eyes smoldering like molten lead with hatred.

The lustrous god looked down at the pathetic figure of Dill with an expression of pity.

“Listen, my son—Prodotis, child of the sun god Ex Machina Coward. To what end doth a human such as thee, fated to die, challenge the immortal gods to battle? One of thy parents may have been divine, but the other was mortal. Of course thou hadst no chance of victory.”

“Father, Ex Machina Coward, who even among the gods is hailed by flocks of people...I will answer thy question. I seek immortality, something which you gods possess but which we humans lack. Gods are not fated to die

and need not live in fear of illness or hunger. It is different for us. The shadow of death loometh constantly over our lives, and as much as it may pain us, we know that we shall be separated from those we love. Equally shall death part us from our enemies. I resent that destiny.”

Ex Machina Coward, the god of youth who enjoys eternal spring—the actor playing the part of this god placed his hand on his brow and sighed. Even something as quiet as a sigh traveled far in the silence surrounding the stage which was erected in front of the temple. The audience was enraptured by this performance, and no one moved a muscle.

“Know thyself, son. Do not exceed thy station. The gods must punish any man who grows arrogant and seeks more than he is allowed—even if he be one of our own children.”

The god drew his bow, and the audience gasped even though it was a stage prop that bore no iron arrowhead. Dill also played his part—that of a man upon whom a god had trained his unerring arrow—despite the bow merely being a facsimile.

Under the threat of death, there was only one honorable path for a man—that being to stare down your approaching doom without fear and accept it.

“That is enough. Gods, and children of men, all of you—put down your weapons!”

A venerable voice rang down from above the scene. With the sound of creaking wood, a device activated inside the stage—one that worked by simple principles, which allowed an actor to be raised or lowered. Thus, the king of the gods was revealed.

“Hero Prodotis, son of Coward...thy request has been heard. However, gods are gods, and men are men. Even I, Ex Machina Anxiety, king of all the gods, cannot alter the destiny that has been decided for the race of men.”

“Then what wilt thou do, Anxiety, god of wisdom?”

“Prodotis, thou art forgiven. Not as a rebellious human, however, but as one of our kin, a new pillar of the gods. Carry thyself with pride, for thou hast won immortality for thyself. Henceforth thou shouldst walk hand in hand with thy godly father, living in harmony for eternity.”

The king of the gods held out his hands, announcing the conclusion of the story. Even the gods were compelled to kneel upon this decision.

Dill, as Prodotis the hero, smiled a broad smile that showed his teeth. Swinging his broken sword over his head, he saluted the king of the gods, the

progenitor of all things.

With thunderous applause, the final curtain fell on the ancient tragedy Prodotis. The actors formed a line on the stage and bowed, and Dill enthusiastically shook hands with the young man who had played Ex Machina Coward.

“You have talent, and you’re young too. Next time I’m rooting for you to play Prodotis. I hope one day we can stand on the same stage again.”

Dill clapped the young man on the shoulder, then strode backstage and downstairs. Separated from the rest of the stage by heavy curtains was the actors’ break room.

“Dill, welcome back!”

A small girl jumped into Dill’s outstretched arms. Planting a foot on his knee, she grabbed onto his broad shoulders and climbed, finding herself in his embrace in no time.

“You were breathtaking today, as always! So handsome! Such a fetching, fetching man!”

The girl looked up at him with red eyes; Dill’s own rust-brown eyes were lost in his smile.

“You’re very clever, Nue. You really know how to flatter your papa. What are you planning on asking for this time?”

“I want something sweet!”

Dill flicked her forehead with a finger. Despite objecting to this, the girl laughed. Dill planted kisses on her forehead and her black hair.

A boy, curled up nearby, looked up at Dill resentfully.

“You’re still a murderer.”

The boy’s eyes held true hatred. The antipathy Dill had played out on the stage, glaring at the gods as he crawled on the earth, had seemed real enough, but ultimately the genuine article was quite different.

This was the same boy Dill had rescued a few days earlier from the village attacked by Reincarnators. With his life saved and nowhere else to go, the boy had grudgingly accompanied Dill.

“I had no choice but to kill him. He wasn’t himself anymore.”

Dill made his excuses quietly. In stark contrast with his forceful

performance onstage, he was now slumped in his chair, all confidence gone from his expression.

The boy's tone toward him was harsh. "There must have been a way to save him."

"Haven't heard of any."

"We might still find one."

"If I'd wasted time trying to save your father, you would've been killed."

"I would have been far better off dying than living on without him!"

Dill fell silent at that. The girl who had been clinging to Dill swiftly climbed down and stood in front of the boy.

"Don't say depressing things like that. It's *always* better to be alive."

Seemingly unable to direct the same resentment toward an innocent girl his own age as he had toward Dill, the boy could only look away, glaring at his feet instead.

"I wish you'd at least tell me your name. I'm Nue Kirisaki! What's yours?" asked the girl with the black hair—tilting her head to one side. Her eyes gleamed as red as rubies.

As the boy looked up, his cheeks were revealed to be just as red.

Arriving at the altar where the sacrificial ritual was being conducted, Dill was greeted with adulation—no doubt in honor of his performance from earlier. He was offered some of the better cuts from the freshly carved beast.

Only part of the beast was offered to the gods, the rest being reserved for the worshippers to eat. Dill offered pieces of skewered meat to the children first.

"You should eat your fill. This meat is for mortal humans to eat, while the bones, which never decay, are for the immortal Ex Machina. Let's take what's ours."

"Could you please stop explaining things like you actually know what you're talking about?" *You killed my father. You're the last person I'd listen to.*

In the back of the boy's mind lurked the memory of the last time he had attended such a ceremony, where his father had explained the rites and their history.

Dill's shoulders slumped. He had no real way of knowing what the boy felt in his heart. "Well, young children never show much interest in religion. That's been true in every age."



Beside him, Nue mirrored his pose for some reason, assuming an air of authority.

“True in every age!” she echoed.

“You’re so annoying.” the boy snapped.

You’re so cute. Those were the boy’s real thoughts, quite at odds with the words he spoke. Even his hatred toward Dill was starting to diminish.

“Nue, show him how we pay our respects to the gods.”

“Got it!”

Nue Kirisaki first raised the skewered meat high above her head, then took an enthusiastic bite of it with her pearly white teeth.

“Dang, that’s good! I can’t get enough! See? It’s delicious. Won’t you have some?”

“No thanks.”

Nue pouted after receiving this cold rejection. Laying a hand on her shoulder, Dill stepped forward.

“Putting religion aside, you really ought to eat something. Once you’ve had your fill of food and drink, we’ll be setting out.”

The boy furrowed his pale brow, conflicted about what to do next.

Dill continued. “It’s up to you whether to accompany us from this point on. However, if you ask me, this camp won’t last long. In the near future, Reincarnators will probably come and kill anyone left behind.”

“In that case, why not stay and face them head-on? Don’t you think this is the perfect opportunity? You want to find your daughter’s body, don’t you?”

Hearing this, Dill smiled sardonically. This seemed to be a self-deprecating smile, rather than a derisive one at the boy’s expense.

“I don’t believe in fighting battles I can’t win.”

“Coward.” As the boy looked up at Dill, his eyes were once again filled with hostility and contempt.

“Rather than challenge a hundred opponents today and perish, I choose to spend a hundred days eliminating one at a time until they’re all dead.” Dill met the boy’s gaze calmly. “That way I can kill more of them. That’s the path I’ve chosen, instead of the life of a tragic hero.”

“Compared to the man you played onstage...” the boy began with hatred in his voice, but stopped when he was suddenly poked in the ribs. Turning around, he saw the red-eyed Nue holding a meat skewer in each hand.

“Nue, dual-wielding!”

“...Why are you looking at me so expectantly?” the boy said. “No, I said I didn’t want any... I won’t eat it! No, I *won’t* say ‘Ah’!”

Dill smiled wryly, then turned his back to the children and headed toward the altar.

The fire burned brightly. The ruined temple, overrun with moss, had been swept clean. Behind the altar stood the statue of a god—or, more accurately, a god of Redguard itself resided there.

The face of the god had been smashed and its arms had fallen away, revealing a differently colored cross section that resembled muscle fibers. A glimpse of its rusted iron frame was visible inside. Jutting out from the remains of the jaw, various cables swayed in the wind, almost resembling a dignified beard.

“Ex Machina Quiet. According to the records left in this temple, that is this god’s name. It is also said to have been a regional god who governed a group of rivers, ensuring each year’s harvest.” The priest who had conducted the sacrificial ceremony approached Dill and told him all of this. Bandages stained with blood were visible underneath his robe.

“Are you a refugee too?”

“Yes, but I think I’ll remain here. I know the cursed horde of the dead will arrive eventually, but someone has to defend the temple.” The priest answered with an air of peaceful satisfaction.

Dill immediately saw that he had the look of a martyr, resigned to his death.

“The Ex Machina certainly value the temples dedicated to their worship, but I think that they value pious believers like you just as much. Especially in these times, when the Reincarnators’ godlessness has begun to spread to the people of Redguard. Isn’t it part of your duty as a clergyman to survive and protect the faith?”

Just as Dill expected, the priest shook his head.

“Fearing for my life, I abandoned the temple in my hometown and fled. My faith died when that temple burned down. This temple is now my last chance. I will stay here and restore my faith.”

“I *won’t* stop you, but...”

“Regardless, I am a man, fated to die. Farewell, hero of the stage. Please take care on your journey—cabals of Reincarnators are said to be hiding at every turn. May the gods provide you with ample protection.”

Leaving the temple, an ad hoc group of performers were already starting the next play. Some of the refugees had left, only to be replaced by new arrivals. The camp surrounding the temple was only a waypoint on their journey. Any travelers with acting experience took their turn on the stage, replacing each other seamlessly like the cells of a living creature, the constant change of the cast lending new color to the impromptu company.

Dill regarded the clumsy, amateur performance out of the corners of his narrowed eyes, the way one might look at the sun.

“What are you going to do now?”

The boy wasn’t quite sure what the future held, but he seemed to have decided to accompany Dill. With Nue clinging to him, vying for attention, he hid his crimson cheeks and made an effort to sound disinterested.

“We will follow the Bronze Route to the north. Our destination is Vulcan of the Eleven Cities, where the hammers ring high.”

“The north... I hate cold places.”

“It’s only the entrance to the Boreas region, so it’ll just be a little bit cooler than it is here. It’s not a bad place at all—it’s lively and full of people, and the standard of living is high thanks to the favor of the Ex Machina of production. It may even be a convenient place for you to think about your new life.”

The boy was silent. Eyes downcast, the boy stared at Dill’s feet as he walked in front of him.

He must have a lot on his mind. Losing his family, leaving the land he grew up in, having no choice but to be dragged along by strangers... thought Dill with his hand on his chin. His impulsive choice to perform on the stage had not cheered the boy up. That was understandable, though. Even though there had been no alternative, as far as the boy was concerned, Dill had murdered his father.

“Why did you save me?” the boy said, lighting the fuse of another argument.

Dill thought for a moment before answering. "Anyone would have done so," he said.

"I'm asking what *your* reason was."

As they had not yet experienced sin, children could be uniquely merciless in their interrogations. There was no escape.

Dill hesitated.

Uncle, watch out!

Iris, what are you doing here?

This was the millionth refrain of a very familiar scene—a moment stretched out to eternity. Viscous sweat crept down Dill's temples.

"...I don't want to see any more children die."

"Says the murderer."

After muttering this, the boy was suddenly shoved from the side, the unexpected force causing him to stumble and land embarrassingly on his behind. He opened his eyes wide and looked at Nue.

"Cut it out already!"

The girl, who had been clinging to him like a loyal hound until a moment ago, had suddenly changed her attitude. Now she was glaring at him with open hatred in her eyes.

The boy was greatly perturbed.

"Get away from Dill! Don't hang around him if you're going to hurt him. Hurry up and get out of here!"

"Now, now, Nue. I'm fine."

"You saved his life, and he hasn't even thanked you once!"

"It's fine. I wasn't looking for gratitude. A good deed is its own reward."

"Stop saying mean things to my papa! Get out of here! I don't care where you go—just leave!"

Nue's frenzy was intense. Dill, with all his strength, still struggled to restrain her.

"...I'll be going, then."

The boy started to run, and before the tears could fall from his eyes he was gone.

As Dill comforted Nue, who still looked like she might pounce at any time, he reached out in the direction of the boy's retreating back.

"Wait, come back! It's not safe!"

Sid darted through the crowd of people who made their way up the Bronze Route, proceeding with haste. From time to time he looked over his shoulder, but the man with rusty hair was nowhere to be seen. He could only see people with white hair like his own, typical of those who inhabited the region between central and northern Redguard.

Despite not having run very far, Sid was suddenly overcome with exhaustion. He sat down by the side of the road and hugged his knees close, sighing to himself.

How did it come to this?

Sid was starting to hate himself more and more. Dill and Nue...they had been such nice people. He was especially hurt by the fact that Nue Kirasaki, the red-eyed girl, had come to hate him. Although he probably would never have admitted it, Sid had started to fall for her.

The day that Dill had saved him, Sid had found Nue by a fountain on the road, soaking her bare feet in a stream and looking up at the moon. The sight of her had taken his breath away. He felt that he had stumbled upon something that he shouldn't have seen, but he couldn't look away. It was almost like he had encountered one of the Titans of old, the demigods worshipped by the people of the south, deep in some forest.

It was no use reminiscing about that now, though. However long he waited, there was no sign of Dill or Nue coming after him. He had been abandoned, and he deserved it after what he'd done. After standing up and wiping his eyes, Sid began to trudge away again.

Having nothing else to do while he walked, Sid looked at the people around him. Perhaps they had come from another regional branch of the Bronze Route, or maybe from the main source of the refugee exodus—the Empire of Megaros Terea, destroyed by Reincarnators. As if being crushed by a great, unseen hand, all the travelers looked downcast and exhausted.

Like a herd of livestock headed to the slaughterhouse, they seemed only dimly aware of their fate.

Sid's melancholy thoughts were interrupted by the tap, tap, tap of footsteps frantically bounding toward him.

“Gotcha!”

“Whaaaaaa?!?”

Sid found himself tackled to the ground and pinned there. Red eyes gazed at him from point-blank range.

The girl's chest rose and fell violently with her ragged breathing.

"Wha—what—why?" Sid's gaze locked with Nue's, and he saw that her red eyes were blurry and wet. "Why did you...? I said...such awful things."

Sid blushed, as if the color of Nue's looming eyes had fallen on his cheeks along with her tears.

"I came to apologize." The tone of Nue's voice was uncharacteristically calm and serious. Standing up from Sid and looking away modestly as she spoke, she seemed like a completely different girl.

"I don't understand what you mean... I'm the one who was wrong."

"I wanted us to be friends, though," Nue replied.

"Not even friends should be allowed to insult your family...right?"

"No..."

At this sharp retort, Nue hesitated. If anyone was hurt, though, it was Sid himself.

"I don't think I deserve to be around the two of you... Goodbye, then."

As Sid turned to go, he felt a tug on his sleeve. Nue was stronger than he'd realized—he couldn't shake her off. "What do you want from me...?" Sid asked, bewildered.

Nue let go of his sleeve and clasped her hands in front of her chest as if she was praying.

"You know...Dill isn't actually my real father."

"I didn't think he was. You don't look anything alike."

"Really?" Nue looked absolutely shocked. "After my mother died in the war, I was all alone. Dill saved me."

"You're trying to say you're the same as me?"

Nue didn't respond, but her silence was all the affirmation he needed.

"My case is different. *Completely* different."

After all, Sid hated that man. He resented Dill for giving his father, who had become a Reincarnator, a second death.

"I'm grateful I was saved, and that you worried about me. I won't forget that. But I still can't give up on my father. I still believe that he could have been saved. He did hit me sometimes, and yell at me, so truthfully I never liked him very much...but he was my father, after all."

I'm a terrible person, added Sid, silently. Nue just shook her head.

“Well, I’ll be going then,” Sid said.

Do you really have to?

I really do.

Red eyes and blue eyes blinked at each other. Sid turned his back to Nue and made to walk away—but at that moment, he noticed something was amiss. There was a commotion on the road in the direction he had come from. People were swarming over the gently sloping hill in droves, looking panicked. It was as if they were being pursued.

What’s going on?

The wind on his cheeks ceased to blow. In front of him a black hole had opened up, looking as though it had been painted in midair.

And then, something began to slither out of the hole. Legs with muscles like bunches of grapes stomped the earth with hooved feet. Members of a family that happened to be directly in front of the beast were either flung away by the force of the impact or trampled to death. All of this happened in an instant.

The beast was bovine in appearance, but far larger than any livestock. As it crushed anyone in its path beneath its hooves, it turned to look at Sid.

The creature’s face was covered by a perfectly smooth, egg-like iron mask. Live tendons, joints, and muscles were barely visible between the cracks in its skin, which was reinforced with something like armor. It didn’t appear to be breathing—or at least, its throat didn’t move. To compensate, fans embedded in each of its flanks whirred, emitting steam.

Sid had seen something like it before—the straitjacketed apes he had seen the day his village was destroyed had been very similar.

A Sphinx.

This was the mythical name given by the people of Redguard to the biomechanical weapons used by the Reincarnators. A pale-faced man mounted upon the Sphinx’s back looked down impassively at Sid and the other refugees.

The curtains opened incessantly on performance after performance. The people of Terea loved theater, so there was no shortage of actors or audience members to watch them.

People crowded around the stage in front of the temple. The play being performed was a bawdy comedy, one of Nue's favorites, but nonetheless she left Dill behind to pursue the boy whose name she didn't even know.

Dill, the man with long, rust-colored hair, whose youth had passed but who was still in the prime of his life, stood alone now. Watching the play without particular interest, he smiled after a moment, scratching his stubbled chin.

Go get him, he had said to Nue in parting, but now that he was all by himself he felt indescribably lonely.

Each time the actors onstage performed some clownish act, peals of laughter erupted from the crowd.

Dill waited. Time passed—time the children had all to themselves.

The chorus who now took the stage interrupted Dill's thoughts. The comedy had ended and the next play had begun. A mixed chorus of men and women raised their voices in celebration of a hero; this was the heroic play *Aegisthus*. Dill grimaced reflexively.

A moment later, the chorus faltered as the fearsome sound of snapping timber reverberated through the air.

A dark shadow had appeared, trampling the wooden stage into the ground. It was the giant body of one of the bioweapons ridden by Reincarnators—a Sphinx.

This creature was not the only attacker. The temple's stone columns fell, cutting trails through the rising dust. As both those who had participated in the sacrificial ceremony and those who had stood and watched the play tried to flee, the staccato pounding of many hooves could be heard shattering the pavement.

The victims screamed in their death throes. An actor onstage dressed as the hero failed to get away in time, and the bulky leg of a Sphinx trampled on his spine, snapping it. He was killed instantly, and the monstrous bull made no cry itself. A scrap of dark curtain fabric caught on its sharp horn fluttered in the wind like a thundercloud.

“Reincarnator!” Dill cried, sweeping his sword out of its scabbard before he had even finished the word. His eyes were opened wide, with his gums visible above clenched teeth. He gripped the hilt of his sword so tightly that the tip of the blade shook. Dill's face now was nothing like the elaborate expression he had created onstage—this was true hatred.

“N-No! I don’t want to die! Somebody...somebody help!”

On the stage, a priest who had fled his temple was lost amongst the confusion of the fleeing refugees. As he was about to be crushed to death under the Sphinx’s hooves like a grain upon a millstone, a rust-colored wind rushed in between them, saving him from his predicament.

“My name is Dill Steel-Link.”

The first strike was nothing but a flash. His steel blade cut through flesh, then bones of iron, then sparks flew as he finally severed a thick bunch of cables. The Sphinx screamed voicelessly before stumbling on its three remaining legs.

“My name is Prodotis! I am the resourceful strategist, Mentor! I am Scalvos, who drags chains of iron!”

The Sphinx shook its great head around in an attempt to sweep Dill aside with its broad horns.

Dill purposefully drew out the monster’s assault. He could have evaded it easily, but instead goaded it into attacking further. The Sphinx followed Dill’s movements, trying to follow up with another strike—but as its center of mass shifted toward its missing front leg, it fell to the ground with a crash.

As Dill swung his sword down to deliver the finishing blow, he became aware of someone watching him from behind. A Reincarnator crouching in the wings of the stage leaped out at him, a ball of flame burning in his hand. The fireball illuminated the Reincarnator’s pale, expressionless face as he moved to strike Dill directly with the hand holding the flame.

At point-blank range, the flame illuminated Dill’s back—the back that was now defenseless after he had cut off the Sphinx’s head.

But was it defenseless? Hardly!

His chain mail cloak rippled around him. The cloak had concealed the fact that he had rotated his hips dramatically in anticipation of the attack. From this stance he now released a sharp thrust of his sword, like an arrow from a bow stretched to its limits.

“I am Iroas the swift! Kranos of the shining helm!”

A lock of rust-colored hair was burned black and fell from his head. Blue blood dripped from the tip of the sword thrust through the Reincarnator’s back.

“You speak nonsense, barbarian. How many names do you have, all told?”

The Reincarnator who had received a mortal wound to his abdomen said all of this coolly, without a trace of anxiety in his voice. He seemed to have no intention of resisting as his arms lolled lazily and his eyelids drooped almost sleepily.

"I have borne all the names I just announced. On the stage I have played all of the heroes who rushed into battle during the age of the epics, and each time I brought that hero back to life."

While making a lazy attempt to remove the sword that had pierced his abdomen, the Reincarnator laughed derisively.

"Is this an attempt to spite us Reincarnators? There is no comparison between our reincarnation, based in science, and the childish dramaturgy of a die-hard actor. You barbarians—"

"Return to the Imperial City and find another body to leech from. Until I retrieve the body of Iris Earhart, I will come and kill you again and again." Dill moved his face up close to the Reincarnator's. "Again and again."

Dill cast aside his sword, dulled by the blood and oil stuck to it, and carved into the Reincarnator's throat with his dagger. A spurt of blue blood washed over Dill's cheeks.

At Dill's feet lay the priest, groveling and moaning.

Dill looked down at the man he had just saved with cold, contemptuous eyes as he strode closer with his dagger still drawn. The priest screamed and tried to crawl away. Dill stepped around him, stopping him in his tracks.

"I thought I heard you say that you would remain in the temple and protect the faith. What happened to those lofty words?"

"I—I..." The priest trembled, then began to weep. "Please, just kill me. No matter how sincerely I pledge to remain faithful, I am overtaken by weakness and keep repeating the same mistakes... I will never be strong like you."

Dill said nothing. Instead, he thrust his dagger toward the priest. The priest shut his eyes and twisted his neck as far as he could to avoid the point of its blade. His teeth chattered with a sound like falling pebbles.

"Please...do it quickly. At least be swift about it!"

"The men of Westa were once brave."

The blade did not strike, and the priest gingerly opened his eyes.

"You must have heard this proverb—it's used to describe something that was once great, but has since fallen to ruin. We men of Terea will probably be spoken of by future generations in the same way. 'The men of Terea were

once brave. They built the white-walled city of Aspro Terea in the central plains, then they were victorious in the Holy War to the south, unifying Redguard. Today, those same Tereans are all cowards, mere shadows of what they once were.””

The groveling priest was not the only one listening to Dill’s speech. There were still many refugees, wounded or stupefied, sitting on the ground. All of them were Tereans whose home, the empire of Megaros Terea, had been destroyed by Reincarnators.

“If you really are Tereans, then I suppose that there was never a time when the men of Terea were brave. It was only the power of the Ex Machina that built the capital of Aspro Terea, and the victory in the Holy War was thanks to the support of the armies of Poreas. I can think of no other explanation after seeing you flee without even trying to fight. You’re just like a herd of cattle.”

Dill was silent after saying this. The area around the stage also fell quiet. As this was going on, other Reincarnators and Sphinxes rampaged around the temple, piling up more bodies.

“Just like that, theater and epic poems have the power to stir feeble hearts. How will you answer? Who has ever ignored the call to action and done nothing? Remember what you saw in those plays just a little while ago. It’s true—we aren’t heroes. But we can drum the scripts into our heads and play heroes onstage. Even heroes are human and therefore fated to die, but their spirits live on forever, residing in our bodies. They will continue to reincarnate. Now, listen closely—” Dill paused for a beat. From his experience as an actor, he understood well that what he said next would have the greatest impact. “We can become heroes.”

Silence fell yet again. However, from this silence, emotions were emerging that had not been present before.

“O-Ow...!” Thrown to the ground with excessive force, Sid raised his voice in spite of himself. His hands were bound together with a zip tie, so he could no longer get up under his own strength. He could only glare at the Reincarnators with resentful eyes.

Attached to the plastic zip tie digging deep into his wrists was a tag

bearing a mysterious pattern of vertical lines and a thirteen digit number. The pale invaders from another world no longer paid him any attention. Instead they conversed in whispers as they continued their work with indifference.

“This isn’t what I signed up for.”

“We were tricked.”

“I want to return to the mainland.”

“This is the tyranny of the Project.”

The Reincarnators continued to whisper their complaints monotonously as a pair of them passed nearby. They had pale faces and matching work-clothes, over which they wore gray jackets with no distinguishing features.

“Profits this quarter have clearly fallen compared to last year. We should really go back to killing them before transportation.”

“Human rights groups have been making a fuss lately. What a joke! Maybe I should call them animal rights groups instead, huh?”

The Reincarnators looked at each other before laughing, low and mocking. Sid couldn’t understand most of the words they used, but their contempt was clear. Tears of frustration welled in his eyes. *Damn it. Those bastards. I lost mom and dad to the likes of them.*

“N-Nggh.” Nue, who had been thrown to the ground next to Sid, had been trying for a while to chew through the bindings on her hands and feet while the Reincarnators weren’t looking.

Sid shifted toward Nue and prodded her, a voiceless warning to be careful. Nue also realized the new threat and ceased her efforts.

As Sid squirmed on the ground like a caterpillar, a Sphinx strode over his head. The unnervingly silent bull belched in between mouthfuls of grass. Six biomachines like it wandered the surrounding area.

The Sphinx... A truly unsettling creature. They silently obeyed even quite complex commands from their masters, the Reincarnators. One might even have thought that they possessed intelligence comparable to a human’s, but as they apparently lacked vocal cords, they never so much as groaned, not even in battle or in death.

The most offensive thing about the appearance of the Sphinx was its fusion of flesh and machinery, resembling the gods of Redguard, the Ex Machina.

“Those things are kind of scary...” said Nue, after confirming that the Sphinx had moved on. “They don’t even look good to eat.”

“You really are kind of weird. But never mind that—do you think there’s a way out of here?”

Nue turned her head from side to side, examining the area once again. Having made sure that neither the Sphinxes nor Reincarnators were looking their way, she flared her nostrils and puffed out her chest.

“How about *this!*” The plastic band that had bound Nue’s wrists together had been chewed in two. Sid could see its ragged edges were wet with saliva upon Nue’s tongue.

“Now I’ll get yours off!”

“Wha... Hey! Please, don’t!” Sid’s voice was dangerously loud. Nue looked perplexed.

“Why not?”

“Because...well.” As Sid tried to get away from Nue, despite his hands and feet still being bound, there were actually tears in his eyes. “If you do that, won’t it almost be like we...kissed?!”

Nue’s red eyes fluttered. “Hai-ya!” She swiftly lunged forward and tore apart Sid’s bonds with her teeth.

Sid felt the sensation of her soft lips pressed against his skin, her damp breath, her hard teeth...even a hint of the tip of her tongue rasping against his skin.

“Thanks for the meal!”

“!!! ?!? !!!...!!!”

“You really are funny.” Nue laughed. Her red eyes disappeared into closed arcs. In return, her white teeth sparkled.

Sid, as expected, turned bright red. His pounding heart seemed to be trying to leap out of his mouth, toward Nue. His blood was rushing through his veins at twice the normal speed as the same idle thoughts played on repeat.

“I. Like. You! Let’s be friends! What’s your name?”

Oh no. Sid realized his lips were moving of their own accord. He was afraid of this feeling, which he had never experienced before.

He couldn’t breathe. His pulse was racing. But this wasn’t the time or place. They were still in danger, after all.

I’m falling for her.

“—is my name.” His strained voice sounded like a mosquito buzzing.

“Huh?” Nue looked puzzled, and asked again.

“Sid is my name. My name is Sid Faron...”

Upon hearing this, Nue’s face lit up like a flower in bloom, her red eyes shining brighter than before.

“Sid...Sid! Sid Faron! Ahh!”

“I found them! Hey, come over here,” said a loud voice suddenly.

Behind them stood a pale Reincarnator, looking at Sid and pointing straight at him. He called to the other Reincarnators around him, and they all started to approach.

As Sid dropped to the ground and pretended to still be tied up, someone grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back onto his feet.

“It’s a miracle. Besides his hair and eye color, he’s a dead ringer. With him, I can start over...”

Sid couldn’t speak a word, overtaken by the Reincarnator’s abnormal excitement. Then, Nue’s scream pierced the silence. The crowd of Reincarnators had realized that Nue’s bonds were missing and they had all exercised their Skills. Before one of their outstretched hands, Nue felt five times heavier as pressure was applied to her, causing her to sink halfway into the ground.

One of her red eyes looked at Sid. *Help me*, she seemed to be saying.

Yet another Reincarnator held his hand out at Nue. Her head plummeted straight into the ground at this gesture, but her black hair barely moved, tugging painfully at her scalp.

“Let’s do it now. You can carry it out. Thaw out the LC.”

“...you.”

The Reincarnator holding Sid by the shoulder was not paying him any attention, absorbed in the directions he was giving his comrades. At this utterance from Sid he turned to look at the boy. Hate-filled eyes stained with tears glared back at him.

“I’ll kill you.” Sid’s awkwardly thrown punch was intercepted without difficulty. The Reincarnator then twisted his arm, prompting a scream of pain.

“You have no manners,” muttered the Reincarnator. “It’s like talking to a pig.”

A Reincarnator wearing an apron, perhaps in anticipation of impending blood spatter, came and took Sid from the man. Sid, whose arm was still twisted, finally began to cry. “I’m sorry,” he sobbed, over and over, though

he knew not to whom he was apologizing. The Reincarnators ignored him.

The man in the apron took out a box, skillfully selecting and removing a syringe. The thick syringe, which brought to mind acts of terrible violence, was equipped with finger-holes that made Sid wonder how much force they intended to apply.

Sid's face turned as pale as the Reincarnators'.

"Well then—let's get to it."

And then, a moment later...

"My name is Dill Steel-Link."

The sound of their marching footsteps did not sound quite like army boots. One of them walked with a cane, while another dragged an injured leg. Walking among them were a woman holding an empty set of baby clothes, as well as a boy with half his face burned off, and a single man carrying luggage for three people. Makeup and toys were visible amongst the luggage.

Their equipment was dismal. Only a handful of them had proper weapons. At the head of the group was a man astride a horse, wearing a heavy chain mail cloak upon his shoulders. The spear in his hand cast a long shadow, and at his waist was a sheathed sword. This man with rust-colored hair was practically the only one there properly equipped for battle.

"Look, O Tereans," said the man, pointing toward a spot in the sky. His voice was definitely not loud, but it carried frighteningly well.

The downcast crowd looked up at the sky, where they glimpsed the sun shining through a gap in the clouds.

"That's a good omen. We Tereans can count the Ex Machina among our allies."

It was obvious that these words were mere sophistry, intended to motivate the people for the impending bloody battle. This was a mere rabble who knew little about fighting a war.

Some time earlier they had retaliated against the Reincarnators attacking the temple, as the man had cajoled them to—and indeed, they had won. On the other hand, many refugees had been killed in retribution. The crowd barely wanted to fight anymore, war-weary as they were now.

The rusty-haired man, Dill, realized that his words had not been sufficient

to stir up their will to fight. He drew himself up and thrust out his chest, making himself look a little more like a hero.

“The sun shining between the clouds could be an omen of our victory sent by the gods—or it could just be the weather. Let’s find out which it is.”

The horse-mounted Dill held his spear high and pulled on the reins so that his horse lifted its forelegs into the air with a whinny. At the same time, Dill leaned forward and hurled his spear. The spear traced a parabola through the air, its tip shining in the sun as it reached the apex of its flight.

Then it started to fall. Beneath it was a band of Reincarnators.

“The will of the gods has just been revealed!” Dill drew his sword and spurred his steed forward. The spear had not been thrown in vain. It had pierced the belly of a Reincarnator, pinning him to the ground.

“My name is Dill Steel-Link!”

Following Dill’s forward offensive, the Sphinxes in the area reacted immediately, spinning their exhaust fans and charging toward him. The rallied Terean refugees ran in after him like an avalanche. Balls of flame conjured by the Reincarnators’ Skills shot into the sky, then began to rain down upon the refugees.

Sid looked up at the battle in front of him with a feeling close to fear. Rising battle cries, the clash of swords and the shouting and cries of combatants... Above all this clamor he could hear that man’s voice more clearly than anything else.

“Remember, Tereans! Your families, your homes! Your livelihoods, your friends, your daily lives! Who took all of that from you? Reincarnators! These unforgivable invaders!”

In between each opponent he fought, Dill repeatedly raised his voice, stirring up his allies’ hatred for their enemies in his characteristic booming voice.

They were, however, a band of amateurs after all. Although the refugees had numbers on their side, before the Reincarnators, whose Skills defied the laws of nature, their formation toppled like so many wooden blocks. Dill charged his horse into the opening in their ranks, cut down the enemies who had broken through, and urged the refugees to stand their ground with unrestrained rhetoric.

“There are maggots infesting this land—these maggots called Reincarnators, who defile graves and possess the dead, scheming to make us

their slaves as they squirm around in the bodies of your families, friends, benefactors, and neighbors. The Reincarnators have made a mockery of them all! Can you really watch them do that and then just run away, knowing you'll be next?!"

One by one the refugees' eyes ignited with hatred. Hearts that had faltered recovered their resolve. The tale he had woven was not a heartwarming one, though. For all their bravery in battle, people would die—people who should have lived.

With a wave of his hand, a Reincarnator created a pillar of fire, accompanied by a strong wind that sent people flying. Skills—unfathomable powers whose principles were not understood. As people were scattered by these Skills, the refugees rushed toward the Reincarnators as if possessed, dragging them out of their formation and slaughtering them. The Tereans raged and wept.

"What bad timing for a barbarian revolt. Just my luck," sighed the Reincarnator who had seized Sid, sounding as if he was talking about nothing more than being suddenly caught in the rain. He grabbed Sid by the hair and started to drag him away, the syringe the man in the apron had been holding clutched in his other hand. Sid's fate was unchanged.

"Somebody—" *Help*. As Sid started to call for help, reflected in his eyes was Nue Kirisaki, half-buried in the ground by the Skill of a Reincarnator.

He couldn't call for help. He wasn't the only one who needed to be saved in these circumstances. Right now, he was the focus of this Reincarnator's attention. That prevented him from attacking Nue, or any of the countless other men, women, and children currently tied up at this camp. They might have all worked together to flee here, after misfortune descended on their families.

It's better this way. I accept my fate.

"I am Dill Steel-Link, the avenger." The thundering of hooves was accompanied by a gust of air that brushed against Sid's nose.

Even in the midst of the cacophony, the man's voice could be heard clearly. It wasn't loud, but it was deep and powerful.

A hurled spear pierced the abdomen of the Reincarnator clutching Sid. This blow, propelled by a galloping horse, instantly sent the enemy flying out of Sid's view.

Dill leaped from his horse's back, landing on the ground with a thud. He

now stood next to Sid; his steed kept galloping without its rider, fading into the distance. An instant later, the chain mail cloak Dill wore around his shoulders hit the ground with a terrific clang.

“You did well. You’re all right now.” Dill reached out and pulled Sid toward him by the shoulder, wrapping the chain mail cloak around him. His rust-colored eyes, however, looked not at Sid but the remaining danger—the Reincarnator he had just dealt a blow. Dill remained vigilant.

Inside the chain mail cloak, wrapped in arms as hot as fire, Sid was overtaken by an unfamiliar emotion. His pulse was fast. This feeling was similar to what he felt for Nue...similar, but very different. Inside him a great force was raging—an impulse to shout and break into a run—that was probably identical to what the refugees stirred to battle by Dill had felt.



“You look after Nue. I’m going to kill them all.” The warm, dark curtain of the cloak opened, and Sid was left behind. A terrible feeling of loss assaulted him as Dill’s broad shoulders seemed to slide away into the distance.

Dill’s arms whirled as he slashed at the Reincarnators. Spurts of blue blood formed a mist that hung in the air. Screams and curses rang out all around, as though Dill was playing them like a musical instrument. In between slashes, Dill continued to stir up hatred for the Reincarnators. He maintained both rhyme and rhythm, elevating his battle will to a form of music. His cries seeped into the people’s ears, driving them to join the slaughter.

Thump. Thump. Sid could hear his own heartbeat. He knew he was witnessing the birth of a legend. Each time Dill moved, his long, rust-colored hair fanned out wide and streamed behind him, gracing the battle with color. His gestures as he readied his sword or hurled a spear, along with his voice now raised to its limits to encourage his comrades, drew everyone’s attention. Wherever Dill stood became the center of everything. Even in the midst of this bloody battle, Dill was a performer.

“...Oh, right. Nue!” Sid suddenly came to his senses, and searched for the girl with red eyes. She was still sprawled on the ground, facing downward. He could see the back of her black-haired head. Still, she didn’t budge.

“Are you all right?! Hang in there—your father is fighting for you.” As he picked Nue up her eyes opened slightly. They were unfocused.

“Grr...” A vague groan escaped her lips. For Sid, this was still cause for celebration.

“Yes! She’s alive...”

The battle was nearing its conclusion.

“Damn you! Curse you! How dare you, you uncivilized barbarians!” barked the Reincarnator who had tried to drag Sid away by his hair. He was surrounded. The spear Dill had thrown was still stuck in his abdomen. His breath was already faint.

“You won’t get away with this. This is blasphemy against science. This is like some primitive savage beating Einstein to death! It shouldn’t happen... You’re making a mistake!”

“What’s the matter? You seem pretty worked up. Why would a parasitic Reincarnator, who can nest in another body and be reborn, worry about

death? Aren't you proud of your infinite lives?"

Dill held off on the finishing blow. He wanted to mock the Reincarnator, infuriate him, and plant fear in his heart. The bodies of Reincarnators were interchangeable, but not their souls. By wounding their souls instead of their bodies, he could break their will to fight. Or conversely, it might drive them mad with humiliation, leading them to challenge Dill again in a new body.

The Reincarnators stocked thousands, or perhaps tens of thousands, of bodies. Somewhere amongst them was the body of Iris Earhart, Dill's daughter. Retrieving her was Dill's true objective.

"Ignorant barbarian... You misunderstand us. In the end, our work will benefit you too! And despite that, you still fight us!"

"Oh, I know. Self-justification is practically a cliché in war. Science? Civilization? Don't make me laugh. That's just an afterthought. What you Reincarnators call civilized behavior is nothing more than rehashing the same plundering that has gone on since the dawn of time." Dill held up a spear. "Whatever you take by violence can be taken back by violence. My name is Dill Steel-Link. Remember it well. It's the name of the man who killed you."

The Reincarnator turned up the corners of his mouth and smiled. "No, you can't kill me. As for why..." The Reincarnator gestured with both hands as if he was parting the air in front of him. Dill opened his eyes wide, then swiftly plunged the spear forward. However, the Reincarnator was no longer there.

"My Skill is teleportation! I'm a Jumper! By the way..." The vanished Reincarnator reappeared outside of the encircling warriors. "I'll be taking this child's body with me!"

Sid realized too late that the man was already behind him. The spear that should have pierced the Reincarnator's abdomen wasn't there. At this moment, the spear was instead falling uselessly to the ground before Dill's eyes.

Without warning, something cold and sharp pressed against Sid's neck. It was the tip of the syringe. The plunger was depressed with great force, and the blue liquid trapped inside the syringe—the blood of a Reincarnator—flowed mercilessly into the nape of Sid's neck.

"Come, Kaoru. Be reunited with your fath—"'

"Grrrraaaaaa!!!" The syringe shattered, along with the hand of the Reincarnator holding it.

As if propelled by springs, Nue Kirisaki had pounced, and with the full

force of her jaw, crunched down on both.

Time froze there. Nobody, nothing moved. As everyone else froze, Nue continued sinking her teeth into the back of the Reincarnator's hand with a sickening grinding noise. Sid witnessed all this, still afflicted by the blue blood that had been pumped into him. The adorable girl, Nue Kirisaki, had drastically transformed, her red eyes blazing.

Her jaw was clearly dislocated, her mouth opened well beyond its limit. Sharp teeth like those of a beast now sprouted from her pink gums. Her canines were especially long and wide, looking more like stakes than teeth. The white pebbles stained with blood on the ground might have been the teeth that had previously occupied her mouth.

Huh, what's going on?

Nue?

Don't tell me, are you—

Not human?

The shock of this revelation robbed Sid of what little consciousness he had left, and he fainted dead away.

“I am the unavoidable fate, the merciless blade, the unrelenting executioner! I am Dill Steel-Link!”

Dill came barging in and tore the Reincarnator away from the children, kicking him to the ground and planting a boot on his back so he couldn't escape again. Then he cut off the Reincarnator's head without hesitation.

“Let's go.” After a moment of heavy breathing, his shoulders moving up and down, Dill grabbed Sid and Nue, each with one hand, and held them close to his sides. Without a second glance at the shocked refugees, Dill hurried to leave.

“Don't go anywhere.” Dill looked over his shoulder. The refugees had moved to surround him. In one arm he held a girl transformed into a beast, in the other a boy who had been injected with the blood of a Reincarnator. His arms were strained.

His rust-colored eyes glowed like molten metal bubbling inside a furnace. “Just try and lay a finger on these children.” His rusty hair billowed in the wind. “I don't care if you're avatars of the Ex Machina up in heaven—”

“My hero...I thank you.” At the head of the crowd, the man in priest's robes knelt down on the ground, and bowed his head low.

One by one, the other refugees followed suit. The acrid air that had

thickened around them was blown away by the wind.

Even so, Dill glared at the crowd for a spell, meeting the people who displayed such respect and gratitude toward him with an expression of hostility.

After another long moment passed, Dill suddenly turned to go.

“I’m no hero. This victory belongs to all of you.”

This time, Dill really did leave.

For a while now Dill had been suffering from a sharp pain in his left arm. From the moment he had picked her up, Nue Kirisaki’s abnormal fangs had been buried in his flesh. Dill had lost too much blood, and now he occasionally found himself swaying from side to side.

He walked in silence until he came upon a ruined temple—the same temple he had camped at just a while ago. The destroyed remains of the stage and countless bodies lay on the ground.

The noise of boulders crumbling, which sounded close to thunder, stopped Dill in his tracks. The roar came again, and then yet another roar. Trampling on its own sacred ground, it appeared.

“W-W-W-W-Warning. Mutant d-d-d-d-detect-[insufficient battery charge remaining]-ed. Workers are advised to evacuate-[insufficient battery charge remaining]-i-i-i-i-immediately.”

A giant without a head or arms. A bunch of dangling cables resembling a dignified beard. The decayed god of Redguard that had been worshipped at the temple—Ex Machina Quiet.

The void where the eyes of the machine god had surely been when it possessed a head appeared to look down at Dill, who held Nue in one arm. Dill glared straight back with his own rust-colored eyes—the very eyes that had belonged to the hero onstage. Even standing before the god he believed in, Dill stood up straight, feet planted firmly on the ground. He wouldn’t budge.

“Warning. Workers are advised to evacu-[2,512 updates available]-ate immediately. Warning. Work-[unable to connect to the Internet]-ers are advis-[insufficient battery charge remaining]-

ed to evacu-[application error]-ate imme-[restarting]-diate-[insufficient battery charge remaining]-ly. Warn..."

Then the Ex Machina stopped and did not move again. The two competing synthetic voices fell silent, together with the pulse of its engine. The god was long dead, after all.

