Sousuke showed no interest in their exchange, and silently continued reading her history.

First came her name: Chidori Kaname. She lived in Tokyo, Japan. Her father was a high commissioner with the UN. She had one sister, eleven years old, who lived with their father in New York. Her mother had passed three years ago, and Kaname herself was attending school in Tokyo. Past that came more detailed information—height, blood type, medical history, *etc.*

Sousuke's eyes stopped on one particular row, where a key word had been sloppily blacked out with magic marker: "W*******d potential: 88% (according to Mirror Method)." It seemed a rather perfunctory way to hide classified information, but perhaps that was a sign of how much he trusted them.

"So, something happen to her?" Kurz asked.

"Something *might*."

"Huh?"

Major Kalinin sat back in his chair and gazed at the tabloid-sized map on the wall. It showed the world's current borders—the complicated territories of the Soviet Union, China divided into North and South, and the mess of dotted lines that made up the Middle East region. "All you need to know is that the girl in that picture, Chidori Kaname, is under high risk of kidnapping from the KGB and an unknown number of other organizations."

"How come?"

"You don't need to know that," Major Kalinin said shortly.

"I see," Kurz sniffed.

The point was, people might be coming for Chidori Kaname. *Might.* Sousuke didn't know why they wanted her, or what could have led to it. The situation was completely opaque. "So, what's our mission?" he asked.

"We're going to need you to keep her safe. I know Sergeant Sagara can speak Japanese, and I think you can too, Sergeant Weber."

"Well sure, but..." Kurz's father had been a special correspondent with a newspaper, and he'd lived in Edogawa, Tokyo until he was 14, so he could speak

Japanese well enough.

“I’ve already briefed Sergeant Mao,” Major Kalinin told them. “It’ll be up to the three of you.”

“Just the three of us?” Sousuke asked.

“We can’t spare any more. It’s already been decided.”

“It’s not gonna be easy,” Kurz observed.

“That’s why we’re sending you,” Major Kalinin answered. Sousuke, Kurz, and Mao weren’t merely AS operators; they were soldiers trained in a variety of skills, including parachuting and recon. They were part of an elite team hand-picked from a large pool of candidates. To them, ASes were just another kind of weapon, no different from a gun or a vehicle. “And... because Sergeant Mao insisted, your equipment will be Class B.”

Kurz and Sousuke both stared in disbelief. Class B equipment: he was telling them to take an arm slave.

“Uh... in the middle of a city?” Kurz questioned.

“Use the ECS in invisibility mode,” Major Kalinin recommended, “and you’ll be fine.”

Most modern-day weapons, including the arm slaves, came equipped with an ECS—an electromagnetic camouflage system. It was a cutting-edge stealth device that used hologram technology to hide the user completely from radar and infrared sensors. The ECS employed by Mithril were even more advanced, capable of nullifying wavelengths on the visible spectrum—in effect, rendering you invisible. This consumed a lot of energy, of course, so it was unrealistic to use once maneuvers began. But for staying stationary and hiding, it was nearly flawless.

“You’ll get one M9,” Kalinin added. “Take minimal armaments, and two packs of external capacitors.”

“Sir.”

“Also, this mission must be conducted in utmost secret. We’ll have a mess on our hands if the Japanese government learns about it. Therefore, you must

monitor Kaname—and protect her if it comes to it—without her awareness.”

Kurz’s attractive face grimaced. “The hell? That’s ridiculous...”

“It will be difficult,” Sousuke agreed. The idea of protecting someone without their knowledge or consent seemed absurd.

But Major Kalinin remained unfazed. “We have a way to make it easier. This girl, Chidori Kaname, attends a co-ed public high school, where she spends most of her day. Thus, we’ll install our youngest squad member there. He’s the same age as her, and he’s Japanese.”

“Oh, I get it.” Kurz clapped his hands in realization. He and the major both turned to gaze at Sousuke.

Sousuke stood there silently at first, perplexed by their attention. “Major,” he finally asked, “are you suggesting...?”

Major Kalinin signed the directive as he responded. “First, we need to manufacture some documentation. We’ll have to find out what the school requires.”

“What the school requires for what?” Sagara Sousuke asked with trepidation, though he already knew the answer.

“What else?” Major Kalinin replied. “A transfer student application.”

