

[著]
安里アサト

[イラスト]
しらび

[メカニックデザイン] I-IV

Ep. 2

—ランスルー・ザ・バトルフロント—
〈上〉

86

—エイティシックス—

Why, everyone asked.
Without knowing that it is insult.

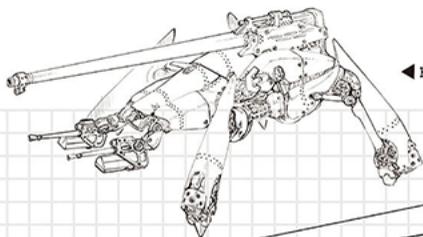
[EIGHTY
SIX]

ASATO ASATO PRESENTS



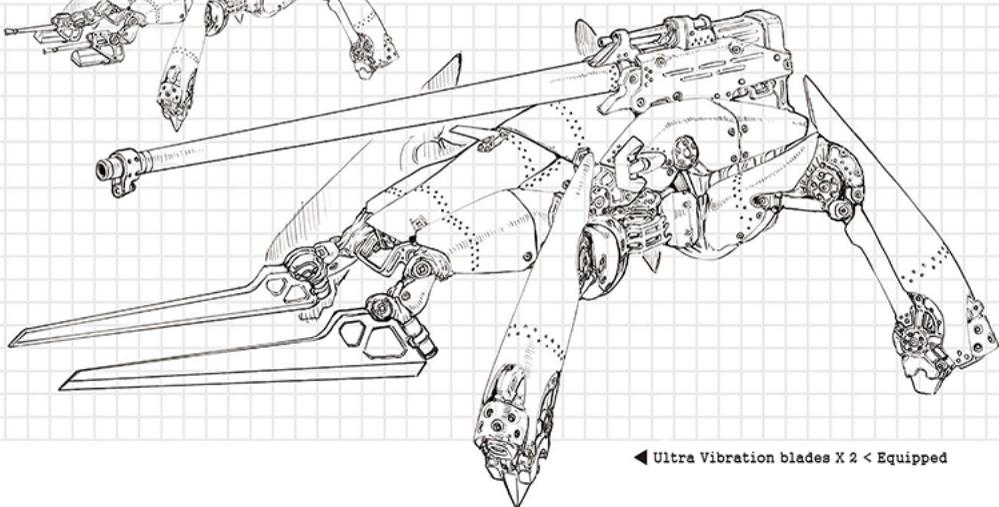
The number is the land which isn't
admitted in the country.
And they're also boys and girls
from the land.

 電撃文庫



◀ Heavy Machine Guns X 2 < Equipped

[mechanical design] I-IV



◀ Ultra Vibration blades X 2 < Equipped

Geade Federation "Field Dress"

XM2 Reginleif

Specs:

Manufacturer: WHM

Full Length: 6.3m / Full height: 2.7m (Excluding combat subarms)

Fixed Armaments.

Combat subarms, Ultra Vibration blades X 2, or combat subarms Heavy Machine Guns X 2.

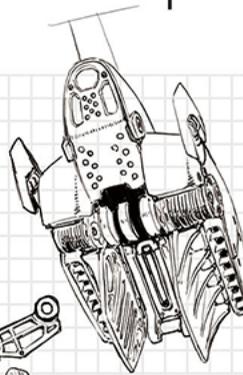
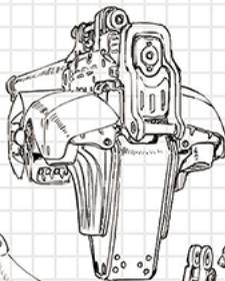
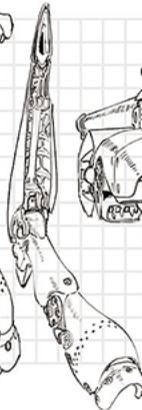
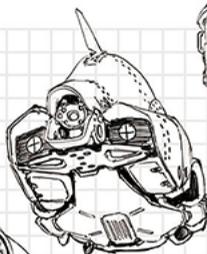
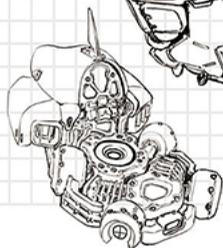
Wire Anchor X 2.

Back Gun Mount arm X 1 (Typically installed with a 88mm smoothbore cannon, can be swapped with a large autocannon or missile launcher)

Feet, anti armor pile driver X 4 (20 rounds each)

Note: Pilots are heavily restricted as the units lack the (fatal) mobility.

This Geade Federation 3rd generation Full Dress (=Multi-legged armor) was adapted from the 'unmanned drone' of the neighboring "San Magno-lia". The Geade pilots shunned the old design that was aimed at maximized mobility, and sacrificed the survivability of the pilots. But to 'them', who had experienced 'worse units', these trivial issues were of no problems to them, and they used the capabilities and advantages to greater effect, contributing greatly on the frontlines against the <Le-gion>.



レーナ

本名:ヴラディレーナ・ミリーゼ。共和国軍人で、弱冠16歳で少佐にまで上り詰めたエリート。シンが率いる“スピアヘッド”^{パラレイド}戦隊を〈知覚同調〉で遠く離れた本国から指揮し、最後は死地に向かう彼らを涙とともに見送った。

C H A R A C T E R S

The number is the land which isn't admitted in the country.
And they're also boys and girls from the land.

シン

本名:シンエイ・ノウゼン。“エイティシックス”と呼ばれる存在の少年。“スピアヘッド”戦隊の生き残った仲間たちとともに、隣国ギアード連邦にたどり着くが、与えられた平穏を享受せず、彼らは再び戦場に立つ道を選ぶ……。

無人兵器「レギオン」の脅威に晒されたサンマグノリア共和国。そこで行われていたのは、白糸種以外の人々に人外——「エイティシックス」の烙印を押し、日夜「有人の無人機」として出撃させるという悪魔の所業であった。

共和国の指揮管制官・レーナは、彼らエイティシックスを救うべく指揮管制を行っていたが、戦隊長・シン率いる「スピアヘッド」の面々と交流するうち、己の認識の甘さに気づき、何とか彼らとの間にあった溝を埋めていくこととする。

しかし、戦況は厳しく、少しずつ数を減らしていく「スピアヘッド」戦隊。最後には、彼らに敵地への長距離強行偵察任務——事実上の処刑任務が下された。

レーナは涙ながらに地平の彼方に向かう彼らを支援し、また、シンはその戦いのさなかで悲願であった兄・レイの意識を残した「レギオン」の打倒に成功する。

最後の〈知覚同調〉を交わし、レーナとシンたちの日々は終わりを告げた。

EIGHTY SIX
STORY

EIGHTY
SIX



クレナ
“スピアヘッド”戦隊では狙撃を主に担当。シンにほのかな想いを寄せる。パーソナルネームは〈ガンスリンガー〉。



セオ
同じく“スピアヘッド”戦隊の生き残り。普段はやや淡泊で皮肉屋だが、年相応の直情さも併せ持つ少年。パーソナルネームは〈ラフィングフォックス〉。

アンジュ
“スピアヘッド”戦隊の生き残り。淑やかだが、戦闘では男性陣顔負けの立ち回りを見せる。パーソナルネームは〈スノウウィッチ〉。



フレデリカ
シンらがギアード連邦にたどり着き、保護された先で出会った少女。わずか10歳でありながらその頭脳は明晰で、歳に見合わない口調で話す。

ライデン
“スピアヘッド”戦隊副長。面倒見が良く、シンの良き相棒にして相談役でもある。パーソナルネームは〈ヴェアヴォルフ〉。

ギアード連邦
〈レギオン〉を開発し、大陸全土を戦火に巻き込んだ〈ギアード帝国〉——。〈ギアード連邦〉は、大貴族による独裁体制であったその〈帝国〉政権を打倒し、新たに生まれた民主主義国家である。暴走を始めた〈レギオン〉との戦況は、開発データの一部などを保持しているため比較的優勢であり、現在じわじわとかつての領土を奪還しつつある。

CREDITS

86 (86—エイティシックス—) - Volume 02 by Asato Asato (安里アサト).

Published by Dengeki Bunko (電撃文庫) in 2017.

Illustrations by Shirabi.

Mech designs by I-IV.

Translated by [Hellping](#).

Edited by Aardvark.

eBook by [Olivki](#).

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

SYNOPSIS

The Republic of San Magnolia.

For a long time this country was attacked by its neighbor, the Empire, which created a series of unmanned military vehicles called the Legion. In response to the threat, the Republic successfully completes the development of similar technology and reflects the enemy's attack, having managed to do without casualties. But this is... the official version. In fact, there were victims. Outside of the 85 districts of the Republic there was actually another one. "The non-existent 86th district." It was there that battles continued day and night in which young men and women from the detachment known as Eighty-Six participated—they fought in drones...

Shinn is the leader of a squadron of eighty-sixers. Lena is a "handler" who commands the detachment from the remote rear with the help of special communication technology.

The farewell story of the severe and sad struggle of these two begins!

PROLOGUE

The Forces Under Her Highness the Queen

“—**Y**ou again, Captain Vladlena Millize.”

The superior, seated behind the desk, frowned bitterly as he watched Lena enter the room.

His uniform was completely wrinkled, and he had not shaved for days; this superior of hers showed no impression of a soldier at all, and as she watched this unkempt sight of his, Lena could only lower her head coldly at him.

She had a brand new, form fitting black uniform on her, and silver, silky long hair, with a few dyed red. Half a year ago, she led Spearhead Squadron, the deathrow squad designated to exterminate the remaining Eighty-Sixers, and sent them off to the other side of the battlefield. Ever since then, she had maintained this appearance. The black uniform was for mourning, while the red represented their blood that was shed.

As she had defied orders and provided assistance, she was demoted by one rank to a Captain. It was unlikely that she would never be promoted again.

“You used the interception cannons on your own volition, provided ammunition and equipment, and commanded the other squadrons personally—how many times do I have to emphasize not to do anything unnecessary for the Eighty-Sixers (pigs). Do you know how many times the logistics and armor corps have complained to me already?”

“They would not have if you had given the command, Lieutenant Colonel. Regarding what they have complained about, and how much efforts you put in, I have no intention to understand.”

The Lieutenant Colonel narrowed an alcohol-intoxicated eye, the area beneath wrinkled.

“Watch your words, lady. As a mere Captain, you should know your place.”

Lena merely sneered at it.

He was basically revealing that he was no threat to her, except for his rank, and had no guts to implement any actual punishment.

The squadron under Lena’s charge had defeated the most units on the Eastern Battlefront. The performances of the subordinates would directly affect the ratings of the superiors. At the beginning of the war, a vast number of actual soldiers were sacrificed; this man before her seized the opportunity provided by the power vacuum, and climbed to the position of Lieutenant Colonel. Unsatiated, he wanted to continue climbing, and for him, Lena was a ‘hen laying the golden eggs’ that should never be defeated.

As long as she did not go overboard, he would shield her from anything.

“If you will excuse me, Lieutenant Colonel.”

She gracefully bowed.

The first legislative zone had lots of historic buildings, and the military headquarters was as rich and colorful as a palace. She walked down the corridors, and surrounding her was condescending, spiteful, mocking glares and mutter.

She was a fool to abandon her post as Major, and a future stake at leadership, all for a bunch of mere Eighty-Sixers. This Princess cannot understand the difference between humans and livestock. In a year, all forces will stop, and the war shall come to an end. Yet she believed in the sleeptalk of the pigs, and became a clown who proposed ‘to

prepare for a battle of attrition’. It would be a matter of time until all the Colorata died off, yet she put in the effort to send them off on the battlefield. Truly she was the vicious Bloody Regina.

How stupid.

The Para-RAID on her neck was activated, and she stopped. The heels of her military boots clicked on the parquet wood. After a moment, she quickly moved on.

“You hear me, Handler One?”

“Cyclops.—the , no? What is the situation?”

Through the Para-RAID, she heard the gruff voice of Captain Iida Shiden—codenamed ‘Cyclops’. He was the leader of the squad under Lena’s charge, the squad called the ‘Queen’s Officials’.

Ever since the incident with Spearhead Squadron, she would ask for the names of all the Processors on the day she took charge, but would only call them by codename.

She could not save a single one of them. She had assumed that she could treat them as people, and called them by their names. However, they could not escape the inevitable, to die without a burial, nameless, as a Processor.

“The enemy had advanced to Point 112, at the old railway terminal. Sorry, the radar’s jammed right now, it was too late by the time we noticed...looks like the new meat is going to suffer here...”

Lena clicked her tongue.

Truly, the situation was dire. On this battlefield, where there was zero dead declared, many died, and a single mistake would result in a catastrophic sacrifice.

“Deploy the main forces at Point 062, and lure the enemy over with the mobile forces. The remaining interception cannons should be able to hit them, barely. That place is clustered with private houses and narrow streets, so it should be advantageous to the smaller

“Juggernauts”.

Cyclops chuckled.

“So we intercept them right in front of the base. If we can’t do it here, this battlefield and the minefield of you Republicans will be leveled.”

“But if we’re going to survive, that’s the best point to intercept I can think of.”

Lena said decisively. Cyclops silently grinned.

To survive. This went not only for the Eighty-Sixers, but also the Republicans, including Lena, who were besieged by the “Legion”.

To keep on living, so she was told.

They believed that she would keep on fighting, and living, and she had to keep that promise.

“Understood, your Highness...we shall inform you once we’re in position. Anything else, and we will inform you immediately.”

The Para-RAID was disconnected.

Lena hastened towards the Control room, and once she saw the scenery outside a window, she slowed down.

The capital of San Magnolia, the only ones walking down the stone pavements were Albas of silver hair and eyes. The five colored flag, symbolizing freedom, equality, fraternity, justice, and purity fluttered under the clean blue sky of Spring, along with the portrait flag of the revolutionary San Magnolia that stood tall.

Soon, it would be the season when she first encountered them, the Spearhead Squadron.

Being able to reach the end of a journey was freedom, fighting until the very end was glory. They, who smiled as they departed, would never return.

Where exactly did they reach?

At this point—on a clearly blustery Spring, flowers bloomed everywhere across the endless wilderness.

If they died, did they have the rest they deserved?

86

—エイティックス—

Why, everyone asked.
Without knowing that it is insult.

[Ep. 2]

—ラン・スルー・ザ・バトルフロント—〈上〉

EIGHTY
SIX

The number is the land which isn't
admitted in the country.
And they're also boys and girls
from the land.

ASATO ASATO PRESENTS

[著] 安里アサト

ILLUSTRATION / SHIRABII

[イラスト] しらび

MECHANICALDESIGN / I-IV

[メカニックデザイン] I-IV

DESIGN / AFTERGLOW

CHAPTER I

Ritt der Walküren

The skies over the frontlines were engulfed in the thin clouds of Eintagsfliege, staining it with a corrupted silver.

“The incoming Löwes are determined to be a battalion!...we have got another company incoming!”

The screams of the company echoed through the wireless communications. Till this point, the company had lost 30% of its total fighting strength, and the news of the enemy’s reinforcements was no different to a proclamation of death to the remaining survivors of the Geade Federation’s 177th Armor Battalion, 141st Regiments’ , 18th Company.

“45 seconds till contact! Oh god...!”

“Argh...they’re still coming...!?”

Seated in the dual-manned cockpit of the “Vanargand”, Eugene groaned as the unit shook left and right. He was a Selena, with silvery white hair and eyes. His youthful bespectacled face was a little slim considering he was seventeen.

The Federation’s tactics to deal with the “Legion” were rather basic, to overwhelm one with many. Even with their 3rd generation full dress weapon “Vanargand”, taking on a single Löwe would require at least double the fighting strength. If the Federation is outnumbered, then it has no chances of winning.

“Shit, what are the bombardiers doing!? Provide the intercepting fire already!”

The gunner and the company commander seated behind him bemoaned, his rants echoing through the wireless. The noise coming from the eight legs reverberated loudly with the thundering from the tank cannons and the roars of the power pack; even inside the cockpit of the “Vanargand”, conversation was possible only through the wireless system.

Of course, the commander also understood that with the intermittent interference of the Eintagsfliege, the radars and sensors could not function normally, and with only our naked eyes we could not see the surroundings clearly, since the surrounding was dark. Any battle with the “Legion” would always begin with a sudden raid.

With a 12.7mm heavy machine gun mounted, the battered Armored Skeleton was mercilessly pounded along with its fellow friendlies by the Grauwolf Melee Hunters. The “Vanargands” armed with thick compound armour and a powerful 120mm cannon, were a tad bit slower in terms of mobility. In contrast to the “Legion” that was made to be a weapon of massacre, humans had no hope to match them in terms of reaction time, and their units were slower in terms of acceleration. While their top speeds were about equal, there was a fatal difference in their acceleration, braking, turning, and various other mobility related functions.

“Don’t slack off! There’s no way back even if we try to run away!”

“You scrap metals, bring it on! I’m willing to be a shield for my countrymen!”

“Damn it! I can’t die here! I can’t let myself be taken away by them ...!”

The wireless communicator was filled with the lashings and gunshots of the foot soldiers as they took on the metal beasts in a desperate struggle, along with their dying screams.

Eugene could only grit his teeth as he heard the clear determination in their voices.

Pip. At this moment, someone responded to their distress call.

Numerous cannons shot down from the skies, as though ripping apart the blue moonlight and the faint veil of the night, striking right above the “Legion” with utmost precision, resulting in a cluster of bullets pelting upon them.

This bombardment had barely managed to avoid hitting the fan-shaped formation of the armored troops, and hit the nucleus areas of the “Legion”; a perfect masterstroke.

The Ameise, equipped with weak armor, were completely neutralized. The rocket launchers on the back of the Grauwolfs were damaged, and had to be discarded. While the lightweight “Legion” units were being depleted, the Löwes, still standing beside the cannons that were spinning about, were shot from the side by piercing rounds at the next instant, and were completely wrecked.

Once the dust dispersed, the Löwe fell to the ground, and the sound of the continuous bombardments could finally be heard from far away.

The sound of the cannon with an initial velocity of one thousand and six hundred meters per second, several times the speed of sound, could only be heard after the shot landed. It’s distinct sound was heavy and shrill, like metal plates clashing.

“The 88mm (Ratsch-bumm)...!?”

“No-no way...!”

Like a jumping spider mercilessly hunting the worms that were crawling upon the ground, it appeared from beyond the darkness of the skies, and assaulted the “Legion”.

The unit landed right atop the turret of the Löwe that was in the middle of the pack, and slammed its anti armor pile driver attached to its four legs into the enemy, causing it to tremble.

The four long thin legs that seemed to be mimicking the joints of a spider, and the white armor had a semblance to grounded ash. The two combat arms were equipped with ultra vibration blades and wire anchors, and they were curled up looking like the jaws of a spider.

Also, it was equipped with a 88mm smoothbore cannon.

The 57mm pile drivers located on the tips of the four legs gave off a menacing coldness befitting its moniker as the war goddess, and at the same time, resembled the white skeleton seeking its lost skull on the battlefield.

“The “Reginleif”...!”

Cries could be heard from the wireless communicator, but the voices didn't contain a shred of relief upon seeing the incoming aid. Instead, it seemed that they were as terrified of it as they were of the enemy.

The XM2 “Reginleif”. The “Vanargand” focused primarily on its offensive and defensive capabilities, and it was equipped with compound armor and a 120mm smoothbore cannon. In contrast to that, this unit was focused primarily on mobility, and as compared to its weight, it has tremendous output generated from its highly potent linear actuators. It was a late 3rd generation combat unit.

It had discarded its armor and firepower to enhance only the mobility, but the excessive mobility could wreck a pilot's body. This three dimensional highly potent personalized unit was created with such a maniacal concept in mind.

It was designed based on the fiendish manned drones that were created by the Republic on the other side of the “Legion” controlled areas, developed for ‘them’ who came from the Republic.

The “Legion” had neither life nor emotions, and would neither fear nor lament its deceased comrades. They immediately switched priorities, and ignoring the remains of their fellow destroyed units, the Löwes cannons immediately flew before the “Reginleif”.

The “Reginleif” retreated back by inches, and the cannons bombarded upon the Löwe that was lying on the ground. The turret, dozens of tonnes in weight, was blown into the air due to the ammunition's that were within it exploding. The turret was specifically designed not to have a blow-off panel, so as to protect its contents, and this in turn resulted in its majestic final moments.

The “Reginleif” darted through the dark red flames and the countless shrapnel from the armor raining upon it, it was racing through the battlefield.

In an instant, it darted through the fifty meters gap between the Löwes, leaped to the side, and landed right before one that had turned its turret around, trying to aim at it. At the same time, it fired the Armor-Piercing Fin-Stabilized Discarding Sabot (APFSDS) from its Ratsch-bumm into the flank of the enemy. The high frequency blade sliced a Grauwolf that closed in without any warning, and the machine then charged towards another Löwe alone.

Yes, a single unit.

One single unit. That single unit practically annihilated the “Legion” that had been completely unscathed. The shrill screeches of the high frequency blades kept echoing, the purple sparks of the pile drivers kept flashing, and the Ratsch-bumm continued to roar, reducing each and every enemy unit into scrap.

In no way was it due to the machine’s specifications. It was simply due to the overwhelming ability of pilot within—deliberately dubbed as such ironically and respectfully, not as a pilot for the ‘unmanned machine’, but as a ‘processor’.

On an average, the Löwe killing rate of a “Reginleif” as compared to the “Vanargand” was pretty similar. The former’s armor would not be able to withstand a single cannon blow, and it had a higher mortality rate. In fact, a squadron piloting the “Reginleif” was practically wiped out during an experimental battle. Only one—standing on that battlefield, there was only a single unit that eradicated all the enemy units alone.

That war junkie left the hell called the battlefield with the assistance of the Federation, only to choose to return there.

‘They’ did not fear the prospect of battling the “Legion”. ‘They’ did not fear death. ‘They’, without any care, boarded the “Reginleif” that had eschewed its armor—and the lives of the pilots along with it, charging into the lonely battlefield when faced with the oppression of the “Legion”.

Madness.

Suddenly, a shadow extended, trying to grab the slender limbs of the “Reginleif”. The latter immediately lifted its leg to evade it, and stomped hard upon it, using the pile driver at the respective leg to stab into the human head.

It was an anti-tank automated drone—Eugene knew that too. However, he was still left intimidated somewhere in his heart. Was the Processor really able to determine that it was not a friendly at that moment?

Or was it that he never really cared whether it was a friendly or not, and prioritized only protecting himself?

The long limb was raised nonchalantly, and it tossed away the drone that was stabbed into the leg onto the last enemy Löwe. The activated detonator ignited the explosives upon impact, and the pieces of metal, being reduced to high speed particles along with the explosion, instantly shot through the outer armor of the Löwe.

The scarlet flames that rose until the skies illuminated the “Reginleif” along with the personal mark on its snowy armor.

The Processor might be mad, after all. He, a headless skeleton raising a shovel, the symbol of a death god so overly heinous and ominous, so feared and yet so respected on the battlefield.

During the first sortie, when all the friendlies were wiped out, he alone eliminated an entire unit. Even amongst ‘them’, he was the cream of the crop, his personal mark standing out amongst them.

The name was—definitely

Eugene recalled, and widened his eyes. The company commander, seated at the cannoner seat, lashed out,

They, borne out of the malice of the Republic, went through arduous, horrifying trials. They were as horrifying as the “Legion” itself, and their names were feared as being the weapons of slaughter taking on human form.

“Eighty-Sixers...the monsters of the Republic...!”

In fact, it was preferable to avoid using multi-legged or caterpillar legged armored weapons outside of battle, to mitigate the wear and malfunction.

The “Undertaker”, Shinn, placed a personalized cargo carrier back into his personal “Reginleif”, and returned back to his cabin. This carrier was designed by the advanced technology bureau, prototype deployment squad 1028 “Nordlicht”.

He was dressed in the steel-colored panzer jacket uniform of the Federation, the twin-headed hawk crest of the country and the insignia on it denoting his rank as Second Lieutenant. Wearing the blue scarf on his neck was strictly a breach of military code, but nobody cared about this appearance as long as it was not in an official meeting.

He was about to remove the RAID device beneath his scar, only to be contacted by the Para-RAID of the mechanic crew in the container cargo to the back.

“–Lieutenant Nouzen.”

“Corporal, the wireless is still switched on.”

There was a click of the tongue from both the Para-RAID and the wireless.

“Argh, I forgot. Well, this Para-RAID’s way too different from the wireless. It’s one thing for us to be experimenting with this shrew here, why get this thing tested in our squadron too...so, same ol’ level of ammo as the last time, half APFSDS and half HEAT (high-explosive anti-tank warheads), ya?”

Most of the “Nordlicht” were Wargue, soldiers of the old battlezones, and without an official military rank. Back when the Federation was still the Empire, these soldiers were sent to the Wolfsland at the border, where skirmishes often occurred, and lived there, considered as additional manpower. Having lived on the

battlefield for generations, these crude men were deemed as mercenaries under the current administration, and lax in discipline. Crude in tone they might be, that was the utmost respect they could show.

“Yeah.”

“Also, got no spare high freq blades, ya. Number of “Juggernauts” been dropping, and ya the only guy using such strange weapons there. Enough with the nerve-wrecking tactics next time, will ya?”

Another unique trait of the Nordlicht was they would not call the XM2 by its official term “Reginleif”. Instead, they would call it the “Juggernaut”, the ‘drone’ of the Republic that was the blueprint of it. Just a month ago, during the experimentation of the newest machine unit, the original squad captain, along with a squadron which amounted to about half of this company, was wiped out. As the highest ranked soldier of the remaining forces, Shinn took over as the squad leader. He had a habit of calling his unit the “Juggernaut”, and it seemed everyone else was influenced by it as a result.

In fact, all the members of the squad felt it was a name more befitting of it than the war maiden it was actually named.

It tormented the test pilots during the development process, and half of the squadron that was assigned with these units was wiped out. The steel horse was certainly appropriately named, its moniker based upon the deformed god that would mercilessly devour in the name of Salvation.

As the units were extremely picky in their choice of pilots, Nordlicht could not be regrouped, let alone be assigned with an additional member, despite them being completely unbecoming of the military definition of a battle.

“Doesn’t matter. The “Legion” should be retreating now.”

“Hmmm? ...Ohh, I see...I don’t know what’s going on, but it sure is useful. “

Shinn removed the RAID device, ignoring the amazement and the monologue that was imbued with a tinge of grimace and fear that was directed to no one in particular. The RAID device was a metallic ring, a choker mic on the throat, only with a more polished appearance than before and improved functions.

So this is close to being a choker again. Nothing changed so he thought.

Suddenly, he could hear some shrill words coming from the pilot seat. The dated language seemed pompous, and for Shinn, who knew nothing other than the battlefield, it was like a difference of an era or two.

“Good work ye, Shinei.”

“...Frederica. How did you get in again?”

Poking her head out from the seat and turning back was a petite girl of ten years or so.

She had a delicate body, and had a pretty, intricate, white, doll-like face beneath her military cap. The red eyes of the Pyrope were dazzling like a gemstone, and the black hair of the Onyx seemed strangely fitting with the grim looking steel-colored military uniform.

Shinn had known this girl for at least half a year, even before he was assigned to this prototype squad. She puffed up her flat chest proudly

“How naive of you to collude with the maintenance crew against us. They were busy with the final checks for the emergency deployment. Lots of chances to slip in.”

“–Corporal. We have to talk once I return.”

“Lieutenant...!? No erm, hear our side out first! We were really too busy, ya...!”

Shinn shut off the wireless without even bothering to hear the excuses, sighed, and lowered his head towards the eyes of the same

color as his.

“How many times do I have to repeat myself again, not to come along with me when I’m deployed? Know your position, ‘Mascot’.”

“Do not forgot, your actions are under our control. Thereafter, you have no right to criticize us. Your commander is I. Bernault never complained.”

The middle-aged man who had returned first, the sergeant who was the most senior in the squadron merely shrugged away, not say anything else.

Bernault knew that while Shinn was tactically correct, he was simply grumbling out of personal feelings, and it was not worth talking about. Shinn himself never pursued the matter.

“Their fault for not catching up. If we had missed the time to attack because we had to meet up, there would be no purpose in mobilizing the defense.”

The Processors who were abandoned with the squadron at the back gave a quiet grimace.

And Frederica in turn frowned,



“Mobilizing the defense, huh? While its a mission suited for you...I do not like it. Such tactics will require our forces to first break through.”

The plan was to deliberately deploy the infantry as the main forces onto the frontline, and hide the armored corps with high mobility and firepower at the back. Once the frontlines were breached, the armored forces would be deployed forward and they would wipe out the enemy quickly. The attacks from the “Legion” over the past month have been particularly vicious, and the forces on the Western frontline could only cease further advancement and remain put so as to reduce the depletion of their forces.

“But even if we managed to hang on till now, as long as there is a difference in forces and reproduction ability, it will be a matter of time until such tactics fail to work—what are we going to do when that time comes?”

Shinn ignored her, and sat down, *What is the point of saying this now? There is no need to worry about that.*

At this point.

Once the country’s completely battered, what would become of the forces on the frontlines? Was that even a question

Frederica leaned her body over unhappily.

“You listening, Shinei? Also, one weakness of yours is your unwillingness to reflect upon your actions. You are no longer in the Eighty Six area of the Republic; this is the Federation’s battlefield—hya!”

The girl was not being loud, but that distinct shrill voice of hers was grating to Shinn, who pulled down the military cap of the girl who was leaning over, down past her nose to shut her up.

Shinn ignored the helplessly flailing girl next to him, leaned on the hard backrest, and then closed his eyes. There were too many of the “Legion” attacking at night, and the requests he received on this day

were relentless. While it was not the first time he was fighting throughout the night, he wanted to at least secure some sleep time for himself.

Next to him, Frederica was still flailing away.

“Woah! I cannot take it off at all! Bernault! Help me!”

“Okay okay, but be quiet after I take it off. The lieutenant and everyone else have been fighting continuously for a few days. They’re all tired, and need sleep.”

“Umu...sorry.”

There seemed to be a glance directed towards Shinn, who did not mind it as he let his body fall into a light sleep.

Even in slumber, he could hear the laments of the dead mechanical souls, not dwindling at all, and in fact, covering the entire West.

FOB15 (Forward Operating Base No.15) was the main camp listed to the 141st Armor Corps, located on the Geade Federation western battlefield, right behind the standby second defensive line patrolled by the 177th armored corps.

The base was rather vast, considering the many personnel along with the armored units that were to be contained. In the vast officer mess, Eugene was holding onto a tray with one hand as he kept looking for a certain person. The camp had to be reestablished multiple times as the battlefield varied, and thus, the cafeteria was rather new and simple. If it had been ten years ago, before the civil revolution, when the Federation was still the Empire, there would probably be an image of a dictator, rather than the tapestry ‘We shall boast our Justice to the World’ on the wall inside.

“Hm. The officers from Nordlicht are still there.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s great that you’re willing to understanding the foreigners, young lieutenant. Those Eighty-Sixers too deserve our sympathies

and compassion.”

The pureblood Saphir Captain, who seemed to be an ex-noble, bared his teeth with a hearty smile, and Eugene gave a vague smile in return, then headed towards where the Captain was pointing.

The Captain was correct in what he said. Eugene himself never met any ‘Eighty-Sixer’ after them, except for him, let alone meeting them. He was also a little intimidated by them.

However, he was not being as kind as the Captain had implied. If he conversed with them normally, he should be able to know how they were as people, or so he thought, but...

The Federation was a multi-racial country, and the military base naturally had races of various colors, but they were all relatively young, some youths in their teens. Like Eugene, they were graduates from the special cadet school. It was a unique establishment, set up for those who went through middle school education to be granted the rank of lieutenant after the bare minimum training, and the higher education they should be afforded before their vocation would be taught during their military days.

Over the ten years of war against the “Legion”, the Federation lost too many officers, and had to maintain the number of officers this way.

But thanks to this, those that were of ordinary families had chances to become officers, voluntarily. No matter how dire the situation was, they could not simply conscript soldiers while ignoring the will of its people. The Federation government was not this fallen. Forcibly conscripting others for battle was something only the vile would do.

The Federation was different from the Empire, and naturally, different from that country in the West.

In modern warfare, the demand was for soldiers to be proficient and experienced in wielding weapons. Surely getting numbers alone would not be of much help. That was what Eugene’s buddy, his bunkmate in special cadet school explained.

“...Hey, why are the Nordlicht guys here?”

“Didn’t we request for their assistance just yesterday? The headless skeleton possessed by that death god is really unnerving.”

“Heard a lot of them got shot down during this month after they came in. Both friendlies and enemies.”

“Seriously, is there something in them or something? I really thought they are some processors or something.”

“Enough with that. You’re no different from the scumbags of the Republic when you’re acting like that. How can our glorious Federation do such a thing?”