Dill dropped his gaze to look at his hands. The two children dangled from his arms, unconscious. He relaxed his tensed shoulders and breathed a sigh of relief. Dill Steel-Link was not a hero. Not a hero—a father.

So, uncle. Who do you care about more—Iris or the gods? This was a conversation he'd had with his daughter more than ten years ago. Dill had read her an old story by lamplight in her bedroom as the rain drizzled outside, but the story had frightened her. In it, a god abducted young girls as a form of courtship. The children of mortal men had no means of resisting.

Dill had answered her question. He prefaced it by saying, *Those who properly respect the gods will not be forsaken by the Ex Machina.*

However, if based on my faith and your beauty, a god came to abduct you... Dill had made her a promise. Reassured, Iris slept through the night.

Iris was gone now. Five years ago, she had been killed by a Reincarnator. Dill had been unable to keep his promise. So far, he hadn't even been able to retrieve her body.

Dill looked down at the children he held in his arms. An unconscious person was quite heavy, and the weight of two lives hung from his arms now.

His chain mail cloak clanged against the ground, and the sound of his footsteps grew faint. His legs shook from the loss of blood. Despite this, the arms holding the two children remained firm.

CHAPTER 2 — PROJECT RE

The stone wall running through the sparsely wooded plain held memories of an age long past. Fallow land sank into dark shadows. Stars were still scattered throughout the sky as the rosy dawn broke.

The autumn wind was cold. Each gust felt like being pricked by needles. At the point that his body started to flush from exertion, Sid Faron ceased swinging his wooden sword and used his hand to wipe the sweat from his brow instead.

The weather was painfully cold, but beneath his skin Sid's blood flowed hot in his veins. To think that this thin layer of flesh was the only thing separating him from the rest of the world... Life certainly was peculiar.

Off in the distance, the scenery was majestic. The path through the cypress forest that had taken all of the previous day to traverse was behind him. They had long left behind the remnants of the ruined kingdom of Krios, famed for its aqueducts.

They expected to finally reach their destination, Vulcan, today. Sid had heard that the city of the blacksmith god lay at the foot of the fanged mountain range visible in the distance.

“I’m alive...” For some reason, the view prompted him to say that.

“You’ve been hard at work,” said a voice behind Sid. An unmistakable voice—a resonant voice that sounded as if it was echoing inside a cave.

“Master!”

“I’ve told you not to call me that.” Dill scratched his temple, the usual smile on his cheeks. He untied the string that he wore in his rusty hair to hold it back while he slept, whereupon it fanned out behind him in the cold air like wings.

“I’d rather you call me papa than Master. How about it, Sid? Wouldn’t you like a handsome, tough guy like me for a papa?”

“Ah, I’d rather not.”

Dill’s jests were accompanied by a wink. It seemed that he had some experience in comedy as well.

“What I really want is for you to train with me again. Soon I hope to be strong like you, Master!”

“As long as you’re calling me Master, Sid, I wish you’d show some interest in theater,” muttered Dill, but he still lent a guiding hand to the boy, who was practicing his fighting stance with his wooden sword.

“Pay close attention to your fundamental form. Fighting stances were developed through experience, passed from one warrior to the next and refined over time. The mechanically ideal posture will lend force to each strike. Never rely just on brute strength. We are not almighty heroes...”

Dill seemed happy as he watched over Sid, who was taking his practice swings so seriously that it was almost comical.

A month had passed since Dill had saved Sid Faron, whose parents had been killed by Reincarnators, and who had agreed to accompany Dill on his journey.

With only a little farther to go until they reached Vulcan, the boy’s attitude had gradually started to soften, gaining a sense of familiarity.

“Your hair’s getting long. Don’t you want to cut it?”

Sid shook his head and repeatedly swept his fringe out of his eyes. The boy’s hair had grown a fair bit since they had met.

“You’re one to talk.”

“You’re copying me, though, right?”

“Don’t be a creep—that’s not it at all.” In contrast to his words, Sid’s voice was soft, even tinged with shyness.

“You’ll never look wild like me. Long hair suits you too well. You’ll just end up looking like a girl.”

“Creep.” Sid stopped swinging his sword. He held both hands over his mouth and laughed.

“I don’t really need a reason; I just felt like growing it out. You’re too self-conscious, Master.”

Sid’s impertinent eyes turned toward Dill, as if to provoke him. He had only started to display this attitude recently. Most likely this was his natural state, the way he would have behaved when he lived with his parents. He was acting spoiled. This was proof of Sid’s trust in Dill, even though the boy might not have been aware of it himself.

For Dill, this was heartwarming, but at the same time his old wounds ached.

“Hey, Master, can we try again today? I’m all warmed up.”

“Oh, really?” Urged on by Sid swinging his wooden sword, Dill also took his sword in hand. This wasn’t a wooden training sword, but he’d secured his real sword in its sheath with a knot of string. It was perfectly safe.

“All right, here I come! Today’s the day I’ll finally land a hit on you, Master!”

Sid squared his shoulders, and with an apparent change in personality charged headlong toward Dill. The man readied his heavy bronze sword languidly with one hand, blocking Sid’s wooden sword. Dill’s own sword barely moved, handling Sid with footwork alone.

“Right, that’s good. That just now—that was great. You have a fair bit of talent, don’t you? Yes, right there is good. You’ve watched me closely... Ah, so close! You were on the right track. Right, one more time. Try copying my movements. Don’t fret, I’m sure you’ll get it next time.”

Dill’s instruction was damning Sid with praise. As Dill continued to flatter Sid, Sid continued to challenge him. If their training had not been interrupted, it would have gone on for an hour.

And then suddenly, Sid’s head swayed while he still held his wooden sword, then lolled to one side.

Ever since the day when he had been partially injected with the blue blood of a Reincarnator, from time to time Sid was overcome by bouts of anemia.

“Watch out! Don’t worry—I’ve got you.” Dill swiftly put an arm around Sid to support him. The pair of blue eyes that had opened wide in shock slowly regained their focus, coming to rest on Dill’s face.

“Master—thank you.” Sid had almost said something sarcastic, but in the end bit his tongue. “Hey, Master. If I train like this every day, will I be like you one day?” Sid’s eyes were heated as he looked up at Dill. Like the surface of water filling a cup to the very brim, trembling even in the absence of wind, Sid’s eyes twinkled.

In the boy’s blue eyes, Dill could perceive an immense trust placed in him, coming from a foolishly sincere heart. *Do I really deserve this?* Dill didn’t immediately have an answer. His throat tightened, so much that he couldn’t even manage to say, “Of course you will.”

“I...will soon be forty.” Dill finally managed to move his lips. “I am well on my way to old age, and I will not grow any further. I have already tasted my share of life’s pleasures and pain...”

Dill slowly crouched down to bring his eyes level with Sid's. He then stretched his hand out, bringing it close to Sid's shoulder—but in the end did not touch it, only tracing its general shape.

“But you're different, Sid. You will grow taller. You'll gain muscle. You'll learn so many things, and go to so many places. It's true that right now you have less experience than I do. But among the things you'll learn in the future, there will be some I don't know. A day shall come when you'll do things I never could. Just the fact that you're younger than I am makes you far more wonderful.”

“Master?” Sid suddenly felt concerned. The long hair dangling over Dill's face cast long, dark shadows over his expression.

“The truth is, this whole time I've been hatching a plan. This is a good time for you to hear it, so listen. I was thinking of waiting until after we got to Vulcan and I introduced you to Cirulia, but...” Dill withdrew the hand he had extended. Instead, he got down on one knee. Crouched down like this, Dill was below Sid's height, and he looked up at the boy.

With his sword set on the ground beside him and his solemn gaze, along with his old-fashioned long hair, Dill looked almost like a loyal knight.

“Sid, will you be my—”

“Hooray, you're gay!” A carefree cheer rang through the early morning air. Sid snapped his head toward the speaker. Nue Kirisaki looked back at him, with a bewitching—but slightly vulgar—smile.

“Oh, don't mind me, don't mind me. Continue, continue. I...don't know what to say! I had no idea the two of you were that close. Deep within my chest, my heart is slowly pounding. What is this feeling? What could it be?!”

Sid turned bright red and leaped away from Dill's side.

“It's not like that!” Sid then glared at Dill resentfully, looking like he might cry at any moment.

With a wry smile, Dill rose to his feet. Without a word between them, he spread his arms out to Nue, who leaped lightly into his embrace as if she had sprouted wings. Nue gave Dill a kiss on the cheek.

“Good morning, Dill!”

“Yep.” Dill returned her kiss upon the whorl of black hair on her head.
“Good morning, princess.”

Sid watched this scene from a distance, looking as if he wanted to say something.

“What are two men doing together so early in the morning? I’m really curious...I really, really am!”

“We men have our secrets. I’ll never tell... Try asking Sid.”

“Zoom zoom zoom!” While adding sound effects to her movements, Nue leaped from Dill’s arms and bounded up to Sid.

As Nue drew closer, desperate for attention and full of expectation, Sid retreated.

“Wha...” Nue’s smile froze. Sid did not smile in return. With his face even paler than it had been during his dizzy spell just before, he stared at Nue’s face, at her red eyes.

His chin trembled slightly. He forgot to blink, as if his eyelids were frozen in place. What Sid’s expression displayed all too clearly—was fear.

Little by little, Nue’s expression changed. The affection that had overflowed there started to dissolve, replaced by stunned shock. The look on her face changed further a few seconds later, her surprise replaced by overwhelming despair.

Nue recoiled, then turned her back to Sid. Running to Dill’s side, she put her arms around his waist and hid behind him.

A chilling silence descended. This was broken by low, muffled sobbing.

Since witnessing Nue’s transformation at the temple on the Bronze Route, Sid’s attitude toward her had changed. Although he had seemed to be growing fond of Nue before, he now kept his distance from her, growing closer to Dill instead. This might have been the boy’s way of defending himself. The fact was that Dill was the only one who could stop Nue during one of her rampages.

At first, Dill had hoped that Sid could fill a new role in Nue’s life. However...

“All right, let’s go. We’ll aim to reach Vulcan by noon. There will be hot showers waiting for us there.”

The children nodded reservedly, having finished their breakfast in silence. Both of them sat the same distance away from Dill, but between them was about twice that distance, an open space of aloofness.

In the vicinity of Vulcan, one of the Eleven Cities of the North, there stood an expanse of dense conifer forests. No such plants had grown natively in the town at the crossroads where Sid was born; he found his arms and legs were pierced by their needles at every turn. Through the gloomy, dark green

woods the party proceeded, seeking the Bronze Route. Since the incident at the temple, they had not set foot on its cobblestones in quite some time.

There was a reason Dill had avoided the easily traversable highway thus far. Many refugees from the Terea region had migrated via the Bronze Route, and naturally, this drew the attention of the Reincarnators, who hunted them to use as vessels.

Even for Reincarnators, it was far easier to cross the road paved by Tereans and Boreasans than the severe Fanged Mountain Range and the great forest spewing mist into the air. The majority of the Reincarnators' forces were always spotted in the regions along the highway.

Dill was strong. However, he was not the kind of legendary hero who could safely go toe-to-toe with an army of immortal Reincarnators. Whatever battles he could avoid, he had to avoid.

"I can see it. Over there is the highway. And there—" They were finally out of the forest. After a glance over his shoulder, Dill quickened his pace.

"—are the footprints of the gods that surround Vulcan. Those are proof that, once upon a time, the Ex Machina descended here."

The scenery was irregular. Next to Dill, Sid gasped at seeing it for the first time. The conifer forest had suddenly ended, and in its place was an enormous gaping hole in the earth—a bowl-shaped crater, revealing a striped pattern of geological strata. The cobblestone road descended the slope into the crater. In the middle of the road ahead, in the center of the bowl, stood a god: Ex Machina Amputation. He was the god of flame and creation who appeared from time to time in the myths of Redguard.

The true form of Amputation, who was depicted in sculptures and paintings as a lame blacksmith, was a gargantuan structure. Although it was mostly cubic in shape, cranes and supporting pillars stretched out like the branches of a tree, reaching straight up toward heaven.

Since ancient times, the followers of this god had gathered in his vicinity, built roads, and piled earth in hills to form a wall around it, resulting in the current city-state of Vulcan.

The structure was huge. There had been places of worship in the village at the crossroads where Sid was born, but they scarcely compared to the scale of Amputation. It was overwhelming.

"They say that they fought him...my distant, distant ancestors," muttered Nue. "The gods you and Dill believe in were our enemies."

“Are you really a Titan after all?” Sid opened his eyes wide.

“More accurately, Nue is one of their descendants,” Dill said. “Long ago, in the Golden Age, the Titans were defeated in battle by the Ex Machina and perished. A small number of their kindred, who had interbred with mortals, fled to the south and survived by being mistaken for humans... It was during the Holy War in the south that I met Nue.”

“So you *were* part of that war, Master...” The color of Sid’s eyes changed. He leaned toward Dill, and his voice was raised in excitement. Dill coughed awkwardly. “That’s amazing! To win back the gods, you fought with the heretics?! I’ve heard so much about it! Terea and the Eleven Cities were allies, and they had an incredibly strong hero named Aegisthus... Ah, right. Aegisthus is real, isn’t he? My father once said that no one that strong could really exist these days, but did he?!”

“Well...he is real, but you can’t believe every rumor you hear.”

“Then he really *does* exist?! Amazing! That’s amazing! Then it’s all true —the return of the age of heroes, the ancient civilization of the Holy Land, the still-moving Ex Machina, the soldiers of the south with a hundred arms, the monsters that flew through the sky...” Sid trailed off. A pair of watery red eyes was glaring at him.

“I’m not a monster.” Nue’s voice was full of anger. “Even the people of the Titan race in the Southwestern Alliance had only two arms, and they didn’t have wings. We don’t breathe fire from our mouths, and we only have two eyes! We’re normal too! I’m not a monster.”

“Nue, I wasn’t talking about...” groaned Sid.

“I just want to be normal...and stay with Dill.”

“Nue.” As if protecting her from Sid, Dill stepped between them and put his arms around Nue’s shoulders. Nue tried to throw Dill off, as if she was throwing a tantrum, but she only attempted this resistance once. After that, she clutched Dill tightly and wailed. Dill, while swaying from side to side and stroking Nue’s black hair repeatedly, turned to Sid and said, “Sid, the Holy War is over. To begin with, do you know what those in the south called the Holy War? An invasion. We won that war. However, right after that the Reincarnators appeared, and our Terean Empire also fell. All that remained afterward were the ugly rumors we spread in order to win.”

A foreign girl, with different-colored hair and eyes, was calmed by her father, who was not related to her by blood. She helplessly entrusted herself

to him.

“Um, I...”

Dill smiled wryly at Nue, who now didn’t want to be apart from him, and kissed her on the cheek and on her hair. Sid, at a loss for words, averted his eyes.

At that moment, it happened.

“Hmm,” a man grunted to himself. There shouldn’t have been anyone nearby, but that very solitude was itself remarkable upon the highway leading to Vulcan of the Eleven Cities.

The first to react, unsurprisingly, was Dill. He swiftly moved so Nue was covered behind him, with his sword and dagger already drawn from underneath his chain mail cloak, readied in each hand.

“...Hmmm,” grunted the pale man, more deeply than before. Behind him was a circle which looked like it had been drawn in the air with a compass. From the shining ring emerged a thin warrior from another world, his body covered in armor.

“Commence the Enlightenment.” From somewhere inside the mask that entirely covered the warrior’s face, a man’s voice sounded via a machine.

The man who had appeared first, a Reincarnator dressed in a black business suit, withdrew through the ring of light as if changing places with the warrior in full armor. The armored Reincarnator advanced; with each step, white smoke billowed up from the ground. Steam rose from fists readied at the Reincarnator’s waist, distorting the scenery behind him.

“This crater is the sacred land of the Ex Machina. Don’t walk in here as if you own the place.” Dill lowered his stance. “You’ll pay for your blasphemy with your life.”

Kicked up by his heel and the back of his knee, Dill’s chain mail cloak rang out stridently. At that moment, Dill charged toward the Reincarnator, who met him head-on. The heel of the Reincarnator’s shoes blasted out fire, propelling his attack forward with explosive speed!

“Nue, we should run—somewhere where we won’t get in Master’s way!”

When Sid shouted this, Nue shuddered. Her red eyes seemed to ask, *Are you afraid of me? Do I disgust you?* Sid grabbed Nue’s hand, and her harsh eyes looking up at him suddenly shivered in confusion.

“Why...”

“What do you mean, *why*? It’s the normal thing to do, right?!?” Sid’s hand,

dripping with sweat, was cold and trembling. However, he endeavored to hide the fear in his eyes, staring straight back at Nue. This was both to protect his own pride, but more than that, to avoid hurting Nue's feelings.

"I suppose it's normal for you," mumbled Nue, looking at the hand offered to her before grasping it in return. As the two fled, the mingled sounds of different solid objects clashing together rang out through the air behind them.

Fire blasted from the Reincarnator's elbow, propelling a punch that struck Dill's chain mail cloak. Staggering from the impact, Dill retaliated with the hilt of his dagger. Pieces of Dill's torn cloak and fragments of the Reincarnator's shattered visor danced in the air as the combatants were thrown backward by the impact, but both of them kicked the ground and clashed yet again at the same point.

The Reincarnator's full-body armor was different from both the plate armor of Redguard and chain mail, in that it fit the wearer's body like a glove. It was light, allowing for nimble movement, but lacked the ability to absorb and diffuse impacts. In short, it was fragile.

Dill, perceiving this, rained fierce blows upon the Reincarnator. Sweeping with his sword and gouging with his dagger, thrusting his knee forward and tearing at the armor again with his dagger in an underhand grip after withdrawing his arm from the previous blow—all the while forcibly interjecting with elbow strikes. It was a flurry of crude attacks, devoid of all pretense; he stuck to the Reincarnator and wouldn't let go. With no crowd to rally around him, this was Dill's other fighting style.

The Reincarnator blasted flames from both elbows, causing both arms to accelerate and spin like propellers, flinging Dill aside. The warrior then leaped backward, touching down at twice the distance a normal person would be able to jump. At the point of landing the Reincarnator's heel emitted a burst of flame. Without taking a moment of rest, he rocketed forward, powered by a Skill.

These jet bursts even made short-distance flight possible. While hovering in the air, the Reincarnator fired another jet burst, his trajectory freely changing—and he was now heading straight toward Dill. This transcended the laws of nature—even the gods would have feared the power of this Skill! This must truly have been the epitome of power!

Dill opened his chain mail cloak and hurled the javelin he had hidden

beneath it. The Reincarnator repelled it with only one hand. It fell to the ground—and now the Reincarnator was right under Dill's nose! His right elbow spurted flame for a straight punch fired with full power.

The armored fist passed through thin air. In response, Dill's sword traveled in the opposite direction, slicing open the Reincarnator's flank. The Reincarnator staggered backward. Trying to stand up, the armored warrior blasted fire from each limb.

"You're a Flinter, aren't you?" asked Dill. In response, the Reincarnator blinked twice beneath his helmet's broken visor. "Using your pyrokinesis to propel your body instead of just blasting your opponent with flame is clever. Not a bad idea. However, you're not the first Flinter to think of it."

"What of it, barbarian?" A brief, cold response, but Dill was satisfied, and he raised the corners of his mouth in a grin.

"It means that I know how to kill you. My name is Dill Steel-Link, and I am no barbarian. I am the killer of the dead, a calamity upon Reincarnators. That is the name of one who has slain many Reincarnators—and is about to kill you." This was sufficient as a taunt, and Dill had been sure to mention his own name.

Having achieved his aim, the sneer fell from Dill's face and his expression hardened. He advanced toward the enemy, but the Reincarnator didn't move—only waited there with both fists ready to shoot from the hip.

What's he playing at? Dill only hesitated for a moment. He had already swung his sword down, aiming to cut off the enemy's head.

The Reincarnator's elbows, readied at each hip, both lit up.

Right, right, left...right, left, right! A subsonic but still high-speed rush! Fists charged with the power of a Skill hit Dill six times, almost all at once.

Striking him on the shoulder and waist and shattering his iron sword, the flurry of blows pushed Dill back. His rust-colored eyes rolled back in his head so only their whites showed. Unable to resist the impact, he bent over backward, raising both hands as if grasping at the heavens.

For a moment, his consciousness seemed to leave his head and depart to somewhere far away from him. He could hear children screaming. *It was like this back then, with Iris.* As new pain blossomed with each blow, fragments of Dill's memory revived.

Blue rain had poured down upon the soldiers celebrating their victory in the Holy War. Their fallen comrades, returning to life, were no longer human

—Reincarnators. Soldiers massacred by Skills. A series of defeats followed, and the deaths of his closest friends. The deaths of his comrades. The death of Iris. The god-father, Ex Machina Anxiety, baring his fangs at humanity. A woman with red eyes. An ominous prophecy. The defeat of the hero Aegisthus. A battlefield they could no longer maintain.

Amongst the withdrawing forces of the Terean Army, Dill already knew. The nostalgic capital city, Aspro Terea, had already fallen at the hands of the Reincarnators. He no longer had a country, nor any children, left to defend.

If that's the case, why in the name of the gods am I—?

I'll kill you. A nostalgic feeling boiled up from inside him, a dried fountain flowing once again, a remnant of his youth and a wellspring of strength. The water that gushed forth from this renewed fountain was pure anger. The tarnish of time had covered his heart like a scab, and Dill stuck his fingers underneath and ripped it off. Something oozed forth.

Dill's irises reappeared. Their rusty hue now glowed with anger, like heated metal. *Kill him! Kill the Reincarnator! Kill! Kill the bastard!* *Remember! Those maggots killed your daughter, stole your hope, crushed the peace you had won—your chance for atonement—and they laughed about it!* *Have you forgotten?! Those godless, pale, sneering bastards! Those unforgivable invaders! Kill the immortal enemy! Kill the Reincarnator!*

“My name,” cried Dill, as he struck the Reincarnator with the hand holding his dagger, “is Dill Steel-Link!”

The Reincarnator brought both arms together to guard. In addition, at the moment of the dagger’s impact, he activated his Skill, dampening the force of the blow and pushing them both backward. Dill had gripped the dagger with such force that the hilt and blade were wrenched apart and fell to the ground. His stock of weapons was now exhausted. Dill grabbed a handful of his chain mail cloak from the inside and twisted it taut. His right hand was now a fist of iron, and he struck the Reincarnator with that fist. A high-pitched sound of metal shattering rang through the air.

Glittering pieces of the shattered visor scattered, falling to the earth like shooting stars.

“Such power... What a wonderful specimen,” muttered the male Reincarnator, whose face, underneath the broken visor, was pierced by fragments of metal and had been partially caved in by Dill’s blow. “I will remember you, Dill Steel-Link. Your body is—”

Dill did not wait for him to finish speaking. His fist, wrapped in chain mail, caved in the Reincarnator's skull.

"Hm..." Behind Dill, watching the decisive moment intently, was the Reincarnator wearing a suit. Dill unleashed a powerful backhand toward him, but the Reincarnator was no longer there. He was three meters away, standing casually. Neither the suitcase he carried nor his dull-colored necktie were even slightly disturbed.

"Hm. Hm!" The suited Reincarnator stroked his chin with one hand and drew a circle in the air with the other. A glowing trail followed his gesture, forming a ring of light. A rumbling that sounded like the roaring of a beast could be heard from beyond the mysterious ring... It was in fact the exhaust of a motorized, two-wheeled vehicle!

With a mechanical cacophony, cavalry from another world came flying out of the portal. There were...five of them, it seemed. Their polished surfaces unadorned, motorbikes revolved in a circle with Dill at its center as the riders sized him up.

"Nue, Sid," called Dill to the two children outside of the encirclement, readying his bare hands. "Time to run!"

Dill turned around and launched an assault on the rider behind him. At that moment, the other Reincarnators all fired their guns at him, the weapons' retorts echoing like thunder. To avoid friendly fire, they had aimed at the ground, but the bullets just missed the fleet-footed Dill, pointlessly blowing holes in the dirt instead.

Dill jumped, and once he'd grabbed hold of the rider Dill then struck his foe before squeezing his opponent's helmet in a headlock. He then pushed the Reincarnator, whose head was now crushed, off the bike. Revving the engine, he kicked off with a wheelie... He had mastered the steed from another world!

"Nue, grab on!" Dill leaned forward to rescue the children as he thundered past on the motorbike.

"Sir, yes, sir!" It wasn't clear whether Nue was serious or messing around. Her eyebrows were raised sharply and she was brimming with enthusiasm. Sid, who was bewildered, suddenly found himself grabbed by the collar.

"H-Huh?"

"Sorry, Sid!"

"Huh?"

"Heave-hooooo!"

Nue planted her feet firmly on the ground, and lifted Sid high...then hurled him with the strength of a demigod!

The horrible floating sensation Sid felt only lasted an instant. Hard, heavy arms grabbed him and held him fast against a body burning like fire. Without looking up, Sid knew that this was the safest place in the world.

“Climbing aboard!”

“Ugh.” Squashed against Dill by Nue, who had jumped on after him, Sid let out a pitiful moan. The iron steed accelerated. Descending the slope of the crater like an avalanche, they barreled toward the castle walls of Vulcan.

“Master, doesn’t this belong to the Reincarnators...?” Sid asked with some difficulty, sticking his head out from behind Nue, who seemed to be enjoying herself.

“Yeah. But it’s mine now. I stole it.” Dill laughed. His rusty hair fluttered behind him, becoming one with the wind. “I had to break a lot of these before I finally figured out how to ride one!”

“Hey, hey, don’t say that. You were starting to act cool for a second there.”

“Dill doesn’t need to *act* to be cool! He’s my papa!”

“You little rascal.” Dill put an arm on Nue’s head and pulled her close. Sid, squeezed tightly in between them, had trouble breathing, but he was happy.

Explosions roared behind them. The other four bikes, in dogged pursuit, were gaining on them. They all rode identical vehicles, the road was straight, and they were running at full throttle. However, Dill’s bike, which also carried the two children, was unstable and more encumbered.

The castle walls drew closer. The sun was high in the sky, and there was no sign of anyone walking in the crater. It was already apparent that Vulcan of the Eleven Cities would be surrounded by Reincarnators and put under siege.

The Reincarnators were all silent for a moment. Then, without a word, one of the Reincarnators, who had finally caught up to Dill, readied his gun and aimed for Dill’s rear tire. Dill steered the vehicle from side to side, evading the gunfire. The bullet ricocheted and grazed the seat.

The following shot sent the muffler flying. Dill somehow managed to avoid getting hit, but he wasn’t sure how many more shots he could dodge. He couldn’t hold out much longer.

To make matters worse, a circle of light cut through the air next to Dill. The work of a Jumper's teleportation Skill...

"Enemy reinforcements!" cried Sid in despair, his words faltering.

"Thanks for the fresh delivery!" Before the new Reincarnator could make it all the way through, Dill pulled the bike up beside the portal and made a merciless attempt to crash into him. He pressed his upper body down firmly on top of the children on his knee, nearly squishing them. He would not let go of them no matter what.

The new Reincarnator concentrated his strength in his slender arms. The moment before Dill's bike made contact, a burst of flame from his elbow accelerated his unarmed fist, which struck Dill and Dill's vehicle, four times.

"You...!" Failing to make contact and instead pushed back by the assault, Dill's eyes widened.

"It is I, Dill Steel-Link. You will be supplying us with a new body!" It was the Reincarnator Dill had retired not long ago. A man...no, a woman!

"You came back in a woman's body. More importantly...long-distance teleportation between the Imperial City and Vulcan should be impossible. You scum must have built a respawn base near the sacred city of Vulcan," muttered Dill, clicking his tongue in annoyance. The woman did not respond, instead turning to her comrades behind her.

"Your help will not be required. Fall back. I will be the one to enlighten this man. Don't needlessly damage a precious A-rank body with bullets."

At the woman's instruction, the four bikers kept their distance from Dill, forming a loose circle around him.

The woman was tall and dressed in a straitjacket, her hair wet and reeking of formaldehyde. Atop her bike, she smiled coldly. She slid her bike closer to Dill's, crashing into it in retribution for his attack. The smell of burning rubber filled the air as both tires on the woman's motorbike emitted fire, accelerating the bike beyond its normal limits!

Dill's vehicle swayed dramatically and the children buried in his chest screamed. Dill endured the impact, and tried to regain control of his bike. The woman swooped in for the coup de grâce, accelerating her fists with her pyrokinesis. One punch—two punches! The impact was painful. Despite the change in sex, the Reincarnator's power exceeded corporeal limits, her blows obviously even more powerful than before. His hands full with guarding the children and steering the unfamiliar vehicle, Dill had little chance of dodging!

“Grrraa!” Red eyes flashed. Slithering out of Dill’s grasp like a snake, Nue Kirisaki leaped into the air. Her pearly white teeth were pushed out of her gums by suddenly sprouting fangs, with which she made to bite through the Reincarnator’s skull!

“Out of my way, monster.”

“Nue!” cried Sid. The Reincarnator swept her arm around with the speed of flames and flicked Nue away. The girl’s fangs, worthy of a large carnivore, were shattered into dust. Caught again in Dill’s arms, Nue frantically choked up blood and fragments of teeth.

“Was I of some help, at least?” Nue forced a smile. Between her lips, a new set of normal teeth could already be glimpsed sprouting from her gums.

“Y-You’ve got some guts!” said Sid supportively. Nue gave him a thumbs up and a smile! On the other hand, Dill’s eyes were boiling with rage at the sight of seeing one of the children hurt. It was as though the rust had fallen away and bare metal shone out from underneath. He stared straight ahead.

As Dill attempted another attack, the Reincarnator tilted her bike away from him. At the same time, the other Reincarnators, who had followed and formed a perimeter around them, all slowed down at once. The castle wall was very close. In just over ten seconds, they would crash into it.

The female Reincarnator ceased her attack and tried to drop her own speed, but realized that Dill’s bike wasn’t slowing down at all.

“Playing chicken, I see... Impressive.” The Reincarnator suddenly pulled up next to Dill, unleashing a blow made exponentially faster by the bike’s speed and her Skill. Dill held out his hand and caught the fist straight on. The air cracked loudly and Dill’s bones creaked—still, he grasped her fist and refused to let go.

Maintaining their speed, they barreled toward the castle.

“Let go! Do you want to end up as a stain on the wall? I’m not going to die. We Reincarnators *cannot* die. That’s something only you barbarians do.” The Reincarnator now sounded simply bored, her voice tinged with contempt.

Dill mocked her in return. “I wonder about that. Let’s put that to the test.”

“Don’t be stupid... Be serious for a moment. Our resources are limited. Even a body of this rank is not easily acquired. Let go... Let go!” The immortal Reincarnator looked agitated. She was about to lose the body she had just occupied, along with Dill’s body, which she had been seeking to

acquire. Exerting all her strength, she tried to tear her bike away from Dill and escape, but he would not let go nor move away.

“How pitiful, godless Reincarnator. Do you fear death?”

The castle wall was upon them.

“Dill!”

“Master!” Both the children shouted his name.

“I am the one who defends the hearth, the broad shield, the survivor—Dill Steel-Link!” Dill rallied himself and stood tall upon the bike, releasing his grip on the Reincarnator. She slammed on the brakes, slowing down suddenly. Dill, on the other hand, headed for the wall at full speed. He had no time to turn to look at the source of the crashing sounds behind him. The wall was right in front of him.

Kicking off from the seat, he jumped high in the air. Under each arm he held one of the children he needed to protect. As that momentum was about to slam him against the castle wall, he met the challenge head-on instead, kicking back against the stone. The impact traveled through the soles of his feet, the shock piercing all the way to his bones. His body went numb to the core, then felt like it was splitting open—an explosion of pain. His sense of reason started to dissolve, but a rush of adrenaline stole it back.

Keep going. Dill advanced another step. In place of his right leg, where fractured bones ground together audibly, he brought his left foot forward. The impact moved there. In an instant it too started to crumble. He moved his feet farther still. Right foot forward. Left foot forward. Right, left, right. As his feet cried out in agony, he continued to move them each in turn. If his legs gave out, Dill would falter and die the very next moment—and then the children he held under each arm would suffer the same fate.

That was why he couldn’t stop moving his feet. Left, right, left, right! Forward, forward...up the castle wall! Upward! Keep climbing, fast enough to clear the top! Dill ran, and as he ran along the wall’s surface, he continued to dissipate the shock of the impact.

With each step he took, he left a footprint in the solidly armored wall outside Vulcan, the surface of which was as hard as a tortoise’s shell.

Amazing. Sid, still hanging from Dill’s side, looked back down from the height Dill had climbed and sighed. This shouldn’t have been possible. Even a descendant of demigods, like Nue, should have been unable to achieve something like this.

Master, you might really be a demigod yourself—a true hero.

Just as he was thinking this, Sid suddenly found himself floating in midair. Dill's feet had left the castle wall. His legs had been crushed pitifully, a fragment of bone jutting out of one knee, but still he kicked at the open air, trying to move forward.

Dill Steel-Link was no hero.

"Don't worry. I'll protect you, no matter what," whispered Dill to the children, as he held them tightly...then plummeted to the ground.

There was a sickening crunch.

Sid opened his eyes. He was...still alive. Right next to him, Nue was moaning as if she'd been hit somewhere, but she too was alive. What about Dill?

A foot with flames blasting from the heel accelerated through the air, kicking Dill in the side of the head.

"Wonderful! I can't believe you survived that. I've never seen a resource quite as excellent as you. After I've killed you, you'll be embalmed with the greatest of care. I can promise you that your body will be provided to someone who far outranks me—a business magnate, a bureaucrat, or a manager. Your body is just that special..."

The fall from her bike had hideously torn the skin from half of the woman's face, but rather than feeling pain, she seemed excited. She was *smiling*.

Dill glared at her, eyes boiling with rage—but that was all he could do. Both his legs were already broken. He had no weapon to wield and no way of fighting back. The remaining Reincarnator bike brigade, who had slowed down to observe the situation, were now catching up.

"Dill Steel-Link...Well done—I mean that. Your resistance will be recorded and branded on your body as a barcode. That first-class body of yours will be placed at the head of our showcase."

"I pity you people." Dill, breathing raggedly, used the last weapon he had left: his words. Besides his lips, there was no part of his body he could move to his satisfaction.

The woman's spirits seemed to be dampened by this. She looked at him now with a doubtful expression.

"Defying the inevitable fate of death, diluting your life to stretch it out, nesting in the bodies of others to survive. You delight in this like children,

mistaking that existence for eternal life. But just think about it. It's your soul, but someone else's body. Can you really say this combination is your actual self? Your soul and your body were born together. Memories do not only live in your head. Your involuntary gestures, your muscle memory, your facial expressions... Do those all belong to you? Are you really in control of that body? In the end, are you really *you*? Can you be sure?"

"...Don't make me laugh. Of course I'm me. I am right here before you. My existence was recorded within the LC, overcoming the limit of my life span. This record is, without a doubt, me."

"You have no gods to put your faith in. You have left behind your ancestral home, and you have no descendants related to you by blood. The only one who can vouch for your existence is you yourself. What a fragile life—cut off from everything else, you are truly alone. And that will go on for all eternity. Reincarnators, I pity you."

"Shut up!" shouted the Reincarnator. Such an outburst was rare for their kind. Appearing self-conscious, the woman irritably thrust her hand into the pouch on her waist, taking out an ampule that she stuck into the nape of her neck.

"I've put up with your pathetic stalling for long enough. Time to implement your Enlightenment."

Dill said nothing.

"Grr..." Nue and Sid stepped forward to defend Dill.

"Stop! What are you doing? Don't worry about me. The two of you should run!" Dill, who had been ready to accept his death, suddenly panicked.

"Children... D-class bodies, total trash. Not to be considered for Enlightenment."

"This isn't your fight! Hey, are you listening to me?!"

"Gr...grrraaa..." Nue growled, and opened her jaw as her bones changed shape. Pushed out by her protruding fangs, her human teeth spilled out of her mouth, clattering to the ground by her feet.

Sid was silent. Staring at the female Reincarnator, he wordlessly pointed a finger at her face. At the tip of that pale finger, a speck of light appeared. *Am I seeing things?* thought the woman, suspiciously. She blinked, and the light had already disappeared. Sid's face was horribly pale.

"Dispose of the children. Recover Dill Steel-Link," commanded the

woman. The other Reincarnators each readied their Skills.

And at that moment, a colossal object descended from the sky, kneeling down between Dill and the Reincarnators as it landed. The impact of the falling mass bent the earth and sent a cloud of dirt into the air. Dust blotted out the sun, casting a dark shadow over the area.

“An S-rank body...” mumbled the female Reincarnator. The drug she had taken had made her calmer, but she retreated a step.

The being who had leaped down from the castle wall looked to be well over two meters tall—a descendant of the giant race. The chain mail cloak the man wore moved in violent waves, glancing off the earth below.

Standing up, the giant gave Dill one look and said, “You’ve lost your touch, Steel-Link.”

“General...” moaned Dill. With his legs broken, he could only grovel.

“Now then, Reincarnators. Shall we go again, today?” The man smirked, and wielded a huge lump of iron he had carried on his back. “My name, and the name of this weapon, is ‘Halberd.’ The noble blood of the snow-white lady runs in my veins. As the commander of the Halberd Brigade, the strongest band of mercenaries in the empire, I defend Vulcan of the Eleven Cities. The three-headed eagle who lusts for the fires of war, the offspring of giants, the towering heroic general, father of the hero Aegisthus! Hear my name and tremble! My name is Halberd!”

As he bellowed his name, the very air shook, reverberating through the castle wall and echoing seemingly without end. Halberd was truly a mythical monster—a god-like figure.

“You want my body, don’t you? Don’t you...? In that case, just try taking it, you wraiths from another world.” Halberd grinned. Behind him the castle gates opened, spewing forth a great number of cavalry and elite soldiers in chain mail. On their backs, the horsemen carried battle standards depicting a three-headed eagle holding a spear, which fluttered behind them like wings.

“Hmm.” The suited Reincarnator had casually appeared from a glowing teleportation gate, stroking his chin. The Reincarnators on motorbikes wheeled their vehicles around and vanished into the circle of light. The last ones to depart were the woman with half a face and the man in the black suit. Whispering something to each other about Dill and Halberd, they too disappeared into the ring after giving the two warriors a final stare like twin pairs of pinpricks.

“You’re a sorry sight, Steel-Link.” After seeing off the retreating Reincarnators, Halberd walked away from Dill with heavy footsteps. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Sid and Nue, who was choking up the fangs she had just sprouted. The tension having abated, Sid staggered from a bout of anemia and sat down on the ground.

“Is this the reason for your weakness?” Halberd regarded the children with cold, pale eyes, and tightened his grip on his iron weapon.

“Hey, General,” Dill’s pupils widened inside his rust-colored eyes. He had no weapon in his hand and his legs were both still broken. “Don’t make me kill you.”

Halberd, the giant, looked down at Dill crawling on the ground. Dill glared straight back at him. Soon the giant’s throat started to shake, turning into a deep laugh.

“Yes, that’s the look. I’ll fetch you a doctor. Return to my side, son.” Halberd walked away, replaced by the chain-mail-clad horsemen, who put Dill, Sid, and Nue on their horses, and rode them through the gates of Vulcan.

Inside the castle walls was yet another battlefield. The cavalry rode along a road strewn with the remnants of barricades and newly fallen corpses which had not yet begun to stink of decay.

“This is the extent of the area we took back this morning! We’re about to cut through territory controlled by the Reincarnators!” The man in chain mail with his hands on the reins raised his voice. His hair was just as long as Dill’s, and he had added extensions of blue and red to his natural black hair. On his left cheek was a tattoo depicting a simplified version of the three-headed eagle design. He also wore vivid makeup. All in all, it was not quite the look one would expect from a mercenary.

The wounded Dill, who had been placed in the saddle, was running a fever, and his pain left his thoughts hazy. “Re...incarna...tor,” he groaned.

Indeed, at that moment, a Reincarnator made an attack aiming for the horse carrying Dill. Besides a knife-proof jacket, the man was unarmored. The Reincarnator ran at the horse with his body tilted forward, his form impeccable. Then he disappeared, reappearing a moment later one meter

closer than he had been a moment before.

The lightly armored Reincarnator was successively opening teleportation gates in front of himself at one meter intervals. Each time he entered a gate, he teleported to the gate one meter in front. The distance traveled each time was short, but the cooldown time on his Skill was equally short. Combined with the man's naturally swift feet, he savagely approached at a speed exceeding that of the horse!

“He’s here! Of all people, why did it have to be Fleetfoot?!”

Dill let out a breath but was otherwise silent.

“Huh?! Steel-Link, did you say something?! Just stay still—I’ll do something about him.”

The tattooed man twisted his upper body and pulled the trigger on his crossbow, firing a bolt behind him. The bolt passed dangerously close to the horse carrying Sid and Nue behind him, then made its way toward the Reincarnator’s chest.

The moment before it hit, the one called “Fleetfoot” vanished, then reappeared one meter away from his previous position. However, he had lost his forward momentum and had to compensate awkwardly to avoid tumbling over. The Reincarnator clicked his tongue in irritation and abandoned his pursuit.

“Hah *hah!* Did you see that? I found his weakness. I know this one well. After all, since the wall fell, I’ve been fighting him every day!”

“...ill them.”

“Huh?! I can’t hear you!”

“I’ll kill them. I’ll kill every Reincarnator!” cried Dill...and then nearly fell off the horse’s back. The tattooed man grabbed Dill hurriedly.

“Steel-Link, that...” The man paused. “...was cringeworthy!” The tattooed man’s laughter trailed off into the distance.

On the battlefield, Fleetfoot found another target and rejoined the fight. A group of more than ten Vulcan soldiers had come to the aid of the civilians who had failed to escape, buying them time to evacuate. Upon the order of a chain mail-cloaked warrior, they raised their crossbows in unison just as they’d been trained. A horizontal rain of bolts fell upon the Reincarnators.

Even with his short-range teleportation, Fleetfoot couldn't dodge every bolt in the barrage—so he didn't even try. He continued his full-speed dash, assisted by continuous teleportation, straight at the soldiers. The barrage of crossbow fire covered a wide area, but it was full of gaps. Ultimately, only two bolts had hit Fleetfoot, neither of them in vital areas.

“Ah!”

“Ugh!” Fleetfoot had flashed by the row of Vulcan soldiers, slitting the throats of two of them with the daggers he held in each hand. He turned around to make another attack from behind, but a spear thrown by the chain-mail-cloaked warrior pierced his back.

The tip of the spear protruded magnificently from the center of the Reincarnator's chest, blue blood spurting from the wound. In the moments before he expired, Fleetfoot attempted another attack, but that too ended in failure.

“Gotcha.” An old man on a nearby roof loosed a sturdy arrow, nearly as thick as a spear itself, from his heavy bow, and watched it send the Reincarnator flying. A chain mail cloak hung from the old man's shoulders, and his gloves bore the mark of the three-headed eagle. The chain-mail-clad soldier on the ground, bearing the same mark, snorted wearily.

“Old man! What's the score today, so far?”

“Fourteen.” The old man spoke quietly, but the man on the ground could hear him.

“I've only got five! On top of that, I lost two! I don't even know if I'll come out ahead on men!”

“Did you see him?” The old man didn't pursue the topic. He was sick of the same exchange. “Steel-Link. He picked a bad time to come home.”

“Not him! That man is utterly without luck. The goddess of luck, Ex Machina Maris, has always hated him.”

The old man was about to respond, but stopped himself. Narrowing his eyes, he surveyed the horizon. Even with age, he could still see that far.

“We have company. ‘Meteor,’ ‘Commander,’ ‘Sinker,’ ‘Summoner,’ ‘Starlight,’ ‘Spiralblade,’ ‘Glider,’ ‘Screener,’ ‘Blusterer,’ ‘Disturber,’ ‘Engine,’ ‘Pitfall,’ ‘Red Lotus,’ ‘Reflector,’ ‘Toiler’...”

“You're kidding.” The man on the ground fell silent. He'd just heard the other man list the nicknames of several individual Reincarnators, each with a powerful Skill. They had all made life difficult for the mercenaries and the

people of Vulcan since the castle walls had fallen two weeks prior, and they rarely died and changed bodies. As a result, they remained in the old man's memory.