## 16 April, 1150 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time)

## 1st Briefing Room, Tuatha de Danaan, 100 Meter Depth, Near Tsugaru Peninsula

Sousuke glared sullenly into the camera.

“Big smile, Sousuke,” Kurz cooed, beckoning. He was serving as an impromptu photographer.

Sousuke made an awkward attempt to twist his face into a smile. It ended up looking more like a muscle spasm.

“There we go,” Kurz said encouragingly. “You want to look nice and friendly on your ID, right?” He snapped the picture.

Sousuke immediately reverted to his blank expression.

Kurz sighed.

## 16 April, 2120 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time)

## Dining Hall, Tuatha de Danaan, 80 Meter Depth, Near Kinkasan

Sousuke furrowed his brow as he surveyed the items scattered across the table. “What is all of this?”

Mousse and a brush, a portable CD player, CDs by enka singer Itsuki Hiroshi and pop icon SMAP, an amulet from Mt. Narita, Rohto Pharmaceutical eyedrops, a coupon to Tower Records, a Nintendo GameBoy, a Mr. Junko-brand watch, a Yunker Kotei health tonic, packs of Marlboro and Libera cigarettes, magazines like *Popeye*, *Josei Jishin*, and *Dragon Magazine*, etc, etc, etc...

“We rounded up everything on board that a Japanese high school student might have,” Melissa Mao explained proudly.

“I see,” he said, then paused. “What’s this?” It was a small ring of rubber in a square plastic wrapper.

“That’s a condom,” Melissa grinned.

“I know that,” Sousuke told her. “But what use would a high school student have for a condom?”

“Don’t play dumb, you perv!” she teased.

“What are you talking about?” he asked with perfect sincerity. “I’ve used them several times before. They’re meant for use in the jungle, to replace a lost canteen.”

Mao stared and said nothing.

“They can hold a liter of fresh water,” Sousuke added.

“Oh, really?” Mao sighed.

## 18 April, 1006 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time)

## 1st Briefing Room, Tuatha de Danaan, 50 Meter Depth, Near Boso Peninsula

“Here, have a look at this.” Kurz pushed Sousuke to the LCD screen, remote for the tape deck in hand. “This is how Japanese high school students act. Burn it into your brain, okay?”

It was footage of a classroom. It seemed to be around sunset, and there were only two students present—one male, one female. Though the classroom was large, they had holed up together in a corner, exchanging nervous conversation.

“Hey... listen. I used to just think of you as a childhood friend, but...” the boy stuttered out, while the girl remained silent. “But I’ve finally realized how I really feel. I... I...”

“Toru-kun!” she cried out.

The two of them embraced. Just then, there was a sound. They gasped and turned. Another girl stood in the door to the classroom. She was watching them and trembling.

“Naomi!” the boy cried.

“You’re awful,” the second girl whispered and then ran away, crying. The boy looked about to follow her, but the girl he was sitting with stopped him, and—

“Well?” Kurz asked, prompting Sousuke for his opinion.

Sousuke’s expression was one of ardent confusion. “I don’t understand. Why did the second girl flee the scene?”

“Flee the scene? You stupid—”

“No... I see now. She had learned their secret. She was afraid of being silenced, so she fled the scene. A wise woman. She’ll live a long time.”

Kurz sighed.

## 19 April, 0330 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

## Flight Deck, Tuatha de Danaan, Ocean Surface, Near Miura Peninsula

The noise of the engine roared.

The de Danaan had surfaced and exposed its flight deck. The black vessel's maw stood open to the sky above, allowing ASes, combat helicopters, and VTOLs to take off from within. On the deck, a seven-blade transport helicopter stood by for takeoff. Its storage compartment was loaded up with an M9 arm slave and its equipment.

Sousuke tossed his bags behind his seat, then fastened his seat belt. He pulled his forged certificate of residence from his inner pocket and double-checked the information.

From beside him, Mao peered at his documentation. "You're using your real name?" she asked him suspiciously.

"It's not as if I'm registered in that country anyway," Sousuke explained. "You can always change the name of someone who doesn't exist."

"Well, I suppose..."

"It's not a problem. Take us out."

The helicopter began its smooth ride toward their takeoff point.

"Are you sure you can handle this, though? You're kind of a dunce about social stuff..." Kurz asked from the seat behind him.

"I'll do my best."