“Well put—may glory be upon the double-headed eagle at all times.”

Eugene passed by some soldiers as burly as the armored infantry, and ironically, it guided him to where he wanted to head towards.

He spotted the one he was looking for at the very end of a long table in a corner of the cafeteria, and brought his tray over.

Opposite that person was a petite girl wearing a military uniform. He himself was dressed in a double-breasted blazer, quietly dumping the food on his tray into his mouth.

Both of them were Onyx and Pyropes, with black hair and blazing red eyes, and they really resembled siblings. The old empire nobles had distinctive appearances, and as a result, the two of them had identical appearances. Eugene heard that he had no family left, however.

In the bustling cafeteria in the morning, this was the only space that was distinctively empty. It was either because they were shunned by the nobles who respected purebloods, or were reviled by the suppressed civilians for having the distinct colors and appearances (both Onyx and Pyropes were nobles throughout the Empire’s time, and mixed bloods were particular hated by both sides), or that their squad and names in particular were notorious enough.

The girl tapped at a corner of the tray with her fork, and spoke with the shrill chirp of a canary,

“...Shinei. Do you like mushrooms?”

“Not really. Don’t force yourself if you don’t them?”

“Bu-but tis’ the hard work of the chef. Leftovers are disrespectful.”

“Then do your best.”

“Uuu.”

Though he said so, he did move the butter-fried mushrooms on the girl’s plate onto his, leaving only one behind. He might appear aloof, but he was like a kind-hearted older brother.

“It’s been a while, Shinn.”

The red eyes looked over at him, and once the former recognized him, they blinked.

“Eugene. So you’re assigned here?”

“Just last month.”

He greeted the girl, and sat on the chair next to her. The latter looked back at him, her red eyes bloody and large.

“Thanks for yesterday. That skeleton personal mark is yours, right?”

Shinn paused,

“Ehh...sorry, which squad were you in?”

It seemed Eugene’s squad was not the only one that had asked for the assistance.

“Haha. Sure was active yesterday, huh.”

Frederica looked back and forth between them, and asked,

“Do you know each other?”

“Same batch during cadet school.”

“We knew each other soon after enrolling. Both of us were in the armored corps, in the same dormitory, and buddies during training. Both of us were in the same test unit when practicing how to operate the “Vanargand”.”

Frederica’s eyes immediately drifted.

“Ahhh...sure was not easy, I suppose.”

With an impish enthusiasm, Eugene leaned over,

“Not at all. This guy’s boring and dull, I can’t understand what he’s thinking at all, you know.”

“Uu, I’d suppose. He would always look at a book whenever others talk to him, and will never lift his head up. If he finds it boring, he will never talk, if not ignore it outright.”

“Some people wonder what’s the color of his blood when it gets really chilly at night, and yet he does exert a lot of effort on the weirdest of things. You heard of the legendary moment when Shinn got a zero?”

“Oh? What would that be about.”

“During the mock battle of combat training, he got the “Vanargand” to jump. It got declared as dangerous piloting, and so he failed.”

That was four months ago, near the end of the three months basic training in the special cadet school.

Though that maneuver itself was certainly part of the pilot’s skills, but with a combat weight in excess of fifty tonnes, having the “Vanargand” jump up would easily damage the unit and endanger the pilots inside. In fact, the gunner Eugene back then hit the back of his head onto the headrest, and he could feel fire on the verge of

exploding out of his eyes.

It was truly remarkable to see someone dislike a tank with sturdy armor and powerful cannons for just being too heavy. Shinn, unused to piloting the “Vanargand”, was assigned to the prototype squad with the “Reginleif” as a result, on the 1028....Eugene really felt lonely back then.

Shinn, the person being yapped at, nonchalantly sipped at his coffee, being a downer as usual.

Both Eugene and Frederica looked displeased. Both of them glanced at each other, and snorted in unison.

“Lieutenant Eugene Lantz of the 18th Squadron. Pleased to meet you.”

“Frederica Rosenfort. An acquaintanceship...now then.”

Frederica finished the coffee with lots of milk and sugar (so much so that Shinn confiscated the sugar after the fourth scoop of sugar), and got up.

“Since old friends have met, I’d pardon myself from intruding any further. Excuse me.”

With both hands, she took the tray that was meant for adults, a lot larger than her own head, and skilfully darted through the crowd before vanishing.

Eugene watched the delicate looking back leave, and asked,

Such a young girl surely was unbecoming of the military base.

“...Your squad’s ‘Victory Goddess (mascot)’?”

“Yeah.”

It was a military tradition that had lasted since the Empire era.

It was said to be a tactic used to prevent soldiers from deserting.

They would have the daughters or little sisters of the soldiers, young girls in particular, live and dine along with the soldiers to create a familial atmosphere. The army had hoped that the soldiers would protect the cute ‘daughters’, and that they would fight the enemy with no regards for their own lives in order to do that.

“Basically, our squad’s full of mercenaries. Well, it’s no different from being hostages like before.”

Truth be told, it was not basically, but exactly that.

Just the previous night, of the squad assigned for aid, Shinn was the only actual soldier. The others were mercenaries (Wargus), for the other soldiers, including Shinn’s superiors, had died in battle against the “Legion”.

“...That’s harsh. We still need mascots now? Amongst the Wargus too?”

“She chose to do so.”

Shinn flatly noted, and Eugene frowned,

“You got to be kidding. Why’s such a young girl going to battle?”

Shinn’s blood red eyes gave him a short glance. At that moment, Eugene felt his chest jump for a moment.

It was a look of one wanting some distance. No, it was a look of one who clearly understood the distance between them.

Those eyes indicated that they were not living in the same world, that there was a crevasse neither of them could cross.

Eugene shook his head, and continued,

“Where’s the reason to fight for that kid? Is there something to protect? Family, country, justice, way of life, there’s no need for her to protect any of these...so why is she still fighting—right?”

Shinn closed his eyes, and then opened them again.

As he opened them, the red eyes showed none of the distance from before.

“...Maybe.”

Shinn went off to get a second cup of coffee, and brought another cup for Eugene. The latter thanked him as he received the paper cup.

While it was called coffee, it was simply a concocted substitute, of fried barley and chicory. The land was surrounded thoroughly by the “Legion”, and with the electronic jamming of the Eintagsfliege, the Federation could not affirm if the other countries still existed, let alone communicating or trading with the outside world. Naturally, nobody knew how real coffee looked like, for they were from the Southern continent and the Southeast.

“Oh yes, you have a little sister, I remember.”

“Oh yeah, she’s still young though.”

Eugene fondled the locket he hung on his neck, alongside his dog tag underneath his shirt.

“...We got no parents. I got to work hard to get her into a better school.”

Six years ago, when the war against the “Legion” escalated, Eugene and his family were forced to evacuate their hometown.

The train to the capital had no space for the entire family to ride on. Thus, his parents chose to send their two children onto the train, and decided to stay behind.

That was the last he saw of them.

The chaos and panic resulted in them being unable to have a proper family photo. His little sister, who was still a baby back then, could not remember the appearances of her parents.

“It’s summer break in elementary school. If I get to return during the next break, I want to bring her out. We can’t really go somewhere

too far, but the zoo or the theme park should be fine. I should also buy something for her. She's a girl, so I should prepare some clothes and shoes. Ah, I heard there's a new cafe in the department store at the capital (Sankt Yedder)."

Seeing Eugene being all excited, Shinn showed a smile,

"Must be tough being an older brother."

"It's nice isn't it? I'm not giving her to you."

"Unfortunately, I got a lot of things on my mind."

Shinn looked dumbfounded, and immediately after, looked grim,

"Shouldn't you not have become a soldier anyway? The situation isn't improving, and there won't be any guarantees in the future."

You're her only next of kin.

Eugene, having interpreted these unspoken words, stopped smiling.

"Is that from your experience from the **previous battlefield**?"

"-Yeah."

That was what Eugene heard from Shinn, when they were still officer cadets.

And thus, he managed to save himself.

In the special cadet school, the cadets would step upon a real battlefield as part of their training. They wore old camouflage clothes, and patrolled the frontlines with only an assault rifle. This was to ensure that they would experience the battlefield, a 'mission' to bolster their courage. Unfortunately, they so happened to be ambushed by the "Legion", and the instructor leading them died in the skirmish. It was because he was partnered with Shinn that Eugene fortuitously made it back alive.

Back then, Eugene had asked Shinn why the latter could determine the movements of the “Legion”...why he was so familiar with combat.

After some hesitation, Shinn answered, narrating his experiences with his usual monotone.

His past.

His own experiences, from how his own country had sentenced him to death, to how he kept on living.

The shocking throat scar hidden beneath the collar of his military uniform was clearly inflicted with the intent to kill, just like a beheading. Eugene did not have the courage to ask.

And it was because Shinn knew the cruelty of the battlefield, how arduous the battles against the “Legion” were, that he would express such worries. Having understood this, Eugene was really delighted. Though Shinn was quiet and introverted, he was not a bad person.

And even after all the harrowing experiences, Shinn was still willing to become friends with him, a pureblood Alba.

“...Well, yeah, you’re right.”

Eugene took a sip of the cold coffee, and grimaced. It was bitter. He had forgotten to add sugar.

“Just yesterday, fifteen members of our squad died. The controlled area is a little bigger as compared to ten years ago, and this base was shifted here in Spring of this year. However, it doesn’t mean that there hasn’t been lots of sacrifices.”

The previous identity of the Federation—the Geade Federation, once occupied lands from the northwest of the continent to the far North, and horizontally It was the largest country on continent, with the biggest population, and also being a military superpower.

Soon after the Federation was formed, it was assaulted by the “Legion”, but the Wolfsland at the border fulfilled their initial purposes. While the area was diminished by half, the vital areas of

production and activities were protected successfully, along with the capital area.

The Federation managed to maintain a vast amount of its production and military might after much defending, and at the same time, they obtained the remaining specifications data of the “Legion” units within the old Empire research labs. Also, after ten years of waging war against the “Legion”, they amassed various combat experiences against them.

With all these factors taken into account, the Federation finally had the ability to withstand the “Legion” on even grounds, and it started to reclaim the lost land little by little. The security of the country and the expansion of its lands could be said to be built on the country’s might, and the blood of each and every soldier.

Specifications-wise, the “Legion” did not have to consider the feeble pilots, and incorporated more functions, so they were better than the Federation’s weapons in every facet.

Also, while the “Legion” should have a lifespan limit program in its central processing system, it had overcome this issue by taking the brains of the dead (which Shinn had dubbed such units as ‘black sheep’), allowing them to continue battling without ending. They kept attacking aggressively, to obtain the individual brains that had yet to rot, and even organized ‘hunters squads’ specialized in capturing soldiers alive. The existence of these squads proved that if this kept up, the Federation would be the first to fall in this war of attrition.

“Just yesterday, from what I could see, the other squads are basically the same. It’s a miracle that the second defensive line hasn’t been breached yet.”

“The captain and the others said that when it does not go well, it was normal. The Western front is the biggest battlefield for the Federation, and the 177th Armor Battalion is one of the many heavy battle areas on the Western frontline.”

The eastern battlefront, along with the first to fourth battlefront in the north and south were all in the mountainous regions. Due to the natural obstacles, it was easier to maintain the defensive lines.

However, the Western battlefield was a completely flat plain, and the skirmishes had to be done head on. A total of four hundred kilometers stretch of the battlefield, and there were four battalions assigned to it, the most of the frontlines. With these disadvantageous conditions, the casualty rate on the Western battlefield remained high...and naturally, this was the place with the highest KIA.

“Normal, huh. I’ve been fighting on this battlefield for a month, but the casualty rate here definitely isn’t low. The number of “Legion” wiped out doesn’t match our casualty rate. We managed to hold the line, but there’s way too many people dying.”

“It’s true that it doesn’t feel like we’re winning. The captain and the others have naturally become used to it, and the higher ups of the army are all nobility from old times. A civilian death or two is just a matter of numbers to them.”

Saying that, Eugene realized his mistake, and pursed his lips.

The friend before him was really beckoned by the Republic as livestock, never once tallied amongst the dead.

“...Sorry.”

“? What about?”

Shinn showed a look of surprise, and Eugene merely waved his hand. It was fine for Shinn to not notice it, for there was no need to harken the painful memories.

But.

Eugene suddenly had a thought.

So why did Shinn return to the battlefield?

Shinn no longer had any family.

His family was abandoned on the battlefield by his own country, the Republic, and he was the only one left behind.

He was not born in the Federation, and there was nobody worth protecting in this country, nor was there a mission for him to protect his country or his compatriots. He could simply live on through the Federation government's provisions if he simply wanted to fill his stomach.

But—why?

“...Shinn, I say.”

“What?”

“No...about you.”

Is it really okay to ask? So Eugene thought and hesitated before he asked.

Suddenly, the red eyes were looking elsewhere.

The eyes were looking beyond the distance, practically through the thick walls of the base, his expression icy. Overwhelmed by that vigor, Eugene hesitated.

“...Wh.”

He was about to ask—why.

At that moment.

The shrill siren interrupted his words.

It was the drone venturing deep into the contested area airing this siren, for the “Legion” was detected.

The “Legion” units were once developed by the Geade Empire, and launched a full scale war upon the continent. However, the Federation, inheriting part of that technology, would only use scouting drones that could be controlled over a long distance.

In the Empire era, higher education was afforded only to the aristocrats that formed the dictatorship government, along with those

right beneath the nobility, so technology-wise, the Federation was no match compared to the old Empire. The lead designer who single-handedly developed the artificial intelligence for the “Legion” was killed before the war started, and the Federation could no longer create drones on par with the “Legion”.

Also, both the Federation government and its citizens felt that the drones should not be used for war. It was the duty of the citizens, their privilege, to protect their own country, and fight for their comrades. They could not, and would not let robots rob them of this glory.

With their own eyes, they had witnessed what would happen when the robots went out of control.

A short moment of silence came along with the tension, and it was replaced by the tense, blaring siren. Both of them got up.

“Again? Seriously, those scrap metals have nothing better to do? No way they’ll be popular with the ladies.”

“The term Weisel originated from the queen ant after all, so in other words, the “Legion” soldier ants should all be females.”

“So that makes the Federation army a group of horny men? How passionate, I’m going to cry.”

Both of them joked around as they exited the cafeteria, and went their separate ways on the corridor. Eugene belonged to the official armored division, and was under a different command branch as compared to Shinn, who was sent from the prototype division. Naturally, their units were in different hangars.

“See you later then.”

“Yeah.”

The main battlefield on the Western battlefield mostly comprised of a cramped, forested areas, or of ruins of the old cities.

These were the measures implemented to combat the main forces

of the “Legion”, the Löwe, and also the Dinosauria that was used to break through the lines, all to mitigate their disadvantages. However, the situation did not go as they had wished. The mass of the “Vanargand” certainly was not small, and it would be hard to move within the cramped areas. Once they were isolated from their fellow machines, they would be easily surrounded by the smaller Grauwolfs, and be disadvantaged.

The forest of conifers and hardwood was unique only to the Western battlefield. The Grauwolfs would scale the thick, sturdy old trunks, leap down, and strike from everywhere, so Eugene kept piloting the “Vanargand”, trying to escape from them. The heavy weight unit of fifty tonnes darted through the silent forest, causing the ground to rumble, with the drive system screeching away.

The “Legion” kept attacking day and night, roaring like a tsunami.

They would attack at irregular, inopportune moments, and kept repeating the same motions to wear down the Federation’s fighting strength, stamina and morale. At times, once they began attacking, the assaults would even last for half a month.

Unlike humans, who had to spend single digits of months in the womb and take years to grow, the Weisels deep within the controlled areas could regenerate the “Legion” indefinitely, enabling their tactic of summoning black clouds.

The skies above the battlefield was covered by the silver clouds made up of the Eintagsfliege, resulting in the constant jamming of the sensors, radar, and data link; at the same time, the Scorpions long distance cannons would rain upon the trenches. Capability-wise, the armored infantry was no match for the “Grauwolfs”, and the “Vanargand”. Number-wise, the “Legion” were advantageous too, and would attack in squads. While their tactics were pretty basic, the differences in the numbers and capabilities were sufficient enough to corner the Federation, their relentless assaults befitting their names as the army of the dead.

What if we're defeated. or so he would think from time to time.

Will we be defeated one day, the Federation, humanity, against killing machines without knowing the reasons and purposes for war—...

“Lieutenant Lantz! What are you spacing out for? You want to die?”

“! Sorry!”

And with a growl, Eugene was kicked in the back, finally recovering from his thoughts. The red blips indicated the “Legion” cluttering the radar screen. The vetronics barely managed to connect, and showed the situation of the various squads on the hologram windows.

The situation was dire. The armored division, supposedly behind the second defensive line for the purpose of the mobility of the defense, had rushed to the frontlines.

Nordlicht, the squad Shinn belonged to, should be in deployment nearby too. It was attacking the flank of the advancing Löwes, darting into enemy lines to halt the attack. The armored corps seized the opportunity to regroup and counterattack with the Nordlicht.

Shinn’s squad was always there when they needed him the most.

And that was where it was most dangerous. Both the enemy “Legion” and the friendlies fell one after another, the bodies piling up, the blood forming creeks.

Yet in the battlefield of hell that the people feared and shunned, Nordlicht kept on advancing.

Eugene knew that many on the frontlines hailed them as the bloodsucking devils.

The headless skeletons bearing the name of a Walkure would follow the scent of blood to even the land of Death.

And with a buzzing noise, all the optical screens and multiple holographic windows were blurred out.

The holographic windows showed the Eintagsfliege density changing. There was jamming.

And before everything was swallowed in the noise, he could vaguely hear Nordlicht hurriedly retreating, and someone on the public channels yelling at all the forces.

An oncoming projectile in the air exploded, the shock raising a strong tremor in the surrounding air.

In modern warfare, a recoilless cannon with low velocity would still exceed supersonic. The sound would always be later than the hit.

The hail of metal pelted.

The wireless was completely silent due to the strong interference. Due to the Para-RAID connecting the subconsciousness of people, Shinn was not affected by it.

“Fine there, Shinei?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh good.”

Saying that, Frederica’s voice quivered.

“But...my apologies, there’s bad news, I fear.”

Shinn looked up at the metallic colored carcass giving off blue smoke, ripped apart by the rain of the self-forging fragments, and slowly spoke up.

“Frederica—close your ‘eyes’.”

He opened his eye, and found lush greenery in the surroundings.

Right above him were the tender green leaves of Oaks and Blumes, along with the sharp, rich green of Spruce and Pines. The sunlight barely managed to shine through the Eintagsfliege, and it lit the mist with the reflected green from the surrounding. The distinct emerald

green of the northern summer forest was like droplets, like smoke.

The dew-covered undergrowth touched his face, and he knew he was lying down. Right nearby was the silhouette of the “Vanargand”, lying on the ground like the carcass of a large beast.

A slender figure knelt by his side. Eugene narrowed his eyes.

“Shinn.”

The blood red eyes turned towards him silently. The icy, poised look showed no signs of faltering at such a moment.

If a death god really existed, surely its eyes would have been like this.

“What happened to the squad leader...?”

“Dead.”

“What, about me...?”

He had a feeling that he was a lost cause. If there had been a glimmer of hope, there was no way Shinn would leave him be.

“Better not ask.”

“Tell me.”

Shinn sighed.

“Everything below the stomach’s gone.”

Looking at Shinn’s blood-soaked steel-colored uniform, Eugene could guess the severity of his own wounds.

Seriously...he’s not a bad guy. He knew it was a little inopportune, but Eugene eked a smile.

Shinn knew Eugene was a goner, and yet he dirtied his uniform, and pulled him out from the cockpit. Eugene could feel no pain, so perhaps he was given morphine. This extremely precious painkiller

was used on a dying soldier.

And he was grateful to be brought outside.

He would have hated to die in that cramped cockpit, along with the stench of his own blood and intestines.

“Shinn...one last thing I wanted to ask of you...”

“What?”

“Mind, giving me my locket... its inside my equipment...”

Once he saw the red eyes looking down at him falter however, Eugene understood.

Ahh, I have no hands to hold the locket.

Shinn removed his glove, and took the locket out, probably worried that it would be stained by blood. After some thought, he moved it from the collar of the pilot clothes to the inside of the shirt. Some heat was absorbed as the icy metal rested on Eugenes body, and it took him a while to get used to it.

Shinn then stood up wordlessly, like an ominous crow. He opened the holster on his right thigh, and pulled his pistol out.

He pulled the slide, and loaded the bullet into the chamber. It was a 9mm automatic gun, one of a larger caliber than the standard handgun the Federation issued to its pilots, yet unable to pierce through the “Legion” armor.

If Eugene were to be doing the same thing, surely his hands would be shaking, unable to squeeze the trigger. However, the eyes beneath the muzzle pointed at him showed no signs of wavering.

Eugene knew it was not out of aloofness. With his last ounce of breath, he smiled. That was all he could do as thanks.

“Sorry...and thank you.”



A gunshot.

While Frederica did say he was alive, she never asked to save him. At that point, he understood what was going on.

“Fido...”

He called out subconsciously, and then realized that his loyal “Scavenger” had been put to eternal rest in the “Legion” controlled area, for there was no need to bring it along. He then kept quiet.

The Federation would not abandon any comrade, even if that person had become a corpse. Once this battle was over, Eugene’s corpse would be reclaimed, and brought to his family for a funeral. If humans really did have souls, perhaps they could have a moment of solace before they returned to the dark abyss at the ends of the world.

All Shinn did was to remember, his name, his dying face, his elated face, and the numerous stories of his family. It was the same for him as it was for the hundreds of comrades he watched depart.

That was all he could do. In the past, and even now.

He took down one of the two dog tags to write a death report. Suddenly, he heard some footsteps, as though something really heavy was being dragged along.

It was not the “Legion”, because the astounding accelerators and buffers would leave even a Dinosauria silent. Furthermore, if there was any “Legion” approaching, Shinn would have noticed it.

And finally, from the thick, lush green mist, there was the squadron mark of the eighteenth squadron, the hedgehog, the silhouette of a battered “Vanargand”.

Once he saw the wrecked “Vanargand” and the young soldier, not of his squadron, standing next to his comrade, the lone surviving operator of the eighteenth squadron, the pilot of the one surviving “Vanargand” stood still.

The “Legion” might be lying in ambush somewhere, for it was a corner of the battlefield where death continued. The soldier before him did not wield his assault rifle, looking completely defenseless, and utterly reckless. The way he stood still however, he was completely devoid of any sense of danger.

Standing in the shadow of the wrecked “Vanargand” was a white armored quad-pedaled unit in standby. Once he saw that, the pilot gasped.

The “Reginleif”. The headless white skeleton that symbolized calamity, only appearing on the devastated battlefield.

The boy took off his helmet, and was unable to communicate with the wireless. The gunner on the back seat remained wary as he opened the cockpit.

The young soldier glanced at them, raising an eyebrow. The pilot gasped.

“Nouzen...!”

It was his peer in cadet school.

The special cadet school was basically a measure to replenish the number of lost officers, and a lot of students were brought to study here due to their poverty. This boy before him was outstanding, his grades in combat training were top notch, but due to insubordination and various issues, he was deployed to a certain prototype squadron. It was said that the squad was filled with Wargus, barbarians born out of Wolfslands, and were made to pilot the prototype as a form of punishment.

Before the boy was the operator of the wrecked machine, again from the same batch, the boy’s buddy and bunkmate, Eugene Lantz.

Once he saw the half corpse left behind, he gasped.

“Perfect timing. Please write the KIA report.”

He caught the dog tag the boy carelessly tossed at him.

The gunner calmly asked,

“You sent him off?”

He probably deduced it from the handgun wielded in one hand, along with the splattered blood on the grass and the ground.

While it was typically a medical officer’s responsibility to administer a triage of the casualty, there was no requirement for a specialist to determine if the wounds were obvious. If they were too serious, and aid was too late, ending a life would be instead a form of relief and consolation for the dying.

Shinn nodded. While the gunner showed a conflicted look, he was about to give his thanks, only for the young operator to yell,

“–Why didn’t you save him!?”

Shinn did not respond.

Instead, he merely looked back, his blood red eyes stiff and calm,

“You know it’s Eugene, right!? Right before we sortied, he said he saw you, you know!? ...Why didn’t you save him!? You were cutting your way through the battles of the other squads!?”

Even amongst the armored division focused on mobile defense, Nordlicht’s performances were the best of the bunch. It was to be expected, for they were always striking back at the enemy when other squads could not afford to do so.

Even though he was so amazing.

Even though he was aided and protected by the Federation, and did not need to return to the battlefield again!

“You just want to wipe out those pieces of scrap metal, right!? – You war hungry Eighty Sixer!”

Eighty Six.

They were the compatriots from the Republic of San Magnolia, deemed by their country as pigs with the appearances of humans, and saved by the Geade Federation.

There were five soldiers who were forced to depart for their execution, and finally arrived in the lands of the Federation.

Shinn remained silent.

And while the operator was about to keep talking, his officer, the gunner, grabbed him on the shoulder.

“Enough already, Lieutenant Marcel. Do you want to be as decadent as the scum of the Republic?”

Marcel muted himself once he heard those words. The Republic did such inhumane things to the ‘Eighty Sixers’, the citizens they should be protecting. Half a year ago, when the Federation sheltered and shielded them, media reports aired throughout the television, radio and the like for days, so everyone knew.

Surely he did not want to be like them.

But.

Patting Marcel’s shoulder, the gunner lowered his head.

“I do hope you will forgive Lieutenant Marcel’s rudeness. Also, I will like to thank you in Lieutenant Lantz’s place. Thank you, and I apologize.”

“...No worries.”

Shinn nodded. With an anguished look, the gunner watched him, and after some thought, he said,

“If you volunteered to be in the Federation army as thanks for saving you, you do not need to do so.”

“...”

“Our Federation will never succumb to the “Legion”. This is not simply for the sake of winning the war; it is also to declare our justice. Our battle is by our own will, to protect our families, country and compatriots. In no way will we force you poor children to participate in the war...it isn't too late to retire and enjoy your days.”

Shinn merely stared back at him blankly.

Suddenly, he averted his eyes, and turned his back on the gunner, who though was not his direct superior, it was still rude on his part. With a calm, aloof voice, he noted,

“The “Legion” is coming. Better regroup with our forces now.”

Shinn had a glance at the battle situations on the many windows in the cockpit of his “Juggernaut”, the “Undertaker”.

Eugene's death was already out of his mind at this point. Having spent five years living on the battlefield, his mind was sculpted into that of a war machine.

He recalled that he had switched off the Para-RAID for the time being. While he was fine with his squadmates who sortied since the era of the Empire hearing this, he was unwilling to have Frederica hear him personally kill his friend. While he had pointedly told her not to look, it was unknown whether she actually did or not.

They were synchronized, and Frederica's voice immediately rang by his ears. It seemed she had been waiting,

“*Shinei?*”

“How's the situation?”

The vetronics data connection had not been restored. While he was certain of the “Legion”'s locations, he had to also determine his allies locations from how the enemy was scattered. It was not an impossible task, but the friendlies were more than he had imagined on this battlefield, and it was better to ask someone who knew.

“*Not good. The main forces have retreated to standby, and are*

primed to counter. The prior cannon assault had caused great devastation.”

“Got a more detailed report on the damages?”

“Several squads do have missing commanders...while I’d still be in the command car, the data link has yet to be recovered...”

It appeared the jamming of the Eintagsfliege was yet to be dispersed. The anti-aircraft guns meant to disperse them were suppressed by the Scorpions, and thus they could not advance.

The Federation’s fighting strength far surpassed the Republic’s, and the weapons used for combat were outstanding too. The cannons and data link provided needed much support...yet they still could not defeat the “Legion”.

The laughable defense system of the Republic managed to last for nine years, probably because the Federation had weakened the “Legion” by at least half. One might even say that the “Legion” used the Republic’s battleground as a trial, a training session.

“–There is contact from Division Headquarters. During the counterattack, Nordlicht shall strike from the flank. To gather at point twenty seven-thirty two, and wait for instructions...a communications soldier reported to us directly. Sure is a tight sport.”

“Understood.”

Shinn turned the “Undertaker” around. Soon after, he regrouped with Nordlicht, along with the remaining two soldiers in his squad.

The members scattered all over the battlefield regrouped to his side, and the radar screen showed blue blips of friendlies, of similar numbers to before.

He saw the familiar personal codenames on the blips, and at the same time, heard a familiar voice he had not heard in a while,

“–A rare reunion we have here, eh? So many “Vanargands” got

wiped out?”

‘Werewolf.’

Shinn glanced at the name that appeared with the squad code and unit serial, and responded to the other end of the Para-RAID.

“Raiden...how’s the squads you’re supporting?”

“Too bad the actual armored corps on my side got wiped out too... looks like we won’t have the fighting strength to counterattack.”

“...Never had any hope for them anyway.”

“However, if the counterattack fails this time, we will really be isolated. Rather than an assault, we are basically cutting off the bait they have laid out.”

“We got thrown to the worst battlefield and are left to fend for ourselves. Guess everywhere’s the same.”

Chiming in were the other Eighty-Sixers scattered all over the battlefield.

On the radar screen that kept blinking due to the strong jamming, the usual names appeared.

Once he saw those names, Shinn sighed.

They had arrived at a different country, but the war had not changed. In the face of the ghost army of machines, humans were powerless to resist, and were gradually devoured along with the perimeter.

Never once did he expect that beyond the plains where countless of his comrades had fallen, the same war was continuing—and that he would step onto the battlefield again, facing the same enemies.

Not when he was assigned to the special scouting mission of an execution.

Not then.

CHAPTER II

Panzerlied

The special scouting mission went smoother than expected, and they had advanced far longer than expected.

It might have a good thing to wipe out the enemy on the first day of the mission. After passing through the contested area, they entered the “Legion” controlled area, where the enemy patrols were less frequent. With Shinn’s ability, they knew where the “Legion” was, and either hid or detoured around, avoid contact as they advanced East.

The season of autumn beckoned, and they began to feel chilly while camping outside, their rations of synthesized food dry and bland, their advance continuing indefinitely. To them however, this was the first trip of freedom in their lives after their hardships.

The areas controlled by the “Legion” were once resided by people, and though devoid of any, the cities and villages constructed remained. Given the chance, they would enter the relics to scout, and hunt livestock that had regained freedom. If conditions permitted, they would also light a bonfire. The cities they encountered on their differed, and the beautiful natural landscapes brought them great joy on their journey.

It was in mid-autumn that the Republic’s landmarks no longer featured in the ruins. Instead, the mark of the Empire remained.

At that point, they had finally arrived.

“Fido.”

“You witnessed our journey here—we command you to do so, until you rot away.”

Fido was shot in the flank by a cannon, and was silenced forever; Shinn knelt next to it, and slowly got up.

It was unknown if his final order was received by the wrecked “Scavenger”. It was unknown if this scrap-picking robot could understand the intent behind those words, given its feeble processing ability.

He turned around, and found that Raiden had returned.

“This should be okay, right?”

After a thought, he remembered something. There were the aluminium graves containing the names of his dead comrades.

Including the grave of his brother, there were five hundred and seventy six of them. He had decided to leave these graves along with Fido and the debris of the “Juggernauts”.

“Yeah. We can’t hang on for long anyway.”

In the previous battle, all the “Juggernauts”, aside from the “Undertaker”, were wasted, but luckily, the five of them, including Fido, had survived. At this point, they had smallarms to defend themselves, powerless against the mighty strength of the “Legion”.

They would really be done in during the next battle.

But Shinn could only give a faint smile, and tapped his fingertip on the burned container equipped on Fido.

“This is all I can repay it with...there is no need to bring this guy along.”

The loyal scavenger that peeled away the armor of the dead was no longer around.

Raiden too chuckled. At this point, it was too late for them.

The end was right before them.

“So our happy journey is coming to an end?”

He sealed away the smile on his face, and looked to the west—the path they had treaded upon.

Under the blue sky was dry, barren wasteland. The breeze blowing by rolled up the remaining yellow petals, and the eight black rail tracks before them extended into the endless horizon, looking pretty ironic. This was the one proof that people once resided upon these empty plains.

“Never thought there would be that many though.”

“...Yeah.”

They barely managed to eke through the deepest of the “Legion” controlled areas, and there were a lot more than Shinn could deduce from the groans.

Atop the grasslands, from where he could see, there were units of Löwes and Dinosaurias in standby, forming a mosaic of metal without any gaps in between. The recollection units Tausendfüßers formed a pair of flowing rivers, one moving from back to front, and the other vice versa. The Eintagsfliege had its wings concealed as it rested atop the wilted forest, forming silver icicles. From time to time, they would descend upon the barren wasteland of a collapsed mountain, or a crater. It seemed the minerals had been mined completely, and the scenery was akin to the end of this world.