"‘Hero,’ as well,” said the old man, ending his list of names. There were more Reincarnators approaching. However, as soon as he recognized that particular one, all other enemies left his mind.

A black haze formed a vortex in front of the old man’s eyes—a sign of an imminent teleportation.

“Edward!” cried the man on the ground. Then, before his eyes, “Hero” descended. The golden-haired, golden-eyed body of a radiant young man was not, of course, the Reincarnator’s own. However, even with his blue blood rendering the face sickly and pale, he possessed an unreal beauty.

“Ready your weapon, prideful warrior of Redguard,” said Hero, holding out his hand. With his Skill, he pinned the old man to the roof with a spear from a distance, then pulled the weapon out and returned it to his hand. The body, once released, fell from the roof—but before it hit the ground, an unseen force caused it to decelerate. Without a sound, the old man’s body crumpled onto the pavement.

“I’ve heard rumors about you. Specifically, I’ve heard that the Reincarnators have a pretentious psychopath among their ranks.”

“Tell me your name, warrior. I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure.”

“Huh? Are you mocking me? I have no name to give to maggots like you!” The Vulcan men readied their shields in formation. The chain-mail-cloaked man thrust out his shield in the same fashion, and together they surrounded the Reincarnator known as Hero.

“What a pity, Jay Dickens.”

The color drained from the chain-mail-cloaked man’s face. But that only lasted a moment.

“Go to hell!” He lowered his stance and stepped forward, and the others carried out the same maneuver. A wave of shields assaulted Hero, ready to crush him.

“I would have liked to hear it from you. My name...is Eugene.” After a moment of hesitation, Hero announced his name. He readied an ordinary spear at his hip, then, supporting it with his knee, thrust it forward with the full weight of his body. It was a heavy blow.

“Guh...ugh.”



The spear evaded a shield and pierced a soldier's exposed shoulder. The man, a Vulcan soldier, groaned in pain—and with that, the perimeter was broken.

Hero took advantage of this opening and slipped through. He plucked a shortsword hanging from the waist of the soldier who had just broken the formation and slashed at another soldier as he passed. He tried to land another hit on the backswing, but was blocked by a shield.

"This metal was tempered by the god of the forge who rules this city, Amputation! Kneel before the power of a god!" The shield thrust forward by the chain-mail-cloaked mercenary snapped Hero's sword in twain. Hero retrieved his spear using his psychokinesis and thrust it into the surface of the shield. The impact made a shrill noise but didn't even leave a scratch.

"Resistance is useless! Don't stop! Crush him!" The swarm of shields bore down on him...and then, the wall closed. Shields collided with shields and rang loudly. There was no sensation of pressing on a human body.

"I saw that coming, Reincarnator scum. I have you now, Hero," laughed the man in chain mail. A bad habit of Reincarnators who used teleportation was predictably using it to get behind their opponents. Without looking back, the chain-mail-cloaked man thrust his spear behind himself. There was, as it turned out, a teleportation gate swirling there.

But there was *only* a gate.

"You've been learning. So have we," came a voice from above the man's head. The man looked up, only to see Hero there. He had used a Skill to ignite his heel with fire and leap into the air, holding his spear in an underhand grip.

"No way. He was...one step ahead!" The spear came flying, and its tip went clean through the man's chest. With his last ounce of strength, the man grabbed hold of the spear. As Hero tried to retrieve it with his psychokinesis, the man only drove it deeper into his body!

"Run, you bastards! Run and live to fight another day! This is my final order. Don't give them any new recruits!"

"Impressive," said Hero, praising the man. He did not pursue the soldiers, instead waiting for them to escape.

In a final act of resistance, the man in the chain mail cloak grabbed something from his pocket. What he had withdrawn was a syringe, the barrel filled with faintly glowing red liquid. Gritting his teeth, he tried to thrust the

needle into his own neck, but the syringe was pulled away by an unseen hand. And then, the syringe was lost—as it floated in front of his eyes, it suddenly shattered into pieces. Just beyond, Hero clenched his fist in midair.

“I wouldn’t try that again.”

“You’re a rotten bastard...Eugene.”

“You remembered my name.”

Hero watched the man die with downcast eyes. Held up by the spear skewering him, the man’s strength gradually faded away. As if he had one last thought on his mind, the dying man’s lips remained tightly drawn, but then finally parted. His soul seemed to slide out with a sigh, along with his final words.

Thwack. Those words were erased forever as the man’s head was blown clean off.

“Oh, shit! Did I overdo it again?!” said a man, with a frivolous laugh. At the tip of the finger he had pointed at the mercenary, embers from his pyrokinesis still smoldered. From behind him about a dozen more Reincarnators had appeared all together. At the direction of the Commander seated in a wheelchair, mechanized ape-form bioweapons—Support Force III—pursued the Vulcan soldiers and tore them apart.

All of their gruesome work was accomplished in less than five minutes.

“Don’t be mad, Yuujin-san. My pyro is hard to control. Look, I’m not as talented as you are! Ah ha ha ha ha—ow.” The one called Blusterer, not at all sorry, continued to guffaw until he was prodded in the head by another Reincarnator. This was the Reincarnator in a black suit: Summoner.

“Blocks Four through Six have been successfully suppressed. We’ve opened a path to the Module. We will no longer need to entertain any insurrection from these barbarians. Let’s be on our way, Yuujin-sama. Our Hero.” The man in the black suit, Summoner, created several circles of light around them. One by one, the Reincarnators passed through the portals and disappeared.

“Yuujin-sama?”

Hero was not looking at Summoner. The body of the warrior he had vanquished earlier was thrown unceremoniously into a body bag by the black arm of a Support ape. Summoner looked at Hero’s face doubtfully, noticing that he’d watched the corpse be taken and seemed lost in thought. But soon Hero turned his head toward the sky.

“Yuujin-sama.” Summoner implied that Hero should hurry, and Hero smiled awkwardly.

“Right—let’s go. Project Re-Earth has begun.”

CHAPTER 3 — AEGISTHEIA

Dill gazed out the window. His eyes followed the shapeless clouds as they moved all the way across the deep blue noon sky.

How many years has it been since I looked up aimlessly at the sky like this? The curtains swayed in unison with his rusty hair, and the aroma that tickled his nostrils from time to time acted as an advertisement for the bakery that had recently opened around the corner.

Occasionally, as if he had just remembered it, he turned his gaze to the script in his lap. After flipping through a few of its musty pages, he closed the book again and looked back up at the sky.

Today's just the same. What I did yesterday, I'm repeating today. For the last two weeks, Dill hadn't held anything heavier than a plate. His arms were undeniably starting to lose muscle tone, but they had softened so slightly that only he could tell.

I'm getting old, he thought to himself, and smiled.

Tap, tap, came a knock on the door. It was so full of nerves that, even in the silent hospital room, Dill might have missed it.

"Come in. No, wait." Dill immediately contradicted himself. "Let me guess...judging by that restrained knock, you probably thought I was napping and didn't want to wake me. That's the knock of a kind lad."

The door slowly swung open. It was Sid, blushing and looking up at Dill with his head turned down.

"Master, cut it out." Sid felt like he might explode as he kept himself from smiling. His hair, which had continued to grow since they had arrived in Vulcan, was curly and rippled down to a point between the boy's shoulders and back. His posture was peculiar, with both hands hidden behind his back. From behind Sid's back wafted a strong fragrance of flowers.

"Master, I..." Sid stepped forward timidly. "...would like to congratulate you on your discharge from the hospital!" He thrust forward a colorful bouquet.

"Thank you. This is nice." As Dill took the bouquet, the sound of

whistling filled the room. A man convalescing in the same room, a deep gouge marking one side of his head, was smiling. A young man missing his right arm at the shoulder also gave Dill words of congratulations. A blind old man cracked a joke. The patient in the bed next to Dill's, a burn victim with bandages all over his body, had just arrived yesterday. He was silent. It was unlikely he'd still be in that bed tomorrow.

A total of five wounded in a hospital room meant for one. Every medical establishment in Vulcan had plenty of work these days. Outside the window was the blue sky of Vulcan where today, just as they had in the days before, the Reincarnators' bioweapons—flying Sphinxes—soared through the sky as if they owned the place.

Vulcan, the First City among the Eleven Cities of the North, had fallen. The fortress that had been considered impregnable, celebrated in song since the age of myth, had not been able to withstand a serious assault by the Reincarnators with their strange powers. A group of Reincarnators who said they belonged to the "Project," more organized in their movements than any enemy who had come before—Dill was told that they had attacked the city in his absence.

The decisive blow had come on the very day that Dill had returned to Vulcan. The moment that the great general Halberd, leader of the defensive forces, had emerged from the city to rescue Dill, the members of the Project had seized upon that opening with lightning speed.

After that single day, the Reincarnator occupation went from controlling only a fifth of the city to controlling half of its districts. On top of this, they had surrounded Ex Machina Amputation, the city's center and symbol, and invaded the temple.

"So you've lost your god," said Sid, gazing up at the center of the city. They walked along a wide road, passing a long line of citizens who had lost their homes and now waited for rations.

"What could they want with it? They don't even believe in gods." Sid was pushing the wheelchair in which Dill was seated. On Dill's knees were the flowers he had received earlier.

"After they surrounded Ex Machina Amputation, the Reincarnators ceased

their attack. It's almost as if their objective all along was to take the temple, and they just killed us and stole our bodies on the side. Although..."

Proceeding down the street, they saw another row of people who seemed to be at a loss. "For a side job, this is really going too far." The speed at which Sid pushed the wheelchair gradually slowed, then he stopped.

"I suppose we're going to lose. Is there nothing left for us...but death?" Sid's voice shook. Dill wanted to turn around and extend his hand to comfort the boy, but in his current state, with his legs still broken, the slightest movement was frustrating.

Instead he thrust out his chest and raised his voice, speaking with the heavy tone of an actor. "In all of history, no kingdom has prospered forever. No king has cheated death. The Ex Machina determined that all things must return to dust. Even the Ex Machina themselves are apparently no exception. That is how powerful destiny is."

"So, we are going to..."

"But I have no intention of letting everything end with your generation." Dill was assertive. "Death is an unavoidable fate, but there is no need to meet with that fate now. Young folk like you shouldn't be so burdened. That's what we adults are for."

Exhaling heavily, Dill took out the crutch resting under the flowers on his lap and stood it upright. Taking care not to put too much weight on his left leg, which hadn't yet fully healed, he tried to rise to his feet.

"I'm still on active duty. I'll participate in the initiative to take back the temple next week. I need to take responsibility for bringing you back to Vulcan under these circumstances."

"What?! Master, you can't!"

Dill smiled. "Of course I can. This is what I grew up to do. I'm sure you know this, but I am strong—and that's because I have something I need to defend. I'm not like the Reincarnators, with infinite lives and nothing to lose."

With his arms outstretched as he rambled on, Dill slumped back down into his wheelchair, which creaked loudly. Beads of sweat ran down the nape of his neck.

"Don't overdo it!"

"When I'm with you, I always want to show off." Dill looked uncommonly bashful. Sid's white eyebrows trembled two, three times.

“This is no joke...” Tears shone on his white eyelashes. Dill wondered if the hands Sid clasped so tightly in front of his chest had always been so pale, and he narrowed his eyes doubtfully. Sid stared back at him severely, but couldn’t stand up to Dill’s gaze.

“What?”

“It’s nothing...”

“Please don’t stare at me. It’s creepy.” Sid looked away as his cheeks grew red.

“For a moment, I thought...” Dill, as if thinking better of what he was about to say, shook his head. “Let’s go. We’re nearly home.” Dill started to turn the wheels of the wheelchair on his own, propelling himself forward. He clearly moved faster like this than he had when Sid was pushing him. Although they didn’t stand out when he was clothed, Dill’s arms were quite brawny. After a moment, Sid found himself about to be left behind.

“Look, Sid, it’s Nue. She’s waving to us.”

Dill’s house was about halfway up the hill in the center of Vulcan, where the colossal ruins of Ex Machina Amputation stood. In front of the tiny home, that had fortunately escaped being burned in battle, bounced a solitary shadow.

“Dill! Welcome home!” As they arrived in front of the gate, Nue leaped forward, but she effortlessly managed not to land on Dill’s legs. *What a good girl.*

“Congrats!”

“I’m home. Have you been waiting outside all day?”

“Course I have! I’ve been stuck outside all day! Now let me stick to you! Sticky—” Dill embraced Nue as she continued to happily spout nonsense and smiled as if she had tickled him. They both looked very happy. Sid, on the other hand, felt let down.

“Ah,” sighed Dill. His gaze went over and behind Nue. “Here comes the most beautiful woman in the world.”

The front door opened, and a woman with milky white hair stepped outside. Leaning against a wall, she crossed her arms languidly.

“So you’re back, you good-for-nothing.” The woman’s expression was hard and her tone was forceful, as if she was chewing each word and spitting it at Dill.

Sid swallowed nervously. This woman was Cirulia Steel-Link, Dill’s

wife. While Dill was hospitalized, she had looked after Sid and Nue. However, she hadn't come to see Dill even once. Whenever Dill was mentioned, she would show her displeasure without fail.

I wonder, what's about to happen here? This was the first time Sid had seen the two of them meet face-to-face.

Dill smiled as if he had just noticed her, and stretched both arms outward.
“Cirulia, I’ve missed you.”

“The feeling isn’t mutual.”



“Don’t be so cold. The whole reason I came back is that I wanted to see your face...”

“Hah. How laughable. Those injuries were just deserts, and don’t expect me to say I’m glad that you’ve healed. The problem with you is...”

“Liar!” Her red eyes flashing, Nue barged her way into the conversation. She wore her usual smile—slightly vulgar, but somehow innocent at the same time. Cheerful and overexcited, her body swayed from side to side.

“Actually, Cirulia and I were just preparing lunch. We were talking about how we have to feed Dill lots of nutritious food so he can get better soon.”

“Is that right?” Dill looked at his wife with a relieved expression. Cirulia let out a sigh, shrugged her shoulders in exasperation, and smiled.

“Why would you tell him that, Nue? You spoiled my fun. Besides, he *needs* a good scolding.” Cirulia broke into a smile, as if the indifference she had shown until a moment ago had all been an act. After grabbing a hold of Nue and patting her on the head, she walked up to Dill. Then, she threw her shoulder against him with such force that everyone expected to hear a crashing sound before leaning against him.

“You idiot... No matter what I say, you won’t understand. You nearly died and didn’t learn a thing! I waited so long for you to come home, I thought I might go crazy. For years and years, I checked every line of the newspaper’s list of war casualties every single day, and felt so relieved when I had made sure your name wasn’t among them. How do you think that felt? The whole time you were away, Iris and I lived that way together. And now I don’t even have Iris to keep me company. I was left all alone...and now I’m just an old lady.” Her voice trembling, Cirulia gripped Dill’s shoulders tightly.

Dill replied, “No, you’re still beautiful. You haven’t changed in twenty-four years. You’re just as radiant as you were when I met you in that alley all those years ago.” Dill’s answer was no answer at all. He had made no promises. The words Cirulia had hoped to hear, however, were not among his words.

“You idiot,” Cirulia repeated. “You idiot.”

Sid and Nue looked up at the two embracing adults. Nue, who had been left idle as a result, also wanted attention, and pointed to herself, saying, “Am I a beautiful woman too?”

“Yes, you certainly are,” Dill replied generously.

“You will be, anyway,” said Cirulia, forcing a smile. Tears sparkled upon

her closed eyelashes. Nue turned around and ran up to Sid.

“Congrats to you too, Sid! Beautiful! A beautiful woman!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Sid laughed.

“Let’s eat. It certainly has been a while since I’ve been back here, though. My beautiful wife, adorable children, food cooked with love, my beautiful wife, and on top of that, my beautiful wife... You’re irresistible.”

Cirulia snorted with laughter. “Hah. Are you stupid? Let me tell you—your room is gone. Sid is using it now, so tonight you can sleep on the couch. The master bedroom, of course, belongs to me and Nue now. No boys allowed.”

“Beauty punch! Beauty punch!” Nue teased Dill. She still wanted his attention.

“Ha ha ha, your jokes are as cruel as ever, Cirulia. Hm? Hey, don’t tell me you were being serious... I’m a wounded man...”

“U-Um, Master. I feel sorry for you, so you can sleep with me if you want...”

“I won’t allow it,” said Cirulia in a deep voice.

“Huh?”

“I won’t. Allow it.” Cirulia’s voice was even deeper.

“H-Huh? Why not? We’re both guys, so it’s fine, isn’t it...?”

“Yippee, that’s gay!”

“Y-You’re wrong! It’s not like that. I’m just...grateful to Master for saving me so many times. To be like him is my life’s goal. I respect...that’s right, I *respect* him. Aah, not you too, Master! Why are you making that weird face?”

Cirulia prodded Dill. “He’s inviting you to share his bed. You’re pretty close considering how little time you’ve known each other, eh? You’ve even made him grow his hair out like a girl. How about taking some responsibility?”

“...That sounds like abuse.” Dill put his hand over his face. He looked truly chagrined. “That’s what we would call child abuse, you know.”

“Really...that’s not what I meant...”

“Awww, no gay stuff?”

The children both looked despondent. Cirulia burst into laughter, holding her stomach.

“Hey, hey, Dill. Forget about that! Nue has been saving something special

for today...huh? Dill?" Nue noticed that Dill was staring at a particular corner in the garden. There didn't seem to be anything unusual about it.

"What's wrong?"

"I was just thinking how lively you all are." Dill smiled ambiguously. Cirulia understood what this meant, and a shadow fell over her expression.

"...Let's go. Just as Nue said when she snitched on you, lunch is ready. Let's eat. Together."

The children didn't understand at all—there was nothing in the place Dill had been staring at. The garden was small and cramped, but even so, apart from that spot there were flowers and small trees growing everywhere. But that corner caught the sun just right, which made it the prime location in the garden. It was there that, one day, Dill would bury Iris's body when he finally retrieved it. He had set it aside to serve as the girl's final resting place.

The corridor was adorned with iron and rust. Hot air roiled along its length, and noises sounded without end, sometimes near and sometimes far. Ventilation fans whirred in their struggle to expel the humid air. Between the walls, a conveyor. Together with the expressionless sounds of machinery, hurried footsteps came rolling in.

Swaying lanterns cast their bearers' shadows onto the wall, and onto the ceiling crowded with pipes. The men were armed. But they now threw down the weapons meant for their protection, lightening their load before fleeing. From behind came the sound of an explosion, and then another. With a definite rhythm, the sound grew closer. The source of this sound, resembling footsteps, in actuality came from someone using her Skill to accelerate her run.

She crouched down by a corner. The joints in her armor, through which LED light spilled out, creaked as hot air blasted out. Then, she jumped, landing on the wall. Ignoring gravity for a moment, she took five steps along the wall and three across the ceiling before running to the opposite wall and back to the floor. She maintained a full sprint the entire way.

As the men fled they looked over their shoulders—and then their faces all froze. She was already right behind them.

"Repeater'!"

“Barbarians. I will enlighten you.” The woman’s voice was clearly filtered through a machine. The Reincarnator known as “Repeater” swept the legs of one of the Vulcan soldiers out from under him, slamming him into the ground.

“A C-class body. So much useless fat.” After delivering a kick to the back of the fallen man’s head, rendering him unconscious, Repeater howled in frustration. “Where is the man in chain mail?!”

“Damn you!” One of the fleeing soldiers had recklessly decided to stop. He wielded the last sword he had on him, the one he hadn’t thrown away, and charged forward to attack Repeater. The slender Reincarnator, clad in close-fitting armor from another world, was already upon him.

Right, right, left, left, right, left. A series of six blows broke his blade, then his ribs, and finally his skull. Repeater snorted.

“Weakling. I’ll leave the rest of the small fry to you guys so you can add to your kill rate.” Catching up to the now stationary Repeater, a Reincarnator using psychokinesis flew into view. Wearing the same kind of reinforced exoskeleton as Repeater, he used his Skill to levitate ten centimeters above the floor, moving at high speed while sliding through the air.

Watching her subordinate slaughter the native people out of the corner of her eye, Repeater looked back at the small band who had lagged behind. The backup personnel, Reincarnators armed with guns and polycarbonate shields, were of course all equipped with the same slender, reinforced exoskeletons.

“What were the results of your probe? Has the mapping progressed?” On her right arm, the imposing Repeater wore a glowing armband identifying her as the leader of this platoon. “We’ve sacrificed quite a lot to progress this far. We can’t return empty-handed now.”

“We’ve achieved seventy percent of our target. It’s actually going quite well.” A Reincarnator with a goggle over one eye spoke up. “Our ranking has also increased. We’re fourth place in the current week, and if we return now without any losses we could climb as high as second. Perhaps we should get out while we’re ahead?”

“Second place! A new record for our team!” The Reincarnator in charge of body retrieval laughed.

“You’re too hasty. Don’t count your chickens before they’ve hatched.” Repeater kicked away the dead and unconscious natives lying before her with the toe of her boot. Her subordinates held their tongues and swiftly went to

work. Bringing two body bags surely wouldn't take too long.

"We won't be withdrawing. We have come to the front lines, to the Module, for the sake of the whole Project—not to collect points. Our platoon will continue to expand the extent of our mapping data and support the reinforcements."

The oppressive corridor was strewn with exposed plumbing. From time to time the Reincarnators passed such facilities as processing plants and service elevators. This was all one gigantic factory—the Reincarnators called it the Module, while the native people referred to it as the interior of the god they worshipped, Ex Machina Amputation. It served as the center of Vulcan of the Eleven Cities. Following the Reincarnators' victory in the recent battles inside the city's walls, the fight for Vulcan had moved inside the Module.

Within Repeater's field of vision stood a holographic window whose functions had been turned off during combat. Now, it displayed a three-dimensional image of the corridor she had passed through, along with a blueprint predicting the structure of the adjacent areas. A blue point of light moving through the map represented a division of friendly troops, currently engaged in battle. Finally, running through it all, the unexplored area at the center of the Module still shrouded in mystery... One of her subordinates, who possessed the Skill to see through walls, constantly scanned the area and sent new geographical data, which was used to update the map in real time.

"We anticipated this before capturing the Module, but this structure's design is quite unusual, isn't it?" muttered the soldier with a goggle over one eye. The goggle's three lenses, reminiscent of a microscope, revolved silently. "Our previous blueprints won't be of any use..."

"On top of that, we have to deal with the barbarians squatting here. Prepare yourself—more of them are coming."

A point of light within the hologram was moving vertically at high speed, approaching their position. The light was red, indicating enemy intruders. From the direction and speed of their movement, it was clear that they must be using the service elevator intended for move resources.

Designated as essential combat personnel, Repeater readied her fists. Behind her, two subordinates held up their guns and shields. They were joined by the psychokinesis user, back from his massacre, who now stood beside Repeater. These four Reincarnators, standing in flawless formation, glared at the doors to the elevator.

“I shouldn’t have to say this, but don’t shoot them immediately. Not only will that damage the bodies, but bullets aren’t exactly free either. At least, not until we take back the Module.”

The low hum of the elevator gradually faded to silence. It was replaced by an increase in the noise generated by ventilation fans. The doors opened. The enemy who emerged from the elevator was two sizes larger still than Repeater and her subordinates had imagined.

“My name is Halberd.” Unable to wait for the doors to open all the way, he pushed them apart farther with arms like great tree trunks. The top of his head, which brushed against the ceiling, shone in innocent anticipation of the impending slaughter. It stood in grotesque contrast to his face, which bore the deep wrinkles of maturity.

The shape-shifting lump of iron he held was so massive that it broke several sections of the wall and ceiling as he assumed his battle stance. The chain mail cloak hanging down his back also clanged against the corridor as if irritated by its narrowness, roaring like a waterfall.

Left, right, right, left, right, left—Repeater unleashed her lethal volley of six strikes! There was nowhere to retreat to in the narrow corridor, but the descendant of giants took the blows in stride with a smile.

“How uncouth. I was in the middle of introducing myself!” As Halberd stepped forward to run over Repeater, the psychokinesis user stepped between them. The power of his Skill started to lift Halberd’s body—but he was too heavy to move very far!

The giant roared with laughter and slammed his iron weapon down upon the Reincarnator, flinging shards of his reinforced exoskeleton everywhere.

Right, right, left, left, right, left! Another volley of six punches from Repeater. This second attack, following the sacrifice of her subordinate, was successful. After all, it had come with a plan. The giant, Halberd, was floating two centimeters from the ground as a result of her subordinate’s Skill. Absent the influence of gravity, she could move him no matter what he weighed. The six strikes pushed Halberd back, slamming him into the elevator he had come out of. Following him inside, Repeater hit the down button and cried, “Withdraw, and take the physical data back to base! For the Project!”

“Such self-sacrifice...I’m getting emotional. Or I would be, if you bastards didn’t have infinite lives. What a pointless farce.” Halberd looked down at

Repeater with cold eyes. “I’ll tell you this for free. I’ve deployed my soldiers at the other end of that corridor. We planned a pincer attack. In any case, I won’t let you return alive.” Halberd grabbed Repeater’s head and pressed her against a wall. Following the elevator’s descent, the exposed wall ground against the armor on her back. Her helmet, grasped with inhuman strength, blared an internal alarm that sounded like screaming. Repeater gritted her teeth and withstood the pain.

“It won’t be an easy death. If you’re just going to be revived anyway, you should suffer terribly first.”

It wasn’t clear how long this situation lasted, but it was likely quite short. The floating sensation disappeared and the elevator doors opened. With a carefully aimed release of her Skill, Repeater kicked Halberd in the chest, flying away with the recoil. She tumbled out into a wide space where red light illuminated the darkness. This was the corridor connected to the blast furnace.

Repeater tossed aside her warped helmet, exposing her half-skinned face in all its terrible glory.

“Come at me, barbarian! Even if I should lose, you can oblige me with some data to collect!”

The advancing Halberd’s expression caught the red light from below, glowing fiercely. The distance between them shrank swiftly. Spraying sparks, the shape-shifting part of his iron mace slid open, revealing a thick blade. The giant lump of iron had transformed into a vast battle-axe!

And then, the charging Halberd suddenly stopped in his tracks as an unnatural shimmer appeared in the air in front of him. As if shielding Repeater from Halberd, a hole opened in midair with a rainbow glowing around its edge. Out of it, a single Reincarnator appeared.

Clad in iron armor, at a glance Halberd might have taken him for a soldier of Redguard. His blond hair glittered in the firelight. However, his face was terribly pale. Combined with this melancholy expression, this made him look more like a ghost than anything else.

“What...are you doing here?” Repeater was shocked. For those in the know, this was understandable.

“I made the decision to come and save those of you who dedicated yourself to the Project without considering the opinions of the inner circle...even though you tried to overthrow me. Go. Retreat through that gate.

Reincarnators can revive, but we shouldn't experience the pain and terror of death needlessly."

"Hero... Eugene...!" Halberd's lips curled upward in a smile. Repeater hesitated for a moment, but soon nodded and turned toward the gate.

"Good luck in battle!" The teleportation gate closed. Although the Reincarnator he was pursuing had just escaped him, Halberd resolved to ignore this completely. His gaze turned solely toward Hero, and his voice raised in excitement.

"Well, this is an honor. A rare talent among the maggots, and a general who inspires courage in them. The Hero of the Reincarnators, Eugene... So you've finally decided to meet me in single combat?"

"Single combat, just like Ajax and Hector in Book Seven of the Iliad... That wasn't my intention, but I don't mind reenacting it." Hero opened a small teleportation gate within reach, pulled out a spear, and readied it. "As the strongest fighters of the Project and Vulcan respectively, let's decide the war with this duel."

The atmosphere in the room was tense. Bones and sinews creaked in Halberd's great body, while Hero emitted the telltale signs of a Skill about to activate.

The tension could have been cut with a knife, but instead it was broken by the giant's ominous laugh.

"You're mistaken! You think I am the strongest fighter in Vulcan? Gah...gah hah hah hah! Wrong! So wrong, Eugene! Defeating me, Halberd, will not change the tides of war. Once I fall, a stronger warrior will still be waiting in the wings." After saying this, he laughed again in a high voice.

"Do you mean the Hero of the Holy War, Aegisthus?" asked Hero carefully, without relaxing his stance. Obsession and impatience surfaced on his pale, melancholy face.

"Indeed," said Halberd, nodding. "The one I raised as my own son, and who surpassed me."

"Tell me, where is Aegisthus?" Hero's voice swelled with murderous intent.

Halberd smiled and drew out his lump of iron. Pulling a chain attached to it, the shape-shifting mechanism activated, and a blade at its tip started turning awkwardly.

"If you want to know, you have no choice...but to defeat me!"

“Tell me your name, O warrior—your name and your lineage. Whether you win or lose, future generations should hear you praised in a manner befitting a great hero.”

Halberd laughed even harder. He just couldn’t hate this man who called himself Hero.

“My name is Halberd! I swore an oath of victory to the god of war, renouncing my parents and my bloodline! There are no ancestors preceding me, and I am followed only by standards fluttering in the wind above my battle brigade. And I am the father of the hero Aegisthus himself!”

“A marvelous introduction. Let us begin.” Hero blasted flames from his foot after stomping on the ground, and Halberd’s shape-shifting mace started whirring faster. Then, they clashed.

He dreamed—a dream of riding on a big boat. The boat was full of passengers, and many more people watched them leave from the harbor. There were so, so many people—people leaving, and people left behind. They all regretted parting until the last moment; some actually got off the boat right before it left.

Sid was also upset and tried to jump off himself, but someone grabbed him by the shoulder. *You can’t go back. We have to leave. There’s no home for us to return to anymore.* A woman’s voice. Clear, and quite strong-willed. In the meantime the ship had already set sail. The coast receded farther and farther into the distance. But it was not the coast, in fact, as the ship was sailing not across the ocean but through the sky, leaving the ground far behind. What would come next?

Nothing. He was overcome with an intense feeling of exhaustion. This was in spite of the fact that he was already dreaming. Feeling tired inside a dream was just strange.

Sid awoke, tears running down his cheeks.

It was early in the morning, and pale light streamed in through the window. Inside the house all was silent; probably no one else was awake yet. Sid tried to go back to sleep, but he couldn’t. He was already wide awake.

Sid got up from his bed. Around him, shelves crammed with old books covered two of the walls. Most of the volumes lining the shelves were either

epic poems or old plays. This was Dill's room, and Sid was only borrowing it. Of course, Dill wasn't here right now. He was instead sleeping with Cirulia in their bedroom.

Taking care not to make any noise, Sid headed to the bathroom. He turned the tap and the water flowed. Running water and the sewer system were a particular feature of Vulcan of the Eleven Cities, said to come from the favor of the gods. It felt strange to not have to draw water from a well, and Sid still wasn't used to it.

After he had finished washing his face, he looked into the mirror. Reflected there was a pale, unfamiliar girl.

"Hey, hurry up and tell me already. Who are you?" Sid blinked a few times. The girl was still there. She was certainly not his reflection. On the other side of the mirror, she looked uncomfortable and averted her eyes. Gradually, the vision changed back into Sid's own image.

Ever since the day that a Reincarnator's blood had been injected into him, he saw the same hallucination each time he looked in a mirror. He had tried many times to communicate with her, but it was all to no avail. Sid sighed and fidgeted with his hair while staring into the mirror. His white hair had grown long—he was getting close to his goal. Running his fingers through his long locks and adjusting their style, he tried to find that man's visage within his own.

If Master knew there was a Reincarnator inside me, would he kill me? Sid recalled a thought he had tried to put out of his mind. He cast that doubt away immediately, returned his focus to the mirror, and sighed. *It's no good. I don't look anything like him.*

Somewhere nearby—shockingly close by, in fact—there was a creaking sound. In the mirror, Sid saw a pair of red eyes peering over his shoulder and was so surprised he thought his heart might stop.

"It's me...sleepy Nue..." Her voice was lazy, her eyes half-open. Nue walked up beside Sid and started to splash water on her face.

"Wh-When did you...I didn't hear you coming at all!" Had she been listening or not? Her red eyes were still clouded with dreams. After scrubbing her face clean with a towel, she stopped and sniffed it.

"This towel smells like you, Sid." Sid's face turned bright red. "Well, I'm going back to bed. Wake me up next year, 'kay?"

"Are you a hibernating bear?" Watching Nue stumble away perilously,

Sid heard another noise. After exchanging a brief word with Nue, Dill appeared. He still had on the hair tie he wore while he slept. Looking at Sid with a surprised expression at first, this soon softened to a smile.

“Sid, you too, huh? Good morning. You’re always up early, aren’t you?”

“Master! Good morning.” Sid’s back straightened like a rod. “I was raised in a blacksmith’s shop. My father...always started work early. Also, I had a strange dream this morning.”

“Oh, I know what you mean. Me too. Look, my shirt is soaked with sweat. Gross, huh?” Dill shrugged, and headed to the shower room next to the bathroom. On his way there he turned around. “That’s right. Sid, since you’re up so early, how about we go for a walk after I’ve showered?”

The day had not yet broken. The town still slept in silence. The sun had not yet risen over the eastern ridge of the Fanged Mountains. At this time, with stars still scattered across half the sky, few people came and went. Sid felt like the last person in the world.

Dill walked stolidly in front. It seemed impossible, but his broken legs already seemed to have healed completely, even though his injuries had been so terrible.

From time to time, Dill looked back at Sid. Today he was clearly in high spirits.

“Hey, Sid. Isn’t it about time you cut your hair? It’s a nuisance, right?” asked Dill, grinning.

“How many times do I have to tell you? I’m not cutting it. In fact, I want to grow it a bit longer.”

“I see. In that case, shall I give you my hair tie? Actually, it would probably be better to get you a new one. We should be able to find one somewhere around here...”

“Don’t be silly.” Sid giggled. “How about you, Master? Why did you grow your hair so long? Doesn’t it get in the way when you fight?” He had been wanting to ask Dill that question for some time.

As if he had been waiting for it all along, Dill answered. “I have many reasons. The first one is so that I can stand out.”

“What? That’s so shallow!”

“It’s not shallow! It’s very important. To an actor, it’s a matter of life and death. On top of that—” Dill’s tone changed. “In the thick of battle, enemies

will be drawn to me instead of my comrades.” The wind blew past with the morning chill, and two manes of long hair swayed in the breeze. Their footsteps echoed loudly.

“War is a terrible thing. I’ve had to leave more than one ally to die. And when I didn’t have to do that, I had to kill our enemies instead. Whatever you do, people will die. But if someone *has* to die, I’d rather it be my enemy than someone close to me. Having to make those judgments is truly terrible.”

With his eyebrows raised, Sid looked up at Dill. *Why is he telling me this? We were having such a nice time. It was so peaceful. Finally getting out of the house, just the two of us, in secret. I was excited. That’s all spoiled now.*

“This isn’t the time of epic poems anymore. The methods of war have changed, and so have our ethics. The heroes of the Golden Age weren’t tormented by guilt after slaying their enemies. They never thought that they should have died themselves instead. They never woke up, years later, with nightmares of the battlefield.” Dill gazed at an olive grove planted ahead. “The superhuman heroes I always looked up to belong to the distant past. The truth is...these days, there are no more heroes.”

Sid contradicted him. “But wasn’t there a hero named Aegisthus in the Empire?”

“He’s a false hero,” spat Dill. He then turned around, crouched down to Sid’s height and looked him in the eyes. “You know, Sid—I’m pleased. You want to be like me. You look up to me. You even call a murderer like me a hero.”

You murderer. Sid had indeed once called Dill that. However... “That was...at that time...I still hadn’t...!”

Shh. Dill held his index finger up to his lips and winked, but his expression was sad. “I know. It’s fine. But you were absolutely right. I’ve never been able to forgive myself. Back before the Reincarnators arrived, during the Holy War, the opponents I killed were just regular people. They weren’t our enemies. My role was agitation—I would infiltrate deep inside enemy fortresses and incite the slaves and prisoners of war to riot. Do you understand, Sid? My instigation even caused children like you to take up arms and charge straight into enemy lines.” Dill extended a hand to put on Sid’s shoulder, but stopped short. It was the same gesture as always, but he hesitated at the last moment as if his hand had spasmed, then slowly let it drop.

“Sid, don’t end up like me.”

“What? What do you mean?”

Dill stood up and, as if fleeing, turned his back to Sid. He resumed walking quickly.

“Are you telling me I was wrong to take my courage from you? That it wasn’t real? That I was mistaken?” Sid was upset. He shouted, “I’ll never cut my hair! Never!” With great, stomping strides he came up beside Dill, glaring at him with his cheeks puffed out. Behind his eyes, Dill felt his tear ducts ache. But Dill was an actor after all. He shoved his feelings down behind a calm, expressionless face.

Sid, who had no way of knowing what was in Dill’s heart, asked bluntly, “So? Where are we going?”

“We’re going to meet a real hero.”

Sid was suspicious. People like that surely didn’t exist these days—Dill had said so himself.

“Do you remember the play I starred in a while back? The story of the hero, Prodotis?”

Sid nodded. Prodotis—back at the ruined temple by the Bronze Route, where refugees had camped, Dill had played the role of a hero who had challenged the gods.

“His grave is in this neighborhood. Well, I say that, but of course Prodotis isn’t actually buried there. It’s only a monument to him.”

Up a hill, beneath a viaduct on the incline, and past an empty street bearing the marks of the recent war, the path finally came to a stop. On an overhang jutting out from the great hill Vulcan stood upon was a small olive grove and shrine.

“Here we are. Isn’t this a beautiful view?” It was just as Dill said. If one stood with one’s back to the hill, there was nothing blocking the sight of the Vulcan Crater. The sun was noticeably higher in the sky than it had been when they had left the house. It shone so brightly on the ridge of the mountains that Sid had to squint.

Dill walked up to the mountain, then beckoned Sid over. “Let us offer a prayer. Prodotis was the son of Ex Machina Coward. This monument is dedicated to Coward as well. Now, first let us cleanse our hands in water.”

Sid followed Dill’s instructions obediently.

“O God of the sun, who announces the start of a new day and watches

over the toil of men.”

“O God of the sun, who announces the start of a new day and watches over the toil of men.” Sid repeated the prayer after Dill.

“And also your son the king, whose heroism in battle never faltered, though he was of mortal flesh.”

“And also your son the king, whose heroism in battle never faltered, though he was of mortal flesh.”

“Throughout this day, please grant safety to us children of men.”

“Throughout this day, please grant safety to us children of men.”

Their voices carried very well in the cool air of the early morning, which was itself refreshing.

“Welcome home!!! Pay attention to me!” The first to welcome them home was the red-eyed Nue, who leaped forward to meet them. After ruffling Sid’s hair, she climbed all over Dill’s great body as if he were a tree.

“Nue, there’s something about you...” Sid looked up at Nue with a slightly resentful expression. Nue, who had clambered all the way up to the top of Dill’s shoulders, looked down at Sid inquisitively, without a hint of malice. *She is cute though, this girl. She’s like a black bunny rabbit.*

“You’re just like a monkey,” is what Sid actually said out loud, while turning his red face away from the sight.

“A monkey! Ook ook eek! I’m Nue the monkey!”

“Aaaaah, you’re coming back down?!”

With tears in his eyes, Sid was chased around by the delighted Nue.

“Oh, Sid. You speak too carelessly.” Cirulia appeared, taking off her apron. “Welcome home. Did you two boys enjoy your tryst?”

“Cirulia, recently you’ve started to talk like Nue.”

“Ook, eek! I’m so eek-cited! Eeek!”

“Noooo, this is sexual harassment!”

“I was startled this morning. When I woke up, who should I find clinging to me? Not you, but Nue. I did think it was strange to receive such a passionate embrace from you so early in the morning.”

“I’m sorry, so please stop bullying me. Sid and I happened to wake up at the same time, so I thought we’d have some fun. I figured we could wait until

mama wasn't looking and sneak out of the house. What can I call it besides a man's sense of adventure?"

"Ook ook eeeek!"

"Nooooooooo!"

"Fine, fine. I don't need to hear excuses. Where's your proof that you're sorry?"

"Right here."

Cirulia was leaning against the wall with her arms crossed. Dill bent down and kissed her after she turned her head to one side, offering her cheek. Right next to them, Sid was in Nue's clutches. As she rubbed her cheek against his, he turned steadily redder, both from friction and embarrassment. His face looked like it might burst into flame at any moment.

"Very good. Now, then, Nue, that's enough. If you haven't played enough, you can play with Dill instead. Good girl. Dill, take her to the town square or somewhere."

"Eeek?!" Nue's sparkling red eyes now turned toward Dill.

"I don't mind that, but what about breakfast? What, you and Nue already ate? But I haven't yet..."

"Ook! Eeeeeeeeek!"

"Here you go, Sid. This is your share." On the dining table in front of Sid was a piece of bread and a bottle of milk.

"...Thanks." Cirulia also made some tea for herself before sitting down across from Sid, who tore off a bit of bread and chewed it. Cirulia focused her attention on him and smiled. *I can't eat like this...* Sid thought. He had not yet opened up to Cirulia Steel-Link as much as he had to Dill and Nue. "Um..." Unable to stand the silence, he spoke up. "I feel like it was a bit harsh not to give Master any breakfast."

"You're too soft on him, Sid."

Cirulia was clearly having fun watching Sid try to explain himself.

It's not like that... Sid thought to himself.

"I'm in the habit of bullying him whenever he annoys me..." Cirulia went on. "Anyway, he's not a kid, so he can easily buy something to eat in the town square, right?"

"Is your relationship in trouble?"

"Um, not really?"

What a strange couple, thought Sid, and apparently it showed on his face.

“How about you, Sid? Did you get along with your mom and dad?” Cirulia asked with a smile. Sid’s hand stopped dead as it was bringing the bread to his mouth. Cirulia didn’t miss the change in Sid’s eyes, and as if she had anticipated that, she widened her smile. She did this to encourage Sid—to give him courage.

“Are you okay? You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“It’s fine...” Memories. The sights still fresh in his mind. A Reincarnator forcing his way into their house. Killing his father, his mother, and injecting them with something. His mother being taken away, and his father rising up from the floor only to try and kill Sid... In that moment, Dill had come.

Noticing that his breathing was shallow, Sid took a deep breath to calm himself. This had been among the speaking exercises Dill had taught him. By breathing in deeply, then slowly breathing out, you could gradually return to your senses.

It’s okay. I’m okay.

“My...father and...my mother...” Sid shut his eyes tightly as tears leaked out from between his eyelids. “...were a very happy couple.”

Sid then began to share his story. He told her how his mother had been born in the Imperial City, Aspro Terea, just like Dill and Cirulia had. How she had been a very refined woman, and how even as a child Sid had thought his father, a blacksmith, to be unsuitable for her. How his taciturn father had been fifteen years older than his mother, so to Sid he had seemed more like a grandfather than a father. How both of them had been very strict in their discipline, merciless even, but in spite of this Sid did not hate them.

Cirulia, who had sunk deep in her chair with her arms folded while listening to Sid, finally opened her mouth to speak. “You’re able to talk about this quite objectively, aren’t you, Sid?”

“Is...that right?” This observation was unexpected. Sid didn’t know what to make of it.

“When you need to, I mean. I take it that your mom and dad didn’t indulge you as Dill does? Instead, they more often yelled at you—or hit you. Despite that, you won’t speak ill of them. I don’t think many children your age could manage that so easily.”

“I can’t speak ill of people I’ll never see again.”

“You’re very grown up. Of course, you had to grow up fast, didn’t you...” Cirulia crossed her legs with her feet up on the table. “Tell me, Sid, what do

you want to do from now on?”

This was a sudden question. Cirulia did not make eye contact as she posed it.

“What...do I want?”

“Very soon, the men of this city will band together to attack the Reincarnators. Dill and I are both prepared for any outcome. But what about you kids? I at least want you two to have the chance to do the things you want...”

In place of clouds, the Reincarnators’ organic drones floated in the calm blue sky, surveying the paper-thin peace. At a glance the Vulcan Crater appeared to be uninhabited, but each time a citizen stepped out into the open, the machines in the sky raised the alarm, sending in Reincarnators.