There was also a Weisel, or an Admiral unit, a huge monster lying in wait amidst the thick morning fog. It was so massive, its entire silhouette could not be determined. The “Legion” moving around them were too clustered, and sometimes, they had to spend entire days, in the cold rain, hiding in there.

How could one fight back against the multitudes of the undead machinery army?

Surely the Republic would be defeated in this war.

Or rather, humanity would surely be defeated.

–One day, if she arrives here...but will that day come?

Angel stored the remaining resources into the last container that was cut away, tied it to the “Undertaker” with wires and winch, and returned to the other two.

“I am done with my job, both of you; it is about time we leave. The other “Legion” hearing this battle will hurry if we dither for longer.”

Krena and Seo too were done with their installation work, and hopped off their “Juggernauts”.

The five of them had decided they would take turns piloting the “Juggernaut” as they advanced, and if they were to encounter the “Legion”, the one piloting would battle, while the others would hide.

Seo stretched his back, cupped his hands behind his head, and pouted,

“But we have Shinn’s “Juggernaut”, of all things...the OS settings are really sensitive. To be honest, I’m a little scared of piloting it. A few limiters are wrecked.”

It was also the reason why the “Undertaker” could move in ways the “Juggernaut” could not. Of course, that was also the reason why Shinn’s piloting skills stood out amongst the “codenamed”.

At this moment, Krena raised her hand.

“I shall pilot first then. My unit was the first to be destroyed, so I’m not that tired.”

They managed to hang on till this point, but the “Undertaker” was pretty aged as it had not been maintained for long, and it was more dangerous to pilot it than it was for a unit a pilot was unused to. Krena moved the machine, and Shinn, sated on the container that was being dragged along, suddenly turned his attention towards them.

For a long time, there was a “Legion” unit tailing them.

And for some reason, it did not attack them. It might be an

Ameise, or it might simply be monitoring their movements. However, it did not call for the other “Legion” units, instead merely stalking them from behind. If they had tried to ambush it, it too would stop. If they returned where they came from, it would follow suit. The “Juggernaut” weapons were tailored for precision, and had little range, only capable of attacking anything within sight. Since it had no intention to attack, Shinn did not inform the other four.

From the voice, he determined it was a “Shepherd”. The voice was hushed, and he could not hear its words, but he did remember hearing this voice before.

When exactly was it—...?

†

Can't die when I should have. Is this karma?

Ray dragged the body that was hard to control, and had such a thought using the nanomachine neural system that was on the verge of collapse.

To preserve and collate battle data, the “Legion” mission recorder would transmit data from a destroyed unit to the closest unit. If the one destroyed was a “Shepherd”, the CPU inside the unit would also be sent to the standby unit.

There could be many ‘black sheep’ derived from humans, but there had to be one “Shepherd”.

A “Shepherd”, with its distinct personality, could not sustain other units of the same characteristics. However, the “Legion” was unwilling to lose these “Shepherds” with better processing ability, and had prepared backup units and a special transfer system as a failure.

Ray itself felt this system was pointless.

The moment they were shot down, it was impossible to transmit the data that was practically destroyed. It was likely most of them could not transmit, and even if they did, it was hard to imagine the standby unit working as normal.

In fact, after it was hit by the shrapnel of the HEAT warhead, Ray's perforated data was barely transferred, but it was on the verge of collapse.

It could not hang on for long.

It understood that, and thus, it decided to stalk Shinn. It wanted to ensure it would not be seen, and tailed from behind...wanting to witness the end of their journey.

The old spare Dinosauria rattled as it advanced forward.

Suddenly, it remembered it was the soul of Shourei Nouzen.

As time transpired, its data was gradually breaking apart, yet it preserved the memory of its final battle. The fighting machine's instincts kicked in with his own madness to protect and kill. He remembered everything, from the illusion of the silver haired girl who stood up to protect, and the voice that tried to kill it several times, and yet called it brother until the very end.

In the controlled area where the "Legion" kept crossing, Shinn and his comrades darted past them, avoiding combat as they navigated forward.

This is fine. Ray thought. There was no need to fight any hopeless battles, and instead, they should consider how to advance further. Beyond this would be the Federation soil, the largest bastion of humanity that was isolated from the outside world, yet fighting on against the "Legion"

And once they reached the Federation, surely Shinn and the others would be protected.

Compared to the Republic, the Federation soldiers were a lot more normal. Its soldiers were of different colors, different races, fighting alongside each other, and would never abandon their comrades, even if they had become corpses.

No way would they ignore the five children who escaped from the pits of death.

By then, surely I will vanish. This is fine. Though he barely managed to maintain consciousness, it was a matter of time until he went berserk. All his memories, all his wishes would be ‘eradicating’... and then, it would be summoned again.

If summoned, surely he would look for it. The kind little brother who could not leave his killer of an older brother who died away, and ventured the hell called the battlefield for five years.

Sorry, but I have to go this time.

The Dinosauria strode off. It appeared to be praying hoping that the final wish it was protecting could be forgiven.

†

“–Angel, it’s my turn.”

Angel, piloting the “Undertaker”, felt confused as she suddenly heard Shinn’s voice through the Para-RAID. It was the second day since they bid farewell to Fido. My clouds were high up in the autumn skies, and the sunlight shone through the creases between the leaves, lighting spots of light, the red maple leaves in the forest fluttering with the window.

“Is it not early? Am I not supposed to continue until noon break?”

“Got sick of it.”

Angel grimaced once she heard his simple, sudden answer. Honestly, this was not the time for them to chatter, and it was to be expected that they would feel bored simply looking at the scenery.

“If you had known that you would be so bored, you could have brought a book along on your way there, Shinn.”

Angel wryly noted, and reached for the hatch lever.

†

As it watched Shinn and the others approach Federation land, Ray heaved a sigh of relief. Its thought process was starting to break apart, dulled.

If this kept up, they would arrive at the Federation patrol line. The “Legion” there would only care about the Federation army before them, and not one unit approaching them from behind. If they could use the landscape to hide, passing through it would still be possible.

Ray did not know how long its body could hang on...but they should be fine. He could rest.

–Yes.

It barely managed to connect to the allied forces intel on the data link. Once it saw the positioning, it felt something burning in its mock neural network.

This is bad...!



As they descended the treacherous, vertical cliff-like path, the “Undertaker” suddenly stopped. Radien, who had taken a blanket out of his own unit, was lying on the container as he suddenly stood up.

“What is it, Shinn?”

Shinn spoke up. His voice was as aloof as before, but with some poised determination.

“–Whoever pilots this has to fight. We discussed this.”

At that moment, Raiden understood.

“Hey! You found out already!?”

They could not avoid the “Legion” no matter how hard they tried... it was likely he already knew when he took over from Angel.

Angel, agitated with fear, hurriedly jumped off the container.

“No, Shinn! –I never asked you to do so!”

She was about to approach, but Shinn fired a grappling wire right towards her. She dodged, and the “Undertaker” seized the opportunity to scale the slope, up to the top. The steep slope was basically a cliff, impossible for any human to climb. There were no winding paths to be seen, and it was likely he led them here for this reason.

The red optical sensors, with several cracks on it, turned towards the four of them. The “Juggernaut” was completely battered, its combat arms on both sides no longer seen; burn marks were all over its armor, and the propulsion was severely damaged.

“Continue moving in this direction. Once you entered the forest, you probably won’t be discovered...not too far away, there won’t be

any voices of the “Legion”. If there are any survivors, if possible, ask them for protection.”

Those were the news they heard on the battlefield of the Eighty-Sixers.

It was to be expected that they would not be discovered. Given that there was an enemy unit within the controlled area, the “Undertaker”, the nearby “Legion” units would simply focus on it, and not much on anything else.

It was likely he had considered this part too.

“You got to be joking! Doesn’t this mean that you’re going to be bait here!?”

“Didn’t we say that everyone is to go together!? I’m not going to let you die alone at the very end—!”

Ignoring Seo’s growls and Krena’s wailing, the “Undertaker” cut off contact on the Para-RAID, and vanished into the green.

Raiden smacked the container without thinking.

“Shit...!”

The pilot had to fight when they encountered the “Legion”. No matter whoever volunteered for the last battle, the others would never agree. Thus, they thought of a plan that seemed more fair, one reliant on luck. However, they forgot something, that Shinn could sense the “Legion” from afar, and that once they discovered an enemy unit they could not avoid, he could choose who to die.

And to avoid that choice, he chose to sacrifice himself.

“That idiot...!”

Raiden armed himself with the assault rifle to his side, and stood up.



The “Legion” patrol squad was suddenly attacked by an unknown machine, and immediately rewrote its Identification friend or foe (IFF) system, its battle datalink switched to the tactic of engage as it took to the battlefield.

The enemy unit ignored the usual armed forces theory, as it suddenly bombarded a Löwe, taking it down before charging into the enemy. The “Legion” patrol squads had no records of such an enemy in its local data, but after searching through the vast data, it discovered a unit type that matched the characteristics; the main weapon of the Republic of San Magnolia, identification “Juggernaut”. The threat level was low, so much so that it was weaker in firepower and armor compared to an ordinary armored unit. It was basically an armored troop.

On this flatland without any obstacles, there was no way it could be on par with the Löwe, advantaged with overwhelming firepower and sturdy armor.

But this “Juggernaut” exhibited combat abilities far upon imagination. By inciting chaos in the battlefield, this unit defended itself from the “Legion” bombardment through the thick armor of the Löwe, and even fired from up close to mitigate the lack of firepower.

The “Juggernaut” used for close ranged combat was no different from the other units in terms. The main difference was the CPU.

Four Löwe patrolling the area were destroyed, and the squad lost 45% of its fighting strength.

However, the machine monsters showed no sense of anxiety at all. They simply escalated the threat level to the main field dress of the Federation, codenamed “Vanargand”. It was impossible for them to suppress given their current strength. They requested reinforcements from their main forces and the surrounding squads.

A special request—a recommendation to capture it alive.

Within several milliseconds, the report and request was submitted into the network, and the “Legion” began movement again.

†

...There was a change in the enemy’s movements.

As he destroyed the fourth enemy, Shinn sensed a change in pattern of the “Legion”, and he quickly scanned his surroundings.

Typically, when surrounding any enemy, the forces and units would space apart to avoid hitting friendlies. It was applicable for the “Legion” too, as they could blow apart their allies without hesitation if necessary. However, the “Legion” facing Shinn kept advancing into their friendlies line of fire, trying to get behind him, and cutting his escape route.

A delaying tactic, so Shinn determined. He sensed that the neighboring “Legion” units was beginning to move. The closest, probably the main forces of this patrol squad, was probably eight thousand meters away. Given the navigation speed of a Löwe, this area would be within firing range in less than a minute.

If reinforcements came, he would really be in danger. He dodged the slash of an oncoming Grauwolf, pointed its cannon back and shot it down, and darted out from the gap that was formed that instant. The heavy machine gun bullets grazed by, and the warning lights indicating the overload of the left hind leg lit up.

The “Legion” was aiming at,

So he thought, and bitterly narrowed his eyes.

*This **head**, huh?*

The “Black Sheep”, and the “Shepherds”. They were the “Legion” units that absorbed the brains of dead humans, acting as possessed.

But Shinn, who served the longest amongst the Processors, never thought of this before.

It was to be expected. Till this point, he had only encountered one “Shepherd”, and it would be hard to determine its location if it was hidden amongst the “Black Sheep”.

Furthermore, Shinn himself had said that the “Shepherd” main objective was to dominate a large area, or to destroy specific targets. It would be hard to imagine one deployed to deal with an armored unit.

He could feel the stare.

There was a strong malice from an area far beyond the range of a Scorpion, and one might even feel a hallucination of black eyes filled with madness.

“I’ll kill you.”

The words were no different, and the voice seemed strangely similar to that of his brother, whom he should have sent off.

The night he was killed appeared before his eyes, and the hands holding the joysticks froze in the miasma of fear.

I’ll kill you.

The imagery kept seeping into his consciousness. It was not Shinn’s own memories. It was someone else’s he managed to peek into from time to time, as though shared through the Para-RAID, or through the ability he once had.

A butty day. Ruins. Shattered stone. In the grey scenery, a hanged sinner appeared to be dangling in the air, and a child’s mantle, dyed a crimson red, looked astonishingly bright.

I'll kill you.

Men, women, children, elderly, noble, plebs...everyone who doomed me.

Back in the eighty-sixth area of the Republic, on the first battle zone Spearhead Squadron was in charge of.

During that battle, four died. With one shot beyond the radar detection range, it obliterated the “Juggernauts”.

“...!”

Shinn immediately had the “Undertaker” jump back, as his prior experience of that encounter and his warrior instincts kicked in.

The radar immediately showed a warning, followed by a hit.

With an initial velocity of up to four thousand meters and a mass of several tons, the cannon carried a vast amount of kinetic energy as it rained upon the surroundings, ignoring the scouting squads of the “Legion”

There was a deafening boom, so much so that it could render one deaf, and the dazzling light covered everything white.

The tremendous impact waves engulfed everything, and the scattered high-velocity shrapnel contorted the sturdy armor of the “Legion”, and blew everything far away. The tremors along the surface gradually formed an expanding round wave, whiffing up a large amount of dust and dirt, forming a crater that appeared to be formed by an asteroid.

A beautiful, serene grassland in autumn was instantly reduced to a massive, barren wasteland.

With the deafening explosions and the wild gales that came right at him, “Undertaker” barely managed to escape from the impact radius, but not unscathed. The shrapnel pierced into the cockpit, and the main screen was shut down. The gyroscope and the cooling system readings had vanished, and all messages on the holographic

windows were forced to shut down.

The silver lining was that the propulsion and weapons systems were still functioning. The enemies remained. Subconsciously, he piloted with one hand to control the damage, and sought the enemies while ignoring the obsolete main screen.

At this moment, the left hind leg that was overly stressed broke at the joint.

“!”

With the remaining three legs, he barely managed to hold the machine upright, and prevent it from falling over, but this was all he could do. The cannons and body of the “Juggernaut” was heavier, and mounted on the back. Thus, if one hind leg was lost, then the “Juggernaut”, whose center of gravity deviated to the back, would be unable to move at all.

The nostalgic growls of the old chief mechanic echoed at Shinn’s ears.

–Its wheels aren’t that stable, how many times have I told you to stop being reckless!?

–One of these days, you’re going to die in some stupid battle!

So now it happens, huh?

A Löwe, having lost half its legs, hurriedly cut through the wall of dirt and sand that arose, darting in.

Shinn could only give an inappropriate, wry smile as he watched the enemy reach its front leg towards him.

The “Undertaker” was blown back, its armor scattered.

Raiden and the others, who had finally managed to scale the slope, darted out of the forest as they followed the noises, having witnessed this.

It was the first time they had witnessed their Death God's defeat, even for Raiden.

Their survival instincts immediately beckoned—given their physical bodies, they was no way they could match a Löwe.

Their rationality anchored them for dead life—if they darted out from this place, Shinn's death would really be for naught.

To hell with that.

It was a momentary pause, and once he heard the footsteps of his comrades running forth, Raiden leaped out of the forest.

The rounds fired from an assault rifle could be heard.

Shinn heard the shrill, familiar sound, and lifted his eyelids with much effort. All the optical screens and devices were wiped out, and he was lying in the cockpit of the “Juggernaut” lying to the side.

He had much difficulty in breathing. It seemed to be burning inside his lungs, and there was a bloody stench in his breath. While he did not feel that he was bleeding, his body was strangely cold, and he merely felt aloof while injured.

It seemed he was still alive, and his body should still be able to move. He wanted to at least pull his handgun out to end himself, but could not move a single finger.

Outside the thin armor, he could hear the growls and gunshots from the comrades he should have abandoned.

How stupid. So he thought, and then he realized he got what he deserved, and was unable to laugh at them.

Perhaps this ending, being so pointless, was so completely reasonable, a fitting end for this foolish, meaningless battle.

Again, Shinn showed an inopportune, wry smile.

He had personally bade farewell to his brother, and after that, he

had unexpectedly advanced far, with no lingering regrets...but at this moment, he thought that he really did not want to die.

If he died, would he too become one of the “Legion”?

If he became part of the “Legion”—whose name would he call?

He tried to recall a person whose appearance he did not know of, and had a bit of regret in his heart.

The growls and gunshots suddenly vanished.

Till the very end, with his ability to hear the dead, he knew the “Legion” was right before him, preparing to peel off the hatch of the cockpit.

—But a tungsten round was shot through the thick armor, giving off a shrill metallic cry.

And that was the last Shinn heard before his consciousness sank into the darkness.

†

Once it was certain that the five enemies were unable to fight back, the one remaining Löwe broadcasted to the entire area network, indicating the end of the battle.

At the same time, it requested for an adjustment of the ‘prototype’ that provided the fire support. While it had requested a priority to capture the enemy alive, the prototype fired with the intention to obliterate, and had an entire squad blown to smithereens just to deal with a single enemy. It appeared the core processing system was still lacking in judgmental ability.

After sending out the request, it pointed its optical sensors towards the disabled “Juggernaut”.

Including the other four bodies, the enemy unit remained alive. The enemy CPU was extremely feeble, and the composition would be destroyed if it was taken out and scanned; worse, if its vitals stopped functioning, the body would start to deteriorate immediately. To capture it alive, it had to keep it alive as best as it could.

This enemy processor piloting the “Juggernaut”.

Its capabilities were so high, it made up for the difference in specifications. If used on their own units, surely their performances would be much improved.

At this moment, the IFF detected a response signal from a friendly closing it.

It was a Dinosauria not belonging to any unit. Perhaps it was approaching, having sensed the cannon strike—

A boom.

The front of the Löwe had a composite armor the equivalent of steel sheets 650mm thick, able to withstand a blast from the same model up close; it was easily blasted through by a 155mm APFSDS.

It was a shot from the Dinosauria. The automated machine knew neither fear nor surprise, and took some time to comprehend. To them, it was something impossible.

Perhaps it was friendly fire. No, there was communication between them on the IFF. It knew it was a friendly, and still attacked. In other words, it was an enemy.

It was a good thing the round used was an old tungsten APFSDS. If it had been a HEAT warhead or a depleted uranium piercing round, the insides would be scorched through, and it would be taken down. It updated the IFF, identifying it as an enemy. It prepared to fight back, using the engagement report in the datalink—

A second shot.

It came practically right after the first shot, and completely destroyed the CPU that barely managed to evade the first shot.

The Dinosauria did not use the HEAT warhead, but an APFSDS round, so as to prevent the explosion of the unit, and damaging the nearby “Juggernaut”. Naturally, the Löwe that was taken down could not comprehend.

The silver nanomachine ‘arm’ extended out from the Dinosauria, and that was the last scene the shattered optical sensors detected before the Löwe ceased to function.

†

Shinn had a dream.

In his dream, Shinn was still a child, and he was being carried around by someone. Other than him, everywhere else was pitch darkness, and nothing could be seen. It was the darkness deep within his consciousness and soul, the region he could hear the souls of the machines from.

Looking up, he saw his brother’s face.

His brother appeared a few years older than their last encounter, probably in his early twenties...when he died.

“Brother...?”

Ray smiled. His smile was so smile, so nostalgic.

“Finally woke up?”

He stopped, and knelt down, putting Shinn on the floor. The little body could not maintain its balance properly. Shinn stumbled a little, and lifted his head again.

Ray remained crouched, but was still a little taller than Shinn. Looking at his eyes, he said.

“This is where I shall stop. You can continue on your own, right? You still have friends waiting for you.”

Saying that, Ray stood up.

Shinn continued to look up. While his brother had stood up, the distance between them did not seem to change.

“How tall you have become.”

Shinn looked down, and found that he had reverted back to his sixteen year old body.

Brother—he tried to speak up, but could not eke out any voice.

For the ghosts, the dead could never be able to converse with the living.

And looking at Shinn’s silent stare, Ray suddenly showed a pained look.

Ray reached out, and gently caressed the scar. The brother’s large palm was the same as that night’s, that battlefield’s.

“Sorry. I guess it hurts, huh...I couldn’t die, and kept calling for you, and brought you to such a place.”

This isn’t it. Shinn wanted to respond. He tried to shake his head to deny it, but found that his body could not obey, and remained still.

It was a lie to say it did not hurt. The malice he felt was a form of torture. “This is all your fault”, he heard these lashings every night, dreaming of the night he was choked. The screams would not disappear no matter how he covered his ears, telling him over and

over again that he would never be forgiven, until the very end. He was hurting because of this.

But because of this, he made it all the way here.

Whether it was the endless duels against the “Legion”, each day on the battlefield where he could have died for naught, where his squads were wiped out, the lonely nights he spent, he managed to hang on, for he had the objective and conviction to send off his brother.

If not, he would not have endured this much, and would have died a mangled corpse.

Because of you. Even though you died, it's because you are waiting before me.

There were so many words he wanted to say, but he could not.

“There is no need to be bound down to me. Forget about me.”

I don't want to.

“Ahh...no, I guess I hope you'll still remember me thought. It'll be great if you can gain freedom and happiness for the rest of the life that belongs to you, and think of me from time to time.”

Brother.

Ray smiled.

“This time, I'm not going to wait for you...I'm tired of waiting already. You still have a long, long time to go...so keep on living. I wish you happiness.”

He let go of the hand.

And he turned around, walking into the darkness.

Into the abyss his father, mother and countless comrades had fallen into.

If he went there, there was no way he could return.

Never would they meet again.

Suddenly, Shinn's body was released from its bounds.

“Brother.”

He reached his arm out, but his hand could not come close. He shouted out, but his voice could not reach.

A certain border dividing life and death was before him, and he could not take the next step towards his brother again.

“Brother!”

Ray turned around, smiling at him, and melted into the abyss of darkness, disappearing.

Like the end of that battle—his brother's gentle, wide hand that faded into the light he could not reach before him.

“Brother.”

Shinn was woken up by his own voice.

He stared at the dark, lifeless ceiling for a moment, and blinked his bloody red eyes that remained unfocused.

It was a snowy white ceiling he had never seen before. Surrounding him were four similarly snowy white walls. A rhythmic electronic sound came from a monitor device, along with the stinging scent of disinfectants.

Shinn was lying on a clean bed in a cramped room, and there was a drip and cords linking to the monitor attached to his body. Given that he was sent to a concentration camp since his youth, and never had any proper medical treatment, it was hard to imagine this place being a ward room.

Suddenly, he felt anguish rising up his nose, and he reached his

left hand out, covering his eyes.

A strong sense of relief was accompanied with a similar sense of disappointment from out of nowhere, blurring his eyes.

He finally recalled.

But in fact—he really did not want to lose him.

On his left arm, there was a drip, along with other sensors, and once he moved his elbow, a siren rang. It was lacking in urgency, and appeared to be an indication that the monitored had woken up, rather than a warning outright.

The white wall by his bedside gradually vanished, and became transparent. Appearing beyond it was an adult man dressed in a suit.

The Jet man was wearing silver framed glasses of high degrees, some traces of white in his black hair, and he looked really scholarly. There was a nurse standing behind him, and further beyond was a corridor as lifeless as this room. It seemed the ‘wall’ that had just become transparent was the door. There were similar doors that could be seen beyond the corridor, and it seemed there were such rooms on both sides of the aisle.

“–Finally woke up?”

The poised voice reminded him of a certain someone he had long forgotten.

Not knowing what was going on, Shinn was going to ask, but could not voice out. The sudden pain left him wincing. The nurse behind him frowned.

“Your Excellency, he had just regained consciousness, still feverish after his operation. It is best not to...”

“Understood. Just a few words.”

The man responded to the nurse’s grumbles with a calm smile, and reached his right hand out for the door.

It was the hand of a soldier. So Shinn thought in his hazy consciousness. The sturdy, thick hand showed that he was proficient with a handgun. The silver ring on his ring finger left Shinn a little curious however.

“Hello...first, do you mind telling me your name?”

There was no need to spend time thinking in response to such a simple question, but Shinn took a lot of time to search this answer from his memories. His mind just could not work. He did not know if it was due to the anaesthetic, and how he ended up like this.

A certain person did ask for his name before, just like this—the memory back then flickered in his mind, and he subconsciously answered.

All he saw was the hallucination of a long, silver hair he had never seen before.

“Shinei...Nouzen.”

The man nodded.

“I am Ernst Zimmermann, temporary president of the Republican Geade Federation.”

†

It appeared that on that day, aired on the Federation news frequencies were the reports of five young foreign soldiers who were discovered on the Western battlefront, and protected.

It was said that the five of them were imprisoned by a ‘hunting’ Dinosauria that was shot down by the frontline troops.

Looking at their camouflage fatigues and a multi-pedalled operating system of unknown model, it appeared they were soldiers from the Republic of San Magnolia to the West.

The Federation ruptured with elation. They never expected another surviving country other than them. There were other surviving countries. They were still not alone.

At the same time, they were worried about the predicament of their neighbors. They wondered if the Republic was cornered to this point, that they had to send young children onto the battlefield.

And after the questioning of the youths was revealed to the public, the people understood the revolting reasons why they were sent onto the battlefield, the worries in their hearts changing from concern to rage.

Most of the people still showed concern for the youths from the neighboring country however.

Such pitiful children, oppressed by their country, yet fighting on, escaping, and making their way here.

At the very least, they should have a comfortable life in the Federation.



“–And that was what happened after the lot of you were protected by our army. I wonder how much you do remember.”

Hearing this question, Shinn started to wonder how he should answer, and he sensed that his mind was beginning to work.

Suddenly, he remembered the predicament before he lost

consciousness, and looked around—only to see no one.

No way.

Ahh, Ernst smiled.

“My apologies. You were still sleeping, so we reduced the visibility to zero...it’s no wonder you are worried...a moment please.”

The man turned around, and said something to the nurse. The color pigments on the left and right wall dissolved away.

Beyond the transparent walls were lifeless rooms just like this. He could see his comrades in the four adjacent rooms to the left.

Next to him was Raiden, who heaved a sigh of relief, before frowning.

“You slept for three whole says.”

The voice still came from the speakers at the ceiling.

What about the Para-RAID? Shinn wondered, and found that it could not be activated. The RAID device once inserted in the back of his neck was aching away. The earcuffs the Processors could not remove by themselves were also gone.

“...What is going on?”

There was neither subject nor predicate, just a doubt. However, Raiden seemed to have understood it, as he shrugged.

“Who knows? Once we woke up, we were locked in this room. They said we were captured by a Dinosauria...but nobody saw it.”

Then, Shinn recalled the dream just a moment ago.

The brother whom he had supposedly sent off, yet still imprisoned inside the deepest part of the Dinosauria.

For some reason, he knew that his brother was really no longer

around.

But he did not see the need to say it, and shook his head gently, only to feel a little dizzy. Immediately, he closed his eyes, and Seo frowned with concern.

“If you’re still suffering, don’t try to force the issue. You just came back from the central treatment room yesterday. Still need some time to rest...Krena kept crying out loud until yesterday.”

“I wasn’t crying!”

Krena protested, her eyes still red and swollen, but she was ignored by everyone.

And in the furthest room, Angel stared at Shinn quietly, showing an alluring smile of a blooming white flower.

Shinn knew it was her seething look, and looked away.

“Shinn, I do know you have yet to recover from your injuries, but do not forget to collect a slap from me once you are done, okay?”

“Sorry that, but we all agree. Next time you do that, I’m going to beat you up.”

Upon Seo’s follow up, Shinn gave a gaudy look.

“...I never planned on dying.”

“Like hell that would have worked out. Even if you never planned on dying, you know you would.”

If he had continued to lure the “Legion” away, it was a matter of time until the unit would be worn out, or he would be depleted of ammunition, and died as a result.

“You thought we never thought of this, and that’s why we can’t forgive you for what you did, Shinn. You know, and you could pull it off, but it’s selfish of you... never again.”

“We were all so worried.”

This time, Krena was crying again. Shinn closed his eyes, and leaned his head on the pillow.

“–My bad.”

Ernst, watching this silently, continued on with a smile,

“The main reason why we have you locked here is for fear of any biohazards, and nothing more, so do relax. You are our first foreign guests since the establishment of this country after all—welcome to the Geade Federation!”

Ernst spread his arms wide in an exaggerated manner, only to be met with silence and cold stares. However, he merely shrugged, remaining unfazed.

“Anyway, this is the matter. Neither you nor us fully know what happened. If you do remember something, I do wish you can tell us.”

Seo raised an eyebrow and was about to say something, and Ernst raised his hand to stop the former, giving a wry smile.

“But you do have time, so you can continue to think later. It is too tiring to talk too much...and I am going to be told off by a certain terrifying big sister here.”

The nurse standing behind the president was giving his back a glare full of quiet pressure.

Just as that president, or whoever he was had considered, a still-injured Shinn still had difficulty staying awake. Soon after they left, he felt asleep.

Looking at Shinn, who fell asleep without managing to say much, Krena nearly broke into tears, while Angel and Seo comforted and teased her respectively. Three days ago, when she woke up, Krena did not manage to see Shinn, and bawled out loud. Even at this point, she would cry from time to time.

It's to be expected. So Raiden thought as he sat cross-legged on the bed in this small prison-like room.

Leaving aside the fact that they were locked up, they were still treated rather well. They were given proper meals, their rooms and beds were really neat. The individual questioning and investigations went smoothly, and everyone had surgeries to various extents, including Shinn who needed an operation due to his severe injuries. The Republic would have left Shinn to die.

However, this was no reason to trust.

They were deemed as livestock taking the form of humans by their own country. Even if the other party was human, even if this was the end of their journey, they were not naïve enough to be given unconditional protection and aid.

If they were to be imprisoned here and give all the intel they knew—they would likely be executed.

In any case, he still could not move. Shinn still needed their aid.

Seriously, we'll hate to meet our end like this, at this place. Raiden looked up at the ceiling of the small room without windows or daylight, and gave a long snort.

While the Federation had been overwhelming sympathetic to the youths, as the leader of his country, Ernst could not simply act on compassion and pity.

Once he exited the shelter module and entered the hospital module linked to it, Ernst arrived at the treatment room that had become the temporary meeting room.

“How’s the analysis?”

The shelter module could act as an isolation chamber against biohazards, and also as a prison; each room had cameras and various surveillances in them.

The intelligence officers summarized all the data analysis, and

showed them on the holographic screens.

“The conclusion is that they are neither spies from the Republic of San Magnolia, nor anywhere else.”

While wary, the youths did not show signs of being trained in such aspects. Even in trivial conversations, given the frequency they would talk, the focal points of the questions, and the number of times the names were mentioned, one could deduce the hierarchy in an organization. However, they never realized they were being analyzed.

Even if they were trained to sufficiently fool any analysis, their country had no reason to order them to pass through the “Legion” controlled area that was assure death. With the Eintagsliege drones jamming the signals, neither the Federation nor the Republic could affirm each other’s existence.

“They might be a little too cautious, but if their predicaments are as they had said, it might be normalcy for them. That sub-leader, Raiden, I believe, was tense the entire time, but it’s hard not to understand seeing how his leader’s like this. Their leader’s basically a hostage to us now.”

In fact, the Federation had no such intentions. While Raiden was not a pleasant person to begin with, he did answer all questions obediently, and there was no need to take hostages.

Even so, that was not out of trust; it was an unwillingness for pointless extended questioning just because he refused. To them, the Republic was not a country worth protecting.

“And one other thing—is it possible they are carriers of biological weapons from the new “Legion” models, or something similar?”

“We need to finish all the checks before we can make the final conclusion. Looking at the current data and the scans after they were brought in, there doesn’t appear to be any anomalies. Also, the “Legion” cannot create any weapons that mimick humans or other organisms, right?”

The “Legion” could not create or use any biological weapons,

especially any units with viral and bacterial weapons, or mimicking the appearances of any known organism. There was a code in its process forbidding this.

It was easy to understand, considering that the “Legion” was originally created by the Empire to suppress their foreign enemies. It would be troublesome to deal with biological weapons that attacked indiscriminately, or androids that made it difficult to differentiate between human and robot. The ugliness of the automated land mines was also due to this reason.

And to add on, given that the definition of any biological weapon was too stringent, even those people deemed as friendlies would be deemed to have broken the rules if a knife was held. Thus, the old Empire could not let the “Legion” take the battlefield along with the human army, and was reduced to a laughing stock.

However, the control system of the “Legion”, especially the tactical, combat algorithms were encrypted in an extremely complex manner, and the constructs of the units meant that if they were hit, the explosions caused within would burn the inner structures completely, resulting in analysis of the “Legion” going basically nowhere. It was ascertained that the “Legion” had overcome its lifespan issue by duplicating the structure of the deceased’s brains, and it was another thing to take note of.

“The devices we caught on the scan is basically a communication device, as they had said. The Pyropes do have some people capable to communicating mentally amongst their kin, and this device does create the same effect in an artificial manner.”