The Reincarnators who had stood against Dill upon his recent return had also been deployed under this system of surveillance. At this time, escape from Vulcan was impossible.

“Master will win. Just like he saved me, he will save this city too.”

“...That’s not possible. He’s not a hero.”

“He is to me!” Sid was furious. Cirulia looked at him with a pained expression. “What I want is to become strong like Master—to train a lot and kill many Reincarnators! To avenge my father and mother! To repay Master...”

“Do you think that’s what Dill wants from you children?”

Sid had no response to this and fell quiet.

“As an actor, he finds that a lot of people come to like him...but he is very often misunderstood. Sometimes he’s so immersed in his acting that he himself can’t tell the difference between his role and his own mind. Sid, I want you to know the real Dill.”

The conversation had taken an unexpected turn, and Cirulia continued to talk.

“When Dill was young, he was, to look at him now, incomparably...beautiful. The first time I saw him onstage, he was perfect. So fine-featured you could hardly tell if he was a man or a woman. Every audience fell under his spell... He was a star. At the time, I was just another one of his adoring fans...”

How long had they spoken? There was a sound at the door. Two voices resounded, announcing their return. Sid was nervous. *Dill is back. Dill West...*

The first to appear was Nue, dressed in some long-hemmed period clothing. Her eyebrows were raised as she presented a smug face in profile.

“It is I, Nue—theatrical edition!” This line fell flat with Sid. “...Is that any sort of a reaction?” Nue turned her head to him with a feigned look of seriousness.

“W-Wow! Amazing! Where did you get that gorgeous outfit?!” Sid knew his acting was terrible, but Nue didn’t seem to mind.

“Heh heh heh. You mean this? This is my costume for the play we’re putting on later. How does it look? Does it suit me? Does it? Does it? Isn’t it perfect?!”

“It suits you. You look cute!”

“Heh...heh heh heh! You’re making me blush! You really, really are!” Nue looked positively lovestruck, arching her back and blushing all over. Dill appeared from behind her. His presence was heavy in the room, and his gravity drew every gaze to him. But according to Cirulia, this was only a shadow of the brilliance he had once possessed.

“Sorry, everyone. I only went to check things out, but Nue said she wanted to change into her costume right away. She ended up putting it on when we visited the theater.”

“I’ve got brand new clothes! Sideways peace sign!” Apparently very enamored with her new costume, Nue struck a series of poses.

“Oh, that looks lovely. Will everyone in the chorus be dressed like that?” Cirulia also looked pleased.

“That’s right. There’ll be twenty tiny ones like Nue, all lined up onstage and singing. Isn’t that great?”



“So you like little girls?” Cirulia clicked her tongue, but not unhappily. Dill was not deterred.

“Of course—every father in the world likes little girls. Just look how cute they are.”

“How cute I am! P is for peace! My name is Nue! It’s written with the characters for ‘coloring book’!” With a peaceful smile stretched across her face, she nuzzled against Dill, who took her playfulness in stride in spite of his injured legs. He really was her papa.

The arrogant, aloof, godlike boy Cirulia had spoken of in her recollections was nowhere to be found.

He despairs, you know—thinking of how many years he’s aged, and how he’s completely changed from the man he used to be. Cirulia’s words came back to Sid. That might be why he loves you children so much. He can remember when he was young like you. You could even say he worships you, like the gods.

Gods. Nue and I might be like gods to him.

Perhaps I was once a god to father and mother... Dill said something and clapped a hand down on Sid’s shoulder. This snapped Sid back to reality. His face turning red, he burst into laughter at Dill’s joke and his own inattention.

The street outside was lively, with the sound of pipes floating into the clear sky like smoke. The final festival of Vulcan, the ancient city of the god of the forge, was beginning.

At the sharp sound of quickly approaching footsteps, Yuujin raised his eyes from his paperback. A young woman with blonde hair and a good complexion noticed him and stopped in her tracks. Her face was bright red with rage, and her shoulders moved up and down as she breathed heavily. *This girl is no Reincarnator. It would be impossible for a Reincarnator, whose veins circulate artificial blood, to have so much color in their face.*

As a result of making eye contact with Yuujin, the meaning of the girl’s flushed face had changed. After an awkward cough and a bow in Yuujin’s direction, she averted her eyes and left. The guards escorting her followed.

After waiting for the footsteps to fade away completely, Yuujin marked his place in the book and closed it. He entered the room the girl had come

from—a short, cylindrical corridor. Beyond it was Halberd.

“What did you say to her?” Yuujin closed the circular airlock behind him.
“She was crying.”

“How gratifying. Serves her right, don’t you think? Gah hah hah!” The giant laughed with a sound like a boulder creaking. The chains binding him jangled in time with his laughter. In the enclosed space, the sound was painfully loud. In the interior of Ex Machina Amputation, this space—more of a corridor than a room—had been designated as a cell for a reason. The cramped conditions were claustrophobic even for Yuujin, and they would rob a prisoner of the will to escape. Since he had been confined here, though, there had been no sign of a struggle in the giant’s attitude.

“Don’t speak so callously. Electra is still only a teenager. She didn’t come to persuade you of her own will—it was decided by the Mainland. She had no other choice.”

Electra Terea Decatos. After the Terean Empire had fallen to the Reincarnators, she was chosen to administer its successor state, the New Terean Republic. For now, she was the head of state.

Halberd snorted. “The last in line to inherit the throne, and on top of that the daughter of a concubine. You chose well. She’s a very convenient puppet to serve as the ruler of your colony.” After spitting out these words, Halberd didn’t give the unfortunate girl another thought. The giant’s eyes narrowed into crescents as he sneered. “So, Eugene the Hero, my friend. Just as promised, I’ve bought us some time. It should be a little while until the next interrogation, so I’ll talk through the night if you want. Now show me your face. Come closer. Come now, closer...to me!” Halberd’s eyes shone dangerously. The gentle smile on his face was clearly counterfeit. Suddenly, the fivefold chains binding the giant had started to look flimsy.

“I’m just fine over here. I probably don’t need to remind you, but even if you should break those chains, I’ll only seize you again. Don’t bother.”

“Just so, just so. You *are* even stronger than me...but in the time it will take you to catch me, I’ll probably tear the heads off of ten, perhaps twenty of the Reincarnators who come to reinforce you—just like in our previous battle. Gah hah hah hah!”

With a weary expression, Hero shook his head. “Surely you know that I didn’t have you drive Electra away so we could pit our egos against each other. Heroes...I want to know about the heroes of this world.”

Halberd's belligerent expression disappeared. "You're a strange man, Eugene. To think you, a Reincarnator, would show such interest in us. Don't you all call Redguard a land of savages whom the light of science has not yet reached? Are you not warriors of Enlightenment, here to grant true knowledge to us deluded barbarians? After all, the culture of Redguard is mere child's play, based on fallacies. Didn't you come here to share your scientific, efficient, rational culture with us?"

Hero grimaced in response to Halberd's sarcastic tone. "Don't think Reincarnators are all the same. As a group grows larger in number, inevitably some among them will break free of their collective delusion, just like I did."

"Despite standing out from the group, you've killed more of my brothers than any other Reincarnator."

"Don't say that."

The giant gazed keenly at the Reincarnator. "Say, Eugene. What in the world troubles you so? You seem to fear winning as if it were losing. That's entirely the wrong way around."

"You're correct. We Reincarnators are defeated by our own victory, letting secrets slip the more we revel in winning. Halberd, at some point you will be moved to the Mainland alive. Your interrogation is merely a formality. When you go there you will see it—a nation without heroes. Our democracy does not allow for tyranny, and in place of that we have assemblies, bureaucrats, and institutions. The truth is, it's an incredible system—regardless of what idiot is elected as our leader, it will function."

Halberd narrowed his eyes. "In other words, Eugene...you want to be a heroic leader."

Hero nodded. Halberd, satisfied, smiled a very unsettling smile. "I see... Interesting. I also once left behind a land that had fallen into decadence and wandered that I might one day be counted as a hero. Although in the end, the true hero was the one I reared..."

"Where is Aegisthus?" pressed Hero.

"That I won't say," the giant replied, rejecting his question. "But I'm happy to speak of other heroes. There is a festival today in Vulcan where the main attraction will be plays put on in honor of the gods. One of those plays will feature the hero of antiquity who once stood against the very gods themselves—Prodotis. Once you understand Prodotis, you will know what sets heroes apart from both the gods and other mortal men. There is no better

teacher of the knowledge you seek.”

“That is fascinating, but what I want to ask is...” Footsteps approached from behind the airlock. Thanks to his Skill, Hero was aware of the sound before it even reached his ears. It was time for Halberd’s interrogation.

“Next time, you *will* tell me.”

“Fine. But make sure you go to see the heroic play, *Prodotis*.”

“Very well.” It wouldn’t do for the other Reincarnators to see him here. Hero left in a hurry, soon disappearing from sight.

Alone, the chained giant chuckled with remarkable malevolence.

Beneath the night sky, burning torches flickered as though they were alive. The last rays of the setting sun shone over the long range of the Fanged Mountains, and the streetlights of Vulcan, built on the slopes, fell dark. Looking east, one might even see a few stars that were not normally visible in the city.

Constructed halfway up the slope were a number of plazas, each with an amphitheater. From above, each stage would appear circular, with tiers of audience seating set at a gentle angle on every side. Countless eyes watched each performance, and all were deathly silent.

The audience could hear footsteps—unnatural ones with a pronounced limp. The rapping of a cane. Rasping fabric. Wheezing. A collection of pained noises.

“Hast thou reconsidered, O Hero Prodotis?” The torches lining the stage finally illuminated the profile of an old man with a long white beard. His bare upper body was very muscular, but his legs, in stark contrast, were spindly. “Answer, O Prodotis. Thou must be awake. The eagles sent by thy father and god have pecked at thy entrails, sending thee far from thy peaceful slumber into blackest agony.” The old man grabbed the nearest torch, brandishing it at the black pillar in front of him.

The light shone brightly. Bound to the pillar with heavy chains was Prodotis, whose protruding entrails dirtied his knees. Seeking immortality in spite of his humanity and challenging the gods to battle, the hero had finally made to strike down the highest of gods, Ex Machina Anxiety. This was the ultimate result of that struggle.

“Answer me! This is insolence! I am Ex Machina Amputation, who stands beside Anxiety and his wife as one of the eleven supreme gods. Even as a hero who boasts a divine father, a man such as thee, fated to die, should not ignore me.” After saying this, the god of the forge raised the cane supporting him and mercilessly brought it down upon the hero, who was bound in place. The raw sound of wood striking flesh and cries of agony echoed throughout the plaza.

Without thinking, Sid recoiled and gasped. Beside him, Dill raised a finger to his lips and looked at Sid with a smile. Sid, blushing, returned his gaze to the stage.

The acting was very authentic. This citizens’ acting company, of which Nue was a member and where Dill occasionally helped manage things, was of a far higher level than Sid had expected. Sid had dismissed it, imagining the company to be something like a children’s performance where the only audience members would be parents coming to encourage them, but he had been wrong.

The subject of the play was the last of a series of three plays featuring Prodotis, the hero of antiquity, as the protagonist. This particular play also featured the patron deity of Vulcan of the Eleven Cities, Ex Machina Amputation.

Crucially, Nue had not yet taken the stage. From some time since its beginning, the action onstage had centered around the tortured hero and the god of the forge. The god pressed the hero to reveal the secrets he concealed, and the hero held on to his silence through every threat and punishment. The actor playing Prodotis had very few lines as a result and was mostly relegated to anguished groaning.

“Oh...thou art stubborn. I, a god, have expended so many words to convince thee. I have promised thee freedom after thy release, to speak to thy father and god on thy behalf...but Prodotis, son of Coward, thou hast shown no contrition. I came hither to the ends of the earth without servants and without the knowledge of thy father, Ex Machina Coward, but thou seest not my gesture, nor dost thou comprehend it.”

“Stop, I beseech thee, god of fire, without equal in the art of the forge, Ex Machina Amputation!” A woman’s voice rang out across the stage, followed by many quiet footsteps from the side of it. All the actors who entered wore the same white costume. The woman leading them was an adult, but those

following her were all children. Among them was Nue with her black hair and red eyes.

"...You are daughters of the old gods, the Titans. For what purpose have you come before us, the reigning Ex Machina? If thou exiles from heaven should conspire with this rebel against the Ex Machina, I know not what far-reaching action my suspicious father may take. When overcome by bouts of fury, he shall show no mercy even to me, his son. These twisted legs of mine stand as proof enough. Thou shouldst take thy leave at once."

Multiple voices answered him this time—a chorus. "Power easily changes hands. Yesterday's king can become tomorrow's slave. Tyrants consumed by the fear of being driven from their thrones may even turn suspicious eyes upon those dear to them. We, the Titans, were once worshipped by humans. Not even a shadow can be found of the royal prerogative we once held. Long has it been since mortal men have raised a fire to us in sacrifice. Everything we ancients once held has been snatched away by the new gods..." Within the overlapping chorus, Nue's voice could be heard clearly, and her normally friendly face was drawn tight in a dignified expression, lit dimly in the firelight. It possessed an air of divinity that matched her role. Her black hair like the night, her red eyes like flames, her youthful face like a god not of this realm—all melded vividly with the world of legends. *I see...she really is a Titaness.*

The chorus sang of the Titans' fall, and the god of the forge told Prodotis that there was a path to salvation even as his torture continued. The hero who had remained silent finally raised his head, and spoke to the gods, new and old.

"I regret not what I have done. Even when prophecy foretold that my efforts would come to naught, I still fought. What else can a man, fated to die, possibly do? Even knowing we will certainly perish, still we sing, till our fields, bear children, fight boldly in war, survive the winters, living on while growing old and infirm. That is what it means to be human. Although we cannot change our final fate, we will never disregard the life we possess. On the contrary, we should live our limited lives to the fullest. 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. You

who cannot die will never understand. Farewell, gods. Farewell, my brethren who must also one day die. I am merely setting out one step ahead of you. I ask you not to raise me to the heavens as a star, to shine for eternity. As a man who must die, I wish to be embraced by the earth and rot away there..."

The play ended. Not a few in the audience were overcome with tears, probably imagining themselves placed in the same situation. Tomorrow, they might all perish by the whims of the Reincarnators. Sid now realized why the people of Vulcan had insisted on holding the festival for their city's deity despite the continuing war. It was all to have this catharsis.

Bounding footsteps approached. Weaving deftly through the crowds, Nue appeared, still in her costume. She didn't speak, but her red eyes shone with expectation.

"Yeah, you were great," Dill answered her wordless question, and opened his arms. Nue yelped in celebration and jumped into them. A moment later Cirulia came and wiped away the sweat that had beaded on Nue's neck. Nue seemed different than usual, an atypical scent lingering on her as if she had not yet fully broken away from the role she had played. Her red eyes were dreamlike, never focusing on a single point, and a single lock of her black hair was drenched in sweat, stuck to her temple and shining there.

How beautiful this girl really is. Sid was shocked at first, and then jealousy began to seep in. Dill spoke with Nue even more intimately than usual. There was a bond between them that only those who had stood on the same stage could understand, of which Sid was completely ignorant. Or at least, that was his impression.

"Maybe I should try acting too."

"Really?" Sid had only muttered to himself, but Dill had not missed it. He wheeled around to look at Sid. Had this been Dill's aim all along?

Sid, embarrassed, cast his eyes down, running them over the ground. "I mean, well...I'll think about it..."

"How nice! Let's act together, Sid!" With catlike agility Nue leaped away from Dill, and Sid noticed the salty smell of sweat as she approached him. And then, her flushed face was very close.

Dill drew closer to Cirulia, who shrugged and watched this scene play out with great interest, and whispered in her ear. "Isn't it about time?"

"That's up to you, right? Even if I object, you'll do it anyway." With a smile, she pushed him forward.

“Right—we have a solid commitment now.” Stifling a smile, Dill headed over to the children. Sid and Nue, whose conversation had blossomed rapidly, both turned to look at him. “Could you come over here for a moment? There’s something I’d like to talk to you about.” Dill sat down where he was and crossed his legs. He set Nue down on top of the leg that had fully healed, while Sid took a spot behind him. From the theater seats, which had mostly emptied out, they looked up at Vulcan’s night sky.

“The city is dark, and it rained last night. This is a good time to gaze at the stars.”

“It’s like the night has come down to meet us.” In surprise, Sid looked past Dill at Nue. Leaning on Dill’s shoulder, she looked up at the night sky, enchantment in her red eyes.

“Very poetic, Nue. Right, let me try to match that. Look to the bright white star in the southern sky. Sid, do you know the name of that star?”

“Um...I think it’s called Cranos. My memory is fuzzy though...” Nervously, he slowly answered Dill. Sid could not read, and Cirulia was still teaching him. He was still ignorant of much of the mythology that was common knowledge in society.

Thankfully, Dill nodded in response. “That’s right. Cranos was a hero connected with Crios, the ruined city we stopped by on our way to Vulcan. Five hundred years ago, Cranos, who was the greatest hero in Crios following the death of Prodotis, fought against an invading army of Terea ten times greater than his and lost. He was slain by the fleet-footed Iroas. It is said that the body of Cranos, with his shining helm, was raised into the distant sky as a star by the power of the Ex Machina. That star also bears the name Cranos, shining over there.” Dill cradled Sid’s head in his arm, directing his gaze to the star in the night sky.

“The slightly dimmer star beside it is Nefritos; up and to the right is the giant, Farena, and the blue one just below is Aftida. Itimenos, who died tragically, Papus, and Diros form a trio of stars. Look now to the western sky. There you can see a constellation for the Tereans who assaulted the sacred city of Krios. First is Iroas, then the great commander Haos, and the knight, Mentor. These form the Delta constellation, which is paired with the Sword constellation, made up of Thronos, Nikitis, and the star for Nomos of the fine greaves. They are the great ancestors of us Tereans...” As Dill spoke, mythology came to life at his fingertips; Sid followed each star shown to him

intently. He didn't think he could remember all of the names of heroes Dill recited, but he tried his best to understand.

"Besides these, every star floating in the sky has its own name, its own origin, its own story. The world of mythology is so vast that, even given a thousand nights, I couldn't tell you all of it. What do you think, Sid? Are you intrigued?"

"Yes. It seems...very interesting." *As long as you're the one telling it.* On Dill's other side, Nue was smiling. That sly yet somehow innocent grin—still slightly vulgar. *What is she thinking about?*

"I see. In that case, Sid, I have a suggestion. I'd like to teach you the names of the stars on a daily basis. In the daytime I'll teach you my methods of acting, in the nighttime mythology, and on rainy days beautiful poetry. When the weather is fine we'll go outside and exercise, and train you in swordplay. Over half a lifetime, I've learned many things I would like to pass on to you." Dill extended a hand toward Sid's shoulder. As he went to touch him, his arm reflexively convulsed, and he nearly drew his hand back again. But Dill, fighting these convulsions, calmly brought his hand down onto Sid's shoulder, as decisively as if he were sealing a letter.

"Would you like us to be father and son?"

"Wha—what?!" Sid was confused.

"A confession!" Nue hopped up and down.

"It's not a confession of love...but I suppose you could think of it that way, in some sense. My desire to make you happy, to dedicate my life to supporting you, does make this somewhat similar to a proposal of marriage." Dill spoke boldly. Some distance away, Cirulia shrugged her shoulders. "So, tell me your answer."

Overwhelmed by this sudden turn of events, Sid listened to his heart. He lost track of time. The clamoring voices of the stage drifted away, then returned. Thoughts raced round and round his head, difficult to pin down.

"That makes me really...really happy." *But.* "But...I feel like I would be betraying my real father." He was afraid to say this—in the back of his mind, he had known that Dill wanted this. Sid himself held the same desire. Every time his respect for Dill deepened, scenes from the past crossed his mind. His taciturn father sitting in his workshop, hammering out a horseshoe or a blade for a farming tool. His narrow eyes that somehow shone with his own thoughtful intelligence, in spite of his total lack of education. The very few

times he could remember his father stroking his head. His large, rough hands. Dill's hands weren't dissimilar, but there was, in the end, a difference between a craftsman's hands and a warrior's.

"The truth is, I didn't like my father and mother too much...but, thinking back now, I realize that they protected me up until the end. Even when they yelled at me, it was because they were worried about me. So now, I'm grateful. Now I think I did actually love them, although I've realized it too late... Therefore..." He had once spoken to Nue about this, soon after they had met. Putting this into words was horribly embarrassing for Sid, and his face was bright red. If his parents were still alive, he would never have said it no matter what. But he was still scared. Surely Dill had only been so kind to him because he hoped one day to adopt him.

"So, I'm sorry, but I can't be your son." Sid then timidly asked, "Are you upset, Master?"

"Of course not." Dill went to put a hand on Sid's head, then stopped. Instead, he stroked the outline of Sid's shoulder, his hand hovering just above it. "Thank you for telling me your true feelings. I envy your papa and mama."

"My, he rejected you." Cirulia was grinning.

"That's right. My love was unrequited, and I'm wounded. You should cheer me up."

"I'll cheer you—cheer you up! Or...I'll *beat* you up!" Seizing the opportunity, Nue pounced on Dill and clambered on top of him.

"Hey, have you come to deliver the finishing blow to your papa?" Dill didn't look too bothered.

Nue cackled with laughter. Then, seeing Sid looking at them enviously, she said, "Sid, I'm surprised! When he asked me I was so happy, I said 'okay' straight away!"

"Master, am I not the only child you've asked?" Sid's voice was low.

"Hm? Well, I want lots of kids. Unlike with a marriage, there's no such thing as infidelity..."

"I can't believe it! You're horrible!"

"You've only just realized that? Sid, he's just like that. Haven't I always told you how horrible he is?" Cirulia's grin grew wider still.

"Master, you jerk! I want my excitement back!"

"So you want me to take another shot?" Dill didn't look guilty in the slightest.

“That’s. Not. What. I. Meant!” Sid turned away, pouting.

“You’re cute even when you’re pouting.”

“I told you not to come onto me!”

“...Gay?”

“I keep telling you, no!”

“Ha...ha ha ha!” Wiping tears of laughter from her eyes, Cirulia looked out calmly over the plaza. Suddenly, as the crowds thinned out, she spied a head of shining blond hair.

“...Apollo?” Cirulia spoke hesitantly and quietly. Dill didn’t notice, his attention grabbed by a distant chorus as he laid his hand on his forehead.

“Seriously? The next play is *Aegisthus*... Let’s hurry up and go home.”

“Huh, you don’t like that one, Master? The one about the hero of the Holy War? I’ve actually seen it once myself. It was really cool!” Sid quizzed Dill innocently.

Dill’s expression was bitter. “Exactly. A shallow piece of theater made as propaganda for the Holy War, aping the conventions of classic tragedies...awful, in any case. I don’t have any intention of seeing—”

“Dill, Dill! It’s Apollo!” Cirulia was no longer calm. She shook Dill to get his attention. Someone wearing a black cloak stood where she pointed—blond hair cascading from a gap in a hood, a noble profile, and a melancholy, darkly sunken expression on his bloodless face.

“Apollonius.” Stunned, Dill muttered his old friend’s name—a friend who no longer belonged to this world. Leaving his family behind, Dill hurried toward the man and pushed everyone in his way aside. Finally, he grasped the man’s shoulder. “Hey, you! You’re a Reincarnator, aren’t you?”

When the man turned around, Dill realized that under the hood drawn low over his eyes, he was weeping. His face was deathly pale. His expression, one of deep despair, did not belong to the friend Dill once knew—that arrogant devil, Apollonius, was long gone. Although he knew that already, Dill was still struck silent. Once again, for the first time in years, he was unexpectedly faced with the fact that his friend was dead.

“Neither ‘Hero,’ nor ‘Eugene,’ but a name I’ve not heard before.” The Reincarnator made no attempt to resist Dill, who had seized him by the cloak at his chest. “Apollonius...I see. That is this body’s true name... Please excuse me.”

Then, there was a sickening sound of a fist striking his cheekbone. The

fist belonged to Dill, and he had struck the man reflexively. Inside his clenched fist, his nails dug into his palm, drawing blood.

“How dare you?” Everyone in the plaza turned to look at Dill. “How *dare* you?!”

The Reincarnator stood back up. His hood had fallen back, revealing the regal features of a Terean noble. His icy pale complexion made him instantly recognizable as a Reincarnator with blue blood flowing through his veins.

A commotion rippled out through the crowd in the plaza.

“Halberd...I take it this is no coincidence. He planned this. ‘The gifts of enemies are no gifts.’ Where is that line from? Was it *Ajax* by Sophocles...?”

“What are you blathering about?! Fight me now! I’ll have you return Apollo’s body to me! That man was my closest friend!” His rusty hair swirling around him, Dill raised his bare hands to fight.

Hero shook his head. “I’m sorry...I was really taken in by the play that was just performed here. It was *Prometheus Bound*, recast with a human hero as its protagonist, revived in full as a trilogy. You people have completed a work that was once lost, not by excavation but through your own creativity.”

Dill unleashed another flurry of blows at Hero, who stopped them all with effortless accuracy. The expression with which he looked up at Dill made Dill feel quite small in comparison. A single tear ran down the side of Dill’s face that Hero had struck.

“That’s it—that anger, that violence. Not empty theories. Physical bodies. In other words, a hero is someone who stands himself on the battlefield. He doesn’t order his troops, but rallies them in person.”

“I told you not to blather! Hold your tongue!” Suddenly, Dill’s tall frame vanished—or so Hero thought. He’d simply dropped his upper body down in preparation for unleashing a roundhouse kick aimed at Hero’s head...but then, Hero’s body shattered into pieces.

That’s impossible... Dill fell heavily to the ground, groaning in pain. Hero reappeared where he had stood previously and turned around to look down at Dill with envy in his eyes. A mosaic of noise spread out around him as he started to vanish again, suggesting the activation of a Skill.

“Time’s up. I must be going.” In front of Hero a translucent hologram was rapidly expanding; this was one of the mobile terminals carried by Reincarnators. “Yes, yes. I know. No, I’ll be there soon. It’s better if I meet them. Most likely over in Central—”

“Wait.” The head of a spear was thrust under Hero’s nose as he concentrated on the holographic terminal. “My name is Dill Steel-Link. That’s the name of a man whose hometown, friends, and family were lost to the Reincarnators!”

A city guard who had swiftly come to respond to the commotion had found his weapon snatched away by Dill; now he could only stand there, unsure what to do. Although he was not wearing his chain mail cloak, Dill was still an elite member of the Brigade of the Eagle, and he was now facing Hero, a high-level Reincarnator. The guard wasn’t the only one who drew back from the murderous intent between these two—the entire crowd did so as well.

“...Master!” Pushing their way through the wall of people, first Sid, then Nue leaped forth. They could see Dill from behind, stepping forward to strike down the Reincarnator.

“I’m sorry, Dill Steel-Link. I have to go.” There was a metallic screech—Hero had drawn an iron spear from thin air and used it to block Dill’s spear thrust. The impact sent a powerful shock wave through the air, causing their hair to flutter. The stalemate only lasted an instant before Dill slid back, then struck at Hero with his elbow in the space between the clashing spears.

“Here comes the cavalry,” muttered Hero, striding past Dill. With a casual wave, he summoned a volley of fist-sized fireballs from his upraised hand, blocking Dill’s pursuit.

“Hmm.” A familiar voice—it was Summoner, the Reincarnator in a business suit, whom Dill had encountered at the Vulcan Crater. Without warning, he appeared next to Hero, stroking his chin and gazing at Dill.

At the same time as Summoner had appeared, Hero had started walking toward a distortion in the air. Dill went after Hero; Summoner intercepted him, but Dill won the struggle and pushed him aside.

“Sid!” Nue held her hand out to Sid. The boy nodded and grabbed it. He felt his arm pulled violently, a destructive sensation of acceleration running through his body. This was Nue Kirisaki’s Titan strength! The next thing he knew, they were both right behind Dill. They had made it, and they both dived to slip through the same gate the others had gone through.

“Stay back!” Time froze, or at least Sid’s body went so cold and stiff that he thought it must have. It was Dill who had shouted. As he turned around, his face was so stern, so fearsome, that he looked like a different man. The

fierce battle sent waves through his long hair, and his rust-colored eyes seemed to glisten brilliantly with rage.

The flow of time started to return. Dill leaped into the gate through which Hero had disappeared. Nue, who came to her senses first, called out to Sid, who stood motionless. The teleportation gate vanished. Summoner, whom Dill had kicked aside, created a gate for himself and disappeared through it.

Sid and Nue had been left behind.

“Hey! Are you all right...” Cirulia, who had finally caught up to the children, put her arms around their shoulders, trying to catch her breath. Realizing that she could no longer see Dill, her expression froze.

As if a dam had burst, the commotion resumed and spread throughout the plaza. Upon the stage, actors who had just finished their preparations became aware of the unusual situation, looking on doubtfully.

“Um, don’t tell me Prodotis just ended? I came to see Nue in the chorus...” rang a strangely beautiful voice. It was a man’s voice, though one that was a little bit high-pitched. The owner of the voice was even more peculiar. Within his black hair were tufts of red and blue; on his left cheek was a tattoo depicting an eagle, and hanging from his shoulders was a chain mail cloak. Sid remembered him—he was the mercenary who had carried the wounded Dill on his horse the day they had arrived at Vulcan.

Cirulia raised her head. Looking at her expression, the tattooed man in the chain mail cloak understood something. “Just wait a little while. I’ll call everyone nearby from the brigade.” The tattooed man took out his crossbow, then after deftly spinning it in one hand, pointed it skyward and loosed its bolt.

The bolt, which had been designed to form a pillar of smoke originating at the place it had been fired, left a trail of red as it climbed into the air. “This takes me back to the Holy War, you know. This is how we saved each other, and how we were saved. Dill might have left us, but I still think of all of us as members of the Halberd Brigade. You can take this as proof of that...” The tattooed man winked, and in a moment they were surrounded by men in chain mail cloaks.

The only thing that could be felt upon passing through a teleportation gate

was a slight sensation of floating. Suddenly, Dill discovered that he was in the middle of a long, narrow corridor. The ceiling was low. To his right and left, he saw exposed plumbing on the walls. Dill felt as though he might be crushed by the oppressive atmosphere bearing down on him. The corridor had surely once been dark, but was now illuminated by free-standing lights placed at regular intervals along its length. Had the Reincarnators put them there?

Where am I? Even the absurd Skills of Reincarnators had their limits, so he still had to be somewhere within Vulcan of the Eleven Cities—most likely in the interior of the city deity, Ex Machina Amputation.

“So he followed us through?” Dill heard the Reincarnator mutter behind him. Hero turned his back to Dill and walked away, and Dill ran after him, still clutching the spear he had taken from the guard. He could still fight. He could take revenge for his dearest friend, Apollo, here and now.

“Yuujin-sama, we have been awaiting your return.”

“...Who is this man?”

They had entered an open space, with a ceiling roughly two stories high. In addition to Hero, there were two more Reincarnators there.

“An enemy. He followed me here.”

“Let us deal with him.”

The two unfamiliar Reincarnators barred Dill’s way. Hero continued to walk away, taking the corpse of Dill’s old friend with him. Something burning deep in the pit of Dill’s stomach propelled his body forward—it was rage.

“Get out of my way!”

“I could say the same thing to you, barbarian.”

Without slowing his pace for a moment, Dill aimed his spear at one of the Reincarnators and charged at him. The Reincarnator ducked low and deflected the spear by striking its side with the back of his hand. Above his gas mask, his eyes curled upward in a smile.

“You’d be better off surrendering. If you lose to me, you’ll suffer a very painful death.” The Reincarnator’s arms and legs, readied languidly for battle, ignited in flames. He was a Flinter, with the power to generate and control fire.

Behind him, the other Reincarnator appeared to dissolve into the background. He was a Whisper, with the power to deceive the senses.

The Flinter who had been crouching low suddenly leaped, his flaming palm grazing Dill's body as it traveled upward. There was an acrid burning smell—the Reincarnator had grabbed the hem of Dill's clothes, which burned away, carbonizing in an instant!

"Well done dodging that! Keep evading me until your will shatters and you surrender! Anything I grab while my pyrokinesis is active burns up in a flash! I even keep turning corpses I could have captured to ash, so I can't seem to get promoted! Take this—and this—and that!" Whirling his flaming limbs around, the Flinter attacked Dill relentlessly. If Dill let him get too close, the Flinter would grab hold of him, restricting his movement and burning him to death...but the Flinter wasn't his only concern.

Huh? He didn't know whether it was a faint smell, a change in temperature, or a shift in the air that he'd picked up on, but he could only call it his warrior's intuition. Dill sensed danger, and so he stepped far away from the Flinter in front of him.

A moment later, in the same spot Dill had just left, appeared a Whisper who had used his Skill to turn invisible. The Reincarnator swiped at the air with the large knife he held.

"Lucky bastard," muttered the Whisper; then, after glaring at Dill for a moment, his form started to appear hazy again. As if taking the Whisper's place, the Flinter charged forward and made another attempt to grasp Dill with his burning hands.

While making sure not to be taken unawares by the unseen Whisper, Dill had to deal with the Flinter, who would burn him alive if he laid a hand on him. All the while, the body of his dearest friend receded into the distance. *Apollo. Apollonius.*

Dill. I have one more thing to ask of you as my friend.

Tilting his head to one side, Dill avoided the searing hand. Wielding his spear with broad swings, he drove the Flinter backward, then thrust out his chest and bellowed, "Forty years ago, a nobleman abandoned his child. Twenty years later, the nobleman came back. His preferred heir had died from an illness. The abandoned child had grown into a beautiful young man, worthy of inheriting his father's name. That man's name was Apollonius!"

Hero stopped in his tracks. He didn't turn around to look at Dill, but turned his ear to listen.

"Stop stalling!"

Dill grabbed the Whisper who appeared behind him, threw him to one side, and kept speaking. “Apollo was taken in by the noble against his will. His newborn daughter was entrusted to a friend and his wife. Another ten years passed, and Apollo met his friend again. The place was the battlefield, and the time was that of the Holy War! His friend was a mercenary clad in armor. Apollo was a general fighting for the crown, and the two were no longer friends. His old comrade, Dill Steel-Link, swore an oath to Apollonius!”

The Flinter and Whisper attacked Dill in turn, hoping to silence him. There was no need for their attacks to connect—as long as they continued attacking, he would surely run out of breath and stop talking sooner rather than later. That would put an end to this barbarian’s demagoguery.

But this tactic failed as Dill continued to wax lyrical. “Apollonius, with his noble bearing, was a hero in the truest sense! Aegisthus, a hero only in propaganda, could not hope to compare! Neither the successors aiming for the throne of Terea nor the Titans of the Southwestern Alliance could block his path to the throne—only you Reincarnators could do that! You laid a trap for King Apollonius... Had he gone on living, he surely would have been remembered as a wise ruler! But you snuffed out his life and took his place! Don’t you feel any shame?!”

“Shut up already, you bastard!” The Whisper showed himself and charged along with the Flinter in a perfectly timed pincer attack. Dill’s rust-colored eyes glowed for an instant, as though the tarnish had been scraped away, and from the movement of the Flinter’s eyes, he spied the Whisper appearing behind him.

“The Ex Machina will not forgive you!”

The Flinter’s burning hand seared the air above Dill’s head. Having ducked, Dill unleashed the power in his legs to spring back up, thrusting his spear behind him. The Whisper was indeed right there, and the Reincarnator’s eyes flew open in shock.

“I promise you this—you will one day meet the same unsightly fate as this man I just skewered.” Dill tossed the Reincarnator to one side, then faced the remaining Flinter. Hero shook his head sadly and finally took his leave.

“Bastard...you read his position from the movement of my eyes, didn’t you?”

“I am the executioner of Reincarnators, Dill Steel-Link. I’ve experienced

your tricks so many times that I'm sick of them." As they conversed, the Whisper whose abdomen Dill had run through with his spear gasped for breath, and he raised a hand covered in blue blood. His hand was empty...or at least it should have been. The air around his hand shimmered like a mirage, though, and when it cleared, a black pistol was clutched in the Whisper's grip.

"Is that so? Have you seen *this* trick before?!" cried the Flinter shrilly, charging at Dill to draw his attention. At the same time, the Whisper behind him pulled the trigger on his pistol.

"Yes. I have." Dill leaped to one side, out of the bullet's trajectory. Standing in its path now...was the Flinter! Showered in a spray of bullets, he danced wildly and somersaulted away.

"I-Impossible!" The Whisper reloaded with shaking hands and readied his gun again, but then something caught his eye. It was Dill—and the tip of the spear he had just hurled in his direction!

"My name is Dill Steel-Link. To avenge my sworn brother Apollonius and Iris Earheart, the daughter he entrusted to me, I will pursue you Reincarnators to the ends of the earth—and kill you!"

"Revenge? You barbarians are already doomed to die, yet you take on such ordeals!" The Flinter, a sore loser, had been looking for some way to retaliate, and he'd finally found one. "Oh, you're protecting your left leg, aren't you?"

Dill retrieved the spear he had thrown, and wielded it with the intention of dealing the finishing blow to the Flinter.

"I hope you can make it home alive—you might find it difficult with those weak little legs!" cried the Reincarnator. Blue blood splashed onto Dill's face. Dill exhaled heavily, then stiffened his expression. To test his limbs' strength, he took one step forward with his left leg, then another step...and yet another. Each was stronger and faster than the last. Finally, Dill broke into a run!

"Two staff members, defeated. The individual's name is Dill Steel-Link. Threat level revised to A+. Report to the Chief and Manager classes, reassessment to follow..." The owner of the voice that had been speaking suddenly appeared. Dill glanced at him, but he was gone in an instant. *If it isn't the Project's Grim Reaper, the black-suited Summoner.*

In front of Dill there were a number of exits. This open space could, after

all, be considered the service entrance to Amputation's giant factory. Any of these exits ought to lead back to the streets of Vulcan.

However, escape was not Dill's objective. Just ahead was one of the bodies he sought—that of his friend. The faces of Nue, Sid, and Cirulia crossed his mind. If he retreated now, he might still see his family again. But Dill shook his head. Instead, he took another powerful step forward with his aching left leg and forced himself onward.

As he proceeded through the mechanized corridor, he noticed that the architectural style around him had changed.

Ever since his descent, Ex Machina Amputation had tasked his earthly icon with its own continued expansion and production. The extension built in recent years contained many structures built by the Vulcan citizens' own hands, some areas built as part of Vulcan's infrastructure particularly standing out. The best example of this was the incline leading up to the streets.

Conversely, in the section closer to the center of the Ex Machina—the very place Dill had just entered—lay intricate structures whose construction was beyond the knowledge of Redguard's people.

The sounds of some kind of work grew closer, creaking sounds, the clash of metal and clamoring voices. Dill grew concerned. *Those bastards, they couldn't be...not in a sacred place like this.*

The floor had become metal grating, and Dill could see several stories of similar corridors below him. He crouched low, almost crawling forward to reduce the sound of his footsteps. He was only after Apollonius. He had to avoid any battles he could.

Then, his field of view opened up. Dill was inside a wide shaft, illuminated by lights the Reincarnators had installed. There was something hanging within the ten-story chasm, blocking some of the lights. The shadow cast on the wall of the shaft was shaped like a human's upper body, but it stood over ten meters tall. It was a god—Ex Machina Amputation. A statue of the god, built as an object of the people of Vulcan's faith, was hanging from the ceiling.

In accordance with legend, the god's legs did not work right. This was because they hadn't been built yet. Its head was carved to resemble a severe old man and the left arm was unfinished. Through the cross section at its shoulder, bunches of artificial muscle fibers were just barely visible. From

the waist down, which was also still a work in progress, there was a framework of bones not yet covered with skin, and a white protrusion resembling a spine hung freely.

Dill lost track of time as he gazed at the god. The finest craftsmen in Redguard had worked on the statue, and they had truly made it their masterpiece. The attention to detail in the already finished parts, which extended to individual hairs in the flowing beard and the eyebrows, was above criticism. The bronze and iron statues dedicated in today's city deity festival would one day be melted down to become part of this god.

"Heigh, heigh, ho!" A strange chant, accompanied by rattling chains, brought Dill back to his senses. Far below, at the bottom of the shaft, there was work being done. Carrying a chain suspended from the ceiling were more than twenty men, and they were surrounded by others. The ones carrying the chain appeared to be Vulcan prisoners of war.

"Heigh, heigh, ho!" The shrill voice sounded again. The man behind the chant cracked a flaming whip upon the floor, and the Vulcan prisoners pulled the chain while groaning. As they did this, a very thick chain attached to the ceiling was pulled taut, and the Ex Machina suspended there started to lean to one side.

"Heigh, heigh, ho!" The chant repeated again. The prisoners erupted in especially anguished groans, and as they pulled on the chain...*clang!* Several metal fastenings hammered into the roof were pulled free and fell noisily to the ground. The god's body tipped dramatically. A giant chain that had fallen alongside the fastenings bounced on the ground next to the prisoners, sending them scattering, as there was no protection from the flailing links. The Reincarnator who had been chanting cracked his flaming whip, castigating the prisoners for their hesitation.

"Now then, onto the next chain! When you have completed your service here, you will all join us as members of the Republic of New Terea..." And then, the Reincarnator cracking the whip noticed with some consternation that his *own* body was tipping over.

"The king's right hand—Steel-Link, who honors the gods." The Reincarnator heard a subdued whisper close to his ear, then died. Dill, who had leaped down from an upper floor holding his spear with an underhanded grip, withdrew his weapon from the skewered Reincarnator's corpse and kicked it away.

“Chief!”

“I thought we’d made a clean sweep of the barbarians in this area.” The Reincarnators started to raise a great clamor, and so did the Vulcan prisoners, who were excited by this unexpected rescue.

However...

“What do you think you’re doing here?” Dill’s voice was still low and subdued. In spite of this, it resonated fearsomely well. His rust-colored eyes, filled with hatred, were not trained on the Reincarnators, but the prisoners. The blood drained from their faces.

“What...are you doing?” Walking with audible footsteps, Dill drew closer to them. “You are meant to protect the Ex Machina. You are men of Vulcan, members of a tribe of blacksmiths celebrated for your skills. What are you doing here?!”

“W-We tried to resist, but we were no match...” The man who had happened to be standing at the head of the crowd found himself grabbed by Dill, and tried to make excuses. Dill’s rust-colored eyes were not forgiving.

At that moment, a Jumper attempted to attack Dill from the side, but Dill slew him with his spear without even turning his head. The ceramic knife the Jumper had held slid across the floor, stopping as it hit Dill’s foot. Dill picked up the knife and held it against the Vulcan’s chest.

“Your god truly exists. He is there right now. I was sent here as proof... When you believe in something, that’s how things go. You decide what to believe—and what to do. I’m going to kill these bastards.” After he finished speaking, Dill turned his back to the prisoners and stood alone against an incoming pincer attack from the Reincarnators.

One of the Vulcans shouted, “Please, wait! What is your name?”

Dodging an iron ball tossed by a Conductor and tripping up a Flinter who swung a red-hot sword at him, Dill then grabbed a Jumper coming in the opposite direction and slammed them into one of the other attackers. His rusty hair danced in the air, blue blood flying off the end of each strand.

“Dill! Steel-Link! The eagle who flies from the right hand, the messenger of victory! I am the one who executes Reincarnators!” Dill announced himself loudly.

At the bottom of the shaft overlooked by the unfinished god echoed the sounds of cries and clashing swords, soon joined by the voices of the prisoners.

There was a circular stage built on the slopes of Vulcan. Basked in the gaze of a lively crowd, a new play was beginning. A play about the hero of the Holy War and the opposing Titans. The ancient race made a futile resistance against the hero, crushed beneath his shield. As this was a reenactment of a battle decided five years ago, the audience already knew the outcome. To the people of the southeast, who had been defeated in the Holy War, this was a tragedy, but to the victors it was the ultimate amusement. That being said, it was not as well attended as the play that had been put on earlier, the ancient tragedy of *Prodotis*. The commotion caused by the Reincarnators during the intermission had done a lot to dampen people's spirits.