“It’s pretty advanced.”

“Yeah. Given their testimonies and all the data regarding the control area in their mission recorders, this is too much of a gift if they are really spies.”

Due to the electronic jamming of the Eintagsliege, the Federation could not communicate on the frontlines through their wireless signals.

“The unit that was collected, I believe that is called the “Juggernaut”, right? Leaving aside the specifications of that thing, the battle logs are really amazing. The pilot is probably that young leader. Once he’s recovered, we should have a talk with him.”

“Oh? We should be priority. We want him to be our test pilot. No way will we let him go to you. The high mobility combat data, and a pilot with actual experience will go well with my prototype. It is a waste to let him go for that lump of a “Vanargand”.”

“What, spider girl?”

“What, you drone beetle?”

“If you want to talk, you can ask them once they have calmed down. No way will we let them be pilots though. If we do so, we’ll be the same as the Republic, no?”

Ernst flatly noted, and the two bickering commanders quieted down.

“Every cause will beget its results. They risked their lives battling till this point, and should have a steady life now. Since their country was unable to do so, all the more should our Federation should insist on our justice. This are the ideals and convictions humanity should have.”

The commander of the Western front spoke up,

“...We should have **executed** them after all. It is for the Federation’s safety.”

“Lieutenant General, we’re done discussing this matter. You have accepted the resolution, have you not?”

“Yes. But as you have insisted, Your Excellency, it is our priority as soldiers to ensure the safety of our people. We shall abide during the expected isolation period, and proceed with thorough checks and questioning.”

“Of course. Just in case, the soldiers protecting them have been

sent to the isolation rooms too, right?”

At this point, they could not eliminate the possibility of them being dormant carriers.

And furthermore—

Suddenly, Ernst showed a hearty chuckle.

“Furthermore...what about their immigration? So long we have dealt with the “Legion” that we have long forgotten about this.”

Before him, the one in charge of this matter was hurriedly dealing with the necessary legal procedures.

†

“So, starting today, you are citizens of the Federation.”

“...A month since we met, and this is what you start with? ‘So’? Don’t you find it strange?”

Raiden’s voice came from behind the reinforced acrylic walls, still full of spite, but the initial wariness was no longer there. All he was showing was simply discontentment.

Ernst remained unflappable. *It was to be expected*, so he thought.

They were youths who should be lively and jumpy at their given age, but they were contained for a month, doing various boring checks every day; it was to be expected that they would grumble a little. Seeing the adolescence befitting their age, he was a little relieved.

“In any case, for the next period of time, I shall be taking care of you. Do rest well, observe this country, and think about what you plan

to do in the future.”

In the future.

In fact, the person in charge had already explained their future prospects, and asked for their wishes. Ernst had already read the reports.

The five of them wished to enter the army.

Did the person in charge not explain clearly, or did they misunderstand something...or did they know anything other than the battlefield?

He had obtained similar reports from the nurses, doctors and consultants.

All of them had felt the five could not remain in their rooms for long.

The anxiety of being imprisoned, the boredom they could not starve off, and more importantly, their curiosity of how the war was going, and the restlessness over the fact that they were not where they should be at.

They escaped the rule of the Republic, fled from the hellish battlefield...but never got rid of the psychological oppression.

Seo sneered.

“You sure? We’re kids from regions unknown who escaped from an enemy country, passed through the enemy controlled area, and made it all the way here. Isn’t it easier to just execute us?”

“So you wish for us to execute you?”

Ernst answered with a smile. Seo went silent.

He understood. They did not want to be killed. They were trying to grasp this environment using their prior experiences.

It was not something they could alter, and they were not wrong.

Shinn quietly spoke up.

Seeing that his wounds had healed after a month, the weight in Ernst heart broke apart.

“So what benefit is there for you to save us?”

“If there is no benefit, and we are to leave these children before us to die, it will not be beneficial to both of us. A basic ideal of society is co-operation...and furthermore.”

Suddenly, Ernst showed a chuckle.

It was so cruel, so grim, and it left the children, who had witnessed the depths of hell, intimidated.

“From regions unknown. If we really do have to kill children just to survive, it is better off for humanity to be wiped out.”

The door of the isolation rooms opened, and the youths, ordered to change clothes, came out, still feeling wary. There was no casual clothing prepared on the frontlines, and they could only change into Federation uniform.

Were they to be brought somewhere else to be executed, or would they be brought to some experimental lab, or prison? In any case, they would rather run away and be shot in the back than be facing a mere execution.

Seeing them look for an opportunity, Ernst pretended not to notice as he discreetly ordered for added security. They would not shoot the youths in the back even if they did run away, but if they were hurt accidentally after they were held down, it would be troublesome.

They were brought onto the transport craft, which flew above the city, and they started to doubt.

The aircraft landed at the base in the capital's suburbs, and they boarded a car arranged for them, leaving the youths perturbed.

The car rushed out of the gates of the base, and into the main street of the Geade Federation capital, St. Yedder.

“...Ah.”

Krena exclaimed, and leaned at the window. Angel and Seo both followed suit. Shinn and Raideen were not reacting as openly, but even they took gasped as they watched the outside intently.

There were many, countless people of different colors, just like them, hustling down the streets.

A young girl was holding the hands of her parents, happily chipping. An elderly couple was seated at the open-aired seat of a café. Students returning from school were joking and laughing. Couples in love were inquiring a floral shop attendant.

Their eyes were damp, their visions blurred. They had nostalgia, reminiscence, and yet felt so foreign.

Outside the windows were the usual, peaceful scenes on the streets, which they had witnessed after nine years.

“—Finally arrived, have you not, pitiful folk expelled from your country.”

The car was parked before the house in a quiet residential area. It was the residence of Ernst, who often stayed at his office instead.

In any case, after hearing these words once he entered the hall, Ernst put a hand on his forehead, and the youths tilted their heads in confusion.

There was a young girl with red eyes, probably just ten, speaking with a shrill voice and a mocking, cocky attitude. She stood on a podium, her arms folded as she raised her chin.

“Us Geade Federation welcome you pitiful folk with compassion and sympathy. Be grateful that you plebs have no need to repay us!”

She pointed at Shinn. It was impressive that she was able to

determine the hierarchy of the squad in such a short time. However—

“Ehh, red eyes, why are you looking back!!?”

“...Thought there was someone behind.”

Naturally, Shinn’s voice was as aloof as ever.

“Was it not I who closed the door? Have you thought of I as a fool?”

Shinn did not answer, but it was likely he did.

“...So I say, the plebs of the Republic are...even though I do have the royal blood of the Empire—”

Saying that, the girl’s eyes suddenly ‘spotted’ a certain something.

“...What in the world happened to your neck...?”

“!”

Shinn immediately gasped.

The bloody eyes looking down at the girl cooled off, becoming increasingly frosty, and it left the girl intimidated.

Ernst sighed, and spoke up.

He did notice the scar on Shinn’s neck, which was covered by the uniform collar at this point, but he never did ask about it.

“Enough, Frederica. I did explain their situation to you...everyone has wounds they do not want to talk about. You should be the same too.”

“...My apologies.”

The girl unexpectedly lowered her head apologetically.

Seeing her act obediently, Raiden turned towards Ernst.

“Your daughter? ...Not my place to say, but you should educate her some more, I think.”

“Ahh, no, she is not my daughter.”

“Who is willing to be the daughter of this chirpy dandy?”

Saying that, the girl lifted her flat chest proudly, only to tumble over, showing some cute innocence.

“I am,”

“Frederica Rosenfort. Due to various circumstances, she is under my temporary care.”

Frederica glared at Ernst, and the latter pretended not to answer.

“It’s troublesome explaining, so the official documentation has her as my daughter. Oh yes, you are my adopted children for the time being...if you’re willing, you can call me papa too.”

A pause occurred.

“...Just joking. You don’t have to show such unwillingness there...”

Even Shinn gave a cold look.

“Fine then. For the time being, all of you are going to stay together. This child may not know much, but I do hope you can think of her as a little sister and get along well with her.”

With a mocking sneer, Frederica curled her lips.

“You pitiful plebs have been oppressed and battling. Surely your hearts are battered. You may think of I as a pet meant to sooth your souls.”

Shinn frowned.

Frederica chuckled, having seen through everything.

There is no way any of you can understand. so she leered with a

strange sense of solidarity.

“For not only I, every single person had prepared the same for you. A safe, comfortable house, a motherly maid, a guardian-like father, an adorable little sister—all of these have been arrived by the Federation government, having considered your loss of your families and relatives at such an early age...you may dote on I as you please, my siblings. As people to be pitied, we shall love each other and—woah!?”

First off, Shinn wordlessly reached his hand out, and ruffled her hair violently, causing the latter to squeal. She kept shaking her head, trying to shake off Shinn’s head, and scaled the slender blond hair, emerald eyed maid behind her, wailing.

“Woahhh—Teresa! They started pulling me so quickly!”

“Yes yes, Lady Frederica. It has been your fault the entire time though.”

Teresa continued with the dagger, and her snow queen-like face showed a tender smile.

“It has been a long journey, everyone. First, will you like to have some coffee?”

They had an earlier dinner than usual, and the five of them went to their assigned rooms, quickly falling asleep.

It’s to be expected. So Ernst thought as he sat alone at the dining table. This was a luxurious residence in a safe city he was used to living in, but for them, isolated from the outside world for years, they had arrived at a different world altogether, a completely different environment. It was no wonder they would be worn out.

Frederica entered, curling her lips unhappily.

“...They went to sleep. So I wanted to hear them talk about the Republic. How boring.”

In her little hands, she was holding a deck of poker cards, clearly intending to play with them while hearing their stories.

“Need some milk, ex-premier?”

“Shush. How incompetent you are. I have no memory of abdicating. Also, who needs milk? I am no longer a child.”

“It’s not good for a child to drink coffee before bed.”

He responded. Teresa was done with cleaning and breakfast for the following morning, and she entered. She brought cups of coffee, one for Frederica, and one for herself.

“Good work, Teresa.”

“No worries. Those children are at a growing age, and ate a lot too. I had a lot of enthusiasm cooking.”

Her blue eyes glance aside, looking pretty upset. *You are hardly at home due to administrative work, so Lady Frederica has been eating alone. She’s so lonely* The rare grumble she made remained fresh in his mind.

“My apologies...will be causing you more hardships in the future.”

The five children knew nothing other than oppression, the battlefield, malice, and death.

For them, it was difficult getting used to the opposite world of comfort and solace.

“You are being too kind, Master. It is my job to take care of you.”

“...Do you think I am being too much of a busybody?”

Teresa did not answer, and merely accepted his stare quietly.

She was no different at all from his beloved woman, a

splitting image even, but her heart was never moved.

“A foolish compensation...am I letting them replace me?”

“–No, Master.”

But unlike her words, Teresa’s voice was extremely cold. The snow queen’s face was exceptionally frosty.

***This is the only way I can act before you,* so she once said. It just so happened to be what Ernst had hoped for.**

A fleeting forgiveness was really unbecoming of him.

“Nobody can replace another. For us humans, each person is a unique existence..”

Frederica flatly noted.

“But people do choose to redeem others, in various ways.”

Ernst took a sip of coffee.

“And who might you be referring to, Your Highness?”

“That...”

Saying this, Frederica kept quietly.

The ripples on the black coffee surface reflected her heart, and she pursed her lips.

Having heard his exploits, and read his information, she was shocked.

She could not hide her astonishment, both when she saw his photo, and when she met the actual person.

But why, why did they resemble each other so much.

If not for him being a different person...a pitiful person trapped in a cage just like her, she would have overlapped his image with the person in her heart.

“...Kiri...”

CHAPTER III

Wild Blue Yonder

The Federation Capital St. Yedder was at least two hundred kilometers east of the Republic's eastern battlefront, covered in a silent white during this winter.

Shinn came to the main road of the plaza, stopped, and looked up at the bell tower of the city hall that looked blurry amidst the fluttering snow. The snow on the asphalt road was already swept away. There was a large momi fir tree standing in the middle of the plaza before the shops, and appeared to be decorated for Christmas purposes.

He had long assumed that he would never see the snow again.

He had long assumed his corpse would be lying in an unknown corner of the battlefield, and that the snow piling atop him would slowly melt away in the Spring breeze.

And at this point, he was standing in a corner of the bustling street, as pedestrians passed and go. The sounds of war could no longer be heard. He looked up, and felt that it was intriguing.

He let out a long sigh, and the white mist that formed was exactly the same as the one on the battlefield back then, when he was at the plaza before the abandoned snow-covered church. However, the thick coat he bought and wore was a lot warmer than his clothing back then.

He shook his head once, and again walked down the snow covered path.

The Empire Capital Library stood in the central street of the

Federation's capital, its heaters working as Shinn removed his coat, shaking off the snow upon it, and entered the library. It had been a month since he arrived, and he started to get familiar with the librarians. He greeted them, and strolled off to the rows of books.

The large hall of the Empire Capital Library was five storeys high, with bookshelves reaching the ceiling, and the wing halls built around it in a radial manner. The dome arch at the top showcased an intricate spiral pattern, forming the constellations of summer. For Shinn, who never took particular heed to the dates, let alone have a vacation, the unique tranquillity of a library with few people on a 'usual day' was something he could not get used to.

“-Hm.”

Suddenly, he stopped before the children bookshelves which he had never paid much attention to. There were a few picture books on this short bookshelf, their covers facing out. One of them was familiar, and he reached out for the one that was a little aged.

He was unfamiliar with the book itself. His eyes remained on the cover illustration

The headless skeleton raising a longsword.

Brother's-...

He casually flipped the pages, but he could not remember the contents of the story. He remembered seeing it somewhere before, but the story itself was not unique, or perhaps he was mistaken. It was about a hero of justice who helped the weak and defeated evil.

But as he read the easy-to-read book, it seemed his brother's voice echoed at his ears.

The massive hand flipped the pages. It started to deepen before he knew it. Every night, he would beg his brother to read it.

And that brother was no longer around.

-*Sorry.*

The final words, and the back of the unreachable silhouette that left him, just like how it was when he was last seen alive.

Suddenly, he noticed footsteps stopping a little distance away from him.

He turned his eyes aside, and spotted a girl about five, six years old. She was wearing a plush cap, her large silver eyes opened big and round.

He realized the girl was staring at the book in his hands, and closed it shut before handing it to her with one hand. The girl seemed shy, and after some hesitation, she timidly reached out for the book, and turned to run away.

Soon after, she was brought back to Shinn by a boy of similar age.

Seeing his silvery hair and eyes behind his glasses, Shinn's face froze for a moment.

A Selena—an Alba.

It was not the Eighty-Sixth area of the Republic, and the boy before him was not of the Republic. Shinn understood this, but he remained restless.

“I apologize for my sister's rudeness.”

“...Oh, it's fine. I wasn't reading.”

The boy raised his eyebrows.

“This won't do. When you are helped or given something, you need to say thank you. This is something to be educated since young.”

Saying that, he nudged the girl on the back, prodding her to move forward. After some hesitation, she murmured something with a pitifully soft voice, and then teetered away again.

“Ah, hey!...eh, seriously.”

Once the lady librarian glared at him, the boy immediately kept quiet.

Seeing the black-haired, green eyed librarian tell off the Selena boy, Shinn was a little taken aback by this. Again, he realized he had arrived in a foreign land.

The boy sighed reluctantly, and turned towards Shinn, lowering his head.

“Thank you. Sorry for getting you involved in our home disciplinary issue.”

The boy apologized seriously, and coupled with his silver hair and eyes, Shinn was reminded of the last Handler he had, whom he never met.

“It’s fine. Being an older brother must be a tough thing.”

“She’s too shy. Really, I wonder who she takes after here.”

He weakly lowered his shoulders, and then seemed a little confused as he tilted his head,

“Erm, I’m not sure if I can ask, but I have seen you often recently. Don’t you go to school?”

For the time being, the Federation had six years of compulsory education, and any further education was on voluntary expenses. The reason for this was that the system was implemented nine years ago, that many areas away from the capital had insufficient teaching resources, lacked teachers, and sometimes, no school buildings either.

For Shinn, a Federation citizen who was not locally born, and lived in the concentration camps and the battlefield as an Eighty-Sixer for many years, he naturally never studied at any school.

Ernst did say that Shinn would get used to this place this upcoming Spring, and there was time time for him to think.

“What about you?”

“Eh?”

“Since you’re saying that you saw me while there’s school going on, that means you’re often here too, right?”

The boy gave an awkward smile.

“Ah, yes, I don’t attend school. Rather, I can’t attend school. The ex-nobles here are pretty much shunned aside anyway.”

After the civil revolution, the nobility of the Federation was broken into two.

The nobles who were involved with mass farming, heavy industries, and any productions involving the lifeline of the country continued with their businesses, aside from their status and tax privileges being revoked. Their businesses were directly involved with the fighting strength of the country, and if they were in chaos, the war against the would take a perilous turn. Similarly, the sons of the nobles who chose to be officers for the old Empire instead of taking over the businesses, and most of them chose to stay with the Federation army.

The other nobles had the privilege to continue their lives as ordinary citizens, but it was often difficult for them to find jobs, for they were unused to toil, and begrudged by the commoner. Some low-ranked nobles of relatively poor fortunes might be worse off than the commoners.

“So I thought you would be the same as me...sorry for being rude.”

Seeing the boy look so apologetic, Shinn shook his hand.

“It’s fine. I’m not a local.”

He had intended to say he was not from the Federation, but through the prior conversation, he knew that the citizens of St. Yedder would subconsciously interpret it as ‘not from the old Empire capital’. It would be too troublesome to explain he was an Eighty-Sixers, for everywhere else other than the capital were considered ‘colonies’. Nobody would delve too deeply into this explanation, and Shinn had

been giving this explanation the entire time.

Of the territories the Empire used to rule, there were different cultures from different lands, including values, customs and languages, and they differed greatly from the old Empire capital. Having understood these unnecessary implication, the boy heaved a sigh of relief, and had a curious glint in his eyes.

“But it is rare to see an Onyx and Pyrope not being born in the capital...ah, pardon me for the rudeness again.”

The boy lowered his head apologetically, and showed a smile on his face, and in the white eyes behind his glasses.

“I’m Eugene Lantz. Nice to meet you.”

“–This is basically how it is. They have been here for a month, and have started to get used to this place.”

Ernst had told the youths to “watch this country carefully, and slowly think of the future.” He had them stroll freely on the streets, but he could not just simply shoo them when they had just came from a foreign land.

During the initial few days, he had arranged for a few guides of similar age to lead them, had them familiarize with the place, and the guides would supervise them from afar, sending reports of their actions to the secretary, who would then compile the large pile of reports and submit to Ernst, who was reading through these electronic documents. He noted, his eyes still staring at the terminal on his work desk.

“Yes. Just yesterday, he went to check on the war history bookshelf, and two days ago, it was philosophy. Three days ago, he went to the war graveyard, but for some reason, he picked up an illustration book today, but I suppose it’s a good thing he made a friend. Time to bust out the azuki bean rice today, huh?”

“It’ll be a mistake trying to cook that when you don’t know how it looks like. Don’t do that.”

“Besides, are you able to return home today like this? Raiden brought a change of clothes here, and even passed Teresa’s complaint to you. What are you doing?”

The Oriental Eisen secretary flatly noted, but Ernst did not mind.

“I did ask for a change of clothes because there is a washing machine in the office, so I have been wearing the same suit every day, and Teresa’s probably just nagging at me because of this. Ah, but I’m definitely going home today, so you people should return back too! It’s the night of Christmas Eve after all!”

“Well, thanks for that then.”

“Since it’s a rare opportunity, I guess I should buy some presents. I wonder if the Republic has a habit of giving presents on Christmas Eve night.”

“Probably yes...but I have no idea if those children could remember it.”

“If they have forgotten, it is best to let them remember...now then. What should I buy...”

Ernst’s eyes remained fixated on the screen, his lips showing an elated smile. However, as he was still busy with administrative duties, it appeared he would be unable to prepare any decent gifts.

It had been almost a month since they arrived at St. Yedder, and the youths appeared to be getting used to enjoying their peaceful lifestyle. Raiden was working part-time as a transporter riding a motorbike, Angel participated in a cooking class, Seo was going out with a sketchbook in hand, Krena enjoyed herself with window shopping, and Shinn had been visiting the library and museum. It appeared they were starting to know one or two acquaintances, or friends.

Thank goodness, so he earnestly thought.

None of them mentioned about joining the army again. It seemed they had finally escaped from the oppression their country had

inflicted upon them...along with the mindset of a combatant they were forced to learn.

They were no longer 'Eighty-Sixers'.

"...Starting Spring, it's time to consider their wishes."

Beyond the windows, the long Winter of the northern country seemed to be waiting for Spring and the light that shone.

It snowed the entire night, and stopped the following day, at noon. The sky was clear, a pristine blue, shining upon the plaza made of white-grey bricks.

Seo stopped his slow feet, and looked up at the blue skies.

There were dried, wilted, black branches atop the large sakura tree in the middle of the plaza, and the clear, distant winter sky was beyond them.

These branches appeared to be forming fragments out of the skies, causing them to collapse at any given moment.

He lowered his stare, and could see the holographic screen on the TV by the streets, showing the telecast of a live meeting.

Seeing Ernst present his speech at the podium with an ordinary suit and glasses, Seo felt something was amiss. He was the hero who led the revolution, and in his tenth year of presidency, but to Seo, he was the eccentric uncle who would occasionally drop by home, decide on the curfew and nag at the children who returned home late, and act like a child jostling over the remote control with Frederica.

There were often times when the broadcasted news was switched to a magical girl anime, or a live soccer telecast was switched to footage of some battalion; these often happened to Shinn and Raiden, and they would often be told, Can't we just watch a half hour anime clip together?

Seo callously listened to the speech, which seemed to be regarding the Federation's status in the war. There were introductions to the

various battlefields, analysis of the battlefield, and future prospects. While Ernst himself was probably not the one doing the analysis, there were at least intel from the various battlefields. It was really a world of difference from the Republic, who were fooled by the same report for five years, and only discovered by their last handler.

The broadcasted news, which Shinn would watch, albeit listening while reading his book, should probably be accurate. At the end of it, the news would surely showcase a list of the KIA. Even the lowest of ranks would be recorded, and all citizens, no matter whether they knew the dead, would give a moment of silence. It was to be expected in the Federation, and also for the neighboring countries ten years ago, just that Seo would never know.

Those white swines of the Republic are really dumb, so he thought as he listened, feeling extremely restless, impatient. He could not simply remain as he was, and could not simply remain at this place.

So, he thought,

As expected, we,

Tucking the sketchbook under his armpit, he walked on the plaza so clean, there was nary a piece of trash to be seen. It was truly too cold, and he did not see any other sketch-lovers on this street.

It was said that there were war in this city during the civil revolution ten years ago. Along the way, there were some bricks that seemed brand new, and there were bridge sections along the city river that were obviously burned off. The ancient cathedral bell that was a derelict due to cannon bombardment remained there. The collapsed stone walls had vines over them, and remained an outstanding sight in the populous city, showcasing an atmosphere of a war relic. Curious, Seo sat by the side, drawing, and for some reason, the old chaplain gave him some sweets.

The distant footsteps approached, and turning around, he found Angel.

“So you are here. You said you were headed to the Republic Square today, so I thought you would be nearby.”

“Ah, yeah. Never thought the Republic Plaza would be right before the old embassy of the Republic...got anything?”

Angel was dressed in a posh blouse, a faint colored coat, a fluffy long skirt, and tall boots. Seo was unused to seeing her dressed up like this, after seeing her in camouflage for a long time. IT was the same for the others too, for though they did not appear to be out of place, something seemed to be out of outdoors.

“Please lend me a hand. I have some baggage to carry, and I cannot do so alone.”

“Oh, okay...you sure I’m enough help? Did you call anyone else?”

Naturally, the girls Krena and the child Frederica would be excluded from this moving job.

“Raiden...is at work. Shinn probably has some spare time.”

In fact, every one of them was free every day.

Seo reached for the earcuff on his right ear, trying to activate the Para-RAID as he said,

“Activate.”

But his fingers just slipped through, and did not touch the hard earcuff.

“...”

Oh yeah, Seo went silent. Angel held in her laughter as she took out a mobile phone from her pocket, and he looked sullen he too took his out.

“Goodness, this thing sure is convenient. Need to carry this every day, can’t contact people if they don’t switch on theirs, and everyone needs to store their numbers.”

But unlike what he had initially said, Seo followed up with sarcastic words, befitting his facial expression. Angel followed with a

chuckle.

“But with a Para-RAID, there is a need to change contacts when there is a change of Handler, no?”

“Those white swines...well, it’s pretty troublesome. All those white swines could have done whatever they wanted, but they always come so much nonsense.”

The choker called the Para-RAID was meant to deal with the Processors, and it was for the convenience of the Republic, who also ensured that the earcuffs containing the modifiable data could not be removed easily. There was no disinfection when they were removed, and once the Federation had taken them off, there were still scars on the ear. Seo himself did not mind, but even he was livid seeing the scars on Angel and Krena’s ears.

The fact remained that their Handler...or to be precise, the Handler in charge of contacting Shinn had been changing, it was not their responsibility. Furthermore, their last Handler was a feeble princess of similar age, and even she endured this; compared to her, everyone else who could not endure looked comparatively bad.

“Those Federation guys are really curious, wanting such a thing. We used this for such a long time, and even we don’t know what in the world that thing is.”

“But it sure is useful for for the warzone, right? We have Eintagsfliege on this side too. Regarding the “Juggernaut” though, that walking coffin is not worth investigating, I feel.”

The items of protection they obtained from the Federation no longer remained.

The “Juggernaut” and the Para-RAID were said to be taken to a research lab for analysis. Of the other items, there was nothing worth commemorating, and they too were given to the Federation.

“...Speaking of which, it did seem Shinn hoped to keep his gun. The Federation wouldn’t allow ordinary citizens to do so, so he was refused.”

For the time being, Ernst would keep it.

“Might not be appropriate to say that it is worth remembering. That handgun had killed off many people however. This is the only job Shinn has never allowed anyone to do.”

Even Raiden, who spent the longest time with him, never got to do so.

Seo sighed,

“Well, it remains a fact that he can hear them all the time, but...I do wish Shinn can enjoy his life a little more.”

Seo assumed that his comrade, who could hear the voices of the unreleased, vengeful spirits, was being bound too heavily by the dead, or Death itself.

For instance, he was the one who killed off his comrades who were in delirious pain.

It was he who promised his comrades that he would accompany them to the end of their lives, from his initial squad to Spearhead Squadron, the comrades who fought alongside him and left him behind.

Their brains were taken by the , repeating the moans of death as they became ‘Black Sheep’.

And also, there was the head of his brother...who died many years ago, yet kept clinging onto him until his recent defeat.

Angel lowered her blue eyes, and sank into deep thought.

“Perhaps some things can only be fulfilled because we are bound down.”

“...What do you mean?”

“To be bound down, in other words, means to be forced to stay. Perhaps it is because he had the objective to slay his brother, Shinn

could remain on this battlefield, and remained on this world.”

And what forced him to stay was the lamentations of the countless dead, their curses ensnared upon the scar on his neck...and ironically, the deceased brother who caused this scar.

“We are Eighty-Sixers. We should have died on that battlefield, so in a certain sense, it was inevitable. That goes the same for Shinn, who has been thinking about his brother the entire time. But now, he has nothing to commemorate him...I am a little worried about him.”

“...”

Seo still did not understand the meaning behind those words.

Adept was adept at observation. Thus, it was difficult for Seo to refute otherwise.

“What about you, Angel?”

“Eh?”

“You too should have died on that battlefield, but you kept living. That old man wants use to think of our futures...but have you thought of it?”

Angel’s flowery-colored lips grimaced.

Ahh, so she’s starting to put on makeup, so he thought.

“Do you still want to hear?”

Seo suddenly cracked a smile.

Of course.

“I guess.”

“For example...I have thought of it, what will happen if Daiya is still alive, what if I wait a little longer. The result will remain the same. What we should do, and what we want to do, we—”

“Yeah.”

Seo carried on, and nodded.

“Same here. I guess everyone’s the same too. This is all we have.”

Yes.

A short moment of silence lingered between those two. In this silence, there was a mutual understanding and chemistry, a satisfactory solace.

Angel suddenly clapped her hands.

“In any case, that aside.”

“Ah, yeah. Carry the stuff back, right?”

They forget.

He checked for Shinn’s number that was stored, and pressed the call button. He kept dialling over and over again...but there was no response after a long while, so Seo frowned,

“–He’s not picking up!”

†

For a long time, Shinn had the dream of the night when he was nearly killed by his brother, and hardly remembered anything else.

But he still understood.

That it was a dream.

“–I know this is too much to ask for.”

Kaie was smiling in the sealed space with white mist drifting. She was one of Spearhead Squadron's members, who fought on the Eastern front of the Republic's Eighty-Six region, and died there.

Her hair and eyes were an Oriental black, and she was dressed in desert camouflage uniform obtained from the Republic's deadstock, and had a ponytail.

Her little head was not at its usual position, but was severed neatly from its neck, held in her hands.



That face was smiling.

“You guys made it to the end of the journey here, and brought us to the end here. You can forget about us...but.”

There were more of them who departed without waiting for his companionship. Rather than it being Kaie herself, she was simply a representation of them.

Corpses, some dying, some dead, were abducted by the <Legion, their heads taken for reading, and stored inside combat units, becoming the deviant ‘black sheep’ comrades amongst the white sheep of the .

“We do understand, but we are still in pain. It is too painful for us to remain on this world like this. We are already dead, and we want to return there. So Shinn, our Death God.”

Kaie smiled as she called out the infamous moniker Shinn himself never felt uncomfortable with.

On the lush grass beneath their feet, there were eight rail tracks. One could see the grey silhouette of the abandoned “Juggernaut” and “Scavenger” amidst the thick white mist.

It was the autumn night two months ago, when they entered the controlled territory.

“Can you help us out here?”

The ‘black sheep’ were simply a crude clone of the deceased’ brains, and had no personalities to them.

And even the ‘Shepherds’, who had thinking ability on par with humans, could not communicate with the latter.

Thus, the girl before him was not Kaie, and neither was it an embodiment of the others...it was Shinn’s lingering will.

Back then, all he cared about was burying his brother, and could

not bother with the others, so he left them behind.

“–Yeah.”

“...Shinn.”

Shinn heard someone call for his name, and opened his eyes. He found himself in the browsing section of the Empire Capital Library, sprawled upon the eight person table. He nudged himself up.

Eugene, seated opposite him, had his elbows on the table, his head on his hands as he leaned over; the silvery white eyes behind the glasses were smiling away. His little sister was not around, probably reading a picture book nearby.

“Even if the sun is setting, you will be told off by the librarian if you keep sleeping. It is true that the shining here makes it really comfy.”

The browsing room in the wing block made ample use of naturally light, as the sunlight shone upon the old, thick glass windows on the ceiling, and the softened light lit the entire browsing room through the stained glass patterns engraved upon them. It was said that in the summer, the leaves of the large Elm tree outside would block and scatter the lights. In the afternoon, the room would feel warm comfortable due to the sunlight, and one could see that on the other tables in the narrow and long browsing room, many boys and girls of similar ages were dozing off, having been reading or studying.

“Stayed up all night?”

“Not at all.”

It had been years since he had been like this. While there were times when he would suddenly fall asleep, probably due to overexertion because of his ability, it was the first time he would fall unconscious and asleep before a near-total stranger.

Sure relaxed a lot here. Shinn callously thought.

There was no noise of the hangar, no gunfire from afar, and no

need to worry about the movements nearby. He was slowly getting used to this lifestyle.

The only thing that remained by his ears were the dying groans of the mechanical ghosts, multiplying at the frontlines far away, surging like a flood.

Eugene then leaned forward, his silvery white eyes giving a mischievous vibe.

“It’s about time. Want to go check it out? There’s a terrace at the top floor of this hall, and very few know that you can actually get out from there. It’s a little far, but you can see it clearly.”

“...See what?”

“The parade. On the night of Christmas Eve. It’s the 24th armored corps of the Western army participating today. Probably can see the third generation, newest ‘Vanargand’.”

“...”

Seeing Shinn’s lack of response, Eugene tilted his head.

“Huh? You don’t have any interest in this?”

“No...”

Rather, he was surprised this person before him was so interested in this.

Leaving aside the Alba appearance that left Shinn startled, his slender frame and honest demeanour made him seem unacquainted with the harsh, cruel battlefield. His hands were a little rough due to the housework, and clearly have held a pen for far too long. It was obvious he was inexperienced in using a weapon, or enacting violence.

“I thought...you wouldn’t be interested in that.”

Hearing that, Eugene beamed happily,

“Yeah, I decided to join the army. Be part of the armored corps. So I went to learn...I thought you would be the same as me in this regards.”