Sid and Nue sat at the outer edge of the circular stage, their backs turned to the performance. Neither of them spoke a word. From time to time they heard snatches of dialogue from the stage or other adults speaking in low voices about the search for Dill, but the children were kept in the dark about what was happening.

"Um," Sid spoke to Nue without looking at her. "Are you angry?"

"Why?" *Ah, not again.* His attention drawn by the unnatural tone in her voice, Sid raised his head and looked at the Titan girl's face from the side.

"...Because it was my fault we didn't make it in time," said Sid, nervous about what Nue's reaction might be. When Dill had pursued the Reincarnators through the gate created by their Skills, the two of them had managed to catch up to him with Nue's help. However, Sid had flinched at Dill's rebuke, wasting their chance to follow him. He had been worried since then—worried that Nue was disappointed, and angry with him.

"It's not your fault, Sid. Grown-ups always leave you behind like that."

"Always..."

"The last time I spoke with my mom, she said, 'Don't follow me,' 'Just stay hidden,' 'Everything will be all right.' Grown-ups are liars. When they say it'll be all right, you know it won't be all right at all."

Sid recalled. The day the Reincarnators had attacked the town at the crossroads, his parents had said the same thing as they shoved him deep into the cabinet where he'd tried to stay hidden. *Don't worry. Stay right there. We*

promise we'll come back for you. In the end, the Reincarnator possessing his father had come back—followed by Dill, who had come to kill the Reincarnator.

“Dill might not ever come back...” Nue was crying.

“Nue...!”

“You know, there’s a reason I always make sure to get plenty of attention from Dill. He’s always fighting, so I don’t know when he might finally go away for good...”

So that’s why she frolics like that. So much that it can get a little annoying... Sid wasn’t sure what to say to her. He wanted to comfort her, but couldn’t find the words.

A clicking sound drew closer to them—footsteps taken in high-heeled shoes.

“Let’s go home.” The steps belonged to Cirulia. Her arms were tightly folded, as if she were hugging herself. “The men in the brigade said they would work together with the search squad to find him. They said there’s nothing we can do to help...so let’s go home.”

On the way home, Cirulia’s gait started to seem careless. She was almost staggering. Perhaps the single glass of wine she had drunk before Nue’s performance had started had worked its way around her body. Her eyes were red and damp, and large earrings she didn’t normally wear swayed above her shoulders.

Come to think of it, she doesn’t usually wear much makeup either, realized Sid. Today Cirulia had painted her lips in vivid red; her cheeks were painted brightly as well, making her look ten years younger.

“He’s always like this,” Cirulia said slowly. Her voice was low and hoarse, not at all matching her current appearance. “Behind that kind smile, he’s always spouting chauvinism, thinking that women ought to stay quiet and stay home. He takes on everything dangerous by himself, instead of sharing it with his family. After getting married, I could tell we weren’t equal. He lives in the world of men...” She laughed in desperation. “To him, Apollo would always be an older friend than me. Not only that...” Cirulia looked toward the house. “Apollonius was Iris’s real father.”

“Huh? Oh...” Iris Earhart—a daughter with a different surname. Sid had wondered about that, and now everything made sense. The fact that he had accepted Nue so naturally, and how he’d welcomed Sid so warmly as well. From the beginning, Dill had never had any children related to him by blood.

Nue moved up silently next to Cirulia. Seeing Nue look up at her with raised eyebrows, Cirulia put a limp arm around the girl’s shoulder. “He’s been taken away by someone already dead, charging away and leaving those of us who are still alive behind. He’s always making me worry. Damn him, damn him, damn him...”

Sid became uncomfortable and averted his eyes, where he noticed a shadow in the window of a nearby house. It was a pale girl with white hair. *It’s me. But also, not me.* The Reincarnator girl, whom Sid was used to seeing by now, was leaning forward inside the glass. She must have been trying to tell him something. As Sid walked, he looked at the girl reflected in the next pane of glass. While making exaggerated gestures, her lips repeated the same words over and over.

Run...a...way.

Run away?

“Grrrrrah!” Nue growled. The red-eyed girl crouched low like a beast and looked up at the night sky.

“What an unexpected encounter. Aren’t you the D-class bodies Dill Steel-Link was protecting when we last met?” A person atop the roof caught the light of the moon behind them, standing out sharply against the sky. Flames swayed from their elbows and at their feet.

The Reincarnator, Repeater, removed her helmet, baring her face with half its skin torn off. “When I think about that man, the wounds on my face ache. I shall cheer myself up by acquiring your bodies and accumulating some evaluation points.”

“You...I remember you!”

Repeater leaped down from the rooftop, landing on the ground with a low stance. From that stance she leaned forward and launched toward them like a rocket, thanks to the thrust from her Skill. The flames roaring from the soles of her feet lifted Repeater’s body into the air. Nue, who was also leaning forward to strike like an animal, let out a growl and charged to meet her.

“Too slow, beast.” Repeater’s body, approaching head-on, suddenly veered sideways just before she clashed with Nue. Normally this trajectory

would have been impossible, but her Skill made it possible. With bursts of flame from her right elbow and foot, she came at Nue from the side, surprising her with a roundhouse kick.

“Nue!” The girl was sent flying. Cirulia cried out and ran up to her. Sid could only stand there, his expression a mixture of anger and shock.

“You...how dare you?!” Sid cried. “What are you doing? Nue is just a girl...!”

“Oh? What of it? I too am a woman. Does this barbarian land lack even the concept of equality between the sexes?”

“That’s not the point!” Sid tried to intimidate her, but the battle-hardened Repeater did not so much as flinch. Sid, on the other hand, felt his legs shake with nervousness as he faced the enemy before him. *What should I do? I have no choice! Master isn’t here! I’m the only one who can do this! I have to fight. Fight—just like Dill Steel-Link! The enemy’s guard is down. This is what I’ve been training for. I should be able to do it. I have to do it! I can’t let another person dear to me be killed before my eyes.*

Behind him Nue vomited repeatedly, perhaps because she had taken a heavy blow to her abdomen. Her confused, pained gasps set Sid’s resolve.

And then, it felt like the blood drained out of his head. Cirulia called to him over and over, but it sounded like he was underwater and everything was happening above the surface.

I don’t know your name, or who you once were, but assuming you were earnest in warning me just now, and assuming the reason you keep looking away from the mirror is guilt...please, lend me your power now!

Sid’s wish was heard. At the tips of Sid’s outstretched fingers, tiny embers of flame ignited.

In the next instant, Sid was sent flying by a knee strike from Repeater.

“So my eyes weren’t playing tricks on me last time. You brat—you were interrupted in the middle of it, weren’t you?” Repeater drew closer. On her way, she casually knocked aside Cirulia as the woman came running up, and with her other hand she brought up her holographic terminal. As she conversed with someone via the terminal, she kept one foot firmly planted on Sid’s back, preventing him from standing. “...Yes, it’s me. You’re nearby, right? Come here and help me. I’ve caught a few fascinating barbarians, so I need extra hands. Right. I’m counting on you.”

Sid struggled. Repeater’s foot was heavy as it pressed down on his back,

and he couldn't push against it all. It appeared that Cirulia had badly injured her foot when Repeater had pushed her aside—she was now curled up on the ground, clutching her ankle and wailing.

Stop! Don't take that child away! Her outstretched hand scratched the ground, the varnish on her beautifully painted nails chipping and falling away.

Sid's eyes met Cirulia's, and he had a feeling of *déjà vu*. *Ah, it's no good. Of course it would end up like this. I can't do anything.*

"I suppose I'll enlighten you first." A cold sensation in the back of Sid's neck made him shudder. Stunned, he tried to look behind himself. He could see nothing, except for Repeater's hand inserting a thick syringe into his neck. The plunger was pushed down mercilessly, the blue blood inside rushing into Sid's veins.

This can't be happening. Even though he escaped that day, this time Sid will truly become a Reincarnator— Cirulia thought to herself.

"All alone in this barbaric land, unable to move a muscle. I feel sorry for you. It must have been rough. But it's all right now. Sorry for stepping on you—the boy put up a fight."

A woman's voice. There was another, belonging to the woman on the ground with milky-white hair and a sprained ankle, who was cursing someone from afar.

"Can you stand? Don't overdo it just yet...I see. All right, I'm letting go."

The light returned. Peering from overhead was a woman with half the skin on her face torn off—Repeater. She looked worried.

"After the first time you reincarnate, it's not unusual to experience some dizziness, giddiness, or even panic. Stay calm... Can you remember your name?"

"Rei..." The boy's voice was high, not yet having broken, and with that long white hair, he really did look like a girl. "My name is Rei."

At that time, within Ex Machina Amputation, Dill had just killed the following enemies—the crimson Dawnlight, Aggressor, and the wealthy Chariot.

Dill slipped past the red trail left by the burning sword swung by

Dawnlight and, gripping his spear high up on its shaft, drove the point into the Reincarnator's jaw from below. As the spear burst up through it, so did a gush of blue blood. Then, from the blind spot created as Dill held up Dawnlight's corpse, Aggressor stormed in with a jump powered by his Skill. He attempted to cut Dill's throat in one stroke, but once he passed through the gate, he was greeted by a steely glare from those rust-colored eyes.

Dill dispatched this enemy, whose actions he had predicted exactly, with a slash from the blade he had stolen from Dawnlight.

"Dill Steel-Link! Give us weapons too!" In answer to this call from a Vulcan prisoner, Dill slid the sword across the floor. This was little consolation, however. The majority of the more than twenty prisoners were fighting the Reincarnators unarmed. One of them was even about to be shot by a Reincarnator's gun.

And then, that Reincarnator's head burst open. Dill had thrown a spear through it.

"Use that!" Having lost his own weapons, Dill quickly glanced across the battlefield. His eyes fell upon Chariot, who levitated weapons made from scrap metal through the air. Dill met Chariot's gaze, and Chariot was terrified. From the floating weapons revolving around him like an asteroid belt, he grabbed an axe and flung it at Dill.

As if it had been drawn there, the axe landed in Dill's outstretched hand.

"You have stolen a great deal from us."

Chariot threw weapon after weapon at Dill, but couldn't hit him. Dill either dodged each weapon or deflected it with the axe. The fearsome rust-colored eyes drew closer.

"This time, we'll be stealing from you." He was already right in front of Chariot, so the Reincarnator unleashed the full power of his Skill. The weapons that had previously floated and gently revolved around him increased their radius and started turning faster, transforming into a giant wheel of death.

"I am the flame that gnaws at the enemy lines, the champion of the Holy War! I am Dill Steel-Link, who toes the line between life and death!" Dill slid underneath the flock of flying blades revolving around the Reincarnator at waist height, leaping to his feet as soon as he reached his enemy. With an unyielding, powerful hand he grabbed Chariot's shoulder, and with the axe in his other hand, he cleaved the Reincarnator's jaw in twain.

Having lost the control of Chariot's psychokinesis, the turning weapons scattered in all directions. Dill knew it was time to speak up. "This is the time to be men! From this place watched over by the gods, raise a smoke signal to herald our counterattack that will take back Redguard!" With the hand holding the bloody axe, Dill pointed toward the enemy forces. Above their heads was the god of the forge suspended by chains. Still leaning forward, it loomed over them almost as if to attack them.

The Reincarnators were frightened. The rallied prisoners one by one started to take up weapons.

"That's enough." Blocking the path of the charging Vulcans, a row of glowing circles of light appeared in the air. Dark shadows rushed out of them. At the head of the crowd, five Vulcans stopped and, feeling something was wrong, put their hands to their necks. A moment later, all five expired, blood spurting from their windpipes. One of the new Reincarnators who had emerged from the row of teleportation gates shook the blood from his knife and stood up. He wore a red armband, the mark of a Chief Reincarnator who commanded a platoon.

"This won't do. You people can't go on strike—you don't even have a union." Then another Reincarnator, wielding a flaming whip, appeared and glared at Dill.

"You'll pay." The third member of the reinforcements finally appeared. The two chiefs made way for him. Refusing to harmonize with the scenery of Redguard, he wore a crisp suit with a double-breasted jacket and a double armband, walking with a grand stride. He wore a bold smile on his pale face, and his eyes shone with bottomless ambition.

"Was I...dreaming, perhaps? Did I just hear a call to arms? A march to victory, beginning here? No, no, no! I'm afraid you hope for too much. Let me tell you what comes next: it's game over!" This man, one of only six Manager-class Reincarnators within the Project, raised his hand as he laughed uproariously. With his black-gloved hand he probed the empty air in amusement, then gestured as if he had grasped something.

The man's Skill activated at that moment. One of the Vulcan prisoners suddenly froze where he stood, grimacing as though in pain. His hands were placed unnaturally on his knees, and didn't budge. Then, his body slowly floated into the air.

"This...is a demonstration. You will be a valuable sacrifice, to remind all

of you of just what we in the Project can do...if we so wish. Do you mind?" The prisoner's body followed the movements traced by the Manager's outstretched hand, tossed around like a rag doll. The Manager then brought his other empty hand forward, then gestured as if wringing out a damp rag.

"Stop!" Dill cried, sending the hand axe spinning and flying at the Reincarnator's head.

"I said you'd pay, didn't I?" A red line shot up, spouting flames, and grasped the axe in midair. It was the burning whip, and it threw the entangled axe straight back at Dill. At the same time, searing droplets of fire rained down on him. He managed to avoid the axe, but he couldn't dodge all of the scattering flame, so a few of them landed on his clothes, melting through and burning his skin.

"You embarrassed me in front of my subordinates. However! I am still a Chief! In a fair fight, I will not be bested by the likes of you! Hai-yaaa!"

Watching Dill dodge the whip out of the side of one eye, the Manager proceeded to complete his midair execution. Writhing in agony, the prisoner finally fell silent as his body slowly twisted. The other prisoners trembled in fear, then clamored as if a beehive had been disturbed.

"Don't think this is someone else's problem." A corridor of teleportation gates traced a complex path, like a maze, as they appeared. In the next moment, the Chief Reincarnator ran through the crowd of prisoners as they scrambled to run away, cutting a path of slaughter. Those who weren't fast enough had their arms and legs severed and sent flying by the Chief Jumper's knife.

"Ahh, now what was your name again...that's right, Dill Steel-Link! You, threat rank A+ over there! I've heard many rumors. You crop up everywhere, you get in the way of our Project and Venture, then announce your name self-importantly and run off. These are your wonderful deeds, are they not? Our own Ryuubi-kun was lucky enough to receive your services the other day—isn't that right?" The Manager spoke to Dill through a loudspeaker. In his voice was confidence and venomous sarcasm. "But, well...this is my first time meeting you in person, so I have to ask...why are you doing this? To the barbarians who are sworn in allegiance to the Project... Oops, excuse me! I mean, to the indigenous peoples, you have spewed harmful rumors, and you have sold them a dream that surely cannot be achieved. The result of that...is *this*." The Reincarnator shrugged his shoulders.

The prisoners panicked in a sea of blood as Dill was held back by a powerful, one-sided assault from the Chief Reincarnator's whip. And unbeknownst to them, further reinforcements to support the Reincarnators were approaching. This rebellion was an unmitigated failure.

For an instant, the Manager ceased laughing and looked serious. "Taken in by a reckless self-styled hero and struggling fruitlessly...you will always end in ruin. Because this is such a rotten world, where a minority of rulers and rabble-rousers herd the common people toward mass suicide, we have to bring Enlightenment to this planet. Dill Steel-Link! If you hadn't come here, these barbarians need not have died...oops."

As the shape-shifting whip of flame was brought down against Dill once again, he let it entangle his sword, then immediately let go. Then he readied the short spear he had hidden behind his back and went to throw it at the Chief Reincarnator—and then, suddenly, his body creaked to a halt. He felt intense pressure against his chest and torso, and his body would not move. It was as if he had been grasped by the hand of an unseen giant.

His eyes met the Manager's as he stood some distance away. The powerful user of psychokinesis grinned, then swept his extended right hand to one side. Dill went flying in the same direction.

"Don't be too careless, Chief," said the Manager as he flicked his hand up, down, and to the left. With each flick Dill went flying, crashing against the walls and the floor. This was the power of the highest class of Reincarnator, the Managers—the true power of their Skills.

Dill was left lying on the floor, like a doll they had grown tired of playing with. The powerful impact of the attacks he had just endured had shattered the barely healed bones in his legs, leaving them unnaturally bent. The spear he'd held had long since flown off somewhere.

Close by, the Chief-class Jumper cut the throat of one of the prisoners, and he collapsed right beside Dill. The man's face, contorted in shock in the moment between life and death, was turned toward him. It was the kind of face he had seen during the Holy War, and many times since in his nightmares. *Why? Why am I dying while listening to what these bastards have to say?* The man's face seemed to ask these questions. Without receiving a reply, the prisoner's eyes clouded, then slowly rolled back in his head, never to return.

"It's too bad I can't kill you by wringing you out like a cloth, as I did in

my demonstration a moment ago.” Footsteps approached, the sound created by a pair of shoes made from the finest leather. The Manager was nearby, but still kept his distance with sufficient caution. “Your only ability in life was driving other people to needless deaths. At least in your afterlife you can become a vessel for a Reincarnator and fulfill a purpose in the construction of the new world!” As he raised both of his hands, he almost looked like he was leading an orchestra. This was the reason Reincarnators who use psychokinesis were called Conductors.

With some effort, Dill looked up, and glared at the Manager-class Conductor. His flames of hatred had not yet died out.

“You look like you want to say something. Well, I won’t let you. Die.” The Conductor clasped his hands together in midair, then brought them down...but stopped in the middle of his gesture. Instead, the Reincarnator hurriedly swept his hand out in another direction, stopping an arrow that had flown right up in front of his eyes.

“What do you want?” inquired the Manager.

A voice answered. “Halberd Brigade, Whitehead Corps. To save our comrade, Dill Steel-Link and our Vulcan brethren, we will join this battle.”

On the third story of the shaft stood a band of mercenaries. After concluding his brief announcement, the middle-aged man at their head jumped over the handrail, down toward the lower floor. The remaining men followed his lead. Chain mail cloaks hit the ground with a deafening clang, and one single man stayed on the upper platform, resting a large crossbow on the handrail, and taking aim. The crossbowman, who had an eagle tattoo on his cheek, pointed with his finger.

“By the way, Manager—that bolt is about to explode!” The Manager barely managed to get away in time. Disappearing inside the explosion, a scrap of his necktie went flying.

“Steel-Link, use this!” cried the marksman on the upper floor. In the middle of his utterance a bolt came flying toward Dill. The bolt, stuck in the floor, had a syringe tied around the middle of its shaft. “It’s been five years! Surely you’ve taken enough time off? The world awaits you, Dill Steel-Link! I would like to sing of your exploits once again!” The tattooed marksman continued shooting as he spoke. Both sides were in disarray and the noise was deafening, yet the man’s voice carried well. This was only natural—the man had once been a bard, and his role in the brigade had been similar to

Dill's.

These two comrades knew everything about each other, the memories they had forged on the battlefield still fresh in their minds. For five years, Dill had tried to return to family life, but could not go back completely, instead wandering like a feral dog. He did everything by half measures.

"Cirulia. Nue. Sid." Dill crawled forward and seized the syringe. "Forgive me." The red liquid inside the syringe had glowing particles of light inside it and seemed to be pulsating. It was hot like fire. The spirit-blood would grant him strength—but at the cost of some of his life span. There seemed to be little chance of getting anything out of this sacrifice, but right now, Dill had no choice.

"Iris, Apollo. Give me the strength to keep up this act." Dill jammed the needle of the syringe into his neck and depressed the plunger. Burning blood flowed into his veins, searing Dill from the inside as the liquid spread throughout his body in the blink of an eye.

The upper floor crumbled. The tattooed man fell down with the rubble, but broke his fall with a somersault just before he hit the ground. With a nonchalant expression, he landed next to Dill.

"Rick. I thank you." Dill called his comrade's name. "Until today, you took care not to let me know...that a Reincarnator using Apollo's body had appeared. To let me continue life with my family until I got back on my feet."

The man called Rick dodged persistent attacks from the Manager-class Conductor, all the while defending Dill from those same attacks. Dill, meanwhile, simply endured his body's reaction to the scorching blood he'd put inside it.

"Five years, I made you wait... Give me my cloak!"

"Steel-Link...!"

"My shield as well!"

The bottom of the shaft was still enveloped in the smoke expelled by the exploding crossbow bolt. This was part of the trick. With a swipe of his hand, the Manager's psychokinesis went to work and the cloud of smoke parted, mostly restoring visibility.

Within the clearing smoke stood a solitary warrior in chain mail. For a moment, the Reincarnators thought this must be a new arrival. But once that moment had passed, the truth was obvious. It was indeed Dill Steel-Link, the man who had fought so gallantly until a short time ago. He had only donned

his chain mail cloak once again.

But this was strange. He was standing...even though his legs were surely broken.

"Hmm, I see. You've used an old model of Liquid Computer, haven't you? I believe you people understand it to be some kind of conveniently enchanted holy water? It can heal some wounds by force. But, in exchange..."

"This is a hero's legacy." Dill took a step forward. The chain mail cloak hanging from his shoulders jangled as he walked. "The hero who once challenged the gods and refused to become a star, shining eternal in the sky, when he died. Instead, he passed down his blood that others might inherit his strength. That hero's name...was Prodotis!"

Dill's rusty eyes glowed through a gap in his long bangs. Bands of fiery red ate into the edges of his pupils, and sweat poured from his temples. The overwhelming sense of menace put the Reincarnators on their guard.

But the Manager responded with disdain. "Ridiculous. As someone who knows what's behind that so-called magic, I can't help but laugh." He then ran his eyes over the prisoners. "In the first place, it looks like those of you in the foreign legion are the only ones getting excited. Am I right?"

He was absolutely right. The men of Vulcan, whose numbers had fallen to slightly more than ten, were drowning in despair, having largely abandoned all thoughts of fighting or escaping.

"Let me give you some more bad news," the Manager continued.
"Reinforcements for our side have just arrived."

From corridors at the ground and upper floors, Reincarnator reinforcements came charging in. The mercenaries of the Halberd Brigade fought back, but they were too numerous to defend against.

The Manger chuckled. "Numbers are everything in battle. We who are immortal will not die even when we fall. Our infinitely replenishing battle lines can be preserved forever. You people have no hope of winning."

"No. You're wrong. War is about *morale*," muttered Dill quietly before joining the battle himself and raising his voice to its limit. "Whitehead! You direct the rearguard! Leave the vanguard to Mace and me! Rick, you take the men of Vulcan and go on ahead!"

"Well, well! Abandoning your precious god and fleeing, are you?!"
mocked the Manager.

"Yeah...once I've killed you."

“Eh?”

Dill’s call to retreat had caused the Manager to drop his guard. As he threw back his head and laughed, he had averted his gaze from Dill for an instant—just one single instant.

The rusty haired man was already upon him. He was fast; this was the power the hero’s blood had temporarily granted him.

“I am the champion of the Holy War! A member of the strongest band of mercenaries in Terea, the Halberd Brigade!” The Manager listened to this introduction as Dill delivered a series of powerful blows to the side of his head with his shield. He tried to resist with his psychokinesis, but Dill was too close. This was not his optimal fighting range.

“My name is Dill Steel-Link!” At that moment, a hand reached out toward the Manager from his side. It was his subordinate, the Chief Jumper. Pushing aside the Manager, who reeled from the repeated blows from Dill’s shield, he stood against Dill in his superior’s place.

“I’ve created gates for you. Escape through there! If you die here, you’ll be fodder for propaganda!” the Chief Jumper shouted.

“I am in your debt!” The Manager leaped toward the first of a series of teleportation gates opened at one-meter intervals, connected circles of light that led back to his allies.

Just before the Manager passed through the nearest gate, though, it disappeared before his eyes. His right hand, outstretched, grasped only air. He turned back around. The Chief Jumper who had created the gates, Fleetfoot, was dead, a sword thrust through his face. Dill placed a foot on the corpse and pulled the sword out, shaking off the blue blood.

“I am the one who slays Reincarnators.”

“You’re a damn serial killer...” The Manager turned toward Dill and thrust both hands in front of him. From his fingertips, the unseen hand of psychokinesis reached out to seize his opponent.

Dill’s chain mail cloak bounced against the ground as he leaped high into the air, over the unseen arm. Even if he couldn’t see it, he could consider that arm an extension of the Reincarnator’s own body. Based on that, Dill could predict its movements. In this way he could see what was unseen.

“I do have another name.” Dill landed on the floor. A moment later his chain mail cloak followed, beating the ground in waves. The Manager looked down at his arms, only to find that both of them had been severed at the

elbows. He could no longer use his psychokinesis.

Having lost his escape route, his subordinate, and his means of attack, the Manager looked up as he trembled with humiliation. He gazed upon the man's transcendently expressionless face.

"That name—" Actors possessed throats of bronze, quite unlike what normal people had. Dill's voice hacked through the air around him, echoing throughout the room like thunder.

"—is Aegisthus."

In a corner of Ex Machina Amputation that had fallen into the Reincarnators' hands, there was a corridor.

"Captain Halberd, I have come to escort you out of here." The circular door opened and light streamed in; a warrior in a chain mail cloak entered, two swords strapped to his waist. The floor at his feet was wet with blue blood.

The descendant of giants leaned forward, his great body still wrapped in chains, and greeted his subordinate. "Ah...it's good to see you. However, this suggests that my plan went better than I expected. Did that so-called 'Hero' in fact meet with Steel-Link?"

The man with two swords nodded yes, without pausing, as he unchained Halberd.

"Ha ha ha ha...how very gratifying. You may be my enemy, Eugene, but you are so honest and easily led. I never imagined you would act so perfectly in line with my wishes." In the considerable time it took to remove his chains, Halberd reminisced. He thought about his shining days of glory—about the Holy War, which had begun and ended on the battlefield.

Apollonius Terea Tritos, third in line to inherit the imperial crown. He had joined forces with Halberd in the Holy War, using it as an opportunity to pave his way to the throne. Now he was dead, his body appropriated by the Hero of the Reincarnators, Eugene. Apollonius had been a devilish young man, and Halberd had liked him immediately. The depth of hatred residing in those golden eyes was delightful to him. When he arrived at the brigade's encampment one day, Apollonius had arrogantly said, "I have no interest in battle-crazed, provincial nobility like you. But I would like to make your lieutenant, Dill Steel-Link, my companion in my pursuit of power. Surrender all to me and, in the process of achieving my ambition, I can promise you bloody battles worthy of a mythic age."

Apollonius had brought a plan of epic proportions. In truth, the Holy War to conquer the south was accompanied by internal strife within the vast Empire of Megaros Terea—it was a proxy war between bands of mercenaries, funded and operated directly by the noblemen in line to inherit the throne. The field battles conducted in the south could not be closely observed from the interior, and they secretly included some clashes against Terean armies.

Of course there were still battles against their primary enemy—the allied armies led by the Titans, remnants from antiquity still lurking in the south. In all of these they achieved victory, and they managed to successfully enter the Holy Land before any Terean troops. There they planted the battle standard of the eagle, solidifying Apollonius's claim to the throne.

If that had been all, Halberd might not have been moved by Apollonius's ambition. But he wasn't done yet. To confirm his ascension as king of the Holy Land, Apollonius forced an immediate coronation on the spot. As the legitimate King Apollonius, his first decree named the Holy City of Dios as the new capital. This constituted a declaration of independence from the Empire.

Naturally, the nobles in the heart of the Empire did not overlook the arbitrary ascension of this new king—the aristocratic society rooted in the Imperial Capital, Aspro Terea, would most surely oppose him. This is actually what Apollonius wanted. What Apollonius truly desired was revenge against the grand, ancient tradition of aristocracy itself for the fate he had suffered—born the bastard son of a nobleman and tossed aside, his very life a trifle to them.

From a kingdom I myself rule, I will rip those stinking, decrepit nobles out by their roots. Apollonius held the political legitimacy of kinghood together with religious legitimacy afforded by his control of the Holy City of Dios. If he could add to this some form of military legitimacy by commanding the forces of Terea, who must be expanding in the vicinity of the Holy Land, along with the supporting troops sent from the Eleven Cities of the North, his independence would truly be realized. *For military legitimacy, I require a hero. If there really are no heroes in this age, then I will simply make one.*

Until Apollonius had singled him out, Dill Steel-Link had been nothing but a reliable lieutenant to Halberd. True, his long rust-colored hair was flamboyant, and he stood out because of that, but Halberd despised such

pretension. When it came to the art of war, there were many men in his brigade who had distinguished themselves more than Dill.

The first time Steel-Link really started to make himself conspicuous was shortly after Apollonius's visit. It was then that Halberd realized just how much this young former actor had been holding back.

An actor is someone who plays a part. Dill, who had supposedly once pushed his way into the high society of the Imperial Capital, possessed a god-like gift for imitation. Having been drawn passively into a war he didn't agree with, this new aspiration—to be reunited with his old friend as his right hand—allowed his god-given talents to be demonstrated to their full extent.

Halberd had assembled his mercenary brigade by gathering men with every talent needed in war—spearmen, swordsmen, archers, skilled riders, messengers, lieutenants. Each of these talented men served as a model for Steel-Link, and thus it did not take very long for him to make himself into a consummate superhuman.

Thus had begun the days of plots and propaganda, battles and assassinations, alliances and betrayals, victories and routs. What bewildering and thrilling times they had been...

"Captain Halberd, let us depart. I have already discovered the whereabouts of your weapon on my way here."

Halberd's subordinate called out to him, returning him to his senses. The chains that had bound him so tightly had been undone. Donning the chain mail cloak that was handed to him, the giant smiled ferociously.

Apollonius was dead. His ambition of building a new kingdom had gone up in smoke. However, Apollonius's body had performed one last service for Halberd.

"Steel-Link. My son, my darling Aegisthus. Haven't you tired of peace by now? Let yourself be intoxicated by revenge. Let hellfire burn in your belly. After all, war never ends!"

"My name is Aegisthus." For a moment, there was dead silence. No one ventured to speak. His self-introduction was uncharacteristically unadorned. Everyone saw his mythical long hair, his chain mail cloak, the stout shield in his hand...this was without a doubt the solitary hero of the current era, who

had been depicted so many times in the newspapers of the Imperial Realm. However, no one present had ever seen him in the flesh before.

“Nonsense! He hasn’t been seen...for five years...” The end of the Manager’s exasperated wail suddenly rose up in a question. “Five years?”

“That’s right! For five years, I’ve kept you waiting...people of Vulcan!” The men he called upon shuddered, and time returned to the still battlefield. The Reincarnators’ pursuit resumed. Beating back with his shield all the Reincarnators who pressed forward to retrieve their Manager, Dill—Aegisthus—swiftly decapitated him! Holding up the Manager’s head, from which blue blood still poured, the Hero announced, “My name is Aegisthus! The hero of the Holy War, the king’s right hand, the strongest and bravest warrior of Redguard, here and now joins the battle!”

To take revenge for the Manager, the Reincarnators rushed toward Dill. As Dill moved to engage them, a man in a chain mail hood appeared beside him, and they exchanged a nod in silence. Dill added to his declaration, “Retreat and gather your brethren. Tonight you must return to this place and save the god of Vulcan! God’s shield, Aegisthus, will buy you some time! Come at me, cursed wraiths—the hero Aegisthus will be your opponent.”

The Reincarnators, recoiling, snapped back to their senses at the crack of the Chief’s flaming whip. The hero and his brothers-in-arms collided with the horde of the dead.

CHAPTER 4 —

RESIST:REINCARNATOR

“Your name,” mumbled the girl. “Tell me...your name.”

“My name?” The female Reincarnator—Repeater, feared for her lightning-fast fists—parroted the question. They were on the streets of Vulcan. On a dark road, far removed from the bustle of the festival, two Reincarnators faced each other.

“My name is Ryuubi. Before my reincarnation I was a teacher. Rei, you’re surely still a kid, aren’t you? In my profession, you can tell. Whatever body you occupy, your age will be revealed by your attitude.”

The girl named Rei wore a strained expression. Although the Reincarnator, Repeater, was smiling, the skin from half of her face had been torn off in a horrifying way. It was a gruesome sight.

Behind Rei, a girl with red eyes repeatedly choked up vomit flecked with blood, and a woman with milky-white hair repeated curses and apologies.

“I’m not really a kid...”

“Are you around college age, then?”

“...I’m sixteen. So I guess I’m legally a child.”

“You see! I knew it.” Repeater smiled calmly. However gently she was treating Rei, though, Repeater was clearly the one who had beaten down the girl and the woman wailing behind her. Rei suppressed her fear and tried to find another topic of conversation.

“Um...”

“Rei. Relax. I’ve already called my subordinates. We may be in a strange land, but we’re not alone. Soon, I’ll take you to the Mainland, and I promise you it’ll take your breath away. Everything there is made to be familiar to us...but, before we go there...” Repeater’s eyes narrowed. “I shall conclude the Enlightenment.”

“H-Hey! Just one question!” As Repeater walked by Rei toward Cirulia and Nue, Rei spoke up to draw her attention. This action was successful—

Repeater stopped and put a hand on Rei's shoulder. The gruesome, skinless side of her face turned toward Rei as she looked down.

"I have a question of my own. Rei, why do you seem to be talking to stall for time?" Rei tried to escape, but Repeater's hand, firmly placed on her shoulder, would not permit that.

"Take *this*." Rei slapped Repeater's face with the open palm of her hand, which was glowing red-hot. The battle-hardened Reincarnator, however, calmly grabbed her wrist and twisted it. Rei screamed shrilly.

"Here's your first lesson—I am the superior Flinter." Repeater twisted her arm harder and said again, "I am your superior."

Rei breathed heavily. As tears welled up in her eyes, she shut them tightly and forced them out, glaring up at Repeater with teardrops in her white lashes.

"Screw you, you shitty teacher...!"

For a moment Repeater was struck silent—then she delivered a knee strike to Rei's solar plexus.

"Gah...!" Rei struggled to breathe. She moved her lips as if to inhale, but had little success. On top of this, Repeater grabbed her by the hair and forcefully brought her face up to look her in the eye. Her pale face, with its missing skin and blank expression, was suddenly very close.

"As an educator, I have never denied the necessity for corporal punishment. Rei, first let's mend your words. You will call me *sensei*."

"Huff...huff...huff."

"Call me *sensei*. Say it. Say it *now*. Don't mess about, just say it."

Struggling to breathe, Rei saw the reinforcements Repeater had called appear.

"...You're here. Rei, I don't know what you hoped to achieve, but this is it for you."

"I was waiting for your pals to get here, you shitty teacher."

Repeater swiftly turned her gaze back to Rei...but she didn't make it in time. Rei's body, which she had held in her hands, had vanished.

"Teach! Over here." The voice came from behind. In the next instant, Repeater took a hand wreathed in flame to her face. She endured the blow, stopping the hand with the muscles in her neck and planting both feet firmly on the ground. She tried to maintain her footing—but then noticed a feeling of floating. Her feet were no longer touching the ground. Although only by a

few centimeters, she was levitating in the air.

“Why, this is...!”

“Fly away!” Again, the voice came from behind. Then, Rei clumsily tackled her. Normally Repeater could have taken this impact without any problem, but right now her body was floating in the air. She had nowhere to plant her feet. Repeater, in her gravity-free state, was sent flying.

However...this Chief Reincarnator would not leave on such terms. As she was blown away, Repeater transformed her legs and back into retro burners, canceling out her momentum. Having left the range of Rei’s Skill, she was now released from the anti-gravity effect. Her feet scraped against the cobblestones as she touched back down to earth. Even so, the shock on Repeater’s face was clear.

“How many...how many varieties of Skill did you use just now? Pyrokinesis, teleportation...and on top of that, psychokinesis. It can’t be!” Repeater’s face, now that even the intact skin on her face had been burned by Rei’s scorching palm, looked truly demonic. With that gruesome face she cried, “Stay back, you fools!”

“Captain?!”

“Sensei! You’re wounded!”

“This girl is a Play Actor! She can copy Skills just like Yuujin-sama!” Repeater tried to keep her subordinates away as they rushed to aid her, but it was too late. Rei levitated herself with the power of psychokinesis, and red phosphorescence swirled around her in a vortex. After firing a brief flare at Repeater and her soldiers, she turned and disappeared into a teleportation gate she’d opened with her Skill.

When she emerged, Cirulia was right in front of her, sitting and watching the action with a stunned expression.

“Cirulia. Nue.” The Reincarnator girl’s eyelashes trembled. “Thank you. And...I’m sorry.”

“Wait—” Rei’s body disappeared again. When she reappeared, she was on a rooftop far away.

“After her! Don’t let her get away!” The fearsome Reincarnators leaped away in pursuit of Rei. Holding Nue, who continued to cough up bloody vomit, Cirulia could only watch them as they left.

Nue moaned. A vile, sour odor assaulted Cirulia’s nostrils as a red lump fell out onto the cobblestones, making a wet squelching sound as it landed.

“Eh heh heh. Gah.” The lump the girl had thrown up spoke. It had incomplete fingers, eyes, and a mouth. “Shall I tell you the secrets of this world?”

Each time the girl kicked off from one rooftop to jump to another, flames ignited at her feet, enabling her to walk precariously through the sky. The phosphors dancing around her were dust motes she had levitated with her psychokinesis, then ignited with her pyrokinesis. The motes bathed her pale cheeks in a warm glow, so that they looked like red blood still flowed through them.

“Hey, wait a minute!” As Rei passed in front of a window, she saw the reflection of a boy who appeared to be trapped inside. “What do you think you’re doing with that body? That belongs to me!”

“Sid, I’m sorry!” The girl clapped her hands together in front of her face in a gesture of apology—but, as a result, she lost her footing on the rooftop. Rei and Sid cried out together in agitation. “W-W—W-Waaah, sorry sorry sorry! I’m sorry!”

“Gaaah! Look ahead! Please keep looking ahead! Otherwise, we’ll both die!”

As Rei fell, she gestured as if parting the air in front of her, forming a shining circle of light which swallowed her whole. The next thing they knew, Rei was running across the rooftops once again.

“A Skill...so I really have become a Reincarnator. Just like the one who killed my father and mother...”

“I really am sorry. I didn’t mean any harm. Really, I didn’t think it would end up this way...”

For a while Sid was silent. Just as Rei started to feel concerned, the boy’s harsh voice echoed through her mind again. “Please explain to me what happened. Rei, who are you? Why did you come to our world? And in the first place, what *is* a Reincarnator?”

These were all difficult questions to answer. There were many things even Rei hadn’t been well briefed on. Their pursuers’ footsteps were near, so she had only a few moments to spare.

“My name is Rei. Rei Mishima. A normal high schooler. Ah—a high

schooler is a child in their teens who goes to school...but that's not important right now!" Rei tore at her hair and chewed her fingernails. These were Rei's habits when she was irritated, not Sid's. "Long story short, I'm someone who was born in a different world from this one, and Reincarnators, by our standards, were all just regular people. This Skill isn't something I've had since I was born..." She dropped her gaze to the palm of her hand, where phosphors coalesced into a spherical vortex. To Rei, who possessed the ability to copy Skills, this meant that her pursuer—the source of that Skill—was not too far away. Rei quickened her pace.

"Where should I start... The blue blood that runs through our veins, what we call the Liquid Computer, was invented, and it was so amazing that all our textbooks talk about it...ah, but maybe I should explain how the Americans discovered a planet that could support human life first..."

"I see. Let me change my question. Rei, are you our enemy...or our ally?"

"I mean to be...an ally."

"But, Rei, aren't you a Reincarnator too? What makes you different from the ones who killed my family and my Master's?"

"We didn't know! We were just told that we would go to a new place and start a new life. That was all we expected... We weren't told that we would have to kill the people already living there and use their bodies. I mean, however you look at it, that's horrible..." Rei rubbed her eyes. Sid, reflected in the window panes she passed, slumped his shoulders, at a loss. "I don't know what I should do. I want to live too. But not so much that I want to take over your body and kill you. I want to give you back your body...but I don't know how. Sid, what should we do? What will become of us?"

"That's what I wanted to ask you..."

The roof in front of them shook three times. Rei, about to jump there, stopped just before she did, the flames from her feet leaving trails as she skidded to a halt. Roofs in the northern country had steep slopes, so she was barely able to avoid falling off by leaning against it.

"Damn you. This is too conspicuous. We were told to act conservatively until the Campaign."

"Hey, isn't this one an escapee? She's not registered in the database." Reincarnators outside of Repeater's group approached Rei, and then Repeater came up from behind. Rei was caught in between them.

"We'll arrest this girl ourselves! We don't need your support. Stay out of

my way!"

Rei whispered to Sid, "What I do know is this—we have to get out of here to survive. Sid, here we go!" The glow of the phosphors intensified. With three more Reincarnators in range, her Copy Skill developed even further.

An explosion that could be described as a small sun washed over the civilian rooftops. Scorched timber scattered everywhere. The Reincarnators slipped on the roof, falling backward onto the street and writhing there in pain.

The phosphors that had expanded to protect Rei dissipated. In their place, an endless starry sky extended above her head. And then, Rei flew. Flames spurted from the soles of her shoes. In the next instant, Repeater attacked the place Rei had stood only a moment ago.

"Waaah! I-Is this safe?"

"Don't worry. This will work. I can become anything."

As if she were kicking off from unseen platforms in midair with successive small explosions from the soles of her feet, Repeater followed them into the sky. In response, Rei curled up her body and accumulated power. The dust in the air started to ignite again, creating phosphors. These condensed around Rei's back, taking a shape resembling a butterfly's wings.

"I can fly! I can go anywhere!" Her wings had emerged—the power she unleashed erupted like a waterfall of flames, carrying her high into the sky filled with stars...into the world of mythology that Dill had spoken of.

Bathed in flames, Repeater lost control of her Skill and plummeted toward the ground. One by one, Reincarnators gathered far below and looked up at Rei's flight. She absorbed their Skills, and the wings on her back grew in number. Two pairs of wings, four pairs, sixteen pairs—they multiplied without limit. Her power only continued to grow.

"Sid. Isn't it beautiful?" They ascended even above the colossal Ex Machina, the lights of Vulcan receding beneath them. The activity of the people, the fires of war that created tears of woe...from this altitude everything looked the same, difficult to distinguish. This was truly the perspective of the gods.

"You've flown this high. Where do you intend to go?" Sid asked.

"Don't know. Where should I go?" Rei laughed. "But this was always my dream: to go somewhere that isn't here. Somewhere without my parents or rotten teachers. Somewhere far away."

As their altitude increased, the wings on Rei's back started to dwindle away. It seemed they had traveled too far from the targets of her Copy Skill, the Reincarnators on the ground. The wings of phosphors that had grown to twenty-eight pairs at their most numerous were shed and fell away one by one.

The fall of Icarus. That legend was, surely, from Greek mythology. The same mythology that created this world...

"But dreams don't come true so easily...not even in another world. There are grown-ups here too. Even though we've come to a new world, they're trying to create the same kind of society we had before." The last of her wings lost, Rei's body was still suspended in the night sky. There was a moment where gravity and the power she used to fight it competed...and then a moment of silence. Losing the protection of the phosphors, her body froze in the wind. She stretched out a hand toward the stars as she started to fall.

"Rei, if we don't do something..."

"Don't worry...if I can't reach the stars, that's all right. There's another place I'd like to go right now." As the ground approached, the phosphors ignited around Rei once more. The lights gathered, enveloping Rei. With her psychokinesis, she formed them into the shape of her favorite old stadium jacket before gathering them in a ring on the palm of her hand. As she fell, Rei gathered her hair behind her head and tied it back with a hair tie made of flames.

"Sid, look. This is who I am." While it was still Sid Faron's body, the expression on its face did not resemble him. If he had still had a body of flesh and blood, Sid probably would have blushed.

Their fall to earth was about to end. Beneath them were nearly twenty Reincarnators, and Rei plummeted toward them. The ground approached swiftly. The moment before she hit it, a huge number of phosphors burst forth like the spray of ocean waves.



“You’re telling me she’s unharmed after falling that far?!” wailed Repeater, who had been lying in wait for Rei. The Reincarnators around her were mostly speechless.

“So, shall we fight?” Rei used her psychokinesis to bring one of the scattered blocks of timber to her hand. The Reincarnators looked at each other to make sure they understood the situation. None of them sought to break their vanguard. Repeater, impatient with their inaction, stepped forward, prepared for her body to be destroyed.

“Hmmm.” A hand was placed on her shoulder. A man in a black suit, who hadn’t been there until a moment earlier, walked past Repeater and toward Rei.

“A second Play Actor, capable of wielding all Skills, following in Yuujin-sama’s footsteps. Allow me to escort her.”

“A Manager...”

He wore a dark necktie with his business suit. This Reincarnator, known by the name “Summoner,” did not call forth a teleportation gate with his Skill, but instead silently crouched low. This was his highly refined martial arts stance. His merciless stare pierced through Rei.

“Look who decided to show up.” Rei laughed. The timber beam in her hand burned like a torch. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

Realizing Rei’s intentions, the Manager widened his eyes. However, before he could take any action, Rei hurled the burning beam at him. Instead of dodging, the Manager opened a teleportation gate in front of him, and the beam flying toward him instead vanished into subspace.

“Let me borrow that Skill of yours.” A tumultuous noise rang out, like a scream, and the Manager’s straight punch met empty space. Rei was no longer there.

A moment later, the street at Summoner’s feet started to crack radially from where he had stepped, unable to withstand the impact.

All that remained was the residue from Rei’s phosphors and teleportation gate. Having gained the Skill of the Manager-class Reincarnator, Summoner, Rei had traveled to some other place.

Reincarnators and their subordinate Sphinxes forced their way ahead

through the narrow passage, through which pipes twisted and turned.

“Are we going to retreat?!”

“Not yet.”

Two men shouted to each other. These two men, who wore chain mail cloaks, stood firm at the mouth of the corridor, forming a rearguard to hold back the Reincarnators. To prevent them from communicating further, the Reincarnator front line pulled back, and others holding guns stepped forward. The men in chain mail cloaks stood with their shoulders together, raising their two shields so that they overlapped.

The muzzle flash from the Reincarnators’ guns was as bright as the desert sun. No one could tell how long the barrage lasted. The bullets shaved away the surface of the shields, deforming their shape; the men endured the deafening retort of the guns and the impacts against their shields. Behind them, standing foolishly close, a man was hit by ricocheting bullets and let out a scream. In response to this the gunfire ceased, and the close combat specialists among the Reincarnators entered the fray. The men in chain mail cloaks reacted swiftly, dropping their shields and each drawing a weapon. One wielded a steel club, the other a wickedly sharp spear that cast a long shadow.

“We are the Halberd Brigade! Like a swift strike of lightning, the three-headed eagle makes its triumphant return!” With club and spear, they each slew one of two Reincarnators who had broken away from the vanguard, leaving them to lie where they fell. But before they had even hit the ground, two more Reincarnators charged forward to replace them, stepping over the bodies of their fellows. The men in chain mail cloaks blocked them with their shields, then pushed them back—as the Reincarnators staggered backward, they beat them to the ground.

A young Vulcan man who had been protected by the two heroic warriors revealed a wound to his leg and cried, “Forget about me! I can’t move—go on without me!” A march is inevitably conducted at the pace of the slowest participants—attempting to retreat while defending prisoners who had already been wounded during the battle in the shaft was a frustrating task. Luckily, the corridor they had fled into was narrow, mitigating their disadvantage in numbers, but if this dragged on much longer they would be in a bind. While Dill took on the enemies’ incessant attacks, he yelled angrily at the men below him.

“Don’t you have any family in the city? If you do, flee now, even if you have to crawl. If not, get out of here alive and go on to start one someday. Don’t tell me you were born just to die here!”

The glow of a lethal Skill met the flash of a swift spear. The motionless man, stunned and unable to comprehend the situation, muttered, “You are *that* Aegisthus, right? Why would you go to such lengths...”

“*Because I am Aegisthus!*” A straitjacketed ape with mechanized arms beat down upon Dill with a heavy rain of blows. His shield was dented, and shards of it went flying. From between a crack that had been left in the shield, his glowing, rust-colored eyes peered out. “My name is Dill Steel-Link. The hero Aegisthus is just a role I was given to play. I am, just like you, a child of man who must one day die. But—!” With his shield before him he barrelled into the enemy, pushing back the opposing battle line. “I have a duty to play the hero until the next performer inherits the role! Stand up! Survive! You too have the right to play Aegisthus!”

Dill’s brash attitude ill-suited the role of the legendary hero. However, this was the battle of a mortal man, not a god. This was Dill Steel-Link’s battle.

“Steel-Link, you...could have retired by now,” said the man in the chain mail hood next to him, lowering his voice.

Dill laughed and replied, “Yes, I could have, had there been anyone to replace me...now, who’s next?!” The enemies flinched. Then they heard the sound of footsteps fast approaching from behind.

“The two of you held out well.” The man who’d spoken was the chain-mail-cloaked lieutenant in charge of the evacuation. He lifted the Vulcan with the wounded leg onto his shoulders, then turned away. “We’ve finished preparing the elevator. We’re pulling out!” Slinging the shield in his hand over his back, he ran straight through the corridor he had defended with his life up until now. Guns fired behind him, the shield on his back ringing loudly as the bullets struck it.

They emerged again into a comparatively open space. Within the tall, narrow elevator hall there was a car surrounded by a wire mesh fence, which was already packed full with the other prisoners. It was truly stuffed to the gills. After loading the wounded man into the car, there was no room left for the chain mail-cloaked warriors.

Dill quickly wheeled around and brandished his half-shattered shield.

“My name...” He plunged his spear into the bioweapons the Reincarnators had deployed as sacrificial pawns, kicking each of the bodies away as he pulled his weapon free. The Reincarnators who followed found their path blocked, the apes’ bodies forming a bottleneck. “...is Aegisthus! The legend revived, the parapet that towers over Redguard! If you wish to pass, you must go through us—over Aegisthus and his battle brothers!”

“You really are a hero.” A girl’s voice.

The elevator car began its slow ascent. The five men in chain mail cloaks who remained in the hall steeled themselves for the final battle. Then, suddenly, an unfamiliar girl appeared.

Dill gave the girl a glance. A moment later, the Reincarnators activated their Skills in rapid succession, some teleporting to get behind the warriors and some launching attacks with their psychokinesis. Dill spun around as he used his elbow to knock back a Jumper who had appeared behind him, then took a kinesis wave directly to his shield. The shield could not hold up to this, shattering into tiny pieces, which scattered on the ground. Tossing aside what was left of it, Dill advanced. He killed the kinesis user, the Conductor, with his spear, then destroyed the bioweapon standing beside him.

“There you are...” That was the voice of a Chief-class Reincarnator directing his men—he signaled for them to aim their guns and fireballs generated by their Skills at Dill. Dill had anticipated this, however, and held up a Reincarnator’s body in place of a shield as he fell back. As if a dam had broken, Reincarnators flooded into the hall.

The Chief’s whip of flame danced, and the bioweapons charged forth to destroy the elevator facility. The other chain-mail-cloaked warriors joined the melee.

The girl meditated. Her toes left the floor, floating a few centimeters above it. Bright phosphors ignited and sparkled all around her.

“...?” *How long has that girl been here?* The Reincarnators who stopped to ponder this were suddenly wreathed in flames. The phosphors swarmed like insects and devoured the surrounding Reincarnators’ bodies, burning through them one by one.

“Kill her! She’s a traitor!” commanded the Chief, pointing at the girl. He’d just received this information over his holographic terminal, but the fact that this left his hands full proved fatal for him.

“I am Aegisthus, who runs headlong at Notos, the indestructible sevenfold

shield!” The Reincarnator saw his left hand severed at the wrist and flying through the air, its fingers still spread out in the distinctive gesture he used to expand his terminal. Even as he was showered in his own blue blood, the Chief Reincarnator went for his whip with his remaining hand. But that hand was also cut off, and the flaming whip bounced off the floor.

A hand holding no weapon grabbed the Reincarnator by his shirt-front, twisting the fabric as it lifted him off the ground. His deathly pale face turned even paler as he gazed upon the fearsome rust-colored eyes glaring up at him.

“You people burned my hometown, killed my daughter, stole my friend, and committed blasphemy. Let me tell you very clearly—you’ll pay dearly for those crimes.”

“This is petty of me...but I would prefer that you didn’t underestimate me!” Turning his head, the Reincarnator shouted to one of his subordinates, “Destroy this body!”

Bullets and a storm of Skills assaulted both Dill and the Chief Reincarnator. Dill clicked his tongue in annoyance and shrouded his body with his chain mail cloak. As he did so, he let go of the Chief, whose body was reduced to a spray of blood in the blink of an eye. Still the barrage carried on, though, and Dill’s cloak started to fray.

Dill’s efforts had been marred by the fact that he’d been unable to hold up his enemy’s head. Although he had felled their control tower, he had not put them to rout. The Reincarnators’ morale had not fallen. At this rate, their foe would still overcome them with sheer numbers...

“Cut it out!” A curtain of phosphors stretched out in front of Dill, and the bullets fired at him burned up the moment they reached the barrier. As if turning the projectiles into kindling, the curtain of phosphors continued to grow as bullets struck it.

To defend Dill, a girl stepped forward, the phosphors following her movement. Realizing that gunfire would not penetrate the curtain, the Jumpers used their Skills to close the distance and charge at them!

“I am the one who executes Reincarnators.” Dill wielded his sword and dispatched the Jumpers. Her eyes shining, the girl looked up at Dill, who did not meet her gaze. Instead, he called to his comrades in chain mail cloaks. “Brave soldiers of Terea! Let your limbs swell with strength! Remember the days of the Holy War! Remember how they feared our names!”

The warriors in chain mail cloaks answered Aegisthus’s voice—Stewart’s

spear pierced the Reincarnator Ironfist; Mace's club smashed Artillery's skull; the musician Wake dulled the movements of Bloodmoon, Chariot, and Jackrabbit with his arrows. Taking a beating from Patrol on his shield, Whitehead advanced. Thrusting forth his spear and skewering Patrol, without stopping he ran through Red Raven who was standing behind him before flinging his spear away. Right after that he tossed his shield, crying, "Aegisthus, use this!"

Dill caught the shield that came flying at him and raised it with one hand. "We are the three-headed eagle that carries the black death! We are the Halberd Brigade!"

What were the names of those the hero Aegisthus then slew? First was Mountain Dog; then he cut down the flying Skyglider with his sword. Next he repelled Charger with his shield, then crushed him into the ground. After stabbing the fleeing Cowboy in the back, his sword snapped in two as he tried to pull it out.

With the Reincarnators Coursechange approaching and Ophidian wheeling around to attack him, Aegisthus coolly stretched his right hand behind his back. A thoughtful battle brother deftly tossed him a spear, and Dill's rust-colored eyes flared up.

"My name is Aegisthus!" He sent the two Reincarnators flying simultaneously. One he slew with his spear, the other he scooped up with his shield, flinging him high into the air. Then, he dispatched the now immobile Coursechange with a thrust.

Around him, the other heroes of the brigade followed his example one by one, holding up the heads of their enemies. At this sight, the Reincarnators finally lost their will to fight and tried to flee back through the corridor from whence they came.

"I'm afraid that's a dead end." The girl with the flaming hair tie stood with both hands in her pockets, laughing cruelly. The density of the phosphors drifting through the elevator hall increased, starting to resemble the aurora that streamed through the sky in the furthest reaches of the north. This high-density cloud of phosphors blocked the corridor; Reincarnators who tried to force their way through were burned and thrown back. The eyes of the gathered Reincarnators, full of murderous intent, turned toward the girl, who took one hand out of the pocket of her stadium jumper, then pointed her thumb downward.

“Try this on for size.” At this, the phosphors she had accumulated rushed over the Reincarnators in waves, engulfing them in a vortex of searing wind. An acrid burning smell filled the air, and then even the stench itself burned up and disappeared. Not even the Reincarnators’ bones remained.

The hall fell silent.

With the links in his chain mail cloak ringing, Dill walked over to the girl. The young Reincarnator raised her head and smiled. “How was I? I think I did pretty—”

“Shut up.” His great hand clamped over the girl’s mouth, then lifted her into the air so high that her legs dangled. “Won’t you Reincarnators be satisfied until you’ve stolen everything from me?!”

The twinkle of hope faded from the girl’s eyes, which were the same blue as the boy’s. Dill gritted his teeth and turned his head away. The hand he clamped over the girl’s mouth was wet—with tears.

“...Are you kidding me? Tears? Whom do those belong to? What about those blue eyes, those tear ducts, that earnest and sensitive heart? They all belong to Sid Faron, not to you! That boy had a future! You plucked his life away as a sacrifice just so you Reincarnators could have your pathetic second chance. You say you’ve been reborn? At least have some shame about it. What need is there to die first and be reincarnated just to do your life over, let alone steal another’s body?! All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players... If you want to change your role, you can do so any time you like. You Reincarnator scum, on the other hand—who lack the courage to forge your destinies by yourself—only ever manage to change your appearance.”

“Aaah, shut up, shut up, shut up! You talk too much!” cried the Reincarnator girl, prying Dill’s hand from her mouth. Motes of fire glowed in her blue eyes. Then, she vanished, only to reappear behind Dill slightly higher in the air. After bending backward for extra momentum, she delivered Dill a headbutt with all her might behind it.

Dill pitched forward onto the ground, but in a moment he stood back up and glared at the girl. The girl glared back. “Enough of your one-sided sermons! Listen to what I have to say.” She pulled a metal pipe that lay on the ground in the aftermath of the battle into her hand, and the moment she grasped it, phosphors ignited all around the pipe, nearly causing it to burst into flames. After she gave it an irritable shake, the phosphors scattered, and

the pipe returned to being a blunt instrument. For his part, Dill held a spear and a shield in his hands, but after glancing at the spear he cast it aside.

The girl threw a punch at him—an awkward strike, her legs staggering. “I came here to save you!” Dill effortlessly weathered blow after blow on his shield. All the while he looked down at the girl with rage smoldering in his rust-colored eyes. “I didn’t know about reincarnation, the Project, or the Second Earth, and I don’t care about them! I didn’t come here to be reborn—I came here to live! That’s why I tricked my dad, teamed up with Kaoru, stowed away on the ship, and came all the way here. Did you expect me to just stay and die with a father like that? This is who I am! I am Rei!”

“What does any of that have to do with us?”

“Ah, you’re right—it has nothing to do with you! I know that! Of course I do! That’s why...” The blunt instrument tumbled out of Rei’s hand. “I wanted to at least come and apologize.”

One of the men in chain mail cloaks had been aiming his crossbow at Rei for a while now. A look of confusion crossed over his tattooed face, and he looked to his nearby comrades. The lieutenant held up a hand to dissuade him and shook his head.

“Sid is alive. He isn’t gone,” mumbled Rei.

Dill became agitated. “Can we bring him back to normal?”

“I think so...but not just yet. I still don’t know how to do it. But he really is in here.” Rei pointed to her temple. “Sid says, ‘Please...give me a break. You’re embarrassing me. Stop using my body to say weird stuff.’...Ha, ha...You’re bright red.”

Dill fell to his knees, as if his knees had given out. His chain mail cloak rang loudly as it hit the ground. “That does sound like something Sid would say.” Dill held his head with one hand, and reached out with the other to touch Rei’s shoulder. The moment before he touched it, he hesitated. He tried to draw it back, but Rei took his hand, placed it on her shoulder, and leaned her cheek on it.

“I came here with something to tell you. I like you.”

Dill was baffled. After thinking for a moment, with a straight face he answered, “I’m sorry, but my loyalty is to my family.”

“No, not like that. Hey, is it all right if I call you papa, like Nue does?”

“I think we’ll need to get to know each other better before we do anything like that...”

“Didn’t you already tell me all your feelings a little while ago, after the festival?”

“I said that to Sid. This is my first time meeting you...”

“Well, I’ve been around for a while—or at least my consciousness was. Your story about the stars tonight was lovely...could you tell it to me again?”

“No, wait. This is bizarre. In the first place, why do you keep interrupting me? I’m trying to say that we need to take this step by step... Hey, Rick! What are you laughing about?!?”

Dill picked up the spear at his feet and hurled it at his comrade, who held his stomach as he roared with laughter. But Rick was also a battle-hardened mercenary, so he evaded it without any effort and continued laughing. The other men around them in chain mail cloaks also smiled wryly.

“Hey, papa.”

“Stop it! People might get the wrong idea!”

“What idea might that be?”

“...In any case, I’m not your papa.” Dill held his head in his hands.

“Let’s go home—together.” Rei offered Dill her hand. A serious expression fell over Dill’s face, and he shook his head.

“I still have a job to do. I need to take back my friend’s body. I can’t let this insult to him go on a moment longer now that he’s within arm’s reach.”

“But the Reincarnators have taken to the streets as well. A little while ago they attacked Cirulia and Nue. I managed to handle them at the time...but I’m still worried.”

Dill nearly wavered upon hearing this, but of course, in the end his determination remained strong. Still, he had to be sure. “Thanks for taking care of them, Rei. They’re both safe now, aren’t they?”

“...Yeah. They should be. I couldn’t stay to see them escape, but all the Reincarnators at the scene left to chase after me.”

“I see.” Dill closed his eyes, then opened them again. “I see. Thank you.”

Rei’s eyelids fluttered twice, then three times. Then she raised her head, aloof and expressionless. “This is just a suggestion, but shall I search for the Reincarnator using your friend’s body? That’s who you’re chasing, right?”

“Can you do that?” Without thinking, Dill leaned forward.

“I can. If I couldn’t, I wouldn’t have been able to jump to your location.”

“Right, I see. Then please, do whatever you can.”

“Got it—but it will take a little bit of time. Give me a moment to myself.”

She gestured for Dill to move away. Dill went over to his comrades in chain mail cloaks and spoke with them. Rei was the only topic of conversation, and they were praising her.

“Yes!” whispered Rei to herself quietly, turning her back to the men. “Yes, yes, yes! He. Praised. Me!” Her fist shook. A small moment of joy—a smile of satisfaction she would show to no one. All around the girl, the phosphors from her Skill floated up like bubbles, then burst.

Squeak...squeak. Amidst many heavy footfalls, one solitary noise reverberated all around. At the head of the group was a wizened old man whose body, nothing but skin and bones, leaned to one side atop his wheelchair. He sat there looking like he might topple over at any moment. The harness biting into his skin only barely managed to prevent him from taking a miserable fall. The old man’s face was pale like a corpse, and he wore a red armband around one bony arm.

“To be honest, it’s an honor,” he croaked, his cracked lips parting. The blond man walking beside him glanced down.

“What is?”

“For me to be selected for such an important operation—and as your assistant at that. That’s what I meant, Yuujin-san.” The old man looked bashfully toward Hero, though his crusty eyes remained shut. He was a young soul in an elderly body. Hero surreptitiously furrowed his brow as he considered this grotesque discrepancy. “This is the final investigation of the Module’s center. We may even have a chance to meet the Colonel on this mission... If I may speak directly, I could consider this a test for my promotion to Manager, could I not?”

“If it is, you’ve just lost a point for asking that.”

“Seriously? In that case, I’ll have to work hard from now on and quickly win some points back, won’t I?” Upon the armrest of his wheelchair, the old man traced a shape with his finger. Accompanied by the faint sound of a gust of wind, two winged beasts emerged from the procession behind them. The birds’ wings were outstretched, but they did not flap them to fly, instead hovering with the help of rotors embedded in them.

“I will send additional air patrol units. Just to be safe, we should stay

vigilant. The more scouts the better, wouldn't you say?" Without making a sound, the mechanized birds of prey vanished into the darkness.

Living drones. These half-mechanized animals, known by the native people of Redguard as Sphinxes, shared this elderly young man's senses and functioned as extensions of his body. The living drone pushing his wheelchair was of a type known as a Charging Support, controlled by his telepathy over a wide area. There were a number of these animals with no sense of self making up the exploration team for this mission.

"They are quite convenient," muttered Hero, as he watched the drones depart. There was a certain amount of sarcasm in his tone.

"I hope you don't mind my saying so, Yuujin-san, but you work too much," the man in the wheelchair croaked hotly. "To give the native people as peaceful a death as possible, you've been hunting overtime, haven't you? There are some among the staff who torment them needlessly. Regardless, how do you think it looks? Some have put about the misguided slander that you have been breaking regulations to gain more points. And just the other day you went out personally to rescue a Chief who screwed up. But surely whatever happened to her would be just deserts, and you should have left her to die. You shouldn't *spoil* her."

"Watch your mouth. Ryuubi has seniority over you as a Chief."

"That's not the issue! Why won't you use us? You are the Project's Hero. If you give the word, anyone will gladly do your bidding. Yuujin-san, you are our true leader."

"I am neither a hero nor a leader."

"If not you, then what kind of person could become a leader?" The old man's voice was exasperated at this point. He most likely thought that Hero's stubborn contradiction could only be obstinate modesty.

"A superhuman," answered Hero. "Reflecting on the ills of monarchy, history created democracy. Surrounding heads of state with committees, judiciaries, and the mass media, we reduced them to caged animals. This was all to suppress the emergence of mad or foolish rulers. Democracy is built upon fear and suspicion toward leaders. But what if a flawless superhuman, whose prowess could not be doubted, were to become king?" There was a mysterious passion in his voice.

The Reincarnator in the wheelchair gulped. As if he had heard this, Hero turned to look at him with murky eyes.

“Our reincarnation gives us a chance,” Hero went on. “Most Reincarnators have not yet obtained bodies, remaining dormant in their cradles in the Mainland...but thanks to our Project, we are already active in Redguard. If a superhuman appeared to replace those opportunistic authorities who slumber and wait for the time to be ripe...the basis of democracy would be overturned. People would finally wake up and gladly cast aside false kings—those in power who do not deserve that title. Then the surveillance system at the heart of democracy, itself based in misanthropy, would be discarded. An unprecedented age, with absolute power entrusted to a hero, would begin.”

“But, that’s...!”

“At least, that’s how I used to think.” Hero smiled abruptly. His golden eyes, which gazed in the direction of the wheelchair-using Reincarnator, were faintly hazy, so it was hard to tell whether or not he was actually looking at the other man. “Don’t trust a former political prisoner like me too much. From my perspective, someone like you, who ran away from your previous job in foreign investment with company secrets, or someone like a female teacher who took corporal punishment too far...they all just pale in comparison.”

The man in the wheelchair gave Hero a dry, obsequious smile. His pulse remained rapid. *Did I tell him about that?*

“We seem to have lost signal from Scout Unit 3.” Hero’s expression suddenly grew suspicious.

“Huh...I’ll investigate! There doesn’t...seem to be any possibility of malfunction. The signal itself must have stopped. For confirmation, I’ll redirect nearby Unit 5’s patrol toward it... Ah, we’ve lost Unit 5! And Unit 2!”

“The enemy is approaching. Contact in fifteen seconds. Hurry, we’ll engage them in the front atrium.” In the middle of the proceedings Hero had stopped waiting for reports, using his own Skill to grasp the situation and giving orders accordingly. His Skill was the ability to learn any other Skill and copy it. There were cases in which Yuujin’s copied Skill would be less precise than the one wielded by the original user, but given sufficient training he was capable of surpassing them. Thus Yuujin, by virtue of his incessant fixation on power, had become a Skill Master, transcending the original users of the Skills he had collected.

Kicking off from the floor with an explosion from one of his Skills, he slid into the space where he had detected activity with a separate ability that allowed him to see through walls. Hero swept his arm through the air and non-offensive fireballs shot into each of the four corners of the room, playing the role of illuminating flares. The light from his Skill shone throughout the entire area, and the properties of the structural materials changed. The front wall was scorched black, as if it had absorbed the light.

“This is the original appearance of the center of the production Module.” Hero extended his hand and took a few steps toward the wall. “Inside are the first Reincarnators.”

“Wrong. You will not find...*hee*...that sort of person in here.” There was the clamor of a chain mail cloak and footfalls like the rumble of an earthquake. Then, from out of a hole torn in the scorched wall crawled a giant body. “Long time no see, Eugene...how many hours has it been? Gah ha, gah *hee hee hee!* Hee hee! Did you enjoy my heartfelt gift?” The giant Halberd’s body was even larger than normal; the color of his skin was a demonic-looking dark red and it throbbed periodically, as if his whole body had transformed into one enormous heart. His irises had shrunk so that the whites of his eyes stood out starkly. Steam rose from his shoulders like a mirage, distorting the air around him.

“Oh, Eugene...gah *hee*...You are stronger than me. To claim victory over you—*hee hee hee!*—I’ll need to exert myself too...like this.” Halberd threw a handful of ostensibly empty syringes onto the ground at his feet. There were seven of them. “For a man of normal stature, one would be sufficient—but because, as you can see, I’m a bit tall...gah ha ha *hee!*”

Hero watched all this sadly as a troop of Reincarnators came up behind him and formed a battle line that centered around him. Halberd also appeared to have men on his side—four men in chain mail cloaks guarding his flanks, most likely the same ones who had infiltrated the Module to free the giant. The strength of the Reincarnator forces was ten times that.

“What a pity, Halberd. Of all of the men I’ve come to know in Redguard, you were the closest to being a real hero.” Hero had once detained Halberd as a prisoner of war, but he had now escaped and had come to oppose Hero at this crucial phase of the Project. Hero could no longer let Halberd live.

Hero drew spears from portals to another dimension he had created with his Skill, readying them diagonally. The Reincarnator in the wheelchair, who

had withdrawn to the far rear of the formation, used his telepathy to direct his living drones to march forth and form a wall of flesh between him and Halberd. Reincarnators with medium- and long-range Skills listlessly recharged their abilities in a row at the back.

Finally, the preparations for his massacre were complete. The giant smirked. “Gah...gah hee hee, gah hee hoo hoo ha ha ha...Gah hah hah hah! Hah! Hah! Haa ha ha ha ha! My name...my name is Halberd!”

“Indeed. Your name is Halberd.”



The Reincarnators' Skills were unleashed. Projectiles made of light rained down upon their enemies like comets with tails trailing behind them. The men in chain mail cloaks, with Halberd at the head of their party, formed a single horizontal battle line and charged forward recklessly.

The first projectile of light connected with its target. Halberd was barely visible as he brandished his giant iron polearm to block it, and everything that followed was impossible to see as the wildly blooming light dazzled everyone. Only the sound could be perceived. The blast from each explosion was short, but they overlapped in a long chain, sounding like a single continuous roar that went on without end.

With one of his Skills, Hero engaged a sonar view of the action. To his astonishment, the men in chain mail were still alive.

Via the information link of his telepathic network, the wheelchair-using Reincarnator immediately sent an order to the living drones in the vanguard. The mechanized apes formed a scrum, bolstering themselves for the impending impact.

The giant's body tore through the storm of light. His shape-shifting iron weapon, upon which was mounted a blade that spun at high speed by an internal mechanism, crashed into the wall formed by the living drones. The revolving blade sawed indiscriminately through an ape's straitjacket, then its mechanized muscles and even its iron bones, bisecting it. Halberd then caught a hold of the apes beside it, destroying everything he touched!

"Advance, my boys! Drag out any cowards who hide in the fortress and pelt us with arrows! Grab them by the hair and throw them into the field! We shall douse them all in flames and burn them to a crisp! Gah hah ha ha ha hah hah haaah ha ha ha! Hah hah! Ha ha!" Men in chain mail cloaks who had hidden behind the giant leaped out in unison, and the surviving Charging Support units moved from their left and right to block their advance. A man with two swords and a man carrying a greatbow on his back reacted to the enemy's resistance; the dual-wielding swordsman drew two swords of different lengths from scabbards slung at each knee—one long, one short. Stepping forward courageously and flitting past the other men in chain mail, the dual-wielding warrior slashed with his longsword, held underhand, then took another step to deliver a two-step strike with his dagger, held overhand.

The strike was shallow, however. The ape's straitjacket, made of cut-

proof material, deflected the wicked tips of the blades, so they were unable to cut deep into the creature's flesh. The Charging Support unit flexed its transplanted artificial muscles, clasping its fists above its head and swinging them down toward the swordsman.

The dual-wielder's hands were a blur. He swapped the blades between his hands with unparalleled speed, switching overhand and underhand grips. He tore through both of the Charging Support's flanks again—and again—and again! Between each blow he swapped the blades between his hands, slicing at his opponent each time they changed hands! The slash-proof fibers were torn to shreds, exposing the flesh underneath...and the dual-wielder's assault was not yet finished.

Slash! Slash! Slash! Slash! Through the dense fur, then slicing through the ribs, then ripping out the embedded frame, the cables...even after both his longsword and dagger became wet with blood and mechanical lubricant, he shook it off and struck again.

At one point the dual-wielder suddenly sheathed his swords and stepped past the Charging Support. There, he met with his comrades, then faced the next enemy. A mere few seconds later, a Charging Support whose belly the swordsman had relentlessly cut into crumpled to the ground, spurting oil.

Seeing that his men had broken through the first of the enemy lines, Halberd chuckled to himself. With the incredible strength of a giant, he continued to crush the Charging Support units despite the resilience of their defenses, reinforced as their bodies were with special fibers. From time to time, he interrupted a Jumper's surprise attack from behind with an elbow strike.

The wheelchair-using Whisper, a telepathic Reincarnator, was thought to be the one really manipulating the flow of battle. For the sake of four of his men who advanced to engage the Whisper, Halberd made a series of ostentatious maneuvers—to draw the enemies' attention, first he roared, then charged forward recklessly, laughing boisterously. Although he didn't really feel it due to the hero's blood he had injected and the sheer elation of battle, Halberd's wounds were only getting more severe.

"So you've made a strategic sacrifice. Surely a man of your caliber wouldn't die for the sake of a mere diversion?" The spinning mechanism in Halberd's iron weapon stopped in the middle of sawing through a Charging Support unit's skull. Hero, who had appeared through teleportation, had

thrust his spear deep inside the weapon's engine.

Halberd raised his weapon and swept Hero aside. With the spear still stuck in it, he swung his lump of iron, its blade's rotation still halted, and delivered the crushing coup de grâce to the Charging Support. Bringing the weapon closer to inspect it, Halberd pulled the spear out, snapped it, and threw it away. The spinning mechanism, however, no longer turned.

"What are you waiting for, Eugene?"

Hero pulled a replacement spear from a teleportation gate, then stepped forward with an impressive burst of instantaneous speed. Seeing his enemy close with him in an instant, Halberd stepped back, just barely managing to keep Hero within striking range of his weapon, which he swung in a lethal arc. Hero dodged, and as he passed by the weapon he delivered another blow to one of its joints. Halberd, matching his timing, twisted the weapon in his hands, snapping the spear stuck in its mechanism.

Then, Halberd stepped forward, reaching straight toward Hero with his empty left hand to seize him—but he grasped only air. Hero had quickly let go of the spear, dodged the attempt to grab him, and retreated.

"We are human. From the beginning, haven't we always lived our lives with the certainty that we must one day die? As we are men, not gods, we must never seek eternal life."

All around Hero appeared the signs of Skills being activated once more. Eight identical spears emerged, all mass-produced, and floated together in a ring. Hero took one of them in his hand before charging again. His aim, of course, was to destroy Halberd's weapon. However hard the giant struggled with his supernatural strength, his attacks with the excessively heavy lump of iron were sluggish. One by one, spears were driven into the joints in the transforming mechanism.

"It's for that very reason that we seek everlasting fame on the battlefield." After receiving many direct blows from Hero's spears, a significant part of the mechanisms making up the iron weapon had fallen apart. Finding the weapon's bulk had shrunk by one fifth, Halberd grinned—then swung it in a smooth arc. He could wield this now lighter weapon much more swiftly.

The spears floating in a ring around Hero were all sent flying. Hero himself was knocked back, shards of shattered spearheads glinting in the air. Slowly tracing a parabola as he flew away from Halberd, he raised his head despite his body bending backward. Golden eyes stared back at Halberd.

Halberd's instincts raised alarm bells inside him. He had felt a strange sensation the moment he had struck Hero, as if a powerful force was pushing back—was it his Skill? Hero, who was still airborne, raised himself upright with a burst of pyrokinesis from his back and touched down on the floor. Then he immediately proceeded to open a teleportation gate and disappeared into it.

Halberd braced himself for the battle to continue. From where would Hero appear? The obvious move would be to attack from behind. However...exit gates manifested all around the giant instead—six of them, in a formation completely encircling him.

“...Gah. Gah gah hoo...Ga ha ha ha ha ha ha!” Hero appeared, unbelievably, from the gate right in front of Halberd. “You thought you could outwit me with this double bluff?”

“Actually...it was a triple bluff.”

The moment Halberd's iron weapon, which he had swung down without hesitation, made contact with Hero, it was deflected straight back. It was the same phenomenon he had experienced just a moment earlier. This time, however, he was at point-blank range, and he finally understood Hero's trick. Smoke erupted from the Reincarnator's body—activating his pyrokinesis at the moment of impact, he deflected the blow with miniature explosions.

“In our world, we call this defense technology ‘reactive armor.’” The voice was too close; Halberd couldn't make out the words. Blood dripped from Halberd's lips, boiling and bubbling up from inside him. Some dripped onto Hero's head, which was pressed against Halberd's chest, wetting his golden hair and boiling off as steam.

Hero let go of his weapon and stepped away from Halberd. The giant's body crumpled; Hero's spear had pierced straight through his chest—through his heart.

“It looks like the battle over there will soon be decided as well.” Standing beside Halberd, Hero gazed upon the end of the four men in chain mail cloaks. In this moment, what were the names of those who slew, and those who were slain? The first taken by the blackness of death was called Lascelles. He stood firm with his broad shield that had been forged in Vulcan, defending his allies—but he could not resist the enemy forces that pressed upon him as four of the Reincarnators worked together to tear his shield away from him. Of all his assailants, it was a nameless cyborg ape—

one of the Charging Supports—that finally broke his neck.

Having lost the man at the heart of their defense, the remaining men in chain mail were targeted one by one. The first to go was Vincent, the son of the venerable archer Edward. Using the archery skills his father had taught him from a young age in tandem with the swordsmanship he had learned during his time in the brigade, he had kept the Reincarnators at bay for a time. The use of these weapons meant he couldn't use his own shield, however, so he was now defenseless. The Reincarnator called Meteor rained down white-hot fireballs upon him, the light from the barrage blinding the hunter's son as he danced wildly to evade them. Thus the son followed the father—falling into the next world, his promise to once again hunt in the fields of his native land remaining eternally empty.

“My...boys...” Forced to watch his men die one after the other, the giant finally moved. As he struggled to pull out the spear lodged deep in his chest, both of his hands were drenched in blood.

“Are you still unable to die, Halberd?” Hero’s eyes opened wide, then narrowed again—with shock, then with pity. “Perhaps I shouldn’t be surprised, considering how many nanomachines you’ve got in you. Forgive my lack of consideration. I’ve caused you to suffer needlessly.” Hero retrieved a sword with his Skill and brandished it high in the air. Then, he aimed for Halberd’s neck, to cut it off with one strike. “This may be little consolation, but soon you’ll be at peace.”

“My name is Dill Steel-Link! Executioner of Reincarnators!”

On the other side of the portal wreathed with phosphors was the corpse of his dead friend, and he also saw his master on the brink of death. Dill announced his name and wielded his spear, full of rage. The Reincarnator, Hero, responded swiftly, shifting his grip on his sword and striking the side of the spear’s shaft. Its edge deflected, the tip of the spear only lightly grazed Hero’s shoulder.

“How...did you get here?”

Dill, of course, did not answer. Instead, he withdrew his spear with his right hand and, in its place, thrust forward the shield in his left in a shield bash aimed at Hero’s face. Hero struck the shield with his knee, halting its

momentum, and without pausing he dodged past the spear to close with Dill—an adverse effect of hiding behind a shield. Hero then twisted his body violently, using all the strength in his body to snatch the shield away.

His wrist would have extended beyond its range of motion had he continued to struggle against it, so Dill had no choice but to let go of the shield. Countering with a kick, he somehow managed to restore the distance between himself and Hero.

“So you were one of those mail-cloaks...” marveled Hero as he kicked the stolen shield far away. When he had met this man before there had been no chain mail cloak hanging from his shoulders...but it all made sense now. This was why he was so strong—and so persistent.

Rust-colored eyes seething with rage glared at the dead man. However, Dill’s attention was focused on the man Hero guarded behind him, Halberd.

“I’m sorry, General. I’m late...five years late. That’s unforgivably tardy. I’ll take it from here.”

As the giant tried to say something, bubbles of blood rose to the corners of his mouth. In the end he could say nothing. Instead he nodded dutifully, and was silent. Dill refocused his attention on Hero. At the Reincarnator who had observed the exchange between Dill and Halberd, without stopping them.

“My name is Dill Steel-Link. I seek the body of my daughter, stolen from me by the Reincarnators. When I swore to take revenge for my friend, that is the name I gave. But I have another name.” At the command of the wheelchair-using Reincarnator, two Jumpers teleported to intercept Dill, but Hero motioned for them to stand down. “I am the faithful blade in the service of the king.”

Dill vanished—another teleportation, accompanied by phosphors. Then, he reappeared behind Hero. “The impregnable shield that defends the kingdom!” Then, a thrust from his spear. Hero was saved by the fact that he shared the perspectives of the two Jumpers via telepathy. He instantaneously created an opening at his flank, then brought his arm back to his side, trapping the spear headed for his back beneath his arm and stopping it dead.

However, there was a second strike—from the shield in Dill’s left hand...even though Hero had definitely taken it from him. Around the shield was yet another wreath of phosphors. Clearly, someone had used their Skill to intervene!

“The fiercely blown horn that guides armies, the messenger of the war

god who rallies their fighting spirit! My king bestowed upon me a name!" A blow to the back of Hero's head shook his consciousness. "That name is Aegisthus, the last hero!" And then, the blow from the shield struck home. Hero's body spun horizontally, hitting the floor; instead of simply stopping, it bounced three, four times. Even with the use of his Skill he could not break his fall. At this moment, Hero passed out.

"Forward! Cover Yuujin-san!" The Reincarnator in the wheelchair widened his eyes. Around the time that Dill had appeared four mail-cloaks of the Whitehead Corps had joined the battle, but this was not an issue. The Whisper, who ruled over the tide of battle, requested support for Hero.

The first to move were two Jumpers. They attacked together in a pincer formation, one in front of Dill and one behind. Dill held his shield above his head and ducked as the two blades passed overhead. At the same time, he planted a hand on the floor and delivered a roundhouse kick. The low trajectory of his kick swept the legs of both Reincarnators from underneath them. Dill, rising to his feet with the recoil, thrust his spear into one of them, ignoring the other one. He then charged toward Hero.

"Aim! Fire!" The old man in the wheelchair cried. The two Charging Support units flanking him were both down on all fours, the muzzles of the gleaming black cannons on their backs spouting flames.

A series of shells sprayed sparks around Dill. He promptly stuck the base of his shield into the floor and took cover behind it, supporting it with his back. The bullets ricocheted off of the surface of the shield, and Dill was left nailed to that position. *There's no time. I have to hurry. Hero will recover...* Dill, anxious to settle the score, planned to force a solution with total disregard for his own life. But at that moment...

"Leave it to me!" A girl's voice resounded from nowhere, and the surrounding air was filled with phosphors. The bullets flying toward Dill one by one went up in flames, eliminated.

"You're the traitor that was reported, aren't you? So you can use any Skill. What of it? I have with me here every Reincarnator." The Reincarnators approaching with guns in hand all took their fingers off their triggers and affixed bayonets to their guns. Then, they all turned in one direction and marched. In the direction they advanced was Rei, who should have been hidden by the Skill she had used to deceive their eyes.

"They're totally looking at me! I've been found, I've been found, I've

been found! Um, the Skill for this situation would be...”

One of the Reincarnators charged forward, his feet sliding across the ground without generating friction, as if he was skating on ice. Holding his gun at his side, the Reincarnator silently approached Rei. Unused to battle and overwhelmed by the vast selection of Skills available to her, Rei was paralyzed with indecision, and the enemy was already upon her.

“The unyielding fortress with seven gates, the indomitable Aegisthus!” Of course, it was Dill who blocked the enemy’s path. After Rei halted the gunfire, Dill was now free to move, and he once again ran to deliver the killing blow to Hero. Then, seeing the enemy had moved to target Rei instead, he turned and hurried to defend her instead. He swept aside the swinging bayonets with his shield. Beyond the Reincarnators he had pushed back with a satisfying ring of metal on metal, leaving them defenseless with their bellies exposed, was Hero, staggering as he rose to his feet.

“Keep...” Dill’s rust-colored eyes remained fixed on the enemies before him. “...your hands off the child!” The Reincarnator, run through by Dill’s spear, found himself flying backward, having been kicked by Dill as he continued to barrel forward. He tumbled into the bayonet troop behind him and lay there on his back. His heart had been pierced, killing him instantly.

“You...saved me.” Rei looked up at Dill’s back.

“Of course I did.” Dill did not turn around. With the next enemy in sight and Rei safely behind him, he advanced, his chain mail cloak ringing fearsomely. The Reincarnators reflexively took a step back. “Thank you—you’ve done enough. You bought us a lot of time...now stand back. If I don’t do this, there will only be more casualties.” The hero faced the Reincarnator who bore the name of Hero once again, and they both started to close the distance between them. Remaining hidden behind Dill’s back, Rei followed after him.

“We meet at last, Aegisthus. Show me what a true hero looks like.”

“Show you...a true hero?” Their spears clashed, then locked together. They both struggled urgently for leverage—for control—putting weight on their feet then pulling back. A series of feints ensued, and they changed their positions with dizzying speed.

“Yes! This is why I came to this world! To meet you!” After all, it was Hero’s Skills that turned the tide of battle. Hero’s spear began to glow red, heat radiating out from where he held it until eventually it had suffused the

entire spear. Dill's spear also began to heat up at the point where it crossed with Hero's weapon, gnawing away at it until it reached Dill's hands. Was his aim to force Dill to drop the spear by superheating it?

Dill twisted his body, swinging the spear in a circle. Contact was broken between the two weapons, and Dill's spear immediately began to cool—but Hero immediately rushed into that opening to skewer him.

Taking advantage of the shield slung on his back, Dill warded off the attack. After completing a full rotation, the centrifugal force in the tip of Dill's spear carried it sideways toward Hero. Bright phosphors covered the spearhead—Rei was supporting him.

“Don't make me laugh, Reincarnator!”

Hero readied his spear at an angle in an attempt to deflect Dill's incoming strike. At the moment of contact, the phosphors around the spearhead exploded. Hero's battle stance collapsed as the shock wave pushed him back. Dill followed through with a thrust from his spear, and it...struck home!

But no, the spear had stopped at the crucial moment. Hero held his hand out in the air, holding his fingers as if he had grasped the spear. The unseen hand of his psychokinesis mirrored his gesture, stopping Dill's spear in mid-thrust.

Dill's awesome strength against Hero's psychokinesis—a struggle ensued that was strange to behold. In a last ditch effort to regain the advantage, Dill whispered, “I'm no hero. I'm a fraud.”

“...You're not the real Aegisthus?”

“No, I am Aegisthus, all right. But that hero was only a fiction to begin with, a piece of propaganda to bolster our fighting spirit. In this age, the sort of hero you seek is nowhere to be found.” Dill's spear descended closer and closer to Hero. “You came all this way for nothing, Reincarnator. Your slaughter, your destruction...all that was meaningless.”

“Impossible. That can't be...”

“You have no cause to fight for!”

“You're wrong! You are a hero! You're the embodiment of the ideal I've been searching for!” Hero's psychokinesis regained its strength, and started to push back against Dill again. “Modesty and falsehoods are unbecoming of a hero! Show me! Show me who you really are!”

One of Hero's golden eyes was bloodshot from the exertion of a Skill—one hitherto unknown to the combatants.