Shinn had been reading up on war history just the previous day, and read the memoirs of famed Empire-era soldiers before then. Seeing Shinn visit the faculty he had been visiting, Eugene had been wondering if the former too wanted to join the special cadet school... since he could not attend school.

So I thought, and I felt closer to you because of that, so the Alba boy said. Furthermore, he had wanted to talk for quite some time.

“The Capital here has been very peaceful, but the war continues on at the borders, and who knows when will be the day they come here. I’m willing to do anything to prevent that from...to protect my little sister, the city here. Also...I want to bring her to see the sea. That’s why I want to end this war.”

“ ... ”

Kaie’s voice, which he had heard in the dream, echoed again.

“Can you help us out here?”

The distant battlefield.

The battlefield where he spent years, and swore to advance until the very end.

At this point, he was not at that place he hoped to be.

He had long forgotten about the insides of the Grand Mur.

For those people were unwilling to face reality, and lost the means to protect themselves, rotting away pathetically in the eighty five areas of the Republic as they stagnated.

At this point, he, who stagnated, had returned to the boundaries of the Grand Mur.

“...I guess.”

The groans of the never ceased. They kept ringing by his ears, encompassing till the ends of the continent.

He kept looking for the massive, perverted corpses of the Republic mixed between them.

But he could not hear her, for perhaps she was still alive.

Would she continue to follow their footsteps, and fight the enemy?

“...Enough rest.”

He muttered to himself quietly, and Eugene did not hear him.

“Ah, got a message. It is from Shinn.”

“Eh, why the response to you!? I’ve been calling me lots of times!”

“Hm...I guess it might be because you called too many times...”

Hearing the overwhelming cheers and the noise of the procession at the other end of the road, Krena stopped in her tracks.

She looked over, and in the vision that was reduced to a rectangle by the two tall buildings to the side, she spotted the massive steel colored bodies slowly ease their way down the main street, and froze in space. The massive 120mm cannon was nerve-wrecking, and it was followed by the long chair, a bare turret, and the body. A startling noise was caused by the motor and the power pack attached to it as the massive weight of the eight-legged armored unit hammered upon the stone tiles.

The eight-legged machines causing loud footsteps and motor noises.

It took her a while to remember these were not the , and heaved a huge sigh of relief. The hand instinctively reaching for her shoulder, where she once strapped the assault rifle over, returned back in place.

“...That scared me.”

In any case, this unit was often seen on the news Shinn and Raiden watched. Apparently, it was called the ‘Vanargand’, the main weapon of the Federation. It had a main cannon and armor on par with the Löwe, and was a far cry from the “Juggernaut” that was inferior to the Grauwolf.

It was probably a parade. The well-polished ‘Vanargand’ and the Federation soldiers dressed in glamorous parade uniform kept moving forward as the March played on. The citizens standing on both sides of the main street were waving their hands at the twin-headed, black-red eagle on the Federation flag.

The officer manning the turrets of the “Vanargand” met Krena in the eyes, and waved at her. Krena was taken aback, but she too lifted her hand, and waved it. The young officer, probably a few years older, showed a proud smile as he gave her a joking bow, before vanishing behind the building.

This country continued to fight the , and the “Vanargands” were weapons used to combat them. However, the scene before her was so genial, so pleasant.

The bustling streets remained a pleasant sight, but Krena remained unaccustomed to crowded places. She turned aside, and walked off.

Having obtained this peaceful, stable life, she got used to it, and enjoyed it. Initially however, she felt so lethargic and worn out, despite there not being any battles, nor any daily chores, and she was left frustrated.

Her comrades too found interests in their lives, and got to know a few friends. The friend list on her portable terminal too had been expanding.

Ever since the beginning, they had decided.

That as they watched this country, they would decide on their futures. No matter the final decision, they would respect it.

She stood before the store she liked, and sized up the shop window reflecting herself. The girl in the reflection was wearing a one-piece dress commonly seen in magazine, along with a cape of fake fur. The heels of her boots were a little too tall, and she was trying to get used to it.

When she initially arrived in this city, she was wearing clothes picked out by Teresa, Ernst's secretary, and others of similar age to her, but recently, she had been picking out her own choice of clothes. She turned her body around, checking if she was cute. The older saleslady behind the window chuckled, giving her a thumbs up.

She was delighted. However, she was a little embarrassed. She lowered her head, and ran off.

She chose the clothes she liked. She dolled herself up. She bought whatever she wanted, and strolled freely. She did not have to worry about dying the next day, nor did she need to worry about the battles she was to face.

...Yes.

It was a dream.

The cheers behind her vanished, and only the loud March of the band echoed on, stinging through the grim silence and the faint, tall blue skies above.

It was said that beyond the blue sky was an endless darkness humans could not stay at.

That was what she heard from the battlefield of the eighty five areas. Perhaps she had heard it from Kujo of Spearhead Squadron, who, in contrary to his appearance, was well-versed in astronomy, or perhaps she had heard it from the female squad leader of her first assigned squad, or perhaps from Shinn, soon after she met him.

Beyond the blue sky was the shroud of darkness.

The sky, the seas, the mesmerizing blue was the membrane of the afterlife.

...Perhaps this was the reason why Heaven was in the skies.

Krena stopped in her tracks, and turned around.

The March continued to blare loudly, as though proclaiming to beyond the skies, *today, at this moment, all of you shall return with us.*

There was a moment of silence by the crowd, along with retired soldiers dressed in uniform; the “Vanargand” was clothed in black, symbolizing death, quietly matching on.

There was a number at the front of the turret, representing the number of KIA and MIA since the previous parade. It was an astounding number. It did not simply represent the names; it represented the number of people who should have been alive.

And there were many more who were once the same as them, comrades, fighting on the frontlines.

While the current life was enjoyable, for them, it was only a fleeting dream.

And they would wake up from that dream.



“I’m back... oh.”

Raiden, done with his part-time work, saw that the hall lights were not lit, and blinked in confusion. Typically, one he returned at this time, Teresa would have switched on the lights at the door and hall.

According to her, the children should be back, and the lights should be on.

The lights at the living room down the hall was lit, and Frederica was seated on the massive sofa, hugging a bear plushie alone as she remained still.

It was something Shinn had bought impulsively. Frederica pestered him to buy something for her, so he bought that plushie.

Frederica would never leave by herself, and it appeared she never attended school either.

“Welcome back.”

“I’m back...the others aren’t back? Where’s Teresa?”

“Went out shopping, yet to be back. Is there something?”

She sighed, feeling a little worried.

Suddenly, there was a loud rumbling sound from somewhere. Raiden looked down at Frederica, the source of this sound, and the latter’s face was flushed as she hugged the plushie in her hands firmly. Finally, with a teeny-weeny voice, she complained,

“Raiden...I’m hungry.”

“Hm? ...Oh.”

Raiden had a look at the clock on the wall, and found that it was almost dinner time. While he and the others were used to irregular mealtimes due to combats and night raids, the child Frederica would have issues.

“Wait a moment.”

Raiden put down his goods, and went into the kitchen.

Unlike the synthesized foods of the Republic that remained the same both inside and outside the Grand Mur, the Federation had produces that could be obtained from the farms or fields.

Raiden opened the fridge, ascertain the dishes he could cook,

washed the ingredients, diced them, mixed them together and fried them on a pan. He simply needed to ensure Frederica had something to eat, and if Teresa was to return at this time, he could leave it as a side dish.

Frederica's eyes were dazzling as she watched from the sidelines, as though witnessing a spell.

“Never thought you are able to cook!”

“Well, if it's not too difficult.”

Even if he was unwilling, this was a skill he had to learn on the battlefield, where he had to rely on himself.

...For most people anyway.

“Next time, if Shinn's the only one at home, tell him that you're hungry, and to buy something back to eat. Don't talk with that kind of tone though.”

Frederica seemed strangely happy for some reason.

“Well, so Shinei is bad at cooking?”

Back during his younger days, Raiden himself was elated to learn of things adults could not do. As he recalled his past, he shrugged.

“Not that he can't. He's just too lax with it.”

For instance, the saltiness of the dish being uneven, or egg shells mixed in, or the soup being overcooked.

While it was not inedible in any case, the taste was undoubtedly terrible, and Shinn himself had no intention to improve. Thus, no matter the squad he was in, Shinn was usually exempted from cooking. For some reason, the only skill he was proficient at was using the knife, and he had mastered the ultimate art of cutting onions without crying. Once they arrived in the Federation however, they had a food processor to do the job, and that skill was not required.

Perhaps he was lax in everything else, for he exerted too much effort on fighting and commanding. That was what Raiden had once thought, but given how Shinn's lifestyle had not changed in the slightest, it appeared it was just his personality.

“So I see. Surely he is someone who gave his utmost to slay his brother...Raiden, what is that?”

“...You haven't seen raw eggs before?”

Raiden cracked an egg with one hand, and dropped it into the bowl.

It appeared their last Handler was a prim and proper princess, but even she knew what an egg was. Whether she knew how to crack an egg or not remained up for scepticism however.

“Umu. Teresa did say the kitchen is a maid's territory, and never would allow me in. So eggs are packaged in such parcels...and coagulate upon heating?”

“It's not a parcel, it's a shell...you really aren't educated on the outside world, are you?”

“That,”

Frederica was about to say something, only to be at a loss of words.

Well, it was unlikely she would say anything. Thinking this, Raiden looked down and narrowed his eyes at her.

He had a feeling. It was likely his comrades too had the same thought. They never paid much heed into it, and did not pursue the matter.

“Anyway, right now, you're.”

The living room door let out a creak, and Shinn entered without making a sound.

“...Frederica, hope you helped out with cooking.”

Frederica was shocked, while Raiden looked over at Shinn nonchalantly. After four years together, he was used to Shinn's ability to pop by without making any loud footsteps.

"The end times are here if you're saying that. Welcome back...lots of things you have there."

Shinn did not bring any excesses when he went out, and appeared to be out for a stroll. However, he was holding what appeared to be some pretty heavy bags.

Following him, Angel, Seo and Teresa returned, holding large paper carriers, or cooler bags. Raiden raised an eyebrow.

"...What's going on?"

"Teresa went out to purchase groceries, but the car broke down once she arrived there. She was done with them, but there was too much for her to handle, and she met me."

"Angel couldn't help much either, so she called me, and then I called Shinn."

Saying that, Seo put down the large cooler bag, and moved his shoulders around lazily.

"Say I say, Teresa. Next time, if you're shopping, give us a call. Tell Shinn or me. We're free, and can help move some things."

"Which maid out there will allow the children she is serving to carry the items?"

"You aren't exactly serving us here. More like that interesting old man."

"I feel the same."

"Not at all. He is not a father anyway."

Ernst would probably be in tears if he was present, and at this moment, Krena, the last of them, returned.

“Ah.”

For some reason, she stood at the living room entrance. Perhaps it was due to everyone looking over at her, or perhaps it was because she wanted to say something once the five of them were back, but found the other four to be present.

“Welcome back, Krena.”

“Ah, erm, I’m back...so.”

The cat-like golden eyes were drifting, only to be at peace.

The determined resolve overtook the uneasiness within.

And Raiden let out a little sigh.

Ahh, this one’s the same too?

The bloody red eyes looked calmly towards the standing Krena.

The silent, cold eyes eased up.

“You’re done, huh?”

That voice, and those words appeared to be prompting Krena, who nodded.

“Yeah. I think I’ve seen all I wanted.”

Shinn probably had already planned on this, and simply waited for the others to make the decision.

But the others must have thought the same.

So she spoke up.

Her lips showed a natural smile, proud of herself.

“Let’s go back. To where we should be at.”



Ernst was finally done with work, and returned to his private residence he had never returned in a while; he heard the youths talking, and was relieved to hear that they were starting to get used to the Federation's lifestyle.

One might consider it fortunate that they were detained in the concentration camp at schooling age. Most children of that age would have known basic social common sense and economical knowledge, like how to shop, and how to behave.

Shinn and Raiden had better education than those of similar predicaments, probably due to their guardians. Seo, Angel and Krena seemed to have no formal education, but given how they could read the operational manual of the flawed weapon, and calculate the trajectory of the projectiles, they were probably smarter than most of the Federation citizens.

For a long time, the Federation had been ruled as an Empire, under a military dictatorship, for which higher education had been siphoned for the select few, so many of the commoner children were never educated, and most of its citizens could not write their names. This was especially prevalent for its colonies. Ernst was made the temporary president before the official elections, and he was in his tenth year, partially due to this reason.

For Ernst, who toiled under the dizzying load of administrative duties, browsing through materials on high schools and vocational schools was a form of leisure to him.

It appeared Shinn liked to learn, and it was best if he could enter a school of a higher level. Raiden appeared to have an interest in tinkering machinery, and might be suited for a vocational school specializing in this. For Seo, Angel and Krena, he enjoyed considering their personalities, and make appropriate arrangements.

Besides, 'her' child never got the opportunity to be born, and he never had the chance to consider this.

He hoped that they would continue like this, and become ordinary children again.

That they would go to school, that they would laugh with their friends, that they would brood over their futures, their love, wonder where they would go for the weekend, and think of other unnecessary matters. While they had missed out these childhood experiences, it was not too late for them to start again.

Also, he had the capability to engineer it. It would be a misuse of power, but it was an insignificant issue. He might be permitted to do some things for the children who came to him, to ensure their happiness.

There was however one thing he was concerned about.

He had assigned personal rooms for everyone, and gave them pocket money a wealthier family could afford, but their personal belongings never increased in number. He never saw any excesses, other than the bare necessities.

Once, they were forbidden from having hopes and dreams, aside from their comrades.

So at least, starting from this point, they could pick whatever they liked, and hold it in their hands, experiencing the joy of receiving...

That was what he thought.

So once he returned to the home he had not returned to in a while, he had a face to face conversation with the five of them. All of them said that they wanted to serve the army, to return to the battlefield they escaped from, and upon hearing that, the materials Ernst held slipped from his arms, scattered upon the floor.

“W-why!?”

Hearing his exclamation, they could only show confused looks.

While they were able to express themselves so honestly, he was not in the mood to be elated by this.

“Why, you ask.”

“Didn’t we already say so? If we have a choice, we’ll enlist in the army.”

“That’s...”

He had heard from them. The interrogators had reported on this, and when they first moved into this house, he had heard this from them personally.

He had assumed they knew nothing of this world, and chose to serve the army.

He assumed they did not know of peace and stability on this world. For they were labelled the derogatory term called Eighty-Sixers, and gave up on their future dreams and their lives of being treated as ordinary people.

They knew, so why did they...?

Raiden gave a quiet chuckle.

Ernst found that compared to their arrival, his smile was a lot calmer.

“Sorry for suspecting you at first...it’s really a nice place. We got careless and stayed too long however.”

“We have enough rest. It is time to move forward.”

“So we have to return, to where we should be at.”

The battlefield.

Ernst slowly shook his head. They wanted to advance, and ‘thus’, chose to return back to the battlefield. That choice was not something he could empathize with.

“So...why...return to the battlefield...”

They had risked their lives fighting, and surviving. They had escaped from there—

Shinn lifted his head, and stared straight at the gaudy looking Ernst.

When he first came here, he had already made up his mind.

It was not really a conviction, however. For them, this was an obvious conclusion. Since they had this chance and moment, they decided to use this moment to reflect upon themselves, and their predicament.

They had no intention of adapting to this lifestyle.

And never did they think of staying here.

During this short one month, they took the opportunity to ascertain that this momentary, peaceful lull from the endless war against the was not where they should be at.

That instead of a nostalgia due to being too far away, it was a vague, distant feeling to them.

In the face of this peaceful, decent lifestyle, they remained unfazed.

This person reached out to these kinless people, and provided this opportunity and time for them. Even at this point, he was thinking for their sake, and he was showing a gaudy look at this point, so he deserved a response, at least,

“We were just lucky.”

Shinn had the ability to hear the , and locate them.

Back in the Republic, it was the last Handler, unlike her countrymen, who helped them cross the Contested Area.

And at the end of the battlefield, when it was cornered, it was most probably his brother who lent them a hand.

They were able to reach the Federation simply because they were lucky to receive help. The countless comrades who died were unfortunate not to receive aid.

That was the difference between them.

“We just so happened to get aid, but if we’re contented and stop here, how are we going to face our comrades who fought to their final moments? We aren’t dead yet...so we aren’t keeping the fight.”

The names of the KIA comrades who fought along them were engraved on the aluminium plates placed next to Fido, acting as an offertory, and also a mark of their journey. He however did not intend to leave the final promise behind him.

He remembered them all. Even at this point, they were together with him.

It is a promise, a promise to bring them to the end of the fight, and witness the end of the journey.

“The still remains, and this country might not exist if the war continues. We can’t just ignore the fact before us and live in a seemingly peaceful environment, waiting for our deaths.”

Acting like the white swines was something they utterly detested, and would never forgive themselves over; this was why they gave up on the Republic of San Magnolia.

For the white swines fled the battlefield despite a war going on, lulled themselves into a sense of false peace, shoved the responsibility to fight over to the Eighty-Sixers, and lost the means to protect themselves. Even animals were stronger than them at this point, let alone humans.

During the special scouting mission, on their death march through the controlled areas, they had witnessed the latter’s fighting strength multiple times.

For Shinn, who had been hearing the voices of the ghosts in his ears, the mechanical ghost army was expanding, murmuring away incessantly.

The Republic alone would be unable to handle it.

The whole of humanity might even be devoured by its might.

And in the face of this threat, they could not simply ignore it.

They were the Eighty-Sixers.

Despite being swarmed by the enemies on the battlefield, they survived to the very end on their own might. They were abandoned by their country, and bade farewell to their friends. They had nothing else, other than themselves, which was their pride, their identity.

“We can’t avoid death, but we can choose how we die. Since we’re going to die anyway, we’re going to fight until the very end. So please, don’t take away our freedom to choose.”

Hearing that, Raiden cracked a smile.

Shinn had left some parting words for their last Handler.

“And also...we have said to a certain person that ‘we’ll be leaving first’. It’ll be bad if she catches up and sees us like this.”

Shinn ignored the banter.

However, Ernst kept shaking his head.

“That’s not it. That’s not it...!”

Ernst was no stranger to the battlefield.

He was an officer of the Empire. When the civil revolution broke out, he led the revolutionaries on the frontlines. They killed many, and many of them were killed. Many people too harboured the same scars.

Many comrades died valiantly in combat, and the others survived, earning peace and happiness. Ernst had seen too many instances of soldiers who were tormented by such unnecessary guilt.

That was not the case.

“You experienced war and hardship, so since you came here, you should enjoy what you earned. If those who died in battle are really your comrades, they will have the same thoughts...you shouldn't be blaming yourselves for this!”

Not because they survived.

Not because they obtained peace and happiness.

Otherwise, humanity, the people unable to escape their pasts, would never be able to obtain everlasting joy once sacrifices are made...!

However, the expressions of the five never changed in the slightest. They might have understood, but they remained unmoved. Ernst felt an unknown uneasiness surrounding him, and was about to continue with something,

But Frederica, who had been quiet the entire time, silently spoke up,

“Enough, Ernst.”

Ernst was taken aback, and looked down at Frederica.

The bloody red eyes were looking up at him sternly,

“Whilst it may be an act of kindness to provide a safe nest for an injured bird...when the bird is healed, and wants to fly, due to the various dangers outside, the nest thus becomes a prison. So long have they tried to escape the cage of oppression, and you wish to lock them in the cage of compassion?”

For a moment, the faint colored lips pursed together, and chimed on with some rage,

Her eyes were filled with some sadness, some anguish, like a caged beast looking at the outside.

“Thus it will end up as no different from the Republic, which you surely would know, no?”

Ernst was left speechless.

“Furthermore, they are not stubborn children who do not know the ways of the world. One day, the children will leave their parents. As a parent...it is advised that you should let go and watch them move on.”

Ernst remained silent at the words of the petite girl whose age was not even half of his.

It was unexpected that these words could come from the lips of such a young child. Shinn lowered his head towards Frederica, asking,

“Need me to say thanks, Princess?”

“I’d say that it was out of a moment of impulse, that I wished to say something to that fool with the stone

She snorted as she turned her head around, and quickly glanced towards him.

“...Figured, have you?”

“More or less.”

She had a demeanour unbecoming her age, along with an uppity attitude. She was under the care of the country’s temporary president Ernst, never went to school, and never went out alone. It seemed her existence was kept a secret.

Furthermore,

“Your intonation has a unique characteristic. I felt I heard it somewhere before, and I figured it out a few days ago...it’s just like my mother.”

That was the most he could recall at this point. The faces and voices of his parents had long faded amidst the memories of war and the voices of the dead.

“In other words, it does seem your parents were Empire nobles... perhaps others can be found if they are sought out, but given your lack of intent to meet them, truly I am unable to agree on that.”

Shinn seemed a little surprised as he looked back at her, and saw utter sincerity in her similarly bloody red eyes,

“Abandoned by your country, separated from your relatives, and never inheriting your country’s history, nor the culture of your race. It is understandable that you may think of it as protecting yourself...but such a life remained an incomplete one for people. People cannot leave the place they grew up in, unable to break from the blood ties. For those who lost their homeland, their kin, and existed only by protecting oneself, they shall crumble easily once they lose their way... remember this so.”

“ ... ”

For some reason, her words sounded so sincere.

It was hard to imagine them being from the mouth of a child who had just turned ten.

It was as though she had personally witness the destruction of a person, that she had bitterly sought for an answer in her own way.

A sense of familiarity suddenly flashed by in his mind.

The same bloody red eyes looked up at him again.

For a moment, they faltered, but she closed them, and with a strange conviction, she looked up again,

“Thus, my true name is Augusta Frederica Adele-Adler. I am the final queen of the Great Geade Empire who commanded the to conquer the continent...and thus the one person who took the lives of your relatives and homeland. If you begrudge me over this, I am

willing to listen.”

Raiden silently spoke up.

“How old were you back then?”

The began its invasion ten years ago. Frederica, who just happened to be ten this year, was a baby back then.

He had heard that for the last two hundred years of the Empire or so, the monarchy was mostly an installed puppet handled by the aristocracy.

“The ones who took everything from us is the Republic. Are you still going to say nonsense now...don't take us as fools.”

“My apologies.”

The girl sheepishly lowered her head.

She shivered, and lifted her head again.

“Whilst I do admire your pride, I too have something to ask of you, Eighty-Sixers...if you wish to return to the battlefield, do bring me along. Also, I do hope you shall slay the soul of the wandering knight roaming the battlefield.”

There was no need for further explanation, and they had understood everything.

As Eighty-Sixers, they were unable to reclaim the corpses of their dead comrades, and could not build graves for them. All they could do was to watch the corpses be ripped apart by the enemy, and taken away.

“Trapped inside there?”

Frederica nodded slightly.

In other words, that would be the that attacked you, before you arrived at the Federation. It bombarded you during the battle...the

‘Shepherd’, I take it?”

“How do you know?”

It was through Shinn’s supernatural ability that they were able to distinguish the laments of the individuals trapped in the machines. The Federation had practically no knowledge of the Para-RAID, and it was the capital far from the frontlines. How did she know that it was her knight who was within the deepest parts of the enemy controlled region, amongst the she had yet to meet?

Hearing that question, Frederica winced in pain,

“I’d say it is the ability granted by my bloodline, to look into the present and the past of them I meet...my apologies. The scar caused by your brother...surely must hurt.”

–What in the world happened to your neck?

At that point, Frederica probably saw everything.

The night when he was killed by his brother.

The moment he destroyed the Dinosauria containing his brother’s soul.

That at her age, he had decided to finish this mission no matter what–

“With my eyes, I can only observe. I alone cannot save the knight abandoned in a corner of the battlefield alone, crying away, so please aid me for this cause. Just as you saved your brother, and your brother saved you...I do hope you can save my knight.”

Shinn slowly closed his eyes.

He finally understood the sense of familiarity he could not shake off.

He was of the same age when he decided to slay his brother, who died and wandered upon the distant battlefield.

“–Yeah.”

Ernst let out a long sigh.

“...Understood. I will have Frederica sent as a mascot, and arranged to be in the same squadron...however, there is one condition I wish to make.”

Upon hearing the mood-killing words, all present gave him displeased, nonchalant looks, but he did not back down.

“You shall enlist as officers. Specifically, through the special cadet school of the Federation. Or I won’t agree.”

While there were a few who did not fulfill the condition of finishing their secondary education, it should not be too much of a problem. It was not a rigid condition after all, and would not affect the Federation’s war situation too greatly.

Huh? Krena narrowed her eyes sceptically.

“Why? Rank doesn’t really matter to us.”

“No. I am taking care of you as though your parents have entrusted you to me. There’s no doubt your parents would feel the same, and I can’t leave my own discretion out of this.

“How do you know what they think?”

“I do...I was a father after all.”

The desire for their children to do well...such were these creatures.

“The choices afforded for a soldier and an officer defer greatly after retirement. Once the war ends, and when you return to society, it is better for you to have more options.”

Once the war ends.

Hearing these words, the youths looked strangely confused.

Before they were wise enough, they were involved in the war against the , toyed by the cruelty and madness of war, and never considered anything beyond surviving the day.

Their faces clearly showed that they had thought of nothing.

Have I said something too cruel? Ernst could not help but wonder.

Over the four, five years on the battlefield, they were tormented by the realization that their families, who took to the battlefield before them, would never return. They had once waited for their parents who would never return, watched their comrades die by their die, and harbored thoughts that they would surely die at a certain time, probably the next day.

And thus, they should live and die as people instead.

Yet he told these children, who made up their minds to die, to keep on living, to live a long, long life, without knowing when they would die. They were to live the complete opposite way of how they lived, having lived on edge and surviving by the skins of their teeth.

Surely they did not know the cruelty behind this.

“One day, the war will end. If you say you are going to fight until the very end...then from now onwards, you are to consider what you want to do after the war.”

CHAPTER IV

Unter dem Doppeladler

The meeting room of the 177th Armor Battalion base was as spacious as a mini amphitheatre, and the faint light from the holographic screen dimmed the expressions of the commanders gathered.

There was the jamming of the Eintagstliege from the Contested Area to the “Legion” dominated areas, and even for the Federation, it was impossible to observe these areas. However, the Federation soldiers were not incompetent in their efforts to scout the enemy. Even the incomplete data gathered had some intel worth understanding.

That would include the changes in quantity of messages; which would indicate the sound patterns, numbers, and movements of the drones. Such were the reports from the scouting team that entered and exited the dangerous Contested Area.

“–Given the aforementioned analysis, the Integrated Analytics has determined there is a high possibility of the “Legion” launching a massive offensive in the following days.”

Hearing the report, the Major General leading the 177th Armor Battalion sighed as he remained seated on the leather chair furthest inside the meeting room.

“We guessed it. They’re finally coming.”

The enemy had tried to break through the various frontlines, and clearly, an imminent strike was about to begin.

Suddenly, a slender figure stood in the silent veil of darkness.

It was a young female officer. She had blond hair that was very shair, purple eyes, and red lips that were elegantly glossed over.

The soldiers and officers of the Federation army had fallen one after another, and the field commanders had changed over and over again. The Lieutenant Colonel insignia on her collar was a rarity at her age. She had an armband on her left arm, indicating she was from the research team, and a pilot emblem on her chest.

“What is it? Colonel Wenzel?”

“Major General. Our army will be preparing to counter the mass scale attacks from the enemy, and the various squads of the 177th will have to be regrouped. I hope this time, you will return me my troops.”

Some not-so-kind whispers immediately echoed in the large meeting room.

And in response to the stinging malice, the pretty lady showed a smile. The Major General let out a little sigh.

“The “Reginleif” is still in its experimental phase, and it is unknown if it can be used for solo combat. It might be more appropriate to mix them along with the “Vanargands” like before.”

“If I may say something, Major General. Of the 177th, or even 8th army, Nordlicht has taken down the most units. This should justify solo operations, I presume?”

“Conversely, the loss rate has been exponential...half the field dress were destroyed during the first battle. It is not a unit worth trusting.”

“Please consider that a selection phase. The loss rate beyond that has been low.”

A voice came from a corner of the room.

“Sure can boast with the experienced Eighty-Sixers there...a death merchant desperate to recover, sending those pitiful kids back onto the battlefield.”

Upon hearing those words that seemed furious rather than condescending, the pretty lady’s face froze.

Her eyes flickered, before she swallowed whatever feelings she had, and spoke up again,

“–My XM2 “Reginleif” mobility surpasses the “Legion”, and with appropriate tactics, the combat capabilities are no inferior...given the onslaught of the “Legion” far surpassing us in numbers, our current tactics won’t be enough. I do believe we need to think out of the box, and beat the numerically superior enemy with the few elites.”

The pretty lady then smiled politely.

The pretty purple eyes were staring right at the Major General.

And the Major General looked back, narrowing his eyes.

He knew what this younger lady, who was his peer in military college, was thinking,

What? Hurry up and agree to it already! This spider girl.

“For the sake of the peace of the Federation citizens, I do suggest looking into proper usage of :the “Reginleifs” and the Nordlicht forces, Major General.”

†

The “Legion” had made its way to the second defense line, and on the previous night, it was beaten back by the Federation.

“Leaving that aside, can’t we have a change of how we’re used here...sortie when we receive request for aid, and get locked back in the hangar or warehouse once we’re done. They think we’re dogs or something?”

“Request for aid’s always at the last minute. The base there doesn’t

have the time to actually take us in, I think.”

In a corner of the 13th FOB acting as the temporary dormitory, Raiden was sitting on a simple bed on the canvas floor by the “Juggernauts”, grumbling away, while Shinn, sitting on another bed next to him, flatly retorted.

The mornings of an army was often early. Outside the hangar, the mechanics of the base had begun work, and the thousands of soldiers started to buzz. These two, unaffiliated to this base, had nothing to do.

Nordlicht’s base was at the Divisional Headquarters to the back, and they, as the members of the mobile defense team, were on the frontlines with no base, and were in this abnormal situation.

Specifically, the base calling for aid would providing supplies and lodging as a FOB, until they received a distress call again. The ones calling for aid however were not platoons, but units instead, and even though they were in the same battalion, they would end up living at various bases. They had been living this life ever since they were assigned to this squad.

Luckily, the various FOB would also accept soldiers from the other platoons, and would provide the bare minimal lodging and meals.

There were private rooms installed in this case, even in uninhabited areas, and the females, including Frederica, were assigned individual rooms.

“Basically, the “Reginleifs” are just prototype units for testing, and the higher-ups probably never thought of tweaking it. Probably don’t have the time.”

“Lots of us were killed off...they’re probably coming, just as you predicted.”

Raiden looked aside at Shinn, who merely shrugged.

His ability, granted by his brother and never disappeared after the latter was buried away,

It was no longer a matter of ‘they’ll come soon’.

“To be precise, they might come at any given moment...it has been like this for a while.”

The morning buzz of the buzz was overpowered by the groans of the ghosts, sounding a little distant to Shinn.

“–Two of our men died, Fabio and Beata of the second squad. They could have avoided death, but some soldiers were surrounded by Grauwolfs, and they said there were people they knew there, so they went to save them.”

Creaking sounds echoed with the footsteps as they walked down the corridors of the barracks.

Nordlicht squadron, which had no base on the frontlines, naturally had no office for the squad leader and vice leader. Thus, the reporting to be done in the office was done calmly, with Bernault tailing behind Shinn.

“Now we got less than 20 men in our forces. We did ask for resupplies, but the main army has lost quite a number too, so they probably won’t send any over to us. Just a bunch of Wargus mercenaries deployed by the research branch...and our leader’s a weirdo unpopular with both the military and the research branch.”

The leader of the 1028th Experimental squad, Lieutenant Colonel Grethe Wenzel.

Shinn had only met her on the day he joined, and never communicated with her directly.

“Well, since she built the “Juggernaut”, I don’t think she’ll be popular.”

“That’s the pilot crusher who had ten pilots hospitalized during the testing. That leader’s the princess of her family’s military business. We won’t have to worry about a change of spare parts and backup units, but a death merchant selling weapons doesn’t sound good, ya.”

In response to Bernault's chatter, Shinn flatly responded,

"I'm already used to lack of backup or supplies. If they send over the spare parts, that's good enough for me."

"How many times have I said that it's just the Republic's weird way of doing things. Please don't say that it's fine with that ridiculous standard of you Eighty-Sixers, will ya?"

Upon hearing that Shinn was Eighty-Sixer, Bernault immediately understood.

Initially, Nordlicht was a battalion, with an actual captain leading them.

However, to put it mildly, the captain was not capable, and during the first battle, many of the members died under his poor command, including himself. Shinn, who was just the platoon subcommander, took over, and they had assumed they would be done for. How could a brat out of special cadet school bear the responsibility of a commander?

He was wrong, utterly wrong.