“Get away and hide! He’s reading your memory!” cried Rei, and Dill recoiled. The balance between Dill and Hero broke, and they resumed their brawl. Hero’s gaze remained fixed on Dill.

“Where does your story begin...? Outside the gates of an orphanage. I see. You were abandoned. Your mother was poor...and mad, it would seem.”

“Stop!” screamed Rei. A wave of phosphors surged toward Hero. Following a glance from Hero’s left eye, which was not engaged in the use of this Skill, he created a vortex of blue phosphors with a wave of his hand.

“I’d like to concentrate. Please be quiet.” Two kinds of phosphors, red and blue, collided, and annihilated each other with an explosion. “Is this kind old man your adoptive father? You were lucky to be picked up by someone like that. Hmm, you had a sister? But she seems to have had some kind of mental disabil—”

“Shut up.” With blue veins standing out on his brow, Dill stretched out his hand to grab Hero by the jaw and silence him.

He failed. Hero evaded him and continued to stare brazenly at him with his bloodshot right eye.

“...Forgive me. Let’s skip over that part. The next to come to the orphanage was a blond...ahh, the former owner of this body, Apollonius. You’d known each other that long? You grew up together, and when the orphanage burned down, together you traveled to the city...” Dill and Rei launched assault after assault against Hero to prevent him from reading Dill’s past any further, but as if Hero’s telepathy could read the future as well as the past, their attacks were all evaded, every one dealt with. “You were a day laborer, then you stood on the stage and met with unexpected success. You became an actor...but one day your talents grew obsolete. Out of all of your followers, in the end there was only one—a woman named Cirulia. You married this woman.”

Dill was enraged, but he also started to panic. He couldn’t allow this Reincarnator, who had taken the form of his dearest friend, to read what came next. He could not allow such an insult. *I need to kill him before then!*

But it was already too late.

“Apollonius, whom you were living with, also got married. His bride was Maria Earhart...he chose such a young girl? From a moral standpoint, I cannot understand that...”

“Shut up! What would you know?” Despite Dill’s wild attacks with Rei’s

support, Hero continued his judgment.

“However, is it not a fact that this girl, Maria, died in childbirth? Clearly her young age was the cause.”

“Iris was born because they wanted a child. Only seeing scenes from the outside, not having been there yourself, what would you know?! Were you able to read anything from my memory about Maria’s poverty, the decline of her family’s name, or their sinister plans to marry her off? You didn’t hear how forcefully the baby cried, echoing in the light of dawn, nor did you see the sparkle of the golden eyes she inherited from her parents—so what could you possibly understand?!” Dill bashed Hero repeatedly with his shield, again and again. Each time Dill struck Hero with his shield, Hero’s stance faltered, and his field of view was almost entirely blocked. He couldn’t see. The shield was in his way. His view of the past was now clouded with noise.

“You’re right. I *don’t* understand. But that’s exactly why I need to know more. Show me... After Apollonius departed, Iris became your adopted daughter. This Iris...aah!” Hero gazed at Dill, stunned. “Did we kill her?”

“That’s...what I’ve been saying...this whole time!” Phosphors glowed at Dill’s elbow, then exploded. The shield on his arm, propelled by the shock wave, slammed into Hero and sent him flying. “Men of Terea!” Dill turned to look at the men behind him. “Arthurs, who wields two swords! Whitehead, the battle-hardened. Birkin, the acrobat. Mace, the pious! Stewart, the indomitable! Rick Wake, player of the harp! And last but not least—Halberd, the valorous!”

Dill called out to the men in chain mail fighting around the wheelchair-using Reincarnator who controlled the tide of battle, shouting their names one by one and naming their virtues. The mercenaries did not turn around, but offered their ears and waited.

“Think back! In the past, did we not overcome greater hardships than this? There was the wise Lycaon; the death god Chimera; Heraclitus, bravest of the hundred-handed ones; and the rest of the twelve Titan generals. Eventually their defenses fell before us, and the gates to the Holy Land opened. My brothers of the three-headed eagle, bound in rings of iron—now is the time to restore your valor and our name, which even the old gods feared!”

The men in chain mail called out as one. “We are the Halberd Brigade!” These were the names of the enemies the Tereans went on to slay! First Whitehead, who commanded his own troops, slew Aegis with his floating

shield; then Arthurs, with his two swords, cut down both Waterfall and Butterfly.

“Don’t let them get carried away! Ready your aim...fire!” cried Commander shrilly, and Sphinxes with machine guns on their back, together with Meteor, who could throw projectiles of light, rained fire upon the Terean forces.

They aimed for Birkin. Apparently aware of this, the mercenary crouched low and ran forward. With his sword and shield at the ready, he flitted past the other men in chain mail as swiftly as the wind! The rain of gunfire and light projectiles followed after him at right angles, intersecting each other in an unavoidable web of death. Birkin leaped into the air, as if his sword, shield, and chain mail cloak all weighed nothing.

Then, he landed. The bullets that had followed him made Jester dance on the spot.

The acrobat Birkin’s devotion was not in vain. In the opening he’d managed to carve out, Mace challenged Meteor, whose psychokinesis was so strong that it was given visible form in the bullets of light he threw. Transfixed by Birkin somersaulting as he evaded his projectiles in the distance, the foolish Meteor did not notice Mace’s advance. At that moment Mace was already upon him, his club of dark, tempered steel bringing death to the Reincarnator with one blow.

It was Stewart who slew the other enemies aiming for Birkin, the Charging Support units equipped with machine guns. One he struck down with his spear, the other he slashed with his sword. Then, over their heads flew an arrow loosed by Wake, the harpist.

“Defend me!” Commander quickly came to his senses. One of his Charging Support guards responded, its body taking the arrow meant for him. Commander wiped cold sweat from his brow. A moment later, he noticed something—an explosive tied to the arrow around the middle of its shaft.

A shock wave rushed through the room, and something tumbled out from the resulting cloud of black smoke.

It was a single wheel from the wheelchair that had been blown to pieces.

“My name is Dill Steel-Link. I am simply an average entertainer. Having peeked into my memory, you must now understand—Aegisthus is a fabricated hero.” Dill introduced himself without looking back at the explosion behind him.

“Are there truly no heroes here? In this world too, there are no heroes to provide and guide the people. Even after leaving our world, are we still doomed to live in eternal stagnation?”

Next to Dill, Rei gulped. Dill walked toward the cornered Hero, intent on delivering the final blow. “That is the fate of mortal men. Can’t you, who denies the existence of the gods, accept your limitations and surrender to them?”

“...Aah!” Hero did not reach for a weapon, but instead collapsed in his lamentation.

“Lacking the moral boundaries the gods provide, you Reincarnators have bottomless ambition. To give yourselves an excuse to fulfill your own desires, you branded us as barbarians, justifying your plunder—but when you are done with us you will devour each other. You have no heroes among you that will stop it. Feel free to continue on your path of self-destruction...!”

To engrave despair and hatred into the heart of his enemy, Dill rained words upon him. This had become routine work for Dill—a ritual to draw the undying Reincarnators to the inevitable rematch. All of it was for Iris’s sake.

But Hero’s reaction was a little different from what Dill expected. “Aah! Don’t say such things! I’ve seen it with my own eyes—the destiny that awaits you after this. That destiny is fitting for one who will be called a hero by future generations...”

“Enough. Let’s end this. Give Apollo back to me... Apollonius would never have looked so pitiful. He wasn’t that kind of man.” Dill shook his head and brandished his spear. He was going to deliver the coup de grâce to this being who had assumed his old friend’s appearance, and finally give that friend a proper death.

“...I know where your daughter is.” Dill’s spear halted. Instead, he thrust out his empty hand and grabbed the Reincarnator by the chest, lifting him off the ground.

“Tell me. Where is she?” His rust-colored eyes glared up at his opponent’s face, which was now held high up in the air above him. As a side effect of the hero’s blood Dill had injected into his body, Hero’s outline burned with a red luster in his vision.

“I just realized...I’ve seen her before. The girl I saw when I looked into your memory with my telepathy. She is truly, without a doubt...aah, but this is too much! Just too much! What a fate! What hardship awaits you just

ahead!"

"Stop your blathering! There's no point in begging for your life, you immortal Reincarnator! Tell me!"

Hero, who hung in the air, without resisting, spat out the answer so readily that Dill almost felt the wind had been taken out of his sails. "Tōkyō."

Rei, behind Dill, couldn't believe her ears. *Tokyo? What is that Reincarnator talking about? After all, that city, Tokyo—it's already...*

"We Reincarnators call it our Mainland—the Tower Capital. It was once your hometown, the Imperial City of Aspro Terea. Iris is there. She is more closely and safely guarded than anyone. If you want to know why, it's because the Reincarnator living inside her lies at the heart of our entire reincarnation system."

Dill Steel-Link sought his daughter's body. In order to meet a Reincarnator inhabiting her corpse, he had killed many others to increase the small possibility that one of them would take Iris's body as their next vessel and appear before him. And now, Dill had finally achieved his objective. *The Imperial City, Aspro Terea. If I go there, I will find Iris...!*

"Aegisthus. If you truly wish to take back your daughter's body, not only will you face us, the Reincarnators of the Project, but the one hundred million Reincarnators who still sleep in the Tower City—the ones who have not yet obtained bodies—will stand before you as enemies! In spite of that, do you still—"

"I-I-I think you might have said too much, Yuujin-san."

Dill swiftly turned to face the owner of this new voice, his eyes full of murderous intent.

"Eeeek! S-Stop! Can't you see I'm a noncombatant! Don't look at me with such fearsome eyes! I-I'm a doctor! I'm this man's chief physician!"

"Huh? A doctor?" Rei's doubt was understandable—the new Reincarnator's appearance did not match his description. He did have a lab coat on, at least, but for some reason he wore sunglasses over his eyes. What appeared to be a massive lump on his back was actually an extreme case of hunchback. This small, terrified man held both hands in front of him, desperately trying to escape Dill's gaze.

"Oooh...I told you to stop, so why do you keep looking at me like that? This is why I said I didn't want to come here. Shiden, you bastard..." As the man continued to mutter curses under his breath, he tilted his sunglasses

down to wipe tears from his eyes. At that moment, everyone could see his two eyes, bloodshot from the burden of an overloaded Skill. The expression in his bloodshot eyes was sly.

“Hmm.” The Reincarnator appeared and brushed the dust from his suit; then, as a finishing touch, he tapped the double band wound around his arm.

“...Manager?” Commander, after being saved from the explosion, did not even have his wheelchair and could only look up in stunned amazement at his superior.

“I’ll be frank. You’re out of time. Even allowing for the fact that you met with unforeseen obstacles, you were supposed to have completed the final investigation of the Module by this point.”

“Please accept...my humblest apologies!” His elderly legs unable to even hold his weight, the spirited Commander could only bow his head in humiliation while groveling before the Manager. There was no other course of action. The man before him, Summoner, was one of only six members of the highest rank in the Project. He was on equal footing with Yuujin, also known as Hero.

“...Hmm.” A few seconds passed. “We have another mission for you. Please transfer at once.”

“Eh? B-But...”

“I, along with two other Managers, will accomplish the final investigation. Your aptitude would be insufficient.”

“...Yes, sir!”

A teleportation gate opened in front of Commander. Summoner had created it, as if to order Commander to crawl out of here on his hands and knees. When Summoner turned his head to glare ruefully at the Manager, a dark shadow fell over his head.

“Withdraw at once. Losing you and that body at this point in the mission will lead to delays. Do not misunderstand your value. Allow me to take it from here.”

Summoner raised his bare hands in preparation for battle, as before him now stood a giant.

“Gah...gah...ga hooo...gah ha ha ha ha...!” It was Halberd, who had

suffered mortal wounds just before this moment. The ancestral miracle elixir, the blood of Prodotis, had compensated for the wound to his heart so that he could still stand firm, the now shorter lump of iron clutched in his hand. “I won’t allow you to stand in my boys’ way.”

“And I won’t allow you to stand in the Project’s way.”

The giant’s lump of iron clashed against the salaryman’s bare hands.

It had all happened in an instant. Now Dill was on his knees, and Hero was looking down at him.

“For the first time in a while, I actually feel good. I feel like a long rainstorm has ended, and I can see the horizon clearly.”

“That’s a good sign.” The Reincarnator who made this comment, the one wearing a lab coat, was no longer the frightened hunchback he had appeared to be before. Standing with his back straight, he was revealed to be a man of great stature—almost two hundred centimeters, taller even than Dill. He’d removed his sunglasses, revealing a pair of eyes so hideously bloodshot that the natural color of his irises could not be discerned. The doctor had two bands on his arm to designate his rank—a Manager-class Reincarnator. “That being said, it would not do to put too much faith in this favorable turn of events. With my Skill, I’ve only managed to loosen one of the fetters at our feet. If in the heat of battle you allow yourself to become far too overexcited, you may fall into a manic state. Switching between mania and deep depression—such drastic adjustments to your mental state should only be attempted when you’re working with me.”

“I know all that, Doctor. So...what should I do?”

“Complete the mission to investigate the Module. You should be capable of doing that as you are now.”

Hero looked down coldly at Dill, then turned on his heel. “Understood.”

“Wait...!” With a cry Dill leaped to his feet, and charged at Hero from behind. The moment Dill stabbed Hero, he dissolved into mist—only to reappear right next to his previous position, but now facing toward Dill, whose sight had been deceived by telepathy.

Hero countered with his own spear, and Dill blocked it with his shield, pushing it back. But Hero had a plan—a power play making use of his

opponent's shield. Rotating his body and letting the shield pass by him, he struck at Dill with his elbow; Dill crouched to dodge the blow, then smoothly transitioned into a low tackle.

Putting both hands on Dill's shoulders, Hero dodged skyward. Dill, however, recovered quickly and launched a single attack with his spear toward the now airborne Reincarnator. In response, Hero summoned a spear of his own using his Skill and diverted Dill's strike, entangling his weapon.

Then, Hero touched back down on the floor and turned to face Dill once more. They were back to square one.

"What will it be, Aegisthus? Shall we contend like this for eternity? Up until a moment ago, I suppose I wouldn't have minded that," Hero muttered spitefully. Dill turned his gaze to the activity at his back, only to find that the Reincarnator in the lab coat was headed straight for Rei.

Dill showed no hesitation. He turned his back to Hero, sprinting toward Rei instead.

"I thought as much." With impunity, Hero walked alone, proceeding into the depths of the Ex Machina.

"Now, now, please don't struggle."

"No! Let go of me!"

Rei desperately tried to escape the grasp of the man in the lab coat as he held her arm and twisted it. She brought forth phosphors to try and fight back, but they dimmed as soon as she generated them, dissipating without displaying any power.

"Please don't struggle—it's no use, you know. My Skill is telepathy. Any image I draw in my mind is exactly reproduced in the mind of my patient through this mental link. In short, I have assumed complete control of your five senses—yes, I have." The lab coat Reincarnator spoke quickly and matter-of-factly as he prepared his Skill with indifference. Except for his black pupils, his eyes were entirely stained a single shade of red. Rei screamed in horror. "Now then, you may feel a pricking sensation."

The lab-coat-clad man's left hand descended toward Rei's forehead. His touch, which had previously restored the beleaguered Hero's will to fight, was the same touch that had transformed his own appearance so drastically that he looked like a different person. This was the ultimate incarnation of telepathy—the forbidden Skill that overwrote its target's personality.

"I am the gale that blows through the battlefield! The whinny of the war

horse that heralds the onset of battle—”

“So...you’ve come.”

“—Dill Steel-Link!”

“But that’s not where I am.”

The man in the lab coat disappeared from Dill’s vision with Rei in tow; Dill’s spear thrust met only air, and the momentum sent him tumbling forward. The man in the lab coat and Rei were standing in a completely unexpected spot, far from where Dill had struck.

“This concludes the girl’s treatment.”

“Rei—!”

Rei’s body spasmed as she crumpled to the floor. “Welcome to the Project,” the Reincarnator said.

Dill hurled his spear, which skewered the belly of the boastful man in the lab coat—but then he disappeared. Clearly this was nothing but another illusion.

“Rei, are you all right? Rei!” Already out of breath, Dill ran toward her.

“Stay back!” Rei waved Dill away, phosphors trailing behind her hand and exploding in its wake. Dill staggered back, pushed away by the shock wave. Beyond the black smoke, Rei’s head was raised; an unusual number of phosphors floated around her, glowing with a mad hue.

“What...what should I do?” Her expression was one of despair.

“I’m...broken.”

“Rei. It’s all right. Don’t worry.” While looking straight at Rei, Dill spread out his hands, approaching her slowly with half steps.

“I’m telling you, stay away from me!” The floating phosphors burst, and Dill was once again blown back. Barely managing to stay upright, Dill’s feet touched back down on the ground. His rust-colored eyes continued to gaze at the now distant Rei, even more forcefully than before.

“Relax. I’m coming.”

“Stay away...” Rei continued to shake her head as tears intermingled with phosphors fell from her eyes, which glowed scarlet from her out-of-control Skill. “Stop. This is bad. Seriously, it’s impossible...for me...to control.”

“Trust me.”

“I don’t want...to kill you,” pleaded Rei. Dill approached carefully...and then the phosphors exploded in a chain reaction. Dill was flung away yet again before a separate shock wave sent him spinning. Yet another burst

threw him to the floor with such force that he bounced off of it. Dill was now far away from Rei. He was doubled over, his spear and shield lost—but still he kept moving.

“I’m coming...to get you!”

“Might you be confusing her with your daughter?” Dill threw a punch at the man in the lab coat who now stood beside him, and the illusion vanished. “Your condition is hardly ideal. You need to face reality.” Dill swept the vision of the Reincarnator, who had appeared in another position, away with the back of his fist. He continued to advance toward Rei.

“It’s already been five years, you know.” Dill paid no further attention to him. He just walked straight toward Rei.

Another illusion appeared and spoke to him. “Nothing will come from revenge. Shouldn’t you live your own life like everyone else?”

Dill ignored it.

“Hey, uncle. Why weren’t you there for Iris?” He stopped. Before him now stood a girl with brilliant blonde hair, a shade she had inherited from her father. She looked grumpy, with her cheeks puffed out.

Right before his eyes was Iris Earhart.

“Iris was lonely,” the vision continued. “That’s why I came to see you. I wanted to be the first person you hugged after the war ended. But instead, Iris died!” Even with her lisp, she made every effort to sound refined, just like she had when she was alive. A stunned gasp escaped Dill’s dry throat. Tears fell from his eyes, as if he had finally come undone.

“If you had been there for me, I wouldn’t have minded. Iris was a good girl. I didn’t need anything else. I didn’t need letters, a childish teddy bear, or my real papa! All I wanted was my uncle and big sister at home with me! But, uncle—you ignored Iris, and you were always at war. Why? Didn’t you care about Iris? Hey, why weren’t you there? Why are you taking revenge for me now? Iris is already dead. Why? Hey! Papa—”

“I’m sorry.” Dill knelt down and clutched the illusion of Iris to his chest. “It would be easy to brush this off as a deception, as nonsense...but...”

Dill stroked Iris’s hair with the hand he had wound around her. Her outline was just as he remembered her—her scent, her warmth...everything was just as it had been when he had embraced her for the last time on that fateful morning. “...You were created from my memories, were you not? If so, your words...are real to me.” Dill drew himself away, looked at Iris again,

then embraced her once more. "I'm sorry."

The illusion faded away...without giving him the words of forgiveness he had anticipated somewhere in his heart.

"Has this round of counseling failed too? Well, there's nothing to be done about that," muttered the man in the lab coat next to Rei as he placed his hand on her head once more. "Let me give you some stronger medicine."

"Don't get cocky, you quack son of a bitch." Rei grabbed the arm of the man in the lab coat in retaliation. The glowing phosphors in those fiendish eyes glaring up at him began to well up in an endless flow. She wasn't even trying to control her Skill any longer. "I'd rather blow everything and everyone here away than let you get away with this!"

"And that boy's body too?"

That made Rei fall silent.

"You hesitated just now, didn't you?" Rei had left a fatal opening. The man in the lab coat sunk his fingers into her head as blackened blood pooled in his eyes and began to drip down his face. His telepathy began to invade Rei's mind, and phosphors ran up the arm of the Reincarnator in the lab coat in protest.

What Rei was hearing went something like this:

"Take part in the Project..."

Dill called Rei's name.

"The Project is the sole publicly acknowledged plan of action for Enlightenment that has been subcontracted by the Ministry of Regeneration..."

"She copied the Skill of the man in the lab coat and defied him, but the enemy had her far outclassed—"

"According to the law there is no doubt as to the legitimacy of the Project's authority."

"The telepath in the lab coat also possessed the ability to jam Skills—"

"With respect to the planet in question, Japan and the United States of America possess equal rights..."

"None of the Skills of the Reincarnators within range of her Copy Skill could overturn the situation."

"Following the USA's acknowledgment that it has lost all rights here, our country will take unilateral action."

Moment by moment the erosion continued, and her options dwindled.

“The Project will act.”
Rei steeled her resolve.
“Take part in the Project.”
Sid. You’re our last hope.
“Take part in the Project.”
I’m...counting on you.
“Take part in the Project.”
I’m sorry.
“Take part...”
“...in the...”
“...Pro...”
“...je...”
“...ct...”
“The Pro...”

Rei’s hair tie made from the flames of her phosphors melted away, and her white hair that had been tied neatly back cascaded onto the ground.

“Huh?”

Sid Faron had regained consciousness. His cheeks were wet with blue blood. In front of his eyes stood Dill, a Reincarnator dressed in a lab coat sliding off the spear in his hands. Sid realized the blood on his cheeks must belong to that Reincarnator.

“Master?”

“I see. So rather than a forced shutdown, I forced a reboot?” The Reincarnator Dill had stabbed repeatedly, who looked as though he should have long since expired, then began to speak, startling Sid. “Not a gambit I would have recommended. It seems like you managed to escape my telepathy, but what about the girl?”

Dill stomped hard with the heel of his boot, and the Reincarnator’s head was utterly obliterated.

“Is that you, Sid?”

“Yes, it’s me! But Rei is...!” With Dill embracing him as if clinging on for dear life, Sid couldn’t finish the sentence. Blushing bright red, Sid somehow managed to push Dill away. “Master, please listen! I can no longer hear Rei’s

voice! I can't go on fighting like this..."

"Even so, at the very least..." Dill smothered Sid's protestations with his embrace. "...At least you're alive...!" Behind Dill's quaking back, Sid could see the Reincarnator in the lab coat sprawled on the ground in a gruesome state. The more Sid looked at the corpse, the worse it got. How many times had that Reincarnator been stabbed with Dill's spear? His torso was nearly ripped in two. He couldn't possibly have been left breathing because Dill had simply failed to land a killing blow—Sid could only imagine that Dill had left the Reincarnator barely alive intentionally. That must have been how deeply Dill had been enraged by the thought of losing both Sid and Rei together.

This didn't frighten Sid. Instead, he had an uncontrollable urge to apologize.

"My, my, my. Sorry to interrupt your lovely little moment here..." Several men had broken away from the battle with the Halberd Brigade that was still raging on. All of them were Reincarnators, and they were five in number. "Why don't you come play with us too, Steel-Link? Or would you prefer to be called by that ridiculous name, Aegisthus?"

"Perfect timing. I was just about to look for some sacrifices as a parting gift to Rei."

"Heh heh heh heh! So you're both ready and willing. I'm pleased to hear that! Say, do you remember me?! I remember *you* very well...heh heh heh heh!" The Reincarnator, who wore a gas mask, languidly raised his hands. After a moment, his arms and legs burst into flames. He was using pyrokinesis!

"Of course I don't remember you. I wouldn't bother giving each sacrificial beast a name."

"Heh heh...heh heh heh! You barbarian son of a bitch!" With his limbs all burning, the Flinter charged at Dill. As Sid gasped, he suddenly felt himself suspended in the air. Dill had lifted him up.

"Master? If you do that..." A searing hand approached, burning the intervening air. Dill dodged it, but the Flinter grabbed a lock of his rusty hair, which flared up and fell to the ground as ash, filling the space with the stench of burning hair.

"Take this—and that! And this and that and this and that! Better step up that dodging or you'll end up bald as an egg!" Dill continued to evade the Flinter's assaults and occasionally thrust back with his spear, but both of

these maneuvers lacked spirit. Fatigue was starting to catch up with him. The effect of the hero's blood he had injected had long since run out. And on top of that, he was saddled with the most obvious disadvantage of all—he was forced to fight while holding Sid in his left arm.

"Master! That's enough! Don't worry about me—please just fight!" Sid's pleas only hardened Dill's resolve.

"You see, you see, you see?! You see, you see?! As long as you're carefully clutching that brat, you're a sitting duck! But if you should eventually toss the boy aside and abandon him, I'll be sure to kill him right away!"

The Flinter's flames brushed past Dill again and again. But though their battle dragged on, Sid didn't have a scratch on him.

Sid gave up on asking and resorted to struggling to shake Dill off. As a result Dill's stance was broken.

"You see! Now I've got you!" A roundhouse kick from the Flinter left an arc of flames behind it as it traveled through the air. Then, it connected with Dill's thigh. A moment later there rose the smell of burning flesh. Dill was nearly knocked back, but managed to stand his ground.

Sid was stunned. Tears fell from his eyes, and inside his chest he was screaming. "Master...please stop. You're Aegisthus, aren't you? You're everyone's hope... You can't die. It would be far better for me to..."

"*You* are our hope. Even if I should die, I won't let go." Dill's unyielding, rusty eyes glared at the Flinter. Annoyed by this, the Flinter stopped for a moment. Then, he realized something.

"Huuuh? What the hell are you all doing?" His words were addressed to his allies behind him. The Reincarnators, armed with guns, had raised their left hands, holding up invisible shields formed using psychokinesis. That was all very well and good...but the guns in their right hands were all clearly pointed straight at Dill. "If you shoot and hit me instead, what do you propose to do about it? Huh? No, no, wait..." He thought for a moment, then grinned. "That's fine too. Right. G—Go ahead and shoot. Blow me away too if you have to, but make sure you kill this bald bastard."

"Oh no...!" Sid panicked and prayed frantically, and his Skill answered him. He produced a warm phosphor on the palm of his hand...but that was all. Praying internally, he tried to manipulate the phosphor.

He couldn't do it. He tried to imitate another Skill. He couldn't do that

either. Sid didn't know the first thing about the principles of these powers called Skills or how to use them, and thus he could only produce a small light on the palm of his hand which served no purpose at all. "You're kidding. It can't be! Rei, answer me—Rei! Do something! Please save me once again! If you don't, Master...my Master will...die..."

There was no response.

Sid's tears were overflowing. *Why am I always so useless? It should have been me that disappeared, not Rei. At times like this, Rei could, Dill could...I want to be strong. I want to fight! I want to be reborn!* As he thought this, it suddenly occurred to him—Rei's Skill was the ability to copy other Skills. In other words, the power of imitation. Phosphors started to envelop Sid's body.

Dill's spear was knocked out of his hands and fell clamorously to the floor.

"Gotcha...!" The Flinter laughed, grasped Dill's shoulder through his chain mail cloak, and dug his fingers in deeply. This kicked off the radiation of heat from his Skill, which started to burn Dill's flesh. He groaned and finally let go of Sid. The boy he had been defending so desperately fell to the floor.

"Relax...whatever happens, I've been told not to kill the brat. Now, fire!" At the Flinter's order, the Reincarnators pulled the triggers of their weapons without hesitation. Their souls were undying, their bodies interchangeable. To them, self-sacrifice held no special meaning.

Dill could clearly see the trajectory of the bullets flying toward him. Under ideal circumstances, it would have been easy to dodge them or block them with his shield or his chain mail cloak. But right now a Flinter was clutching his shoulder. In a last-ditch attempt to escape certain death, Dill headbutted the Flinter as hard as he could. The Reincarnator's concentration was shaken, but he recovered quickly. In spite of the blue blood flowing from a cut on his forehead, the Flinter was certain of his victory and smiled. But then a spear was driven into his face from under his chin. The Flinter's body went limp, then collapsed.

The bullets sped toward their target. Dill moved to guard the one who had felled the Flinter...but there was no need. A young man with phosphors

woven through his hair kicked the Flinter's body up in front of them to serve as a shield.

Dill, kneeling on the floor, looked up. The young man had voluminous locks of hair, long and slender limbs, breath that sparkled, and eyes filled with light. In that moment Dill recognized a friend with whom he had lost contact twenty years ago—someone he could never see again, no matter how much he wished to.

"I choose to copy...Dill Steel-Link!" His name was Youth. As Sid turned to look at Dill, he retained his white hair and blue eyes, but was otherwise the spitting image of Dill himself in his younger days. But his expression held none of the sneering arrogance Dill had possessed back then. Instead, his blue eyes shone with nothing but trust, without a shred of doubt.

Now Sid possessed both Dill's experience, and the body he had enjoyed in his heyday.

"This is how I choose to use Rei's Skill! Let's fight together, Master!" The phosphors at his hands drew toward him a sword and a shield that had been discarded in the battle. Rei's Skill had weakened, but it still lived on.

After briefly consulting each other, the Reincarnators all fired a second time. Sid stood right in front of Dill, blocking the gunfire with his shield. The moment the shots abated, Dill leaped out in front.

"Follow me, Orestes!"

"...Yes, Master!"

Dill's swiftness exceeded the Reincarnators' expectations, closing the distance between them in an instant. One of them used his Skill with his left hand, generating a barrier to repel Dill, but even that was no use.

"My name is Aegisthus! And your name..." Dodging past the barrier, Dill skewered the Reincarnator straight through the face with his spear. Sid moved in behind him, sword in hand. "...Your name is Orestes! The meaning of that name is 'the one who surpasses Aegisthus'!"

"Orestes...my name is Orestes!" mumbled Sid, as if confirming it to himself. He felt power surge through his arms and legs. Phosphors continued to gush forth without end. Sid had leaped out of the normal flow of time and now found himself at the moment in every person's life when they are at the height of their strength—right in the middle of his youth! The names of the enemies Orestes then slew were...the wise Steady! Paradox, with his nigh unbreakable shield! The bullets fired by Wild Horse did not even graze

Orestes, whose blade sent his head flying! Then, from behind Orestes, Backstabber cast off his telepathic stealth cloak and rushed to attack him!

“Aegisthus of the stout shield will not allow it!” Backstabber was struck by Dill’s spear and crumpled to the floor, the shadow of death covering his eyes. Dill halted where he stood and gazed steadily at the young man. Without a hint of timidity, Sid looked straight back at him. His blue eyes were irregularly dotted with phosphors, causing them to glow with a supernatural hue. “I’ve waited a long time to meet you. Let’s go now—together. Let’s catch up to Hero and put an end to this battle.”

“Yes, Aegisthus!” The two heroic warriors ran off together. Leaving behind the enemies who pursued them, the Brigade of the Eagle who still fought on, and everything else.

The corridor was bright white and utterly sterile. The floor looked exactly the same as the ceiling and the walls—there was no discerning up from down or left from right. This style of architecture had been developed in distant antiquity by those who needed such an environment, in order to live somewhere without the restraint of gravity—under the ocean, for example, or in the depths of space.

His own footsteps and breathing were the only sources of change in the suspended temple. Although the battle between the Reincarnators of the Project and the native people was actually not too far away, the series of airlocks he had passed through on the way here seemed to push everything far off into the distance. Here, Hero was all alone.

His palms were covered in sweat. The telepathic edification the doctor Reincarnator, Puppeteer, had imparted to Hero had overstimulated his nervous system. His heartbeat felt unbearably loud, and he was aware of his breathing becoming heavier. Each time an airlock appeared in front of him, he turned the handle, opened it, passed through, then closed it behind him. He repeated this again and again. Whether the people pursuing him were Reincarnators or natives, he wouldn’t let them get in his way.

He ran through yet another airlock, and finally was confronted with a long-awaited change in scenery. He was now in a circular room. In the center stood a pillar; fanning out around it were eight coffins. They were white,

ovoid in shape, and sported transparent lids. A number of tubes connected the coffins to the pillar in the center—obviously not the work of the indigenous people of this world.

The room was not silent. All around there was the persistent noise of machines in operation. The room was cool throughout, thanks to air conditioning, and ventilation fans spun with an almost imperceptible hum.

Hero gripped his spear tightly and approached one of the egg-shaped coffins. Underneath a single pane of glass slept an elderly Black man.

“You are not...my colonel,” muttered Hero, before driving his spear straight down into the coffin. The glass shattered, and the chilled air inside rushed out. Hero twisted the spear he’d embedded in the coffin’s occupant. The sleeping man did not resist—in fact, he didn’t move a muscle. The alarm raised by the coffin itself protested loudly.

Hero turned to the next coffin and pierced it with his spear in the same fashion. When he was done with that, he moved on to the next.

“*Daisy, Daisy...*” Hero suddenly became aware of the tune he was humming. “...I guess that makes me HAL?” The fourth occupant—Caucasian. The fifth—another Caucasian, female this time. The sixth coffin was empty. The seventh contained a man—Asian, but not of Hero’s ethnicity. So far everyone had been of advanced age, none of them younger than sixty.

With the tip of his spear completely covered in frost, he thrust it into the final coffin. The occupant was another Caucasian male who wore a crucifix on his chest. Now that he’d failed to find the man he was looking for, Hero’s work here was done.

Hero dropped to his knees on the spot, his spear clattering as he flung it to the ground. Suddenly, he turned his eyes toward the ceiling, yelling up at the empty air. “Panopticon! You saw that, didn’t you?! I’ve done it! Just as you asked...to atone for my sins, I committed an even greater sin! Are you satisfied now?!”

There was no answer. There was no one else here—no one apart from Yuujin, Hero of the Reincarnators, and seven frozen corpses. “How about you say something? I know you’re watching me with your Skills! You think I’m too great a fool to understand why you never ask us to submit evidence?! You coward! If you believe that the Project is just, why don’t you take part yourselves? Why do you need to adjust our thinking during those regular examinations?” Hero paused for a moment before continuing bitterly. “Of

course, you'll just get the Doctor to erase everything I'm feeling right now, won't you?!"

Again, there was no answer. Clutching his knees, Hero buried his face in them and wept fitfully.

After some time, he detected something strange in the flow of freezing cold air leaking from the coffins. It seemed as though a strange wind current, originating from a rectangular gap in the wall, had parted the cold white air that had spread across the floor of the room.

"What could this be...?" Upon removing the wall panel, Hero was greeted by a strange sight. Hot, musty air blew into his face as he pushed aside bunches of electrical cables to reveal what was buried in the space behind the wall—a bivalve with a striped pattern. Yes, it was definitely a shellfish, just like the ones that could be caught in the ocean. What was it doing in a city state so far inland? On top of that, it was abnormally large—a gargantuan two meters in height. There was something obscene about the stripes on the surface of its shell—it gave Hero an indescribable feeling of unease. The kind of fear that every human being feels when encountering something beyond understanding welled up in Hero's heart.

There was a creaking sound behind him. Hero wheeled around instantaneously, but his legs were too exhausted to bear his weight; he was unable to stop himself from slipping and falling backward, toward the giant shellfish lodged inside the wall. "What is that!?" he cried as he hit the ground.

Having fallen onto his back, Hero now looked up from the floor at the shellfish's body, and this is what he saw—a *face* peering out from the mouth of the shell. It was a man with his silver hair hanging loosely, his body sunk halfway into the pale flesh filling the shell's interior. Or perhaps he was being devoured by the shellfish instead?

"His name is Prodotis. He was the son of Ex Machina Coward and the king of Krios, the castle city with seven gates. Stand aside, Reincarnator. A cursed wraith like you is not worthy to stand in a mausoleum where a hero rests." Dill had opened the airlock and stepped inside.

"Prodotis? The hero from that play, the one who revolted against the gods...he was real!?" Hero looked in turn at Dill and the legendary figure inside the shellfish. "But, what...what is this? The first generation of Argonauts surely hadn't had the technology to create something like this. The

approach taken to preservation here is clearly different from what was used for those frozen Americans..."

"That is your people's thought process, thinking all things can be explained by science—how optimistic of you. There *are* gods. We cannot expect to understand everything. Humbly accepting the limits of humanity and living to carry out your duty—that is what life is all about." Dill's voice was low and unwaveringly calm. There were many things about the room Dill himself knew little about—its meaning, the frozen men Hero had just killed, and the great champion who slumbered inside the shell. However, he didn't need to know about these things. Dill knew what he needed to do—take his revenge. "I am a warrior. I came here to do battle with you. My name is Aegisthus. I am the hero of the fallen kingdom of Terea. I am Dill Steel-Link, claimer of corpses."

Hearing these words, Hero reclaimed his resolve. "I am the black ship from a far-off land, Hero of the Project. The hero of a thousand faces, Eugene." Upon finishing their introductions, both men readied their weapons and closed the distance between each other—and at that moment, Hero's finely attuned senses perceived the sign of a coming change in the circumstances of their battle.

Out of a teleportation gate ringed with phosphors came the flash of a blade swung down toward his back. Hero just barely managed to spin around and block it with his spear.

"I am the new light, carrying out an inherited purpose!"

"What? You're...!"

"My name is Orestes!" The young man who emerged pulled back from his clash with Hero for a moment, only to rejoin the fray with a kick to the spear Hero had wielded to defend himself. There was power behind that strike. Hero stumbled backward, and the young man's sword swung once more, its blade dimly illuminated by sparks of light.

After the second blow, the spear was cleaved in twain. Hero grabbed the two shorter sections of his spear, throwing the half with the spearhead at Sid and the other half at Dill, who he guessed was standing behind him. Then, he immediately activated his Skill, holding both fists clenched at his sides as light burst from his elbows.

Right, right, left, right, left, left, right, left, left, left, right, left—twelve blows in rapid succession! Sid held up his shield to block them, but their

momentum defied all expectations. He could not withstand them all, and his guard was shattered. However, Hero did not seek to finish him off. Running past Sid, he turned around until his back was facing the wall, preventing Dill from coming up behind him to deliver a fatal blow.

“So...with your Copy Skill, rather than imitating another Skill you took the appearance of Aegisthus? All in order to defeat me?! But I have just one question...why Orestes, of all names...?”

“Orestes means, ‘he who will surpass Aegisthus’! I made my wish, Rei gave it form, and Dill Steel-Link gave me my name. Bearing that name, I will slay you!” The young man with white hair and phosphors all around him glared at Hero without a hint of doubt. Right beside him, Dill reproached Hero with his own eyes. “Master, let’s go!”

“It’s time for us to truly become master and apprentice. Learn from me—and surpass me!”

“All right!”

The two heroes, Aegisthus and Orestes, stepped forth. Hero, waiting to join them in battle, opened teleportation gates to his left and right using the Skill of a Jumper. Then, with the unseen hand of his psychokinesis, he reached inside the portals...and pulled out an innumerable array of weapons. Swords, shields, and spears...he levitated these all around him, forming two intersecting circles. This was the power of a Conductor’s psychokinesis.

The two heroes charged into the swirling blades floating around Hero like asteroid belts. As they performed their function of defending Hero, the swords and axes were knocked out of their orbits and sent flying.

However, Hero’s tactics were not exclusively defensive. From among the weapons he had summoned, he grabbed one of his familiar mass-produced spears, narrowing his eyes and waiting—waiting, that is, for his enemies to show him an opening.

“*There* you are.” Weaving through the gaps in the rapidly revolving weapons, Hero thrust his spear toward Sid’s abdomen, left unguarded after a series of attacks, with needlepoint precision! Sid noticed too late to defend himself, immersed as he was in knocking down the weapons floating before his eyes.

“I am the shield with a navel, the ferryman who guides lost youths! I am the killer of Reincarnators!” Dill broke in between them with his shield, beating back the spearhead and knocking it aside. Then, Sid leaped through

the ring of weapons, which had momentarily ceased spinning as Hero attacked, and slashed at his enemy!

One, two, one two! Powered by his Flinter's Skill, his fists accelerated to high speeds by the bursts of flame from his elbows, Hero struck at Sid! However, with only his left hand free to throw punches, his stance was uneven—this was nothing but an attack of desperation. Sid reeled from each blow, but he did not fall, and he swung the sword he wielded at Hero, cleaving his body in two with one single stroke!

Or so Sid thought. In the next moment, the Reincarnator's body turned to mist and vanished.

“A telepathic illusion—Master, behind you!” With a Whisper’s Skill Hero had deceived their senses, escaping danger and moving behind Dill. Dill responded with an elbow strike, and felt it connect. Hero staggered back from the blow to his chest; Dill followed with his shield. Just the approach of the shield toward his face obscured his vision almost entirely, but Hero continued to dodge it. This was not only thanks to his reflexes—he had the power to gaze *through* the shield with the clairvoyance of a Pathfinder.

“What’s the matter? Is that all you’re capable of? Orestes, Aegisthus! Have you forgotten my name?!”

Sid rushed to support Dill, but a fireball produced from Hero’s pyrokinesis hit him directly. At the same instant, phosphors ignited around Sid, annihilating some of the flames, but he could not avoid being singed and blown backward by the force.

“Sid!”

“My name is Eugene. The Reincarnator who defiled your friend’s corpse and took his place. Am I wrong?!” Hero grabbed Dill’s shield and with the supernatural force of his psychokinesis wrested it from his grasp. Having removed his opponent’s main means of defense, Hero thrust his burning spear at Dill. In return, Dill also lunged forward with his own weapon. The two pierced each other through their shoulders.

The exchange was not a draw. Having been burned by the flames from Hero’s Skill, Dill’s wounds were deeper. Hero, who had rallied a moment faster, swung his spear to deliver the killing blow.

“Go ahead and show me, then.” Dill dropped to the ground and rolled across the floor, dodging a series of strikes from the flaming spear. He managed to grab onto the shield he had dropped, but an instant later, the

unseen hand of Hero's psychokinesis seized it and took it from him. The spear came for him again. "Show me what a hero looks like!" Hero thrust his spear down toward Dill with great force and anger. What was he angry about? Dill didn't know. He couldn't know—but he didn't need to. As the spear struck the floor, the heat of the spearhead melted clean through it, each thrust leaving a smooth hole. Dill continued to dodge, withstanding the assault—and then, he fought back. Hero's attack was preceded by an obvious flourish with his spear, which allowed Dill to lock his own spear with it and divert the point away. The time had come to bet on his own luck—he took the opportunity to try and lever Hero's spear away from him.

The attempt succeeded, and the searing spear left its wielder's grasp and flew far away. But Hero quickly found an alternative, holding his hand above his head and opening a gate from within a dark, swirling vortex.

"Now then. How will you endure this?" The gate that appeared on the ceiling was connected to the Project's armory, and the barrels of numerous guns emerged from it. Although there were no fingers on the triggers, Hero pulled all of them at once with his psychokinesis.

"*I will* endure it!" It was Orestes that leaped forth with these words. Phosphors swarmed around the portal in the ceiling; their heat melted the gun barrels, warping them irreparably. The scale and force of Sid's Skill was small, but it was more than enough to produce an explosion. Dill and Sid ducked as the force of the explosion blew over their heads.

The ends of Sid's hairs started to burn, but after he focused his phosphors at the tips, they started to grow again, stubbornly retaining Dill's likeness. Dill with his spear and Sid with his sword—synchronizing their breathing, they attacked Hero as one. To support the young man's fearless deep assault, Dill slyly delayed the timing of his own veteran strike—a tactic that could not be easily dealt with by ordinary means.

Hero, however, handled it with his Skill—he had no other choice. To focus on crafty old Dill, he had to ignore Sid, and the young man's sword landed a direct hit on Hero's defenseless torso. Hero's pyrokinesis activated at the moment of contact. This was his defense technology, meeting one force with an opposing force to cancel it out—a process known as reactive armor. However...

"Look at me." An unexpected impact made Hero stop. Blood dripped from his lips. He looked down. Sid's sword had cut through his armor and

was now embedded deep in his torso. *What about my Skill? It definitely activated. So why didn't it deflect his sword?*

No, more importantly...the sensation of time slowing down overcame him, induced by the Liquid Computer in his moment of peril. Hero was not experiencing time normally right now. The delay between Sid's attack and Dill's, in real time, was a mere...