However,

"...Isn't it better off for you to stay with the regular armored corps? Why come here to suffer with us?"

"I feel more at ease here. There's too much regimentation in tactics and command chain in the regular army. It's very inconvenient."

There were no specified tactics when he was fighting as a 'drone' of the Republic, and no Handler who actually gave commands (except for the last one). Thus, the personal judgement and responsibilities came naturally, and surely he would not be happy to look up to his superiors' orders, and abide by the rules of the army.

Bernault snorted.

"A teenage brat going 'very inconvenient'?...Well, for us folks here,

if we aren't commanded to waste our lives for nothing, that's good enough. Doesn't matter even if the commander's an unsentimental brat who always charges first and is a steel-faced death god who'll make us crazy if we synchronize carelessly."

While Bernault was blunt in his words, Shinn never listened, and nonchalantly lifted his head to look out of the window.

His eyes were fixated upon an open-top truck that was driving down the dirt road, whiffing up dust.

There were heaps of black cadaver bags atop the truck, appearing like harvests of beans and yam. It was probably the KIA who were killed in combat the previous day.

Eugene too was probably taken back. So Shinn thought.

He was thinking of the peer who said he wanted to fight for his family.

—Then, you.

Shinn knew what Eugene did not ask him...but back then, how would he have answered.

"Lieutenant...Lieutenant, you listening?"

Regaining his senses, Shinn found Bernault's bewildered face looking at him.

"Ahh...sorry."

"Well, we know you brats need to sleep at night, and fighting at night over the past few days has been sorta tiring...but that might be a little too much, ya think?"

Bernault looked forward, kept quiet, and stopped in his tracks.



Shinn looked over at where he was looking, and understood what he was getting at.

Frederica, lacking sleep over the past few days, was wearing a set of pajamas as she appeared with messy bedhair and sleepy eyes. She was dragging a teddy bear with one hand, approaching them while bare-footed.

Federation military regulations would have deemed her appearance shoddy. The Wargus Bernault, deemed as a mercenary, had lax military standards, and Shinn, who was deemed as a drone, did not have any knowledge of military regulations. Neither of them bothered with that.

However, the top three buttons of her blouse unbuttoned as it was draped loosely upon her, and the tender bare right shoulder to the top of her chest was exposed. Even if she was a ten year old who had nothing to be seen, it was unsightly.

“Frederica, change your clothes if you’re going out. If not, go sleep a little more.”

“Uuu, Kiri, comb my hair.”

Shinn let out a sigh.

“Frederica.”

The bloody red eyes blinked, and looked up in surprise,

“Shinei...sorry, mistaken here...”

She flatly responded, but intended to continue forward while appearing thus, so Shinn grabbed her by the collar.

Angel, who just happened to pop by, was tasked with her.

“Sorry Angel. I’ll leave her to you.”

“What is it? ...Goodness, Frederica! Why are you like this? Come

here, hurry! Seo, get Frederica's uniform!"

"Eh, we got that here!? Well whatever."

And Seo, who just happened to be passing by, was assigned to Frederica's room."

After watching them leave, Bernault spoke up,

"Now where was I...ahh yeah. Those 'goods' are here again. HQ just contacted us."

"Goods? ...Ahh..."

Realizing what was going on, he sighed.

They had received asylum in the Federation for half a year...all this while, the 'kind citizens' had been giving them items and support.

They were no longer children, but they were given dolls and drawing books, and there was excessive concern and sympathy in their letters. Ernst had never revealed anything about the Eighty-Sixers, to ensure that they could live stable lives as residents. Perhaps it was due to this that the Federation's image of 'pitiful young children who were oppressed by the savage Republic' would never fade away.

Shinn never cared about how others treated them, and never cared about others giving them kindness and pity. He was frustrated however if they were to display such emotions to him. It did not feel good after all.

"Discard them, like usual...how many times must I say that checking them all is a waste of time. Don't ask me again."

"That's what HQ seemed to have thought. Checking them boxes and receiving cheap sympathy is probably you guys probably don't want. But I'll just report this to you, or else I'll be accused of shirking responsibility."

Shinn looked over to the hulking sergeant who was at least double his age.

“Just a formality, lieutenant. An army’s still an organization of humans. Humans are irrational, inefficient animals, so there will be irrational, inefficient procedures.”

Well, it was the same for the Republic too.

Shinn recalled his days of doing his battle reports properly, submitting his patrol reports regularly, and the silver bell voice that he was really annoyed by initially...upon recalling that, the instance of memory was puffed aside by Bernault’s gruff voice.

“Anyway–this is the end of report, commander. Please sign here.”

Shinn immediately sighed.

“...I say.”

During breakfast, Seo pretended to be in a bad mood,

“I was nice enough to bring a change of clothes, and then you wouldn’t open the door, and called me a rapist. Isn’t this too much, you think? And you smacked the doll onto me. Throwing is one thing, but smacking? Did I do anything to deserve this?”

It all happened on the previous night, after Angel had told him to bring the washed uniform over.

It was a trivial matter, but it was a quite a calamity for Seo, who proceeded to snip at Frederica regarding this. Angel, who had witnessed everything, stifled a laugh as she chuckled, while Raiden and Krena were stunned, while Shinn remained nonchalant as usual.

Though they were all under Nordlicht, the five had not been gathered together like this in a long while, for they were assigned to different squads. They were in charge of mobile defences, and often ventured everywhere.

The defense of the Western battlefield was frantic, to a point where they had to send in weird prototypes and experimental squads that were just introduced into actual combat without the results to show for it.

Frederica lowered her reddened face.

“Frederica too, you could have worn your blouse properly, but you took it off immediately.”

“I never saw anyone that sleepy. Couldn’t you have slept little more if you’re that tired?”

“!! Ehh Shut up! Shaddap!”

Seo’s casual concern was brushed aside like nothing.

“Besides, the fault is yours for trying to enter without knocking, while a fine lady is changing! Am I right, Krena?”

“I did knock. And who’s the fine lady here?”

“And in any case, why did you strip without getting your change of clothes.”

“Basically, it’s your fault for running down the corridor half-naked and in a daze, Frederica.”

“Wh-who ran down the corridor half-naked? Raiden, from whom did you hear that from!? You were not around at that moment!”

Of course.

Everyone present turned towards Shinn, who ignored them.

Frederica lowered her head,

“...Never have I expected you to be so mischievous...”

“You forced yourself to come along, couldn’t take care of your body well, and couldn’t speak well, so I just told them to send you back to base.”

Frederica immediately pouted her mouth unhappily as she looked up to glare at him. Without looking at her, Shinn continued calmly,

“A Mascot doesn’t have to follow the rules of a soldier, and has no

obligation to sortie. I'm not saying that you're useless, just that we can't guarantee your safety. Better to send you to the backline, and we can be more assured."

"But that cannot do...to witness everything, I have come."

Raiden chuckled.

"Then starting tomorrow, you can't come out running half-naked."

"Do not mention that already. Have you not have enough!?"

Again, Frederica hollered with her face flushed.

It was too pitiful of her to keep teasing her, so the five decided to stop.

"So. Guess we're going to start packing up today." Said Krena.

The battles would end, but the frontline work never did. They were to repair or rebuild heavily damaged defense installations, reclaimed the damaged remains of both sides, and reclaim the corpses of friendlies.

The 177th Armored Battalion managed to fend off the attacks, but it took heavy losses, and was short-handed everywhere."

"Either that, or we're to patrol the Contested Area...the armored division seemed to lost quite a number during the battle yesterday."

"The Main Army won't send in patrols for no real reason. It's troublesome to obey orders even though we know it's useless."

"What about you, Angel?"

"I suppose so..."

Frederica closed the schedule book with the cute anime illustration, and let out a sigh unbecoming of a child.

"It does seem that all of you are used to being deployed here and

there.”

Ignoring the surprised looks from everyone, she flatly continued.

The Mascot’s role was simply to ‘exist in the squad’, but Frederica was already assigned to the experimental squad while Shinn and the others were already in cadet school, and she was in charge of contacting the research branch and the commander.

“Grethe is calling for us. We are going home, the headquarters of us.”

The HQ of the 177th Battalion was an old Empire airbase, with many hangars, and repair rooms, along with large runways that were simply used for ferrying transports. At one corner of the barracks, next to a hangar, was the 1028th Experimental headquarters, a borrowed control room.

“–First of all, good work for providing aid every day.”

In the briefing room of glass walls, where the hangar downstairs could be seen, the commander of the 1028th experimental squad, Lieutenant Colonel Grethe Wenzel greeted everyone with her lips coated red.

Gathered were the research branch, the managers of the technical crew, and the Processors who oversaw the squad leaders, basically the five Eighty-Sixers including Shinn. Seeing the five squad leaders bring the average age down greatly, Grethe grimaced.

“Compared to a month ago, there has been a lot of changes to the combat personnel...but it does seem the “Reginleifs” suit you Eighty-Sixers and mercenaries.

She had a look at the hangar beyond the soundproof glass, towards the ‘workpieces’ that were no more than twenty given full inspection and maintenance, having returned to roost after a long while.

The Federation had finally introduced a high mobility field dress, the “Reginleif”, the first in its history.

It was designed with mobility being the focal concept, that the ‘enemy could not take aim with its high mobility’, and was a result of her ideals and beliefs.

The 120mm tank cannon of the Löwe remained powerful, and even the “Vanargand” could only withstand a hit with its front armor; anywhere else, and it would be taken down. In that case, maybe they should ditch the armor and evade with mobility, which might increase the survival rates of the pilots.

A month ago, training was done, and they were ready to sortie. Back then, there were fifty “Reginleif” units the battalion, and looked quite the impressive sight in the hangar.

At this point, the massive hangar was mostly empty, with debris of the units containing ammo cache the 88mm cannon camped under the shutters, showing a forlorn sight.

There were less than half of the existing units, and the young squad leaders were in their later teens.

But a conclusion could not be made yet...probably.

“Before a notification, I will like to inform you of something good. The United Kingdom of Roa Graecia and the Wald Alliance still remain. Our patrols have captured their wireless signals.”

Since before the start of the war against the “Legion”, the United Kingdom of Roa Graecia was the last imperial country of the continent, to the north of the Republic and the Federation (formerly the Empire), and the Wald Alliance was a militant neutral country to the South.

Neither sides could contact each other due to the jamming, unable to ascertain if they were still alive. Given the detectable range however, it appeared they could.

“It seemed they too managed to establish some defences and maintain survival. The United Kingdom is slowly moving south, and we probably can provide personnel and goods transfer. A joint operation too might be on the cards...but we have no detection of

signals from the other countries, including the Republic of San Magnolia to the West...”

Grethe said, and glanced to the side, only to see Seo with his face lazily resting on his hand, and Krena sprawled on the table, so she grimaced.

They showed no worry of their country, and did not laugh at this matter even though they were oppressed. They really did not care. *The wounds sure are deep*, so she thought.

Shinn and Raiden were a little more serious, but it appeared they were worried about something else, or somebody else. Angel would give them looks from time to time, and she probably felt the same.

The chief mechanic, with some white in his red hair, spoke up,

“Alright LC, the messages aren’t exactly good, right?”

Hearing his half-joking tone, Grethe nodded,

“Unfortunately, no...our expectation is that the “Legion” will launch a full-scale assault in the coming days.”

The head honcho of the research branch, the only civilian in the room, gasped.

At the same moment, the lax attitude from the squad leaders vanished. An inappropriate comparison would be the bored watchdogs napping in their kennels, only to lift their heads after hearing the whistle.

“Supposedly, the Western forces will be increasing its fighting strength, and regrouping all current forces. Our 1028th Experimental Squad will also be sorted as a formal armored division, to the 15th FOB. Our squad will be under the 141st Regiment, and I shall take direct command...it won’t be like before where you are assigned in squads and deployed everywhere, you will be deploying as a full platoon to fight the others. Our “Reginleif” and Nordlicht squadron shall show what we are made off...any questions?”

“–How’s the scale of the assault.”

Shinn asked with the usual nonchalance, either because he had expected a realignment, or had no interest in it. Grethe smiled,

“Currently, it is predicted that we can handle it with the forces we have, and reinforcements are merely a precaution...speaking of which, you have submitted a report regarding this, Second Lieutenant Nouzen.”

Raiden glanced aside at Shinn.

The latter ignored the look. Grethe noticed this, but did not realize the intent, so she let this pass.

“There are good points to note from the viewpoint of a frontline commander, and considering you were the leader of the ex-Republic’s elites, it is an interesting perspective. However, is it not a little too daring to predict the attacks of the entire Western battlefield just by surveying a battlefield occupied by a battalion?”

Shinn seemed to have expected this question, for he simply answered,

“The area the 177th is responsible for is particularly unique, and I think there is sufficient evidence to deduce based on the situation there...I had a feeling during the battle just now that the “Legion” was retreating, and not beaten back by us.”

We did not fend off the enemy,

Were we lured in?

The smile vanished from Grethe’s face,

“The larger the battle area, the longer it will be stretched. The defense line and FOB were pushed forward and built just three months ago...personally, I don’t think the present situation is optimistic in any way.”

“...How sharp you are. You can be cuter if you act a little more

innocent.”

She teased, but Shinn did not bat an eyelid, so she sighed.

“Right you are, Lieutenant. It appears Command has known of this. However, even if we maintain our lines like this, it’s only a matter of time until the Federation shows weaknesses. The “Legion” won’t be waiting to be destroyed. We have to keep advancing and eradicate them completely.”

“ ... ”

“And also, even though the “Legion” is intending to surround us and attack, you have detected too many enemies, far beyond the numbers the analytical branch has given.”

It was far more than the theoretical numbers and production values of the Weisels, and even with reinforcements, the entire Western frontlines was in a disadvantageded.

Grethe would have considered removing the usually stoic boy from his position if his reports had not exhibited knowledge and intelligence despite his predicament. Simply put, it was preposterous.

Perhaps the Republic’s experiences of fighting the “Legion” in such fatal weapons and harsh conditions resulted in his overestimating the enemy as a result.

If necessary, he would take independent action while ignoring military orders and discipline (but Grethe had been able to protect him due to his accomplishments)...it appeared the trauma the Republic had inflicted on him was great.

“There is no need to worry...our Federation is different from the Republic, and will not ignore the threat before us. We will do everything we have to do thoroughly, even it is to collect intel, or to analyze them. Most importantly, the Federation will never abandon its allies.”

There was no need to fight while stranded on the battlefield, as they were on the Republic’s.

They did not have to struggle for their lives, without the intel and support, and while overwhelmingly few in numbers.

“ ... ”

The bloody red eyes merely lowered, and closed; it was unknown if he had understood her.

Seeing this, Grethe showed a smile.

She had a long way to go before she could gain their trust.

“Also, I’ll like to take the opportunity to welcome new comrades into our squad. I shall introduce them, so all squad members, please wait a little moment.”

Follow me, so Grethe ordered, and Shinn followed her through the corridor of the base, her heels tapping at the floor, causing a crisp sound to echo. They had just bade farewell to the familiar chief mechanic and the research chief whose words would leave others speechless whenever he did his inspection. Following them were the other Eighty-Sixers.

“So what do you think of the “Reginleif”, Lieutenants? Caught your fancy? –Compared to the old aluminium coffin you rode on.”

Grethe suddenly turned around, her face beaming,

“I was in the base all of you were housed in. Back then, I could not speak to you directly, due to espionage and quarantine reasons...your partner was placed in my research lab. Want to have a look?”

“...No need.”

It was one of his spare units; whenever a unit he was using was on the verge of being scrapped and unrepairable, he would change units, and thus would not spend much time using them. However, it did not mean he thought nothing of these units. As a pilot who once roamed the battlefield, he was unwilling to be reunited with the partner that should be scrapped and put to rest, for it would be akin to digging up

a grave.

“...The grading report was probably submitted along with the Para-RAID.”

The main reason for the establishment of the 1028th was to test the “Juggernaut” and the Para-RAID use. There would be grading reports and the checks on the human body, to determine how humans would be affected.

“I know. Just want to hear your report. You did pilot a similar field dress by the Republic after all.”

Shinn let out a sigh.”

“If you’re talking about the “Juggernaut”.”

Grethe frowned.

“It’s the “Reginleif”.”

““Juggernaut”.”

“I said it’s the “Reginleif”.”

““Juggernaut”.”

“...Yes yes whatever. And then?”

Grethe shook her head unhappily. Raiden was behind them, trying to stifle his laugh, and ended up coughing.

Shinn ignored them, and continued,

“Basically, it’s an aluminium coffin somewhat better than the Republic’s “Juggernaut”.”

Grethe went silent for about ten seconds or so.

And then, with a hurt look, she said,

“...Really”

“Eh, you didn’t know?”

“Basically, that thing’s a pilot crusher.”

Krena and Seo muttered away, but Grethe did not hear them due to her shock.

The “Reginleif” mobility was truly ridiculously high.

After all, the initial development concept was to match the mobility of the “Legion”, and not the personal safety of the pilot. Thus, there were many operators who were eviscerated during the testing phase. After they were introduced for actual combat, there were many who were also eaten away by the “Reginleif”

Shinn, Raiden and the others managed to hang on because they were Eighty-Sixers. While they were growing during their early teens, they began piloted the Republic’s “Juggernaut” that were not designed with the pilot’s personal safety in consideration, and got used to it.

“I never...expected such a shocking thought. It’s so weak, fragile... er...I do wonder if the fools who designed such field dresses are really alright...”

It was callous of her to mention this before the ex-Processors, but it unfortunately was the truth, and Shinn did not mind.

“...Seriously, did you guys really pilot such scrap metal full dresses in the Republic!?”

“There was nothing else.”

“Ah, I see...”

Grethe muttered a few words, probably cursing at the factories of the Republic,

“...It’s not a bad unit, I think. It is a little selective of its pilot, but it’s fast, and has good controls, and takes little turns. The “Vanargand” too is a steel coffin, so this looks a lot more comfortable than that.”

The Eighty-Sixers, already used to the Republic's "Juggernaut" that was no different from nothing, never trusted in the defensive capabilities of the armor. Compared to the slow "Vanargand" that relied on its armor, the "Reginleif", with its enhanced mobility and able to evade the enemy, was a lot better.

"Really...but I do get the feeling you are not praising it..."

"...But Shinn is not praising it in any way."

Angel's quiet retort remained ignored.

Grethe sighed, and saig,

"So why did you sign up to be the Processors?"

"I heard you're the one who chose us Eighty-Sixers as candidates, Lieutenant Colonel."

"Just as test pilots. I never thought you would join the actual corps. Your experiences and skills did help greatly...but truth be told, I am thoroughly opposed to having young soldiers like you take the field. Especially when you are Eighty-Sixers."

Shinn looked towards Grethe, who shrugged,

"I too was a pilot. Ten years ago, when the war against the "Legion" just started. I was the same age as you are...I was a cadet for the air force, and the airspace got taken by the "Legion"."

With the anti-air cannons of the Stachelschwein and the jamming of the Eintagsfliege prevalent, the airspace from the Contested Area to the "Legion" controlled area was completely seized. This appeared to be the case for both the Federation and the Republic.

"I did just the military with many of my friends who were cadets... and many of them died. We piloted the slow "Vanargand", a few steps forward, and the "Legion" got behind us before wiping us out. I was thinking it would be great if there was a faster machine. That was why I built the "Reginleif"."

Grethe, who had lowered her eyes in remembrance, lifted her eyes, and smiled,

“...I do thank you for your unfiltered suggestion, Second Lieutenant, and everyone else...I will have you give a few better opinions after the next modification, so please do look forward to it, okay?”

They exited the gate of the base, they stepped on the newly paved asphalt road. At the end of the road, there was the lush green grassland of the summer.

Beyond that, Shinn’s eyes remained upon the rail tracks buried amongst the grass.

He remembered the eight rail tracks of multiple lines extended to the distance.

This was the place.

“When you guys made your way through, this place was “Legion” controlled territory.”

Grethe turned around, and smiled. The red lips showed pride..

“It has been half a year. We fought our way here.”

Ahh... a sigh from the back reached Shinn’s ears.

Upon the lush green grassland of summer, the white flowers bloomed. Lying in an unfamiliar coffin of glass were five, no, four “Juggernauts” from the Republic, along with a “Scavenger”.

“We discovered this while pushing up our lines. I know it may be unpleasant, but we did dig them up and investigate them. The names on the grave plates were found along them...and they were put back to their old spot after their names were recorded on this cenotaph, so don’t worry”

Grethe gently touched a stone monument built to the said of the glass coffin. Having visited the Federation’s graveyard, Shinn know it

was the Federation's version of the cenotaph.

“We don't know what the rules are in the Federation, but in the Federation, the people will exalt the heroes who protect the country. Thus, the names of the dead will remain on this cenotaph in the national graveyard...but we did think your comrades would have rested upon the land you have finally arrived at. Thus, we left their graves plate here.”

“...”

A slight feeling of emptiness appeared in the chest.

Neither the dead, nor him had expected them to remain on this earth in such a miniature, pretty monument.

All he had hoped for was that those that knew him could remember him from time to time—

—Can you please not forget about us, Major?

That was what he had hoped for that night, while the blooming fireworks exploded in the sky.

“...Lieutenant?”

“It's nothing.”

He shook his head. It appeared the Federation had different thoughts on this issue compared to them. Shinn had not hoped for them to understand...but the manner in which they expressed their thoughts was something worth being grateful for.”

Also, they did not discard the remaining plates with the engraved names of the comrades, the proofs that they once existed, or shifted them away along with the other data.

I gave it a really long mission to do thought, so he thought as he looked at the remains of Fido concealed inside the glass coffin.

We command you to continue to do so, until you rot away.

The “Legion” too had a unit used to remain the remains of the units, the Tausendfüßler. One day, these remains would be taken away, or be eroded away by the weather. Shinn had assumed they would die soon after they left, and soon, Fido’s mission would end...so he thought.

He heard familiar footsteps behind him, and they stopped nearby.

It was the sound of four limbs tapping away.

Looking back, he found the massive body of the “Scavenger”.

The body with distinct joints had four short, stout legs, and two mechanical arms. It had an old, ugly appearance that was rare even on the Republic’s battlefield.

Following that, the fleeting footsteps of military boots hurried over. Raiden ducked to the side, and appearing was Frederica, who nearly collided into him.

“Hey! Even if you are rushing, you cannot just leave me behind!”

Her hands were on her knees, and she was panting away. Krena reached out, patting away at the twigs, petals and bright colored insects clinging onto Frederica’s long hair and uniform.

“Oh yeah, Frederica, where did you go?”

Frederica did not participate in the meeting, and was gone before they knew it.

“To-to the, research lab, and get this fellow, working. This, has been, a surprise, Grethe, and the, other, researchers had prepared.”

“Surprise?”

“You came from the research lab? You alright? Still alive?”

“I rode this fellow, here, and then, this thing suddenly sped up, once it saw, you and so, abandoned ! was.”

“Well now, Frederica, calm down, regain your breath. You can talk after that.”

“...And then, what is this?”

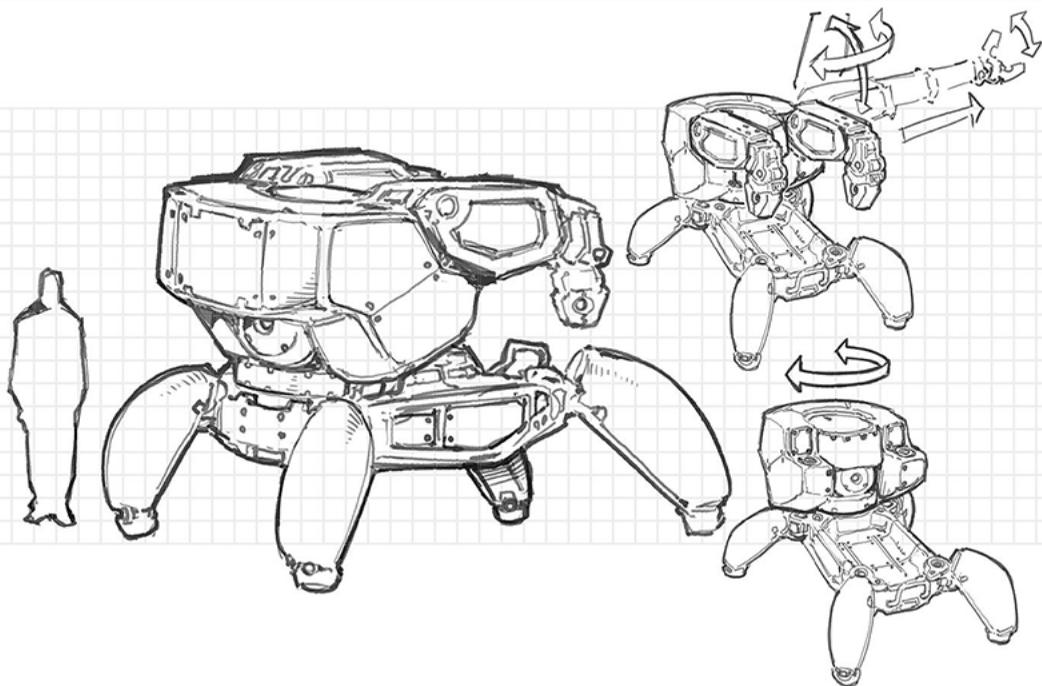
Frederica regained her breath, and then straightened herself proudly.

“An excellent question it is, Raiden. So this one,”

“–Fido?”

FRIENDLY UNIT

Friendly Unit introduction



Automated Support Unit

Scavenger

Specs:

'Manufacturers (nickname)
Republic: Republic Military Industries (RMI)/
M101 'Barrett'
Federation: WHM/"Scavenger"
Full Length: 3.1m / Full height: 2.5m

Fixed Armaments.

Super precision arms X 2
Large container mount X 2.

The Republic's unmanned unit "Scavenger" is created for support purpose. It can be equipped with energy packs and ammunition, and is dubbed "Scavenger" to reclaim spare parts from other disabled units.

Contains a simple AI, and was originally intended for simple work. However, the individual unit 'FIDO' serving Squad Spearhead led by Shinn might have learned much over the intense battles, and was able to understand what Shinn and the others were saying. It could be used to reclaim parts of the dead, and had surpassed its original capabilities as a work unit.

Shinn cut them off, basically having paid no heed to them at all. Raiden gave a miffed look,

“Hey, are you the type to call everything you think of as a pet Fido or something?”

“Not at all...”

Frederica was elated,

“So you do recognize it after all. Yes, thus the Fido who fought alongside you.”

A moment of silence.

“”””Huuhhh!?”””””

Four of them exclaimed in unison.

Shinn in turn lifted his eyes towards the large body of Fido, and betrayed a rare reaction as he widened his eyes, remaining still.

“While those graves were inspected, this fellow here had an inspection. The interface was damaged, but luckily, the core unit remained intact, and thus repairable to this state. Oh, its controls has been enhanced, so you may expect it to perform during battles.”

Though I'd admit is as ugly as usual. Probably some humor from the research lab chief who assembled the unit. So she quipped.

Since it was left along with the other graves and their personal units, one would suppose it was a companion unit they really missed. In that case, it probably was better to maintain its old appearance.

“Maybe it thought it was ‘dead’, so I’d assume. Once it was transplanted into its new body, in no way had it moved at all. Only when...”

Frederica showed a grimace,

“Only when it heard of your name, Shinei, did it move...sure did miss you.”

One had to wonder, how many could sense the jealousy in her tone.

Shinn in particular never noticed, for he was not listening.

Fido approached him from the front, and stopped within reach.

“...Pii...”

The optical sensor peered up at Shinn’s face. The latter sighed.

“We command you to continue to do so, until you rot away. Didn’t I tell you to do so?”

“Pii...”

It then shrank back (the sensors and unit appeared to act this way). Seeing that, Shinn chuckled.

He reached out for the cold metal casing. The countless scars were no longer on the surface.

“Well...it’s good to see you again though.”

“Pii.”

This mere trash picker might be feeling emotional too. The optical sensors continued to flicker, as though tears were going to break out from the dam.

“Pii...!”

The massive body capable of lifting at least ten tonnes suddenly darted forward, perhaps trying to mimic an embrace.

Shinn, having expected this, sidestepped it.

Fido, unable to stop in time, continued to roll down, and only stopped once it collided with the debris of a Löwe. Thunk...it collided,

giving off a long, deep sound like a bell.

Fido immediately went silent, and Seo looked towards it, saying,

“Well, still the same as usual.”

“! C-can you show some concern for it?”

Frederica was the only one panicking,

“Fido won’t break with one or two of that.”

“But I am talking about Shinei! Good thing he dodged, but that was dangerous!”

“Well, Shinn is able to predict Fido’s movements, it seemed.”

Nobody cared nor knew if it was due to them spending time together for five years, or that he was already used to Fido’s antics.

Seeing its head turn around dejectedly despite having expected this, Shinn’s smile grew.

Grethe, witnessing this by the side, gave a smile.

Thank goodness,

“...You’re finally smiling, Lieutenant.”

†

The main base of Nordlicht was within the headquarters of the 177th Armor Battalion, and the Processors had personal rooms in the base barracks.

However, ever since they were assigned squads, they spent days

foraying the various bases on the frontlines, and hardly returned, and it did not feel like home to them. Inside his cramped, shoddy person room, Shinn was reading a philosophical book, his eyes on the words while not reading them at all. He heard a knock, and lifted his head.

There was some free time from dinner till bedtime. The barracks, far from the hangar, could not receive any sound, while the commotions at the cafeteria remained distant. This remained the same for both the Federation, and the Eighty Sixth area.

He opened the door, and found Frederica there.

“!...Can you please change your habit of walking without making any sounds...!? It is bad for my heart!”

She exclaimed.

I can't change this habit even if you as me to, and that's why it's a habit. Shinn had no intention to change for the better, and Frederica did not know that.

“And in any case, how in goodness sake are you able to walk so quietly with those boots...? I cannot hear any shaking of the floor.”

“It's not like I had any intention to keep it hushed.”

Daiya, Kaie and Kino had told him not to do so again, standing behind them so discreetly made him appear as a real death god, and that it was terrifying.

Shinn pulled the door instead, and shuffled to the side, inviting her in. She teetered into the room, making loud sounds. She gently sat upon the hard bed, and looked around the simple, dead-looking room that was like a jail cell.

“How disappointing...you could have decorated this place with some photos, drawings, or a book you like. How depressing it is to view your room.”

“It's just a place to sleep. Will be troublesome if there's more belongings.”

Truth be told, he was not reading because he liked to read. Whenever he had matters on his mind, he would be distracted. Reading was a momentary solace for him, for his ears continued to be filled with the voices of the Dead.

Back when he was in Spearhead Squadron, he built a simple bookshelf in his room, and the reason too was that he was lazy to return to the library that was a ruin.

Though they were protected by the Federation for a year, Shinn's concern and obsession that all things physical remained as little as usual.

Frederica seemed to have realized it, and she frowned,

“Fool, how is this room just for sleeping. This is your place, a place to return to. A temporal barrack it may be...but no good it is to keep empty.”

It would be understandable if he was still in the Eighty Sixth area, or Spearhead squadron. She sighed. The Eighty Sixers in that country would never be able to return.

“Eugene's room was filled with photos.”

“You cleared it?”

“They were lacking manpower, so it so happened that I helped clear his belongings...they were all photos of his little sister. Never saw photos of his parents. Maybe she was his last kin.”

“ ... ”

I wonder if a photo of Eugene remains with his sister, thinking that, Shinn felt some pain in his head.

There was the little girl he met in the capital's library.

Shinn was of a similar age as he when he lost his parents and brother, and with the arduous battlefield, he gradually lost memories of them.

Eugene, who hoped for his little sister to have a happy life, kept thinking of her until the very end. Thinking how he would vanish from her memories...Shinn felt sadness.

“...I should not have asked of his name.”

Frederica’s ability would not work on anyone she had just met. With a name, and a few words, she could see that person’s past and present with her ‘eyes’.

If she had not spoken with him that morning, she would not have known of his death that day.

“No way you are thinking that people you know end up dead later, are you? I do feel the same. In no way do we no when we will die...but it is better to have known others. For you can remember them.”

Shinn blinked.

“If there’s no need to, I’ll rather not link that to the deaths of anyone.”

Shinn himself had lost his family, and was deployed through the intense battlefields as a Processor, seeing the other squad members die one after another. For Shinn, those were his true thoughts.

He did not regret the promise he made with his comrades in his first squad.

He did not regret the decision to bring along the comrades who fought valiantly and died on the battlefield.

He was not numb to losses in any way...but that, for the girl who had to carry the soul of her own knight, there was no obligation for her to bear any more responsibility.

Hmph, so Frederica snorted.

“Is that all you have to say?...you all-loving death god.”

“Anyway, what is it?”

Certainly she did not drop by to critique the decorations of the room.

Frederica blinked, and then seemed to have recalled. Her vision started to become unstable.

“Erm, well, in fact...”

After some hesitation, she did not lift her head, and continued to mutter with a teeny-weeny voice,

“...Sorry about the morning. Erm...”

Ahh, that. That morning.

Kiri.

He had not known of the name of Frederica’s knight.

“Am I similar to him?”

“Not exactly an exact replica, but the back looks similar. Both of you are of the same family after all. Half the bloodline is the same, actually.”

Hearing this unexpected truth, Shinn looked over at Frederica, who was grinning mischievously like a child who had succeeded her prank.

“My Knight, Kiriya Nouzen, the same tribe Nouzen...have your father mentioned anything anything of your family lineage?”

“Uhh.”

His father had not mentioned anything about time. Perhaps, even if it was mentioned, Shinn had long forgotten about it.

“He so happened to be of your family lineage. Do show some concern...since the beginning of the Empire, the Nouzens were an Onyx family of martial artists. Many have inherited the bloodline of outstanding combat ability, and it always bore the responsibility to

protect the King...your family had served the royal family, all of them born with abnormal ability, and even of the old nobles, many inherited such a bloodline. The family forbade mixed-marriages to preserve such abilities...Shinei, this might be the reason why your family emigrated to the Republic.”

Even after hearing that, Shinn remained unfazed.

For he did not remember his parents having ties to the Federation, and did not remember them moving to the Republic. Not at all.—no.

s—It’s all your fault.

Whenever he tried to recall, that scene would first appear before him. Even though he knew it was not his fault, it remained the same.

—Mom’s death, my inevitable death, it’s going to be all your fault!

Frederica, engrossed in her own memories, did not realize Shinn was frozen in place,

“Kiriya was not of direct relation to the Marquis Nouzen family, and is a little distant from your bloodline. About four years older than you...and last I saw of him, he was the same age as you are now.”

Soon after Frederica ascended to the throne, the civil revolution broke out. She was chased out of the palace before she understood anything, arrived at the castle by the border, and was stationed there along with the monarchy side, along with her close guards. The fortress was named Rozen Fort. It was said that in the beginning of the Empire, it defended against the barbarians, whose blood stained the walls a bloody rose. Legend also had it that it had never fallen, and it was the last bastion of the Empire.

There were only serious looking adults in the castle walls, and Kiriya, closest to Frederica’s age, was still ten years older, and the only one willing to be her playmate.

He combed her hair, plucked the fresh flowers from the garden. No matter the tantrums she threw, he remained by her side, and never was annoyed by her.

Frederica's eyes were filled with nostalgia. Suddenly, she giggled.

“Serious to a fault he was, and extremely inflexible at that too. As Raiden would say, he's damn serious...Shinei, surely you will not get along with him if you meet.”

She sounded mischievous. *Hmph*. Shinn snorted.

He would never know the personality of the knight he never met. Given her description, perhaps that might be the case.

“Sure sounds like I'll have trouble dealing with someone like him.”

“That certainly does come to mind. He kept telling me to look away from my books when talking to others, that there are rules everywhere to follow, whether it is in house, or military rules, and given you have ignored every admonishing, he would be utterly furious...sure is nostalgic.”

They were linked by blood, but they knew of neither each other's name nor appearance, let alone say goodbye to each other. Frederica showed a faint smile as she imagined these two youths interacting with each other, a scene that would never exist in reality, and she lowered her eyes.

“Once, he said that he wanted to meet...his counterpart in the Republic.”

Publicly, the master of the clan never forgave his son for eloping.

But in fact, he wanted to meet his own flesh and blood. When his grandsons were born, he sent a picture book exactly the same as the one I'm holding now. He never threw away the letters his son sent him

Hearing these words, Kiriya was smiling, but his hands were shaking.

During the initial phase of the revolution, as the battles took place in the capital of the Empire, Kiriya's family, and the nobles close to them were all dead.

The Marquis of Nouzen was on bad terms with the monarchy faction and Kiriya's father, so he had long given up on the administration, instead joining the civilians. After the Federation was established, he managed to preserve his prestige and clan. Frederica only knew of this after she was in the care of Ernest. Of course, Kiriya, besieged by the revolutionaries at the border castle, knew nothing of this.

He really wanted to meet them, and tell that he was of the same clan as them.

He wanted to tell them that he was alone, with no one to rely on... and it was so unbearable.

“ ... ”

Shinn could not experience the feeling.

He lost his family, he lost his memories of them, and he lost the place he could call his hometown, yet they did not matter to him.

He kept living, without relying on anyone else, nor anything. He was an Eighty-Sixer, having lived such a long time. He could not comprehend the need for strength other than his own when he was trying to protect himself.

“How did he end up with the “Legion”?”

Frederica remained silent for a long while.

“...The skirmish at Rozenfort was intense. The Federation assumed that if they caught I, the “Legion” would stop.”

It was true that the prime minister and the closest generals had the ability to control the “Legion”, and had used the “Legion” to secure strongholds. However, the “Legion” was simply designed to exterminate the enemy, could not determine non-combatants, and would leave anyone alive. It was hard for the “Legion” to execute such a complex command. During most situations, the defences had to send in human soldiers to fight, but humans fighting along machinery was a forbidden protocol, and most of the defendants died.

The youngest of the guards, Frederica's knight Kiriya too participated in the battle against the Federation that lasted for days.

As to be expected of a heir to the strongest warriors of the Empire, he slaughter masses of Federation soldiers every day.

“And then one day, Kiriya changed.”

His family and friends had died in the revolution, and the hometown he grew up in was his enemy, the guards who fought alongside him died one after another. It was likely Kiriya had lost too much.

Protecting Frederica had become the one mission to him, until he was slowly showing his lust for battle. She could often see him trample upon the corpses of the Federation, stand beside the side of the bloodied field dress, and smile at Frederica.

It was a calm, bright smile.

–*Princess.*

“Afraid of that him...I was.”

Thus, Frederica escaped the fortress.

After escaping, she was soon captured by the Federation army.

She was truly lucky that Ernst had arrived at that battlefield to patrol. She remained alive, and the imperial mantle of red and black were hung up as proof of the death of the Queen.

Kiriya witnessed it.

Given her ability to discern the past and present of those she was familiar with, Frederica knew that Kiriya saw everything.

Soon after, the fortress was broken through. He saw the mantle at his post. The sixteen year old boy, who slaughtered countless to save his Queen, saw the Queen's mantle hung up high, dyed red by the blood of the soldiers who were injured capturing her.

Frederica's ability could not discern what Kiriya was thinking of at that moment.

But back then, the Tausendfüssler just happened to be wandering around. They were looking for resources that could be used again for battle.

And unlike the Republic's "Scavenger", the Tausendfüssler had no reservations of reclaiming the dead body

The "Legion" had already learned the ability to use a human construct as the core.

The steel monsters approached the highly prized 'prey'...and Kiriya stood still, not escaping at all.

"It was I who turned Kiriya into a monster."

Shinn could not see what Frederica could, and naturally, could not witness her image of 'Kiriya' at this point. The Para-RAID of the Federation could not allow for anything beyond synchronized hearing.

But twice he had experienced how powerful that long-distance cannon was.

Even Frederica, who so dearly loved her Knight, had to call it a monster.

"You have said the "Legion" will soon attack...Kiri might come along too. When that happens..."

"Understood."

Shinn showed a wry smile as he was reminded by the girl.

And then, showing a wry smile upon hearing his reply was Frederica.

"You do not understand...if it gets too dangerous, do retreat and not try to hang on."

He looked down at her. She did not lift her head.

“I had long forgotten—no matter how we humans look forward to the future, we die in an instant.”

Just as Eugene died the previous day.

“...As you have said, I do not like to see people die, especially those I know. It is not worth sacrificing you and Raiden and the others just to save Kiri. You do have a life ahead of you. Thus, do not lose it.

Ahead.

“—Future, huh?”

Hearing that, Frederica was stunned, and a little worried.”

“Goodness. You have not thought about it at all...an inappropriate example it may be, but you can learn from Eugene. Where do you want to go during your next break? What do you want to do in the future? It is good to think about that. You should think about it...a little.”

“ ... ”

—Once you retire.

At that moment, Shinn seemed to hear the silver bell-like voice he once heard of.

It was soon after Kujo’s death, when they did not know each other, and did not feel the need to know.

—Is there any place you want to go to, or what you want to see?

Back then, he had ignored it, rather than feel annoyed by it. He never thought of it, and never felt the need to. The answer had never changed.

But if the same question was to be posed to him again, how would she respond?

And so, what inspired her to continue battling as a Handler while in the Republic that had long given up on fighting?–

The night on the battlefield came early.

War is a monster, repeatedly devouring away at massive resources and labor every day. There was no energy for lights, whether it was in the barracks, or in the Federation itself, and lights in the dark night would result in easy targets. Every area, aside from the headquarters having the bare minimum of lights, would enact a lights out. It was something common in both the Eighty-Six area, and the Federation's Western battlefield.

“Shinn, do you know where Frederica is?...ah.”

It was almost lights out, and Raiden, having heard from Krena that Frederica had yet to return, went out to look. He knocked on Shinn's door, nudged it aside, and stood there.

Aside from the bed and desk here were no empty space to spare in the cramped coffin, prison cell-like room. In this usual barrack, Shinn was in deep thought as he leaned his back on the pillow like a cushion, and next to him, Frederica was clinging onto him, giving a rhythmic, sleeping breathing.

“So she's here. She really admires you as a big brother.”

“Just thought of me as him.”

Shinn took a moment to answer, and probably was not used to hearing this. *So how does he call his brother anyway?*, Raiden, who had no siblings, was similarly unfamiliar with this term, and did not think too much about it.

“Ahh, her old knight?...but are you taking that for real? You seem concerned.”

The feelings seemed a little different as compared to his Eighty-Sixers comrades...and the last Handler.”

Shinn pondered a little.

“Hmm...maybe...she’s like the old me.”

“The same?”

Seeing the red eyes look back at him, Raiden pointed at his neck, the thing that was hidden under the uniform collar.

Frederica’s knight never did the same thing to her.

The brother who did that to you is nowhere to be found.

In any case, Raiden activated the Para-RAID, called for Krena, and asked her to take Frederica back. A little moment, the latter dragged her feet into the room. *Seriously, what are you doing!?* saying that, she lifted Frederica like a baggage, and went back.

After watching her leave, Raiden took out the chair under the table, and sat on it.

Shinn’s RAID device was tossed onto the desk, and probably not with him as Frederica had been sleeping on him.

“...I heard that you told the higher-ups?”

Keep mum about that. that was what Raiden had reminded when they had first arrived at the Federation, and surely Shinn did not forget.

“I told you not to already. Didn’t you say before that nobody will believe it until they actually hear it? And even if they do, nobody knows what will happen next. Anyone can understand immediately once the Para-RAIDs are connected...but you haven’t forgotten the consequences, have you, ‘Death God’?”

Back in the Republic, none of the Handlers who synchronized with Shinn and heard the voices of the dead connected with him again, except for the last one.

The other Eighty-Sixers Processors managed to hang on, for they were used to the violent deaths of their squadmates, and numb to the grudges of the ghosts. However, Shinn was reviled by many, and those

that could not get along with him died one after another. They cut off the Para-RAID synchronization with him, and lost the protection of the 'death god' who could hear the "Legion", overseeing the battlefield.

And there were many who hated Shinn because of this.

Upon knowing of this, how would this Federation deal with Shinn's supernatural ability to hear the "Legion"? Raiden had to make the worst assumption.

The Federation had seen the "Juggernaut" destroy the test pilots, and never stopped using it. While unsure of the theory behind the Para-RAID, it continued to use them in a manner no different from human experimentation. To that extent, the Federation was a cruel entity.

"The Federation isn't as pure and noble as it likes to think it is. Even here, us Eighty-Sixers aren't on equal grounds as them...maybe nothing has changed after all."

Pity and condescendence; in terms of looking down from above, there was no difference. One-sided compassion would only mean the lack of determination to understand, and it would be a matter of time until it would become malice shrouded in kindness, or without the kindness.

If they were deemed as monsters.

If they were deemed as useful monsters.

"The ones ripping your brain out this time won't be the ""Legion". You can be a lab rat all you want, but sorry, I don't want to end up as a hostage. Don't do anything stupid."

Of course, these were not his true thoughts.

Rather than do anything to Shinn, it would be easier to take the people around him as hostages.

Shinn slowly closed his eyes, and sighed.

“...Sorry.”

“It’s enough that you told them that...whether the Federation believes it or not, that’s up to them.”

This was not a bad country. They would have the country would not be vanquished, if possible.

However, they had no obligation to sacrifice themselves or their comrades just to protect this place. That was all.

Thus, Raiden narrowed his eyes.

Shinn was not one to make decisions so heartlessly.

“You alright?”

“–What?”

“I’m telling you not to think too much about those useless things... thinking about what old man Ernst said?”

Shinn went silent.

“I’ll say that Frederica bothers me a little more...I never thought about it. Never needed to.”

Back then, he should have two futures awaiting him; to die along with his brother, or to meet his demise during the special scouting mission.

At this point, him being here was way beyond what he had expected.

Let alone the future.

“What about you?” so Shinn asked, and Raiden shrugged.

“Well, just going with the flow, I guess. I can’t really think of what will happen after that; I can’t even imagine this war actually ending. Do something, earn a living...I don’t think it’s harder than fighting the

“Legion” anyway.”

Raiden did not think about this, he was confident he did not need to think too hard about it.

To not die, one would have to work hard to live. To live, one had to be a little more honest. No matter whether it was the battlefield on the eighty-six area, or the endless future after the war, such a notion would not change drastically. In fact, the predicament was no different for the Eighty-Sixers, who had to keep fighting to live on until the very end.

However,

Seeing the red eyes look down in seemingly deep thought, Raiden had a thought.

At the collar of the uniform, one could vaguely see the shocking scar of a beheading when his brother tried to kill him.

Even after Shinn had slayed the ghost of his older brother, the scar remained, ensnaring him.

Perhaps **such a person** would need a little something extra to keep on living, unlike a human like him.

Something that could counterbalance the curse, or to erase it.

Raiden glanced aside at something tossed in a corner.

Tossed by the side of a bed was a stupid philosophical book with a note stuck between it.

If they were back in the barracks of Spearhead Squadron, and it was their last Handler contacting them through the Para-RAID from the first area of the Republic.

What would he be thinking of at this moment?

Or perhaps, what would he be waiting for?

“...Wonder if Major’s doing well there.”

Shinn glanced back at Raiden, chose not to say anything, and shrugged.

Goodness, this guy isn't being honest, Raiden let out a long sigh.

CHAPTER V

Cries Take Aim

Through electric signals, the robotic words were transmitted to the skies above the battlefield.

<No face to Big Network no. 1.>

<Begin the Purge now.>

<All "Legion" units within Network are to be thawed.>

<Repeat. Begin the Purge now.>

<Target, East battlefield. Geade Federation.>

<Northern battlefield. United Kingdom of Roa Graecia.>

<Southern battlefield. Wald Alliance.>

<Western battlefield. Republic of San Magnolia.>

<Notify all "Legion" units under the network.>

<Begin extermination.>

At the same moment.

Western forces of the Geade Federation, Nordlicht squadron of the 177th Battalion. One officer got up immediately.

†

Raiden had a dream of falling down a cliff.

“–Get up.”

He heard these words while the back of his head hit the floor. Raiden rubbed his neck that was tilted as he slept, and got up from the hard bed of the barracks.

The lights in the cramped room were not switched on, and the faint moonlight showed a silhouette. Shinn was holding the pillow he had pulled from under Raiden’s head, and was standing before him.

“Hey...you’re saying one thing and doing the opposite...”

“This isn’t the time for this.”

A terse reply.

He sounded anxious.

It was the middle of the night, and he was dressed in the Federation’s steel-colored Panzerjacke.

At that moment, Raiden lost all desire to sleep.

“...They’re here?”

“Yeah.”

Raiden looked out of the window. At the distant skies to the west, silver clouds of Eintagsfliege cluttered the sky, burying the darkness of the night beyond it.

“How many of them?”

“Too lazy to count. Feels like all Seven Seals have been opened.”

“I have no idea what you’re referencing here.”

Hearing this rare joke from Shinn, Raiden knew things were getting really tricky.

The red eyes narrowed towards the distant battlefield, giving a cold glint.

“...It’s about time to assume the worst right now. Some of the forces we thought were headed to the other three countries are headed here. Looks like this Western battlefront is the most important one to the “Legion”.”

“Quite an honor for us.”

Raiden sarcastically retorted, and then got up in an instant.

The sharp blue light of the crescent moon shone upon Shinn’s sidelong face, and seeing that, Raiden frowned.

“...Say.”

“–For today’s battle, it’s best to keep the Para-RAID synchronization to the minimum.”

One had to wonder if the stone-faced death good had no intention to hide his feelings, or could not do so. The bloody red eyes were looking back at Raiden, grimacing.

The white face looked exceptionally pale, even under the moonlight. The red eyes were a little contorted due to pain.

“Unless necessary, try not to get close to me...I thought I got used

to this, but tonight's really tough.”

The screams of the dead had numbed the heart of the death god, who remained unfazed by the howls of the older brother he worked so hard to seek. His death god was blatantly showing weakness.

“–Understood.”

“I’ll leave the launch preparations to you. Wake the others up.”

“What about you?”

Shinn merely turned his eyes back, and patted the handgun by his side. It was not a small handgun the Federation had issued its pilot for suicide purposes, but a Republic automatic handgun that was bigger.

“This isn’t the time to keep mum.– I’m waking the entire army up.”

It was common in the military for things to be abrupt and unreasonable, but the Processors, woken up from their sleep, were utterly annoyed.

It was not an official order, and was made based on the squad leader’s discretion. Even if he had the skills of a real death god, there were no sirens, and there was no enemy shown on the area radar. Everyone else was utterly furious.

“Shit, if they tell us this is a training, I’m going to misfire at that death god...”

“What next time? This time already. Stray bullets. Stray bullets.”

There were the hoarse yells of the mechanic crew, who received the order for the “Juggernaut” to launch.. There were the mechanical sounds of the gantry crane, along with the noise of the heavy machinery moving the ammunition and energy packs. Hearing the Processors stifle their complaints behind these noises, Bernault, who was passing by, snorted.

“Ya guys can’t even retaliate man. Who were the ones who went to taunt the leader and got their asses kicked?”

Back then, they did not know Shinn was an Eighty Sixer. Seeing his noble-like appearance, they despised him, thinking he was a noble prince. There were quite a few who got beaten badly..

“But sergeant.”

“And ya haven’t been under his charge, so ya can’t feel it yet. Tell you what, that squad leader can figure out where those scraps are going better than the radar.”

The siren blared.

The growls and noises froze, for an ominous sound occupied the hangar hall.

It was the signal heralding the assault of the “Legion.”

The Processors were flabbergasted as they exchanged looks, and Bernault shrugged,

“...What I tell ya?”

At a corner of the First Defense line, the armored infantries were huddled in the entrenched bunker Tochka, gulping nervously as they awaited the enemy.

Ruins and forests were commonly seen on the Western battlefield, but unfortunately, neither could be seen here. The bunker had been reinforced heavily to withstand the barrage of the “Legion”, and were positioned

In a position where covering fire could be provided. The entrenchments were meandering, each corner a right angle to minimize the destructive blasts of the grenades. The plains before them were littered with anti-tank mines, along with the 88m anti-tank cannons behind.

Luckily, as the siren had aired early, the armored corps from the nearby barracks had hurried over with haste. The mighty machines brought some solace to the soldiers who feared darkness and death

“–Leader.”

A soldier dressed in armored exoskeleton pointed forward. Beyond the distance, an inorganic, heinous, and surrealistic metallic silhouette appeared in the darker night.

The next instant, the entire horizon stretched across their sights was filled with the color of metal.

“Wha...!?”

It was like an oncoming tsunami. A countless number of shadows crossing the ridge, the shattered waves becoming torrents of madness, reducing the plains under the night into metal as they raced through. Like the looming water, like the cackling flames, and like the sounds of bones rubbing together, the rumbling sounds lurched forth as a tide, as the endless wave of enemy loomed from the other end.

It was a sight impossible to imagine.

The shadows covered everything that could be seen. The ominous darkness approached silently and quickly, devouring everything.

They, everything, were,

“The “Legion” ...”

Dicit ei legio nomen mihi—est quia multi sumus.

A thunderclap boomed.

The cannons ripped through the air, landing like a hammer from the heavens.

Only a few might have realized it was the initial bombardments from the Scorpion. It was no wonder, for this scene before them was overly surreal. It was a scene out of a religious text, like the Last Judgment depicted in Revelations of the old Bible.

The first shots landed far behind the Federation’s defense bases.

And this time, the second shots landed before them, far closer this time.

It was not a misfire. Artillery troops were meant to bombard enemies hidden in the horizon, dozens of kilometres away. The initial shots were simply test shots to zero the error, so surely, the next time

—
“Fire for Impact incoming!!!!!!”

A boom.

The grenades were fired in unison, and the silver covering the dye was instantaneously dyed black, before they accurately landed in the trenches, and exploded.

The 155mm grenades exploded, resulting in some intense blasts, and the pellets that came flying at high speeds a tad later ripped apart the trenches and the armored infantries hidden inside.

Following that was another blast, a bombardment, another, and another. Each grenade would deal fatal damage to half of the people within the blast radius of forty five meters, and hundreds of such were fired, landing in unison. The rain-like bombardment continued to blow aside the howls and shrieks.

The armored infantries were pinned down the defense bases. At this moment, the steel-colored torrent had closed in upon them.

A startling number of Dinosaurias were lined in a massive Panzerkeil formation, the cannons aimed forward as they stormed on.

The intense bombardment of the Scorpions continued, but the “Legion” knew no fear as they continued to advance while pelted by friendly fire, relying on the sturdy armor, and the hundreds of tonnes of machines easily trampled upon the obstacles like toys.

Seeing the Ameise leading the pack, the armored infantries were intimidated.

The tremendous impacts blew upon the front of the “Legion”, and

destroyed the mine buried underneath. The blasts from the cannons and mines uprooted the dirt, and the Ameise darted into the combat area.

The few anti-tank mines that were not blown up were triggered, and several of the enemies were blown up.

The Dinosauria continued to advance, even trampling upon the remains of their friendlies. The Ameise, of lower worth in combat, were sent forth to pave the way for the Dinosauria that were more valuable. It was a self-destructive sacrificial manner befitting of the battle machines, which humans could never replicate.

The massive steel beasts remained unscathed as they passed the field of mines, and reached the trenches of armored infantries that somehow survived.

“Shit!! Hold your ground!! Don’t fall back even if you die!!!!”

The soldiers and mechanics were not the only ones who sprung into action after hearing the siren. The commanding generals and colonels too hurriedly got changed, and hurried to position.

The radar had long collapsed due to the jamming, and the notification of a “Legion” assault was from an unmanned scout far beyond range. The Federation leaders had no interest in wondering why the scout unit was so far. Command then dispatched more scouts to the destroyed scout, and from the numbers and formations, they deduced the scale and composition.

All of them paled at the shocking truth.

“Impossible...the entire Western frontline is under heavy assault...!?”

Grethe was in the command room of the 1028th Experimental squad, muttering as she saw the expected distribution map of the “Legion”.

The first defense line to the West was completely dyed red. It was where the 177th battalion, the 8th army overseeing it was positioned.

The red beacons indicating the enemy units reached so far back, and the friendly units assigned to the line, the blue units, were overwhelmingly fewer.

They had expected this massive assault, and had prepared for it. Such a vast scale and numbers were beyond their initial expectations however. The garrisons assigned to the first defense line were insufficient to deal with them.

The mobile defense squads on standby at the back should be prepare to sortie, but could the frontlines hang on until they arrive? Thus was a big flaw to the mobile defense, that they were too cumbersome, and specialized machinery were needed.

If the frontlines were breached, it would be too late for the back to deploy on the go. Surely the Western frontlines would be breached...!

Heard from the headset for commanders were the communications between the division headquarters and the main. The United Kingdom of Roa Graecia too was under heavy assault. All forces were fighting back furiously, but it remained a question as to whether they could hang on.

Will humanity finally reach its demise on this day?

She heard a message from the hangar.

“Lieutenant Colonel.”

“Second Lieutenant Nouzen. What is the situation? When can you sortie?”

“Anytime. Nordlicht is ready to launch at any moment.”

Grethe was momentarily stunned, and she looked back at the holographic screen with the ‘sound only’ words. The other command staff in the room were stunned speechless.

Shinn in turn answered calmly,

“We have not received any orders. I’ll receive the reprimanding

later”

Reproaching aside, Independent action would result in punishment, but he seemed confident that he would not be punished in any way as he responded calmly,, or perhaps he did not care about being punished.

Grethe curled her red lips into a smile. She had lipstick on her at all times, so that her subordinates would not realize when she paled.

It seemed there was no need for that.

“No matter what those shitty old men say later, I’ll cover up for your guys, Lieutenant...the other squads will sortie once they’re done preparing. Hold the line until then.”

“Roger.”

Since its inception, the old Geade Empire had always been a military superpower, and many cities were designed specifically as bases to deal with incoming enemies at the start of the war.

All the streets were narrow, and would never be linked directly to the center of the city. The rivers flowing through the city also divided the city into two. The walls of the ancient cobbled streets of stone remained flawed, and the brick houses were densely packed.

But even so, the assumptions when building them was that they would be battling humans.

“Retreat! Now! The armors are here!”

A squad of armored infantry hastily darted through the complex bending stone pavements.

The rearguard soldier turned around, and behind him, the sound of bones rubbing each other was approaching. At that instant, the cannon of 120mm blasted through everything, ignoring the buildings between.

The stone walls were utterly hapless in the face of the tank

cannons capable of shooting through six hundred milliliters of compressed steel. The cannon made a near direct hit upon the rearguard soldier, blowing him to smithereens, and the rubble blown away ripped apart the soldiers that were unable to escape, along with the armor upon them.

“Captain!!”

“Don’t go back! He’s a goner!”

The walls collapsed, and a smoking cannon appeared from there. The massive metallic coloured Löwe leisurely turned around the corner. The shattered bricks piled upon the road, but were nothing to the multiple legs.

There was no time to escape. The armored soldiers stopped in their tracks, glaring back at the enemy about to kill them. The tank cannon was aimed towards them—

A sharp, heavy sound of metal racing across the hard stone ground was followed by the stone tiles trampled upon as it jumped, and the wind that blew along with it.

A pure white silhouette flew above the armored infantries.

The white silhouette landed upon the wall to the left of the street, leaped off the wall with a triangle jump, and bounced up again. The Löwe tried to aim towards it, raising it up like a horse’s rein, but the cannon got hit.

The armor was pierced, and it exploded within. The ammunition within the Löwe blew up, and the armor module quickly fell off, before the flames gushed out.

The heat waves and light scattered everywhere, but did not affect the soldiers behind the white silhouette’s armor.

It was a pure white armor. The four-legged silhouette resembled a white skeletal corpse without a head. Under the canopy was a personal mark of a headless skeleton wielding a shovel.

“The “Regin...leif” ...”

The “Reginleif” red sensor turned towards them.

“Are there any other remaining fores?”

Before the assistant squad leader knew it, there were white units standing on the roofs to the left and right of the street.

One could hear the clattering footsteps and engine sounds of through the house, and clearly it was not the “Legion” with their highly effective sound reducer. They were a lot lighter than the “Vanargand”, and appeared to be of a similar make to the “Reginleif” before them.

Sensing the red optical sensor directed towards him, the assistant leader realized the question was posed towards him, and spoke up.

The tactics would differ if there were any friendlies still alive in the combat zone. Since they were defeated so haplessly, he should at least inform the comrades who came to assist.

“None at all, we’re the least! The other squads...were wiped out by those scrap metals.”

“That so?””

There was no mourning tone in the flat answer, only an aloof voice.

It was rumoured that the ‘death god’ had a headless skeleton for a personal mark.

And that would probably be that Eighty Sixer.

“Please fall back and regroup. We’ll hold the line here.”

“–Now then, shall we get to work?”

The XM2 “Reginleif”, also known as the “Juggernaut”, was recently deployed into battle, and had the highest mobility in the history of the Federation’s units. The unit had a main cannon, combat arms, and

various parts to maximize its unique traits, and could fulfil multiple purposes.

The ‘Snow Witch’ Angel piloted abandoned the usual 88mm smoothbore cannon, and replaced it with missile pods that could overwhelm with firepower.

Before the battle began, she had heard of the “Legion” distribution from Shinn. Time passed, and the positioning had changed greatly; however, she could imagine where they would move.

She predicted where the enemy would be, and figured out the position to deal maximum damage towards them.

It was the weapon Angel had honed after four years of fighting and surviving against the “Legion”.

She entered the coordinates into the support computer, and squeezed the trigger. All the missiles loaded fired off, the tails of smoke following as they glided through the air in complex trajectories, evading enemy intercepting fire as they zoned in on the target.

Once the estimated coordinates were released, the proximity fuse of the missile shell exploded, and the cluster munitions within scattered. The cluster pelted upon the “Legion” from above, and the latter hurriedly scattered.

Her voice was gentle, and she showed a smile.

However, nobody knew that the gentle smile she showed in the cockpit was so cruel.

“They’re out. Gonna step step step on them like ants with a wrecked hive.”

The goggle shaped headmount display for precision targeting showed the “Legion” units darting around the blind spots behind the building and rubble. The enemies had scattered, wary of the cluster bombs from the missile.

Krena was in her “Gunslinger” unit, hidden at an old church bell as she aimed at an enemy.

The ‘Gunslinger’, specializing in sniping, was equipped with the 88mm cannon with an elongated barrel, designed to stabilize the bullet trajectory and the initial velocity. The unit’s fire control and stance control too were swapped to sniping mode, and combined with Krena’s skill to shoot down fast moving “Legion” units, it resulted in high accuracy the research branch was impressed by.

The wind speed, temperature, and various data appeared on the headmount display, along with the cross reticule.

Upon hearing the voices of the dead coming through the Para-RAID, she narrowed her eyes.

She had no need to fear the moans of the dead, or the screams of the dying. As long as they were not her comrades turned into ‘black sheep’, she would not lament for them like Shinn did.

For Krena, the “Legion” was an enemy threatening the safety of her precious comrades, and especially Shinn who was fighting on the frontlines.

The enemy.

Should be vanquished.

She subconsciously held her breath, her golden eyes becoming frigid.

She squeezed the trigger naturally, without thinking. Far away, the Löwe that had its armor shot through collapsed.

“Commanding unit down. Switching positions. Cover me.”

“Copy that Krena. Leave the scraps to me!”

Raiden’s ‘Werewolf’ was equipped with heavy machine guns for combat, and the main cannon, along with the mount arm, was swapped out with an autocannon. This set of weapons allowed him to

suppress, stop the enemy from darting through the hail of bullets, and provide cover for the advancing friendlies.

Since he had been partnered with Shinn, who specialized in close ranged combat, for at least three years, it was inevitable that he chose such tactics and weapons to provide cover for the latter.

Raiden was also in charge of covering the other members, always checking on their status. It was the perfect role for him, who was adept at taking care of others, though he would rather die than admit so.

Two heavy machine guns, an autocannon, all of which could be aimed at different enemies. The Ameise and Grauwolf were pelted by the dense machine gun fire, falling one after another, and the shots from the autocannon stalled the two Löwe squads. Two “Juggernauts” raced by the ‘Werewolf’. ‘Undertaker’ went by one Löwe, severing it, while ‘Laughing Fox’ hopped onto a tall position, and shot down another with a cannon.

The ‘Undertaker’ continued to charge to the end of the street, while ‘Laughing Fox’ shot the wire anchor, headed to the neighboring block.

Krena followed suit, providing cover for Shinn. Angel retreated to the back, reloading her missiles.

Raiden immediately accessed the battlefield, felt he had to support ‘Laughing Fox’, and turned the ‘Werewolf’ over.

The ‘Laughing Fox’, Seo’s “Juggernaut” had standard equipment and armaments, the 88m smoothbore cannon, heavy machine guns for its combat arms, along with four pile drivers and two wire anchors.

However, his style of combat was not standard in any means.

“Alrighty, there.”

He evaded the blast from the Löwe, hopped onto an abandoned car, and jumped up. A wire anchor was shot into the air, etched into the wall as he continued to jump. The Grauwolfs quickly gave chase,

and he shot another wire anchor at the wall of the opposite building, releasing the previous anchor, and the recoiling steel wire formed an arch in the air.

He got right above a Löwe, and squeezed the trigger.

The weakest part of the armor, the top was shot through, and the enemy unit blew up.

He moved in all directions, using the wire anchors.