Dill's spear forced Hero to twist his body to dodge it. As a result, Sid's sword, still embedded in his torso, dug in deeper and opened the wound wider. As ordered by the nanomachines in his bloodstream, Hero's pain was immediately suspended. He kicked Sid, the recoil sending him flying backward, and in the intervening time he activated his Skill. With telepathy he deceived their sight, so that he appeared to vanish into the background.

Stall for time. Staunch the wound. Then, redeploy! All of this so that I can witness more of a true hero's deeds with my own eyes. The man also known as Yuujin looked at the phosphors around him, floating like a million fireflies. The phosphors that touched Hero's skin as he fled, clutching his wound, burned vigorously, then vanished. These phosphors did not impart any damage, but as they sparsely covered the room, they made Hero's path clear.

"Look at me!" howled Sid, doubled over after receiving Hero's kick. Dill hurled his spear. The spear flew unerringly toward Hero's position.

"That's it! Show me more!" Hero waved his hand, dropping a thunderbolt onto the spear flying toward him. *What kind of Skill is this?* Even Dill had not yet seen a Skill that controlled electricity. *To think he still had a trick up his sleeve at this stage of our conflict!*

Hero stood back up. He'd cauterized the wound to his abdomen with a flame ignited by his Skill, and he called back his sense of pain, wincing as he felt it return. There was value in each of his senses, though—this he knew. Now using his Skill to produce a magnetic field, he drew his spear back to his hand and readied it. He was ready to meet the two heroes who pressed upon him.

Dill was the first to strike. He slashed at Hero with a sword he had picked up, leaning forward to put all his weight behind his strike. Hero blocked with his spear, then pushed against Dill with a pyroblast from his back, forcing his opponent to stagger backward.

"Orestes!" cried Dill. "Go! You're no longer the child who could only

watch his parents die!"

As if Dill's voice had spurred him on from behind, Sid ran swiftly toward Hero. He and Dill were already within range of Hero's Skill. With the same spear he had used to block Dill's attack, Hero now struck aside Orestes's sword.

His eyes bloodshot from overtaxing his Skills, Hero stared fixedly at what happened in the next moment. He saw the same trick that had overcome his reactive armor—phosphors producing small explosions on the blade of Sid's sword at the point of impact. Hero couldn't believe his eyes—Sid had actually copied Hero's unique *application* of his Skill, essentially fighting fire with fire.

Sid and Hero were both blown back by the impact. At that moment, the only man with the freedom to take action was...

"Aegisthus!" cried Sid as he tumbled to the ground, unable to break his fall. "I knew about you! Long before I ever met you, and long before you saved my life!"

Dill's chain mail cloak rang as he swung his sword.

"Plays about you were put on by acting troupes from far away, and by the villagers during festivals! You may call it propaganda, but Aegisthus was my ideal—and my aspiration!"

Dill and Hero were locked in a fierce battle. In a repeat of their previous clash, Hero focused his Skill behind him and released it, creating a blast of pyrokinesis that propelled his body forward—but Dill did not budge. Rather, Hero felt himself shoved back! *Why?! Is this sheer force of will? No, that can't be it.*

Dill had taken a lower stance than before, leaning toward his opponent. He had deflected Hero's propulsion upward so his momentum dissipated mostly without effect, and he would not give him the opportunity to adjust his Skill and activate it again. He took one, two, three steps forward...Hero felt his back hit the wall. There was nowhere to run.

"Finish him! Orestes, son of Aegisthus! You are my successor!"

Footsteps approached. Sid panted as he stepped in closer without fear.

"My name is..." cried Sid.

"Your name is..." chorused Dill.

Hero opened his eyes as wide as he could. To burn this scene into his memory forever.

“Orestes!”

Eugene—or rather, Yuujin—Hero of the Reincarnators...

“Well done...”

...was defeated.



CHAPTER 5 — EPILOGOS, PROLOGOS

The blade wreathed in phosphors shattered Hero's armor, then pierced his flank and finally his heart—all in one thrust. Orestes slowly took his hand off the hilt of his sword and stepped back. His knees shook, then finally buckled as he fell straight to the floor. Phosphors rose and dissipated all over his body, and by the time he had managed to sit up, Orestes had already transformed back into Sid.

“We...won?” Sid mumbled, as if to make sure—as if he couldn’t believe it himself. He was breathing heavily, his shoulders rising and falling. Then, as if to answer his query, Hero collapsed where he stood, having sustained a mortal wound at last.

“I will not...apologize.” Hero’s lips moved. Dill, who still stood near Hero, kept his guard up and readied his sword, moving in front of Sid to protect him. “But...I will at least say this.” Hero looked at Dill, then at Sid. His eyes were sincere. “Thank you.”

Dill ground his teeth with a noise like boulders rasping against each other. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m expressing my gratitude. You two really are true heroes.”

Dill’s rusty eyes ignited. “Reincarnator. What...are you...talking about?”

“To my way of thinking, having just one hero in the world is enough. But the two of you have encouraged each other, increasing your strength, and now you have accomplished your crowning achievement—you have defeated me, a representative of the Reincarnators, who brought all of his inexplicable Skills to bear.”

“Shut up!” Dill, giving in to his anger, grabbed the dying Hero by the chest. “You stole Iris from me, made a mockery of Apollo’s death, and took my country from me as well! I don’t want to listen to anything you Reincarnator scum have to say! My name is Dill Steel-Link! I am the one who will kill all Reincarnators!”

“Thanks to you, my way of thinking has been updated.”

“Master! He might still try something!” Something glinted in Hero’s pocket, and Dill bent over backward to dodge it. The wickedly sharp silver needle grazed Dill’s cheek and flew behind him, its trajectory clearly influenced by Hero’s psychokinesis.

Without hesitation, Dill struck Hero’s head from his very shoulders.

“If we need heroes, they can be made, like I was. Also...” The severed head still spoke as it fell. The needle, controlled by psychokinesis and belonging to a syringe filled with blue blood, changed its trajectory. Now, it flew toward the ancient hero buried in the wall—flying toward Prodotis, the hero sealed inside the strange shell “...If we don’t have enough, we can simply make more.”

“You think I’ll let you do that?” Sid’s voice rang out. At those words, the syringe exploded in midair. The nanomachines inside were scattered on the floor and much of their mass was destroyed in the process, but Sid would not let even a single speck remain. The flames from his phosphors continued burning until everything had been reduced to ash—he’d activated Rei’s Skill to utterly destroy the Reincarnator’s weapon.

“The battle is decided,” declared Dill.

There were a few phosphors still left, which spilled out from the palm of Sid’s hand. As though they too were exhausted, their glow weakened as they fell, and they vanished before they hit the floor.

Rei. Sid called out to her inside his head, but the girl’s voice did not answer. “Thank you...for everything.” A supernatural wind seemed to smile at him as it gathered up the phosphors and carried them away.

Vulcan of the Eleven Cities of the North. Long before even the Golden Age, the Deus Ex Machina descended from heaven to declare the demise of the age of Titans. Out of reverence for this god, the people built the castle city within the footprint his manifestation had left upon the land.

The City Deity Festival had since been held each year to celebrate the day that the god descended to the earth. It was held even when Vulcan was besieged by neighboring cities, and even in the year when the Fanged Mountains were capped with record snowfall and Vulcan was isolated. The

festival would be held (though on a scale in accordance with the circumstances of that year), respects would be paid to the deity, and people's hearts would be soothed. This year, as well, the City Deity Festival would go on, as it always had. Even with their home surrounded by the unknown enemy called Reincarnators, the festival would go on, to light the flame of hope for the people of Vulcan, and to carry them to the next morning.

“Although we tried, in the end Cirulia and I couldn’t have children.” They were in the deepest part of Ex Machina Amputation, in a room with an unknown purpose. In the center of the room stood the strange pillar, the eight coffins situated around it; the hero of antiquity inside the wall, who looked like he might move at any moment, so vibrant was his skin. “On top of that, Iris and Nue were both girls, right? Of course I loved them both, and it’s not as though I was disappointed with them. Both Iris and Nue took a lot of work...but I loved their silly sides too. Still, I just couldn’t completely discard my longing...for a son. If I had a boy who looked just like I did when I was young, I could feel like I’d gotten back the youth I’d lost forever. Or so I thought.”

The body of Apollonius, with his brilliant golden hair, lay on his back with both hands folded on his chest. With that small respect paid to the dead, the body was burned.

“So I was really happy when you took a form resembling me and accepted the name I gave you, Orestes. And when you told me how you knew of me—of Aegisthus—long ago, and had always looked up to me...” The two stood beside each other with their backs against the wall: Dill Steel-Link and Sid Faron. “I felt like my wish had been granted.”

“Um, Master.” Sid broke in, his cheeks blushing the faintest shade of pink. “Do you think it’s all right for us to just relax like this? Your comrades might still be fighting in the place we only just left.”

“Don’t worry about them. They’re all as stubborn as me, if not more so. We won’t be able to help them anyway if we don’t take a moment to recover—we’d only get in their way. And why’d you have to pipe in, Sid? You seem kind of embarrassed.”

As Dill tried to get a look at him, Sid leaned away from Dill and averted

his eyes, as if he wanted to run away. “I mean...the way things were headed, I felt like you might be about to ask me to become your son again, Master...”

Dill held his stomach as he laughed. “That’s so cruel! Is that what you were thinking the entire time I was talking? I wasn’t trying anything, I was thanking you! Looks like I’ve been rejected again, though, and without even asking this time...”

“I mean...I don’t understand this sort of thing! It’s not my strong suit...” Sid covered his face with both hands and looked like he might burst into tears at any moment. Seeing this, Dill smiled, made a face as if he was slightly hurt, then quickly covered his emotions with the practiced mask of an actor.

“All right. Shall we go home?” Sid slowly looked up. Dill nodded to him, then indicated the exit with his gaze. “Let’s go—to our home, where Nue and Cirulia are waiting.”

“...Yes!” Sid stood up and followed Dill, and the two of them headed for the exit.

“Hm.” It was at that moment that the suited Reincarnator appeared in a corner of the room and spoke up. This man was named Summoner, and he was one of the six Managers—the Project’s top executives. And Summoner had brought with him another, hitherto unknown Reincarnator.

“Re...in...car...nators!” Dill bared his teeth as he turned back and swept his sword out from its sheath.

Then his body was struck by lightning.

“Master?!?”

“Yes.” The unfamiliar Reincarnator looked down at Dill, who spasmed on the floor, and nodded with satisfaction. “We’re going to have a wonderful party here.” Then he started walking toward the wall where the ancient hero was embedded, with a syringe held in his hand.

At the same time, there were a number of explosions all around the city of Vulcan, sounding like far-off thunder. The sound was subtle enough that some of the town’s inhabitants did not even notice it, but they were followed by violent changes.

A cluster of suns floated into the sky, driving away the night. The intense artificial light shone in the sky above Vulcan, bathing the streets in its white

glow.

The illumination flares shot into the sky, bathing their targets in light and marking them for assault as they gently descended.

“All organic cannon units, take aim.” Under the command of the Reincarnator sitting in a wheelchair were a number of living drones, the Charging Supports, lined up in a row along the artillery emplacements built inside the castle walls. They minutely adjusted the elevation angles of the cannons mounted on their backs by changing their own posture. “Fire.”

Commander’s order did not need to wait for the noise in the air to subside; instead he used his telepathy Skill to transmit it without delay. A rain of fire began to pour upon the streets of Vulcan.

With the divine cuboid structure that was Ex Machina Amputation at its center, the Acropolis had a number of plazas along its slopes. During the day’s City Deity Festival, plays had been put on in each of these plazas dedicated to the god, and flames rose up as offerings were burned.

Choruses were sung, tales were told, and everyone danced together. Wine produced in Olgia was poured upon the flames, and the shadows of the actors cast on the heavy curtains on the stage grew a shade darker. There was the sound of feet stomping on the floor. Masks were donned. Hands clapped in time to the music. Shamanic cries pierced the air. In the face of the premonition of their impending doom, faith and tragic plays mediated the people’s hearts, as the city of the blacksmith god continued to expect its own destruction.

The actors who played onstage briefly narrowed their eyes at the imitation sun that had suddenly risen in the sky.

“...Has my cursed destiny finally caught up to me?! Aah, just as the prophecy foretold, all the days I spent on plotting to escape my fate have ended in vain. Oh, mother—oh, Princess!”

A new airborne craft emerged in the sky as the flares fell. It traced the lines of the mountains as it flew in a low path toward Vulcan, paying no heed

to the sound it created. As a plated royal crown was burned in offering, the drone took to the sky in the false daylight. The shell it fired hit the plaza and obliterated it.

“You...you...you bastard!”

“Yes. It shouldn’t be too long now. The icon of the god has been carried away, and the bombardment has begun according to plan,” said the Reincarnator cheerfully, putting his ear to his holographic mobile terminal. The bands on his arm indicating his rank numbered three.

“I’ll...I’ll kill you!”

“Very well.” Sid was answered by the suited Summoner, who grabbed Sid’s sword with his gauntleted hands, dodged the kick Sid threw at him, then retaliated with a roundhouse kick of his own. Sid spun in the air as he flew backward from the impact. In the middle of his trajectory he activated his Skill, phosphors exploding on the soles of his feet to produce some forward thrust as he flew back down toward the floor.

“Curse you...for doing that to my Master.”

“Hmm.” Summoner nodded, stroking his chin, then knocked Sid down with a straight punch as the boy flew toward him. Phosphors flared up around Sid defensively, but they were overwhelmed by the blow. Sid went sliding across the floor. The form of Orestes he had recreated crumbled, and in his natural appearance as nothing but a small boy, Sid writhed in pain.

“Damn it...damn it, damn it, damn it...I’ll kill you!”

“My...he has spunk!”

“Yes, sir.” The Reincarnators exchanged words as if nothing had happened. Summoner and the other high-ranking Reincarnator paid constant attention to their watches instead.

“If only Yuujin-san were a little more lively right now...oh. Looks like it’s about time.” The unnamed Reincarnator looked up from his watch and turned around. The man inside the wall, the hero of antiquity trapped inside the oyster, faintly opened his eyes. “Hi. How does it feel? This is the hero’s body you’ve always wanted.”

Out from the gap in the shell, a pair of arms were suddenly thrust forth. After closing and opening their fists, as if confirming their mobility, the arms

grasped the edge of the shell and exerted force against it.

There was a raw, wet squelching sound from inside the shell. The gap between the two halves of the shell widened, and a man's body, with an enormously powerful back, began to come to the surface. Bit by bit, the man emerged.

Clang. The bivalve's upper shell was abruptly torn away and thrown to the floor, revealing the squishy mound of white flesh covering the interior. Standing upon it was a man boasting a body of unsurpassed strength. He was the legendary hero, the king of the ancient kingdom. His name was Prodotis —the son of the god of overflowing sunlight.

"So this...is a hero," muttered the one called Hero, his voice teeming with various emotions as he considered the supreme body he had obtained.

"That's right. And you, Yuujin-san, are the Hero of our Project." After speaking kindly to Hero, the Reincarnator turned his gaze to Sid. Sid's face was contorted in despair. There were now three Reincarnators before him. Summoner was one. Hero was another. Finally, there was the wielder of lightning, a Reincarnator of unknown identity, who had struck Dill down with a single use of his Skill. "There's something that's always bothered me. Why doesn't the final boss of a game set out directly to defeat the hero while he's still low level? If it were me, I would gladly snuff out the world's only hope for the future personally." The Reincarnator who wielded lightning slowly approached Sid, one step at a time. His expression was peaceful, even gentle.

"It's nice to meet you. My name is Shiden, and I work as General Manager of the Project. You might be wondering what that means." Shiden tilted his head to one side and smiled. "That means I am the *strongest* Reincarnator." A current ran through Shiden's arm. Sid, seeing this, tried to create a shield with his phosphors, but by the time he managed he found his body was already burning. "How fascinating. We haven't seen a natural Play Actor before."

"Don't let your guard down. Not only does he have the flexibility of his Copy Skill, but he now shares the experience of a veteran warrior. Even under these circumstances, he might still take a bite out of you."

"True. Let's observe him thoroughly in our lab in Tower City." With the empty syringe in his hand, Shiden drew closer to Sid.

"We are the black eagle that blots out the desert sun!"

“We are the Halberd Brigade!”

Kicking open the airlock, men in chain mail cloaks flooded into the room. While diverting the Reincarnators with throwing weapons, they formed a shield wall around Dill and Sid before the count of three after storming into the room.

“You fought well.” The aging lieutenant took the time to praise Sid. “From this point onward, we’ll be their opponents instead.”

A dark cloud fell over the Reincarnator Shiden’s face. He looked in turn at the six powerful warriors in chain mail before checking his watch again.

“Shiden-sama. We have a schedule to follow,” whispered the Manager-class Reincarnator, Summoner, in Shiden’s ear.

“I know that! But missing an opportunity like this feels like triggering a death flag...”

“In any case, we’ll meet them again. At that time, we’ll take the opportunity to defeat them.”

“You just want a fair contest, don’t you, Yuujin? We aren’t playing sports, you know...” Shiden smiled wryly, then turned his eyes, crackling with lightning, toward the warriors of the brigade. “Looks like that’s how things are, so we’ll be withdrawing for now. I don’t believe we’d lose, but it looks like it would take some time... See you then.” With these words, the three Reincarnators passed through a gate created by a teleportation Skill and abruptly disappeared.

“Master! Master is...”

“Calm down! The electrocution caused his muscles to seize up. If you move him they might rupture.”

Sid had rushed over to Dill as soon as he could, but the man wearing a chain mail hood tore him away. Despite the man’s clerical appearance, his arms were brawny. In his child form, Sid could not oppose him.

“He is still alive, rest assured...but in this condition, he certainly can’t continue fighting.”

“Use the second dose of Prodotis’s blood. I still have my share.” The lieutenant took a syringe filled with red blood from his pocket and held it out.

“Please, wait! You surely don’t mean to make Master keep on fighting?!”

“I do. What will follow is what Aegisthus has always wished for.” The lieutenant answered Sid’s question without hesitation. His resolve was so strong that, conversely, Sid started to become anxious. In that window of

opportunity, the aged lieutenant thrust the syringe into Dill with a practiced hand. “A short while ago, we received a report from a messenger. The Reincarnators have started bombarding the city center indiscriminately. The civilians are said to be fleeing in a state of panic. To evacuate them safely, Steel-Link’s talent for inspiration will be essential. This man’s true value is not in close combat.”

“That’s how it is... Sorry to worry you, Sid.” Dill was starting to regain consciousness and was now somehow able to stand up after his body had been paralyzed. “Nue and Cirulia are in the town. I can’t let those bastards get away with this any longer. Rick, Birkin...would you lend me your shoulders? Let’s get going. We don’t have time to wait for my blood to start flowing again.”

“I...!” Sid pushed aside the mercenaries and stood beside Dill. “I...will protect you. If I can’t stop you from doing something stupid, Master, the least I can do is help you do it.”

One of the men in chain mail whistled. Dill glared at him to shut him up, then turned to Sid and spoke to him gently. “Please do. I’m counting on you, Orestes.”

“Yes, Master!”

With a heavy creaking sound, the platform began to move. Red warning lights started to spin. The incline elevator connecting Ex Machina Amputation to the city center of Vulcan started to descend the slope with the mercenaries of the Halberd Brigade riding upon it.

“You might find this speed frustrating compared to riding down on horseback, but it should be easier than traversing the crowded streets.”

“Besides, it’s a lot easier on those of us who are wounded. General, weren’t you stabbed through the heart? How are you still alive? You really are a monster.”

“Gah hah hah hah...weren’t you struck by lightning? Our heroes are reliable indeed...right, Orestes?” The giant was in high spirits, having survived a wound that should have been fatal by use of a very simple treatment. He gave Sid, who stood at his feet, an inquisitive look. Sid was startled and shrank away. “I’ve heard that you weren’t too fazed by the

lightning that left Steel-Link unable to move. I'm expecting great things from you, new hero."

Sid received these words with a complex mixture of emotions, before practically fleeing to Dill's side.

"Now, we go to war. To war! This is the start of the great battle we've all been waiting for! The foul Reincarnators have set up a perimeter on the castle walls and have enthusiastically been bombarding us. Naturally, they knew that causing this disorder would call us to them. Let's grant their wish by first crushing their perimeter, then hunt the Reincarnators infesting the city center, pulling them out by the roots! While we're at it, feel free to save the damn civilians...all right?" Halberd tilted his head to one side.

In a spot removed from the castle wall, something enormous rose like a cloud rising above the streets. It was far away, but even at this distance one could tell it was not gunpowder smoke. As the light from the Reincarnators' flares illuminated the area, its silhouette was clearly outlined.

"Oh...this takes me back. Take a look, Steel-Link." The giant's mouth curved into the slightest hint of a smile as he turned to Dill with wicked eyes. Dill leaned over the railing of the funicular in shock. Illuminated by the light of the flares and the fires of war raging at its feet, the shape was revealed to be a massive lump of pink flesh. Several protrusions thrust out from the mass, and it started to take on a hideous humanoid form. It looked as though its outer layer of skin had been peeled away, so shiny was its exterior. The thing had muscular arms, a hairless scalp, and a single red eye in the middle of its face. It was a Cyclops, totaling ten meters in height.

"Didn't I tell you not to fight...Nue!"

At a corner of the city center, the houses had been flattened and the street's surface was befouled with an unidentified black sludge. A single giant stood at the epicenter of the destruction. Its disproportionate, vertically asymmetric body swayed with the wind as it looked up at the night sky, which was illuminated brightly by flash bombs and the blazes set in the streets. That individual red eye was enormous, taking up roughly eight-tenths of the area of the figure's face.

Upon the street at the giant's feet, which ran with sewage, a woman with

milky white hair lay unconscious.

“Grrr...hm.”

A man regarded the scene from far away and snorted. At his feet lay the corpses of several Reincarnators in a pool of blue blood. The bodies were in an unnatural state—torn to shreds, a level of destruction that could not be attributed to any weapon.

“You are a disgrace to our people.” The man turned his back to the giant, his fur coat billowing behind him. The man’s eyes were red.

AFTERWORD

I initially set out to depict battle scenes in the style of the Ancient Greek epic poem, *The Iliad*. About three years ago, I read *The Iliad* for the first time, which became my inspiration to write this novel.

I found it extremely distinctive and entralling. The various epithets given to gods and heroes, the characters too numerous to memorize, the depiction of battles so succinct they seemed to be over almost too quickly...and the view of life as something transient.

It would be beyond me to read the work in its original ancient Greek, so to be precise I should say that it was the translation by Chiaka Matsudaira, published by Iwanami Bunko, whose literary style impressed me so deeply. I thought that I would like to emulate it somehow, and I wondered what might happen if I applied that style in the context of a modern light novel.

Of course I couldn't write the whole text in the style of an epic poem, so I kept the themes to scenes where I really thought the *Iliad* style belonged. Fundamentally, I aimed to match the riveting pace of *Ninja Slayer* in my depiction of fight scenes, whereas when writing the more serious day-to-day scenes, the novelization of *Drakengard* came to mind; when I wrote Nue Kirisaki in monkey mode, I was inspired by *Nyoro-n Churuya-san*...but that doesn't seem quite the same.

In any case, I used these works as my principal references, and I can't overstate my love and respect for them. I was influenced by all of them. So if I'm completely honest, I don't know whether or not my book has *any* originality. I started writing this novel ten years ago, and over the years I took influence from many different works and rewrote my own again and again. I've spent a lot of time with Dill, Sid, Nue, and Cirulia.

Something a teacher said in one of my university lectures really stuck with me. "There are times when you must give up on your dream and change to another. The egg you're incubating now may already be rotten." This was the gist of it, but when I heard this I had a thought. Might there not be some special cases where something can only be born from a rotten egg?

Of course, I now understand what my teacher was trying to say. Following one's dream can have a very high cost, and the more seriously one pursues it, the farther one might drift from ordinary happiness. I have a number of acquaintances who gave up on their dreams. At the time, I had no words for them.

Nurturing this egg came with complications, but it has finally hatched. Has it turned out to be the great monster I expected? I don't know. The release of a single book is only that: the release of a single book. I can make no other guarantees. In the end, will I be able to continue working as a novelist? If that dream fails, will I be able to find a new one after all this time? All other treasures eventually turn to garbage.

In *The Iliad*, there is an expression appearing many times that goes like this: "May earth open and swallow me." The wish for the gods to end it all for us in an instant, without suffering, when we are beaten down by sadness and regret, and can no longer stand to live life, is not a wish those of us living in the age of science ought to have any longer. It was an age when faith had not yet been refuted by science. I depicted Dill, living in that age, with a mixture of envy and nostalgia. If one day Mephistopheles should approach me, wanting me to sell him my soul, I would like to abandon the burdens of food and clothing and become a pen myself. But that will surely, surely never happen. I have to go on writing novels instead.

Bonus Short Stories

Nue's Great Spy Operation

“All right, then—go ahead and deliver this surprise packed lunch to him.”
Everything started with these words.

“So why do I have to come along? You’re the one she asked, Nue.”

“Enough chit-chat! Take *that*!”

“Mmph?!” With Nue’s fingers pinching his lips shut, Sid flushed bright red and fell silent.

“Private Third-Class Sid. On our top secret mission, we must stay on our guard.”

“P-Private Third-Class? More importantly, by our top secret mission...do you mean the surprise?”

“We are about to transport supplies to relieve Dill during his meeting with the theater company. A top secret mission means no one’s allowed to know about it, we can’t have any witnesses...ah!”

“Come on, come on—while you’re saying these ridiculous things, Master might wander off somewhere... Oh, that’s not the way to the theater, is it?”

“Don’t let him get away! After him!”

“He went into an unknown building... There’s someone at the entrance. Looks like he’s playing an instrument... Is it okay if he sees us? It doesn’t look like he’ll move anytime soon.”

“In times like these...we throw stones to divert people’s attention!”

“Wow, that does seem fitting!”

“Aim, aim...Koshien!”

Crash! With a satisfying sound the stone collided with the wall, and after the man with the tattoo gave it a glance, he turned his gaze to meet Nue’s.

“Ohh, if it isn’t Nue! What’s up? If you’re after Steel-Link...”

“Hiyaaa! We’re in the big leagues!”

Crash! A direct hit on the man’s forehead!

“Waaaaaaa—what are you doing?!”

“Meh. Now there are zero witnesses.”

“No, it’s not like he’s dead! I mean, is he...?”

“Meh. There are always casualties in war.”

“Would you give that odd character a rest?! Whoa, whoa, whoa—there’s a crowd of people now... l-let’s just follow Master!”

“Sneak, sneak, sneak...” Two barrels rested on the floor of the long corridor. Legs sprouted from one of them, took a few steps forward, then stopped. The legs then retreated back into the barrel. The second barrel followed, moving in the same way.

“Um, Nue. I may be wrong, but isn’t this really obvious?”

“The bolder and more reckless our methods, the better we can pass through the blind spots in people’s imagination, yada yada...”

“The monk-looking guy who walked past a moment ago seemed to be snickering at us.”

“That person was...probably just a weirdo!”

“I think it’s our attire that’s weird... Here it is—the room Master went into.”

“Halt, you rogues! Are you spies sent by the Reincarnators?” They heard a man’s stern voice and the ringing of his chainmail cloak. Sid and Nue froze on the spot, still standing in their barrels.

“...Meow.”

“You really thought that would fool him?!”

“Woof!”

“That’s not the issue?!”

With the two squeaking barrels before him, the man started laughing. “Well, I can see you aren’t enemies of mine. You’re my kids. Were you playing a prank on Papa?”

“Dill!” Nue burst through the top of her barrel and thrust her head out.

“Ah. I’m stuck.”

“What did you come here for?!”

“Um, lunch. Master, I’ve brought you a packed lunch on behalf of Cirulia.”

“You brought me my lunch! I’m so happy. Oh, this is quite a generous portion. I have a meeting with my buddies after this, but once that’s over, let’s eat together.”

“Okay!”

“And so another conflict was settled! Huh, where are you two going? Nue is still stuck, you know? Oh, my oh my. Somehow I’ve started crying! Dill, Sid! Don’t leave me! Wait! Wait, you jerks! *Roll, roll, roll.* Make way for rolling Nue!”

Memory of the Crossroads

“In other words, the reason you tried to steal my hatchet was to get back at that rich boy?”

“But, I...”

“But *nothing*, Sid. Listen. Think carefully. What did you intend to do, taking a blade out of here?” said the father to his young son, still sitting in front of his anvil. “Were you hoping to threaten this outsider, who will be gone tomorrow anyway, just to show off? I trust you didn’t mean to actually hack him apart with my hatchet and kill him.”

The boy glared. His eyes, the same color as his father’s, glistened with tears of frustration. “Doesn’t it bother you, Dad? After you did repairs for him, that jerk called you filthy—a bumpkin. He made a fool out of you!”

“...Sid. Come over here. No buts. Come.” He spoke sternly to the boy, who did not quietly obey him. “You still don’t know the difference between pride and pretense. You probably don’t really know the meaning of those words, anyway, so it’s all right if you don’t understand now. But I’d still like to mention it. If you think back on what I tell you today in another ten, twenty years—or even longer—and understand then, that’s good enough.”

“Could it really take that long...?” Sid muttered his objection and furrowed his white eyebrows.

“It could. Just listen. I have pride in my skills at the forge. That’s because I can make the plows and hoes your mother uses in her field work, the barrels we use to store water, or the wooden horse and shovel you play with. Anything we need, I can make.”

Hearing this, Sid didn’t feel at all proud. Wooden horses and shovels were toys he had long since grown tired of.

“But I know that in other towns, there are countless blacksmiths more skilled than me. When I was young, I went to Vulcan, in the north, to train. The buildings and statues in that city were magnificent. However, while I respect the men who made them, I don’t envy them. I have no need for such skills.”

“Why not? If you could make better things, couldn’t you make more money?”

“I suppose I could. But there’s nothing I want that I could buy with money. I make the things I want, and anything I can’t make I forget about. I don’t know how your mother feels, though. Only women understand women.”

Sid furtively let out a yawn. His father noticed, but didn’t scold him.

“To cut a long story short, that’s the meaning of pride. It means knowing what you need, having the right amount of it, and being content. Anything more than that is pretense. For example, take that hatchet. I sharpened it for the purpose of pruning trees, but if I tried to sharpen it any further it would be excessive, and I’d only end up hurting myself. It wouldn’t be useful.”

Sid’s head swayed from side to side. He was standing up, but was starting to doze off. He was blinking much more frequently now.

“Sid, you need only remember this. Live for the truly precious things in your life, to protect them.”

“I don’t really understand...”

“For now, that’s fine. Just make sure not to take my hatchet again. Acting in violence, giving yourself over to anger—that’s not the sort of behavior one can take pride in.”

Underneath his closed eyelids, Sid was wide awake. He sat up from his sleeping bag. The woods at night were cast in shadow and the undergrowth rustled in the wind. It was quiet, but he could hear a constant noise coming from somewhere. He went off to find the source of the sound.

“...Sid? Were you still awake?” The man with the rust-colored hair stood under the light of the moon, and he stayed his sword-arm in the middle of his training.

“Mr Steel-Link, I have a favor to ask. Please teach me how to use a

sword.”

“If I teach you that skill, what do you intend to do with it?”

“I’ll get revenge for my father and my mother.”

“I have no right to say this... but you should put that out of your mind.”

“I’m from the country. I had never left that village before then, and I barely had any friends. Mom and Dad were everything I knew. That was stolen from me. Besides revenge, there’s nothing left for me now.” Sid delivered these words one after the other, as if he’d given them careful thought. Dill hesitated. “Please take responsibility for not leaving me to die that day.”

In the end, this decided the matter.

“Is it really all right?”

“Yeah. Hit me like you mean it. In any case, I don’t think you’ll even graze me. Just be careful not to injure yourself.”

Sid, holding a real, naked blade, was flustered. It was heavy—and it was sharp. Gazing at the point of the blade, where the moonlight gathered, the terror of the thing made him dizzy.

“Here’s your first lesson. The hesitation you’re feeling now is the same hesitation you’ll feel when you go to take your revenge. Your enemy will fight back, and you will die.”

“...! Yaaaah!” Sid, becoming irritated, charged toward Dill. However, lacking the strength to support the weight of the weapon in his hands, he lowered it by the time he took his third step. Dill still hadn’t moved a muscle.

“Let me tell you—I won’t let you change it for a knife, though it would be lighter. Killing someone with a short blade is harder than killing them with a long blade. It requires you to get closer to the enemy and strike their vital spots more accurately.”

Sid tried to raise the sword again...but he couldn’t. His arms were already exhausted.

“You understand now, don’t you? This is impossible for you. Give up.”

“Shut up!” Sid threw his sword aside. He then leapt at Dill and started hitting him, though clinging to him all the while.

“There’s nothing left for me to do but seek revenge! In the end, the lesson

my dad worked so hard to teach me was meaningless! I couldn't protect the people I had to protect, so how can I speak of pride now?! Is it better to stay quiet on the sidelines?! I'm so... stupid...!"

Dill did not move. He went to put his hand on the boy's shoulder, but in the end did not touch him.

"That's enough for today. Go and sleep."

"But, I...!"

"Sleep now, and after you wake up, if you still feel the same way..." Dill crouched down, to bring his eyes level with the boy's. "I'll become your master in swordplay. Here's your second lesson: it isn't lazy to rest. You understand that one, right?"

"Yes..."

"Good boy."

On the very next day, Sid started to call Dill "Master."

The Decisive Battle! Find Nue!

"Excuse me, Nue. I wanted you to know it's lunchtime...although it was Master who told me to call you..." The door in front of Sid was closed. He knocked and called, but there was no response. Finally, Sid made up his mind. "I'm sure you're just teasing me again anyway, like always... You've got some nerve."

Sid exhaled sharply through his nose, and then stepped into Nue's messy room.

"Because I was the oldest kid in my neighborhood, I was always 'it' when we played hide and seek. Don't think you can escape from me! Today's the day I pay you back for your daily tricks!"

Swoosh. Sid pulled open the curtain, revealing an unnatural lump.

"Found you...ow! A cactus?! Why is there a cactus here?! On top of that, it's huge! How long have you been growing this?!"

The cactus' name was Taro! That's what was written on the pot!

"Y-you didn't trick me just now... It was too obvious! I was humoring you, since I'm the mature one here! My real guess is...here! But whaaat?!" An avalanche of stuffed animals, an immense number, fell out of the closet. Every single one of them was a bear!

"Put these on the shelves properly! I feel sorry for the bears! Ooh...are

you here?!” Sid looked under the bed...and found a book with two men on the cover, entangled in a strange position with tormented expressions on their faces.

“Aiyeee?!” As Sid doubled over backward, he caught his foot on a trash can. What should spill out...but strangely realistic origami octopuses, squids, and centipedes! They had...too many legs!

“Eeeee—gross! Now...now I know. There’s no place else. You’re right here, under this bulging quilt, which is so obvious it has to be a trick—aren’t you?! You made me think it was a trap, but you were actually here the whole time! But that’s all over now! Actually, it’s been moving slightly for a while now...”

“Meow.”

“A cat?! I thought we weren’t allowed pets?! Ah, wait, don’t go.”

“Returning triumphantly, trophy in hand...it’s me, Nue! Is lunch ready?”

“It’s ready. Oh, where’s Sid? Weren’t you in your room?”

“Eh? I was outside, playing with some nice pebbles I picked up. With this, my army’s strength grows stronger still. Satisfying!”

Aiyeee?! They heard the boy’s cry of grief through the wall.

“Although you’re certainly a handful, Nue, Sid is quite a lively child as well, isn’t he?”

“Indeed he is, indeed. However...” For a moment Nue’s expression was quite grown up, then she smiled. “Because of that, I’m having a really fun time.”

Nue’s Test of Courage

“I mean, Dill broke both his legs, so for a moment I wondered what would become of him. But his surgery went fine, and tomorrow he’ll be moved to a room with other patients in the general ward.”

“Who are you explaining this to?”

“But since this means we won’t be able to stay with him in his private room anymore, I think it’s a bit of a shame!”

“Again, who are you talking to?”

Dill, whose bed was situated in the center of the hospital room, sat upright in good spirits as he listened to the conversation between the two children who had come to visit him. But that would only last until nightfall.

“I suppose it’s nearly time for lights out...hey, Master, do you have a story for us today?” Sid tried hard to seem casual as he asked Dill for a bedtime story. Each night, he had told them tales of gods and heroes over the past few days, the same way he once had for his daughter, Iris.

But today was different. Sid felt a hand on his shoulder, and as he turned around, he saw Nue’s eyebrows raised in a sharp “V” shape

“Today is a special event. You’re going to hear a story from Nue—a story you’ll think really happened... a scary story!”

“Huh? Why was the quality of that story so far above my expectations? I’m scared...”

“Nue has always had a talent for telling stories.”

“Heh heh heh! I got this one straight from my mother.”

“Ooh... now I’m afraid for the lights to go out...” Sid lay down on the sofa meant for visitors. He shut his eyes tightly, but the events of Nue’s story wouldn’t leave his mind.

Footsteps patter in the darkness. A sudden hand upon your shoulder...you turn around and see...

“Hey.”

“Eeeek!?” His shoulder shaken from behind, Sid turned around to see red eyes floating in the darkness and nearly screamed. “W-w-what do you want?! There’s a limit to the pranks you can get away with, you know.”

Nue was uncommonly reticent, even embarrassed, as she answered. “It’s me, Nue...too scared to go to the toilet alone after the story from earlier.”

Sid’s face froze in a serious expression. “Huh? Are you an idiot? Who gets frightened by their own story? That’s not normal.”

“Nue is also terrified by her own talent...so Sid, can we go together?” Nue clutched Sid’s clothing as she entreated him. Sid blushed and turned to Dill, seeking help. The patient with two injured legs just waved goodbye cheerfully.

“Did you hear something just now?”

“It was just the wind in the night. The window over there is open”

“I’m sure I can still hear something...”

“Perhaps it’s a leaky faucet?”

Their only light source was a candle stuck into a candlestick. The darkness played on their imagination without giving them the choice to refuse. Sid was frightened, but he was also surprised. To think a daughter of the Titans, the ancient race, was afraid of ghosts or darkness! He would have thought that this girl, with her red eyes, would feel more at home in the spirit world than the material one.

“Sid, don’t go too far away...”

“Don’t you cling so close to me, Nue. It’s unladylike.” Even as he blushed and complained, Sid took a step closer to Nue. Strangely, by standing next to someone even more frightened than he was, Sid was able to calm down. With a tranquil feeling in his heart, Sid felt closer to the girl than usual.

“Look, there’s the toilet already. I’ll wait for you, so hurry up and do your business.”

“...Hey, did you hear something just now?” Nue stopped in her tracks. Seeing how serious her expression was, Sid recalled the fear he had forgotten.

“Come on. Please cut it out. Aren’t we done with the ghost stories?”

“I’m not kidding around! I heard something, a rustling sound...aah!” Nue crouched down, then stood back up. With a bright smile plastered on her face, she showed Sid what was in her hand. “Oh, it was just a cockroach!”

“Gyaaaaaaah!?” Sid screamed and fell backward.

“Oh? Sid, are you scared of cockroaches?”

“D-don’t bring that revolting thing any closer to me! If you do anything weird, I’m done with you! I’m serious!”

“In the end, you were most scared of cockroaches, not ghosts! Ah ha ha!”

The girl didn’t notice the woman in white coming up behind her. Neither child was aware that they had just awakened the very being that they ought to fear the most in this moment.

The head nurse, who in her days had throttled many an uncouth patient with her bare hands and knocked them out with painkillers, folded her

brawny arms and smiled sublimely...

Duel in the Wasteland

“We can see it now. Having made it this far, I already feel like I’ve come home to Vulcan.”

They had reached a wasteland just three days away from their destination. Across the exposed, barren land, uncharacteristic of the north, a number of artificial structures suddenly loomed. An aqueduct ran across a series of many arches, and beyond that was a small hill with a mound of rubble upon it. An oblique shaft of light shone down on the hill through a crack in the clouds.

“These are the legendary remains of the ancient kingdom of Krios, where heroes did battle.” Next to Dill, Nue also gazed at this scenery. What thoughts lay behind her red eyes? Sid moved up closer to the two of them and wanted to say just one thing: *Isn’t that amazing?* But looking over his shoulder, he saw Nue’s red eyes trained on him instead. Feeling nervous, he ultimately said nothing.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Dill Steel-Link,” came a voice. A few meters ahead there stood a man wearing a cloak, whose camouflage pattern blended into the wasteland. The man removed his cloak and tossed it into the black vortex in front of him. “I suppose you don’t remember me? That’s to be expected. I’m just one of the many Reincarnators you’ve killed up until now. But because of you I lost my honor and the trust of my fellows.”

“And just as I hoped, you’ve come back in a new body to seek revenge. I welcome you. I’ll kill you as many times as you like.” Dill motioned for Sid and Nue to stay back. The very next moment, the Reincarnator appeared through a teleportation gate right before Dill’s eyes and slashed at him with a pair of knives.

Dill, however, grabbed the blades using his chainmail cloak for protection and held them in place! He attempted to push his enemy to the ground, but the Reincarnator opened another portal and disappeared. He then reappeared at Dill’s side, already holding a new weapon—this time, a sword

“I’ll cut you and your cloak to pieces!”

Dill hurled one of the knives he’d stolen at the Reincarnator, who knocked it away with his blade; the knife fell to the ground Dill utilized this distraction

to close the distance between them, then seized his scabbard and swept out his own sword. There was a keen sound of metal clashing against metal as the two swords bit into each other, competing for leverage.

“You’re quite able. I don’t recall any of you being so skilled.”

“I’ve become skilled in order to kill you!”

The two warriors simultaneously cast aside their swords, then took out projectiles to use as they retreated. Dill threw daggers drawn from his pockets, while the Reincarnator took out a pistol from a portal and fired.

Dill swept his chainmail cloak forward to block the bullets. They did not penetrate. However, Dill did still feel an impact, like he had been struck with an iron staff. He staggered back, eyes wide. The Reincarnator, who had not attempted to block Dill’s daggers, charged forward with the blades still stabbed into his shoulder and flank.

Dill’s stance was broken, and he was toppled by the Reincarnator’s low tackle.

“Let me invite you to a special stage for your execution!” Knocked back by the Reincarnator, Dill could see a teleportation gate swirling behind him. Still tumbling through the air, Dill could do nothing to resist as his body was swallowed by the gate and disappeared.

“Master?!” cried Sid. Right beside him, Nue blinked her red eyes and pointed.

“Over there.”

A powerful wind blew, shaking Dill’s body. Stumbling perilously, he came to his senses. The ground was far below him. In front and behind him stretched a stone path. He was atop an old, weathered pile of bricks—the aqueduct.

There was a mechanical roar like that of a great beast. In front of him was a Reincarnator astride a motorbike, clutching a heavy sword in his hand.

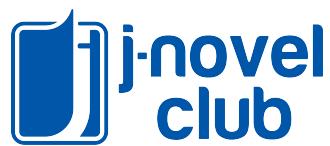
On either side of Dill was a sheer drop straight into the abyss. He had nowhere to run. Dill crouched low and readied his sword; the Reincarnator on the motorbike revved his engine menacingly and watched for the right moment to advance.

“Come at me. My name is Dill Steel-Link—Killer of Reincarnators.”

With an explosive sound the bike charged forward. The Reincarnator's sword scraped against the bricks, sparks flying from the tip as the distance between them grew ever closer. This was the decisive moment!

"Dieeee, Dill Steel-Link!" The Reincarnator opened a gate and vanished. The accelerated bike reappeared behind Dill, who whirled around—thus the pair clashed upon their narrow battleground. The Reincarnator's bike kept on going...then stopped.

The wind blew through the wasteland. Unchanged since the Silver Age, the wind in the plains of Krios was dry and kicked up pebbles. Finally, there came a noise. As if chasing the bike, the bricks that had endured an eternity started to crumble—sending the bike, together with the Reincarnator atop it, crashing down upon the wastes of Krios.



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