The Republic had abandoned its cities, which became battlefields, and that, coupled with the weak firepower of the 57mm cannons, gave birth to this combat ability. The biggest notable flaw of the Löwe and Dinosauria was the thin armor at the top. Thus, Seo had it as his own style of combat, and it was the best answer for him, who had outstanding spatial awareness compared to the others.

For he had no combat sense that would allow him to survive, unlike Shinn, who was able to fight melee combat.

The lock-on alert signal rang.

A Grauwolf had scaled to the roof before him, and fired a missile. Seo glanced at it, fired another wire anchor that entered the wall of another building several blocks away, and used that to pull him towards it. With the explosion behind him, he turned around, and pelted a hail of machine gun fire to silence the enemy.

At that moment, Seo saw the neighboring block, and his jaw dropped.

At the vanguard of Nordlicht was the white silhouette of the 'Undertaker', deep within enemy territory, evading assaults from all corners and destroying the enemy units one by one.

One might say that, instead of the death god liking him, he was the death god instead.

“Seriously...how in the world hasn't Shinn died after all the crazy stuff he does?”

While the frontline combats were struggling, the backend personnel too fought their own war.

“–Get all the ammunition and energy packs! Load them on the trucks so that it can go!”

“Sergeant, backup unit is ready!”

“If the frontline needs them, send them out now! –Listen up! Don’t let Fido get in here to take them! That guy’s to support our leader! It’s our job to deliver the pizza to them!”

In the face of the mighty “Legion”, the combatants had no war to fight if the ammunition and machine functions were depleted. The best form of support was to give them ample, prompt support. The backend personnel knew this, and did their best.

Amidst the noise, it would be clearer to understand the situation through the Para-RAID. So Frederica thought as she listened to the RAID device inside her own room, doing her best to contain her urge to escape the barracks.

She really wanted to help, even if it was just a little. However, she knew it was just for self-gratification, and kept reminding herself to remain rational.

The personalized heavy machines were running at full throttle in the hangar, ferrying the heavy ammunition and energy packs.

In the command room was Grethe and the other control staff, spewing terms Frederica did not understand.

She was just a weak child, incapable of doing anything in this situation.

At this point, she knew that her acting as commander in the heavy transport craft was simply about Shinn, Raiden and the others playing around with her.

All she could do was to open her ‘eyes’, and seek her Knight on the battlefield.

Shinn, fighting on the frontlines against the “Legion”, probably was not in the mood to find Kiriya. If she knew of Kiriya’s position and actions, she could at least give a warning.

She spotted the Knight appearing in her ‘eyes’, standing there, and froze.

She hurriedly fumbled with the RAID device, and switched the contact target. Her face was clearly stunned, her voice gasping as she called out that name.

“Shinei.”

There was no answer.

The Para-RAID however was connected.

The voices of the dead were usually heard when synchronized with Shinn, and again they echoed deep within her ears. At that distant battlefield, his voice remained so calm as he gave instructions.

From time to time, he would contact the other Eighty-Sixers, and also instruct the Processors of Nordlicht, and barking off at the soldiers of the other squads through the wireless external speakers, all while combating the astonishing numbers of enemies.

“Shinei...Kiri is not here.”

There was no answer.

She repeated her call. For some reason, she did not want to assume he did not hear her.

“Kiri is not on this battlefield.”

There was still no answer.

The blood immediately rose to her head.

It was not out of anger...but due to a fear she did not comprehend fully.

“Do you hear me not, Shinei!? Kiri right now is...!”

At that moment, her eyes switched over to the person she kept calling with conviction.

It was a four-legged spider racing through the rubble of the city, in the middle of the night.

The white machine was no longer covered completely white. Ash, dirt, and the silver nanomachine blood of the severed “Legion” limbs had died it silver and ash, covering it in spots.

A flashback to a previous scene occurred.



The red field dress that had trampled on the blood of the soldiers, and the person standing next to it, smiling brightly.

He was smiling, his black eyes frigid and unfazed.

Princess.

So he said, but his eyes were not looking at her.

The red eyes inside the white armor were showing the same glint.

It was swinging the blades that had long stopped vibrating, slashing the enemy with brute force, ignoring the fact that the blades were partially shattered before it turned to another. Shrapnel from a proximity fuse that exploded up close flew into the cockpit, shattering a sub screen, but he remained unfazed. His consciousness was focused on the enemy unit before him, his red eyes sharp and cold.

Frederica's legs weakened, and she fell back.

She finally realized why she had always associated him with Kiriya.

They were not similar. They were the same. She had assumed they were so alike, because both of them were exactly the same.

Fools. She could hear herself utter this silently.

Shinei, you fool. Have you not understood?

Enough. Stop.

“You cannot continue to fight on like this...!”

Beyond my cloud of silver was the crescent moon in the sky, high up to the west, lighting a dim silver upon the ruins.

The heavy multi-legged units suddenly came to a halt. Having confirmed the surrounding voices of the “Legion”, Shinn gasped, and turned around. The skies above the battlefield was completely sealed by the Eintagsfliege, and the “Juggernaut” radar was already muffled, and since the IFF could not be used, Shinn had switched it off.

“–Hey, hold your fire, Nordlicht! Friendlies!”

Appearing before him was the 67th armored forces of the 177th battalion, the crest of the squadron on the “Vanargand”. The red sensor followed Shinn’s eyes, and slipped over there, seeing the fifty tonnes of heavy machinery approaching with light steps.

The legs were not damaged due to the combat stress...it appeared the armored division had awoken up due to the siren, and finally sortied after all the preparations.

“A personal mark with a headless skeleton. You’re the squad leader?”

“Squad leader of Nordlicht. Second Lieutenant Shinei Nouzen... what’s the situation?”

The driver of the “Vanargand” smiled.

“Squad leader of the 67th, Captain Samuel Roots. It appears the first wave of attacking “Legion” has been fended off, and the same goes from the other areas. Thanks to your squad’s emergency deployment, we held the line. Good work.”

Shinn just wanted to ask about their side, for he already knew the “Legion” vanguard had started to retreat, but even if he did say so, the captain would not have believed. Thus, he did not say a single word. All he wanted was to rest his body that was a little weary after battle.

“The other squads have mobilized...it’s alright now. Head back for resupply, and sortie when HQ gives the orders. Leave the rest to us, the Federation.”

You Eighty-Sixers can fall back for now.

While still gasping for breath, Shinn continued on gruffly,

“If I may say something, Captain.”

He affirmed the amount of supplied Fido next to him had brought, and displayed the status of the various “Juggernauts” on the windows...while they were not fully equipped, it was sufficient. They could all continue to battle.

“That “Legion” was just the advance forces. The upcoming second wave is the real one...we fall back now, and this area will fall.”

The driver of the “Vanargand” immediately stopped smiling.

“...What did you say?”

“We’ll leave the defences to you here. Will head on to intercept the main forces. We’ll destroy the vanguard first, and try to dull their assault somehow.”

“Wait Lieutenant! That’s—”

“Ending transmission.—all units.”

While cutting off the transmission, Shinn called through the Para-RAID, and turned the ‘Undertaker’ around, leaving the dumbfounded “Vanargand” behind.

The advanced forces were to prepare the way for the following main army. The groans of the “Legion” were surging from a place the eyes could not see.

His ears immediately picked up replies. Repressed excitement, calm, and grinning audaciously.

“You hear that? If you don’t want to die, come along.”



The main forces of the “Legion” came, and at the same time, the armored forces of the Federation reached the frontlines, building up sturdy defense lines, forming walls with thick armor, and defending stubbornly against the overwhelming attacks of the enemy. A deadlock occurred as the garrisons switched hands.

Somebody noticed that the sky had already brightened, and the naked eye could see the sun in hand.

Red light shone at the horizon.

The soldiers looked up at the skies, from the trenches, from the barricades formed out of collapsed buildings, from the cramped cockpits of the units, and from the middle of the gunfire.

The sky was completely red.

The bright red light of the rising sun was reflected and refracted by the Eintagsfliege covering the sky completely. The sky that was supposed to be dawn was locked under a dull, bloody red light, like an enclosed burning.

Under the red skies, the battles continued.

Under the bloody light, the black shadows comprised of ruins, entrenches, remains of the units, and heaps of corpses started to pile up. Between them, the machine monsters and the humans remained locked in a deathmatch. Fire and blood were spewed, becoming shadows that fell and remained, further reducing the world of red and black to more red and black.

Such was a scene right out of Hell.

Amidst the Hell of red and black, a white nightmare could be seen.

It was racing through like lightning, like a bright fantasy.

It was thoroughly covered with scars, but like its name of a war goddess, the headless skeleton was pure.

If this part had collapsed, the surrounding defences would follow. Thus, they had focused on this position, combating without knowing of toil. In the face of the surging “Legion”, they did not back down, and slaughtered the enemy with the mad battling and precise shots, like wild beasts tearing at each other.

They had ignored all requests of aid from the other squads, or calls from the back telling them to back then. In the face of the endless “Legion”, they had no time to spare aid for other, and knew that they could not fall back even if they collapsed. They, once cut off by the mines of their homeland, might have forgotten about the word ‘retreat’ altogether.

The destroyed “Legion” continued to pile one after another, and using them as cover or turrets, they continued to battle.

But if they kept battling, they would run out of bullets or energy. The “Reginleifs” were units that sought mobility, so the ammunition they carried were far insufficient. Even if they were to head to the back to resupply, it was still insufficient. Thus, they could only remove usable parts from the destroyed friendlies and repair or resupply. The “Scavenger” following them too kept searching for spare parts, removing them, and piling them near their position.

There were soldiers who lived at the border since the inception of the Empire, and were born on the Wolflands. Seeing these silhouettes, they were impressed.

Even as they fought to the death, they were smiling, for they had a few more reliable comrades.

But most of the Federation soldiers could not think as such.

The optical intel reached the command vehicles and headquarters through the data link. All of them, the armored infantries in the trenches, the operators, the commanders, and the higher ups could only mutter in shock.

“The Eighty Sixers...!”

They were teenagers, comrades who were from the Republic, treated as human-looking pigs, sent to the battlefield by the Republic.

The Federation had assumed they were pitiful children.

For they were robbed of human rights, freedom, family, hometown, even their names. They were sent to the battlefield before they had fully matured, and survived the countless battles, before they were finally ordered a meaningless death. At the very least, they should enjoy happiness in the Federation. That was what everyone had thought.

But they gave up on those wishes.

They chose to return to the battlefield, to the most dangerous of all battlefields. They had no reason to fight, no need to protect their homeland, family, and ideals. In fact, they were not protecting anything. Ignoring the pleas of aid from the friendlies, they ripped bones and flesh from the remains of their fellow units, and kept on fighting. It appeared as though they were just seeking to fight a meaningless, unreasonable, endless battle.

They were not innocent, pitiful children who were oppressed, who lost everything.

They were monsters.

They were human-looking, killing machines who were borne out of the ruthlessness of the battlefield, and the malice of the public. They were the demons of the battlefield, unable to understand the compassion and aid granted to them. It was not their sin to be born and twisted as such, but their hearts, twisted to this point, were a lost cause.

“Monsters...”

There was a possibility the Eighty Sixers might have overheard that, but nobody would reproach the person who uttered that.

†

The large transport craft ferrying the emergency response team landed near FOB 15, the armored units and infantries soon hurried over.

The blue blips indicating friendlies instantly multiplied on the screen, the red and blue intertwined like a mosaic. Grethe was watching on, and suddenly, the red blips started to move.

The clusters of red and blue started to disperse. Like sand in an hourglass returning to place, the red blips slowly returned to the west, to their controlled area.

“–The “Legion”...”

Shinn had long forgotten the time.

The optical screens showing the outside was dyed completely red. He could not remember how many enemies he had defeated, and how many were left. The short pause between the assaults allowed for them to feed on rations, and any minimal rest they had was through closing their eyes. There were no tactics, just a demolition of the waves of “Legion”. It was not a battle per se, but a primitive deathmatch.

With his lone shred of rationality, he could barely figure out friend and foe. If the battle lasted a little longer however, who knew what would happen.

Suddenly, Shinn noticed it was raining, and lifted his head.

The “Juggernaut” voice sensors picked up white noise and the rain pelting upon the armor. The sounds seemed serene in the noisy battlefield.

His mind was dulled due to fatigue, and it took him a long while to understand the reason behind of this sound.

The “Legion” was starting to retreat.

The voices of the dead were fading, and only the covering fire of the Scorpions and the noise of pursuit squads battling echoed intermittently.

He opened the canopy that had been locked for what felt like a long time, stood amidst the drizzle, and let out a long sigh.

Seeing the red light by the edge of the thin cloud, he knew it was the late evening of the Northern summer.

“–All forces.”

His voice was a little hoarse. It appeared his throat was parched.

The voices that answered were a lot fewer than when they sortied. Some answered with gasping breaths, and some did not, probably for the lack of necessity.

And of course, there were some who could do neither.

“The “Legion” has begun a full retreat. It’s time to head back.”

Shinn docked the ‘Undertaker’ at the hangar, got off, and found Frederica standing before him.

Her eyes were slightly red, perhaps because she had spent the entire night up. The long hair that was usually combed was all messy. Perhaps she had been waiting for him here after he sortied.

Their eyes met, and her tender face contorted. She seemed relieved, and yet seemed to have been reprimanded harshly, for tears welled in her eyes, and she leapt into his clutches, feeling impatient as she embraced him tightly.

“Shinei, you fool.”

He did not know why he was scolded. He subconsciously reached his hand for the little head that surprisingly did not have a military cap, and caressed the black hair, her tender hands clutching at him harder.

“Fools, both of you, you, and Kiri.”

†

The forces on standby were assigned to keep guard against another possible “Legion” attack, but the heaps of work for the Western forces commanders remained. They had to replenish the lost manpower and equipment during this battle, move the wounded and the corpses, repair the defences, analyse the battles, and determine the contributions.

First off, they should reward the scout unit manager that had detected the assault of the enemy (far) earlier than expected, pinpointed the correct area, and saved the Western front from the brink of annihilation. That was a common consensus amongst the commanders.

But the manager had doubt over this.

He claimed the instructions to scout the area was not from him.

He said there was an officer who found him, and convinced him to spot this area, and that the discovery of the advanced forces, and the instructions to the other combat areas were down to that officer.

In that case, surely the contribution belonged to that officer.

“—While the manager was poised when he said so, I heard that you have actually used some violent methods, Second Lieutenant Shinei Nouzen.”

The commander office inherited the positioning and decorations of the Empire. The Major General was seated behind the thick, heavy Mahogany desk. He was wearing service ribbons, and a cross medal on his neck. His hollow eyes were shrouded by his black eyebags.

“A Federation soldier’s gun is to be pointed at the enemy, not to threaten our side. This applies irregardless of you pointing a gun at anyone.”

“...The discovery of the enemy shall offset this punishment, I believe. That man could have been promoted if he had not said it.”

Hearing the calm response, the Major General narrowed his eyes. He could sense Grethe behind him rubbing her forehead.

Shinn in turn remained still before the desk, in a ‘restless’ posture. Countless independent actions, and a violation of military regulations. While out of necessity, interrogation and punishment were needed.

Given the list of offenses, he could have been detained, but given how they were simply interrogating him, it appeared they were still accessing him.

The Major General turned his leather chair around, and glanced aside at the tablet terminal, before lifting an eye towards Shinn.

I heard from the gendarmerie that you had some interesting answers...that you can hear the voices of the “Legion”, and determine their positions even.”

Grethe then interrupted impulsively.

“Major General. You might not believe it, but it is the truth. The squad members that used the RAID devices and had audible synchronization with Lieutenant Nouzen have confirmed this...”

“Did I ask for you to speak up, Lieutenant Colonel? I do know people with such powers exist, and the witnesses have said it. Those along however cannot prove this situation.”

The Major General tapped at the terminal, and displayed a map of

the battlefield on the table. Beyond the hologram map were the black eyes staring back at Shinn.

“Where are they? –Point out ten places, from closest to furthest.”

Shinn looked up. There was a dummy surveillance camera at the ceiling, the tablet in the Major General’s hand was positioned just enough to prevent him from seeing it, and an intercom was hidden in the Major General’s hair. It seemed the Major General wanted to affirm the data captured by the radar, and match it real-time.

Principle aside, this certainly was the most direct, reliable manner to affirm the validity of something, so Shinn sighed,

“...Excuse me.”

He sought out the closest enemy position on the map, and pinpointed ten positions. He was able to accurately detect where the “Legion” were, and the distance, but he could not convert it as into common distance units. Leaving aside the fact that he was used to the Republic’s combat areas, the battalion’s map was much bigger, and he could not deduce on gut feeling.

Once he drew the seventh position, the Major General’s eyes widened, and he hushed his voice into the intercom, for that position might not have been detected.

Once Shinn was done answering, he returned back to his position. The Major General let out a long sigh.

“...One thing I want to ask.”

After a moment of thought, the Major General asked.

“Why do you want to do this? While it certainly helped support the Western front, you should know this is a dangerous act, right? Why risk this?”

“I determined that proper protocol will be too late to intercept the enemy...at that moment, you probably will not believe if I said so.”

“You are not answering my question. I am asking if you have considered your own safety...have you not, as an Eighty Sixers, thought of the possibility of you being used as a canary, or a guinea pig?”

For they were the Eighty Sixers, who were deemed as human-looking pigs by their homeland.

“Of course I did...but if we are defeated by the “Legion” because of this reservation, everything else would have been for naught.”

The Major General remained silent for a few seconds.

“I see—you will sacrifice yourself if it means destroying the enemy. That makes you Eighty Sixers, huh? An ice blade you are, shattering yourself as you shatter the enemy.”

Grethe raised an eyebrow, trying to say something, but the Major General impatiently raised his hand to stop her, and said,

“I shall not look into this matter any further...if there are similar crisis to be sensed, may I expect a report from you like this instance?”

“Of course.”

“When that happens, I shall inquire you again, Lieutenant Colonel. You may contact me directly if it is an emergency. I shall inform my aide.”

Once they exited the commander’s office, Grethe sighed, and said,

“Please, stop making me worry so much, Second Lieutenant. Your words and tone are not appropriate when speaking to a superior.”

“My apologies.”

“Goodness...and also, please think of how you should protect yourself. Results wise, protecting yourself means protecting those around you. Do you understand, **Full Lieutenant** Nouzen?”

Seeing the suspicious look from Shinn, Grethe merely shrugged.

“All the Lieutenants died, so we promoted you. It’s common in the Federation army.”

She pointed at the Lieutenant Colonel insignia on her collar, the rank she attained midway through her twenties due to the impromptu commissions on the battlefields, and she showed a wry smile.

“You are already acting as squadron commander, so perfect timing...you could have an additional rank, but it was nullified because of your actions.”

“...”

“Can’t you be happy or sad about this? Your pay will rise anyway, though you might not feel anything about this.”

The necessary expenses were paid by the military, and there was nothing else to spend of. Thus, despite her telling him this, he did not feel anything.”

Again, Grethe showed a wry smile.

“Seriously...this is all from me. Good work, Lieutenant.”

“... Please excuse me.”

Bidding farewell to Grethe, who returned to her office, Shinn walked down the long corridor paved with carpet, and quietly let out a sigh.

The Western army had been dented to a destructive extent, its defences left for the backup forces as they regrouped, so there was no mission. The days of interrogation left him unable to affirm the situation of his squadron, and he prepared to head to Nordlicht’s barracks at the headquarters.

Suddenly, Shinn heard quick footsteps approaching him.

He lifted his head, and found Frederica. Her sturdy boots were trampling upon the carpet, and seemed unbecoming of the base camp that had mostly relaxed.

At the same time, he sensed a stare from far away.

The black eyes encased in malice.

“–I’ll kill you.”

He felt a shiver down his spine.

Why? Why did he forget?

He encountered it twice. He knew that was the trump card of the “Legion”.

But why did he subconsciously eliminated the threat from his subconsciousness?

It was because, in a corner of his heart, he thought that even if the strongholds, country, and even humanity right behind the battlefield he was on were destroyed, it had nothing to do with them.

That for the Eighty Sixers, who had deemed the besieged battlefield as a hometown, faced the enemy in the eye, and would inevitably be crushed, nothing mattered–

But at that moment, he realized that he never actually left the battlefield of the eighty six areas in the truest sense of the word.

Frederica yelled,

“Get down! Kiri is...!”

The sound of an ultrasonic cannon ripping through the air came almost instantaneously with the noise of a tremendous weight hitting something.

A flash appeared outside the windows.

The line of sight was dyed completely white.

The noise was so great, it was deafening, as the cannon ripped the air like a thunderclap, and the shockwaves that followed ripped

through the entire base.

EPILOGUE

When “Johnny” Comes Marching Home

“—**T**his is the First Northern Area, First Forces ‘Sledgehammer’ calling all Processors. To all Processors.”

The partner “Juggernaut” lying by the side was badly dented on the cannon and the armor, after having taken a clean impact from the Löwe that weighed in excess of fifty tonnes, it could not move.

The pilot managed to crawl out from the crushed cockpit, dragging his paralyzed right half as he came to an old bridge in the outskirts of the area. He leaned his back upon a wrecked stone pillar, and laid down weakly. He wanted to open his eyes, only to end up feeling utterly lethargic. The armor of wilted bone color was smeared with the blood oozing from his body, and was vividly clear even in the night.

“This is the leader of “Sledgehammer’, ‘Black Bird’.”

All members of the squadron had been eliminated.

It was likely that the other forces in the area were wiped out too.

Total obliteration.

The “Legion”’s specifications were far superior to the “Juggernaut”, and there was no comparison. Such ferocious enemy units attacked on an unprecedented scale, and they, weak in fighting strength, had no hope of survival.

But they fought. Behind them was the country that was not worth protecting, and there were no families awaiting their return.

But they kept fighting.

“Our battle has ended.”

Thus, that was the lone remaining pride of the Eighty-Sixers.

The light-nulfilling armor reflected no moonlight, and the heavy metallic body of a Löwe made practically no noise as it moved forward towards him.

Perhaps the enemy was unwilling to slaughter a dying mouse by wasting some rounds, for neither the terrifyingly powerful 12.7mm heavy machine guns nor the ferocious 120mm tank cannon were aimed at him. The Löwe leisurely moved forth with the arrogance of a carnivore, its massive frame taking up the entire width of the stone bridge.

He, unable to move anymore, could only lift his head towards this steel tank that was closing in, sneering.

He was speaking into the public channels, in a one-way communication channel, but he could sense that on the other end of the receiver, countless numbers of his fellow eighty-sixers were listening to him intently.

“To all the Processors who can hear this. To everyone who fought until the very end, and survived until the very end. We’ve finally—retired. Good work everyone.”

They lived on this hellish battlefield of no death, where there was no redemption or hope, that no matter how they struggled, death awaited them.

Once he said everything he had to, he cut off all communications, and tossed aside his headset. He then picked up the crude looking control device within his crushed right hand.

The Löwe passed the stone bridge, closing in before his eyes as he leaned haplessly on the stone pillar.

Five years ago. Back then, the commander of his first squadron

was an Eighty-Sixer, a survivor of the Republic's Orthodox Army who was thrown into the battlefield. The commander taught him how to fight, how to survive, and how to use this controller.

There were none of the white swines left who would do this.

His lips and skin were searing and cracking under the intense heat, yet the smile on his face was so hearty.

Never once should he succumb to despair, nor give up hope to survive, nor let hatred stain upon the pride in his heart.

Such were the rules he had imposed upon himself, and thus was he able to keep fighting till this day.

But at the very end, this line from him would surely be forgivable, no?

He saw the enemy unit raise its leg before him, and with a chuckle, he pressed the detonator.

This line was meant for the shameless, tragic white swines of the Republic who had given up on battling, shied away from reality, and neither knew how to resist nor choose to die this way.

“—Serves you right.”

The plastic diamond charge latched onto the bridge exploded.

The old passing bridge, along with the steel beast king of land combat and a mere Eighty-Sixer who could not be counted amongst the dead, sank into the dark river in a rising fireball.

Year 360 of the Republic's calendar, August 25th, time 2317.

When the siren blared in the military headquarters, none of the Handlers in the common office understood what that meant.

In a certain sense, that was to be expected.

The siren was installed ten years ago.

By their predecessors, the Republic Orthodox Army who were in charge of protecting the country, that all men, even the backend staff, were to run to the battlefield and die valiantly there, never to allow this siren to be aired.

The massive hologram screens blinked into life. Displayed on the massive hologram screen occupying a wall was a crude footage, due to the darkness of the night and the electronic jamming.

All of them stared at the screen intently, looking either surprised or annoyed. Amongst them, only Lena felt some strange urgency choking her throat.

There was a massive concrete structure reaching the sky, its walls thick enough to bury a deck or a few small houses; and at this point, it was collapsing haphazardly.

That structure was truly too heavy, resulting in the shattered cracks to resemble a meander-like valley, and a massive horde of steel color roared in like rapids. A terrifying army formed by various multi-legged army exhibited its killing capacity to its limits as it crossed the valley.

She felt a chill run up her spine.

“What is this? Some movie? Sounds interesting.”

“Hey, somebody turn that thing off. It’s noisy.”

None of them had ever seen such a thing, and as they obviously did not know of them, they just lazed around in a trance. Lena herself felt weak, and stumbled a step back.

Over the ten years, the citizens of the Republic pushed the responsibility of the war to the Eighty-Sixers, and concealed themselves in the cage of false peace by shutting their eyes and ears. Not even the military had ever seen the true appearance of the enemy. Amongst them, the only one who knew their appearances was Lena, who had witnessed them personally.

That was six years ago, on the day she visited the frontlines with

her deceased father, lost him, and was saved by Ray.

And just a year ago, when she synchronized her sight with Raiden as she supported Spearhead Squadron.

The charging vanguard leading the army in a wedge formation were the Ameises, shaped as sharp as piranhas.

Approaching with astonishing mobility on their six legs, advancing through the irregular severed surfaces of the collapsed wall were the Grauwolfs.

And remaining alert to all of its surrounding with its 120mm tank cannon, racing in a stable formation were the Löwe.

Using its massive weight to trample and kick aside the rubble with impunity was the Dinosauria, advancing as though on the plains.

And on the ground was the structure that was famed for being sturdy, yet utterly collapsed before her eyes—the Grand Mur.

This,

Was the siren indicating the breach of the final defenses.

“...!”

They have come.

The “Legion” had been quietly been building its strength behind the electronic interference of the Eintagsfliege, and launched their assault on this day. The Republic, hiding in their fragile dreamland while ignoring reality, finally met its destruction on this day due to its arrogance, just as Shinn had predicted.

The “Legion” crossed the rubble of the Grand Mur, over and over and over again.

They had entered the unprotected Eighty Five Areas, into the Republic of San Magnolia that had assumed it was filled with eternal peace, and forgot how to fight to protect itself.

It was most likely that most of them were ‘Black Sheep’. The “Legion”, with the brains of the dead implanted in them to overcome the state lifespan, were the masses of Eighty-Sixers souls the Republic left to die on the battlefield, not even granting them a proper burial.

The army of the Dead had returned home.

Amidst the crease in the fortress wall was on the verge of collapse, there appeared a light beyond the torrent of steel and the night.

It was a light caused by the optical sensors, cold and blue, a ghost light in a deep dark forest, leading people into an endless abyss.

The faint moonlight shows a vague silhouette. The shadow, massive as a skyscraper or a colossus, made it difficult to determine the actual range.

The front side of the shadow quickly rose. At the same time, the noise on the monitor was amplified for some reason.

Suddenly, she noticed.

Upon the devastated scene of the collapsed Grand Mur, there was a giant hitting it repeatedly, and finally crushed it.

It was a devastation, caused by a cannon strike.

A flash.

At that moment, the footage on the screen vanished, showing complete darkness. It was likely the camera..or the land where the camera was installed, had been blown away by the cannon.

The siren showed no signs of abating.

At that moment.

There was a unit the elites of the elites on the First battle zone of the Eastern frontlines had once encountered, but had to retreat. It was a brand new long ranged cannon with astounding fire rate and range beyond its contemporaries, pelting its strikes with tremendous

power like a downpour.

“–Railgun.”

Lena muttered, and pursed her lips.

Her fellow countrymen remained unperturbed, sensing that there was a commotion, but not endangered in the slightest. She suddenly turned to leave the office, towards her control room. The heels of the military boots landed on the wooden land, resulting in anxious knocking.

The RAID device was giving off an illusionary heat.

“Lena! That siren was...!”

“Reporting in, your Majesty! The Northern battlefield...!”

“Arnett, Cyclops. Affirmative. –They’re here.”

She switched the Para-RAID to target every single unit that could be connected, and began to do so. Typically, a commander could only be synchronized with one unit, but this was certainly not enough. Thus, she had Arnett help out, and adjusted the Para-RAID settings slightly over a year.

The enemy was the army of dead souls, of the countless Eighty-Sixers the Republic had abandoned to die on the battlefield.

To resist them, they had to gather their fighting strength.

To keep on fighting.

To continue fighting in response to their final words, to survive.

“–This is “Bloody Regina” to all Processors on the Frontlines!”

Federation Military Alias, the Morphos.

One unit alone was enough to breach the Grand Mur, and the new “Legion” unit reduced the stronghold of the Federation military into

dust. This footage, found in the collapsed military headquarters, was the first observed data of this particular enemy unit.



AFTERWORD

A pilot suit is just a decoration! Hello everyone, this is Asato Asato.

I've always wondered, "Why do all 'pilot suits' have to be so 'tightfitting and snug'?", and never got to understand the reason why.

Of course, such combat uniforms have various functions and design, but does a pilot suit have to be like that? That goes especially for a robot specializing in land combat; why can't they use the tanker jacket like actual tank soldiers?

No, actually, we all understand. It's because girls wearing pilot suits are cute. Cute is justice. But the protagonist of this work, Shinn is a boy...!

Thus, in this work '86-eightysix', all pilots wore camouflage when piloting, and not pilot suits. This volume however, it's changed to something similar to the Panzer Jacke.

Luckily, when editing the manuscript for the first volume, I wrote things like, "If possible, I hope not to use any pilot suits...", and when drafting the plot of the second volume, I wrote "I hate pilot suits!!!" on half of an A4 sized paper. The kind editors-in-charge kindly listened to the various weird requests I had, and accepted them all. Yay!

And so, we came to a consensus, "But we want to see Lena in a pilot suit!". To those of the girls in pilot suits faction, please look forward to it.

No, this isn't ironic. Cute is justice. Girls in pilot suits are justice.

Now then.

Back on point. It's the second volume!

It continues! It continues! It's all thanks to the passionate support of you readers! Thank you very much!!

And so, sorry that it ended up as a two parter.

I had initially planned to write a book, but after cramming what I had to write, and what I wanted to write, it far exceeded what I had initially planned...

The content was basically the epilogue written in different perspectives, one from the perspective of one, and the other in the perspective of the many. The first volume was written in Lena's perspective, while the second and third volumes focused on Shinn.

The title of this work is '86-EightySix-'.

Why did they continue to use this derogatory term imposed upon them by the Republic after leaving that battlefield? Basically, what are the Eighty Sixers? I plan to use the second volume to write what is a prologue to a story of him and her.

And this time, a few other explanations.

-The main cannon of the Juggernaut.

The main cannon of the Juggernaut was the 88mm, called the 'Ratsch Bumm', but in reality, the 'Ratsch Bumm' is actually the 76mm anti-tank cannon of the Soviets.

So why did I not use the actual term 88mm? Please refer to the German 8.8cm cannon during the Second World War, or the common nickname of the Flak 36, and then refer to the book cover or the fold behind the book.

...Understand now? It's a typical example of picking a pen name without thinking too deeply, and getting into trouble later on. (TN: The Germans call the 8.8cm the Acht-Acht. 8-8)

-Title.

Like the pen name, I was often asked how the '86' came from.

In English slang, it means 'rejecting entry into a shop', or 'refusing a customer'. Also, it can mean various things like 'eliminate', 'punish', 'murder'.

And finally, the thanksgiving.

First, to the editors, Kiyose-sama and Tsuchiya-sama, who gave me much patience and feedback when I kept changing the plot and manuscript since the beginning like a headless chicken, precisely pointing out the flaws in the story.

Next, to Shirabi-sama, who added much needed killing intent in the pretty illustrations. There has been a huge variety of new female characters!

And to I-IV-sama, who used the mysterious, random setting I came up with, and created a new, powerful "Juggernaut". I am looking forward to seeing how that guy looks in the third volume.

And to all you readers who supported this work. The writing for the next part is right under way, and I hope to meet you in the third volume 'Run to the battlefield (Second Half)!'.

And I hope this work can temporarily lead you on a journey to the sun being born, to the battlefield of the Northern military countries in the summer, and to them who are again involved in the battlefield of howling iron and battle.

When writing this afterword, BGM: [Run Through the Jungle \(Creedence Clearwater Revival\)](#).