"Tessa was worried, you know," Mao added. Tessa was the captain of the Tuatha de Danaan.

"That's understandable," Sousuke agreed. "It's an important mission."

“That’s not what I meant...”

Just then, the pilot in the bulky helmet said “We’re taking off.”

## 20 April, 0820 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

## Tokyo Suburbs, 100 meters north of Jindai High School

“Ugh, it sucked,” Chidori Kaname whispered in disgust. Her dark brown eyes searched vacantly for something in the blue sky above. The black hair that hung down her back swayed limply with each step she took. She repeated: “Ugh, it just *sucked*.”

It was Monday, and she was part of a crowd of students on their way to school. Tokiwa Kyoko, the classmate who was walking beside her, chimed in. “This again? You been moaning all morning, Kana-chan. Was he really that bad?”

“I mean, he just kept going on and on about *nothing*...” They were talking about a boy she had gone on a date with yesterday. “I agreed to go out with the guy. Couldn’t he have put together a conversation with a *little* more depth?”

*Who cares if your dad’s a designer, or you have a friend who’s a J-Leaguer? Who cares? What about you?* she had ended up thinking.

“Hmm, fair enough,” her classmate agreed, deciding it was too much trouble to do otherwise.

“The life of Zhuge Liang, pollution in the West Pacific, religious strife in the Middle East...”

“Hmm, fair enough.”

“You can’t ‘fair enough’ your way out of this, Kyoko!” Kaname objected. “You’re the one who introduced us!”

“Well, he asked me to.”

“So? If someone asked you to auction me off in Macau, would you do that too?”

“Hmm, fair enough.”

Kaname groaned. “You’re such a bitch... Huh?” She had noticed a line of students out the front gate. “Oh, God, a bag check...” Her mood sank. The noncurricular guidance teachers were checking the pockets and bags of every student heading into the building.

“Hey, it is... Wait, Kana-chan, you’re not carrying anything dangerous, are you?”

“Uh? Well, not dangerous, but...” The problem was that her bag was full of strange books, like *Murphy’s Laws of Success, History Edition — You Can Live Like Zhuge Liang!* and *So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish,* and *Miracles of Archaeology: Did the Moai Write the Dead Sea Scrolls?!* and such. (She had borrowed them from another friend, and she was bringing them in to return them.)

“So, what’s the big deal? If you had a machine gun or a bomb, *that* might be a reason to freak...”

“What kind of weirdo would bring in something like that?” she laughed, then paused. “Hmm?”

Beyond the gate, at the head of the line, a crowd had formed. She could hear the sounds of an argument.

“What’s that all about?” In the spirit of curiosity, Kaname and Kyoko approached and peered through the crowd to see what was going on.

Their homeroom teacher, Kagurazaka Eri, was apparently grilling a student. “You think we’ll tolerate this kind of attitude your first day here?”

“No, I...”

“You’re not going inside until you show me your bag!”

“But...” It was a boy. He seemed to be trying hard to stay cool, but couldn’t completely hide his distress. His eyes darted all around, suggesting unease with the attention he was getting.

“Who’s that?” Kaname whispered. “I’ve never seen him before...”

He was wearing the same high-collared uniform as the other boys, but there

was something strange about him. He was handsome enough, but Kaname's real first impression of him was "grim." He had disheveled black hair; his mouth was in a tight frown, with the air of someone on constant alert. He seemed skinny at a glance, but he carried himself like a practitioner of judo or some other rough sport.

"Show it to me! Now!" The teacher grabbed the student's hand and snatched his bag away.

"Ah..."

"Don't tell me... You've got cigarettes, don't you?" She opened the bag and rummaged around inside. She pushed aside textbooks, and notebooks, and...

At the very bottom, she found an Austrian machine pistol with three 34-round magazines. There was also a cylinder of plastic explosives with a detonator, a stun grenade, a miniature camera, piano wire—

"This has to be a joke," she said after a pause.

"What?" The boy looked distraught.

"You can't bring toys like these to school. I'm confiscating them."

He blinked. "What?"

"Go on, wait for me in the office!" the teacher ordered. "It's almost time for homeroom!"

The student just stared at her. The onlookers dispersed, laughing. Kaname mustered her most disgusted tones to say, "Ugh, a military geek. Gag me..."

Kyoko laughed. "I don't know, he seems hilarious to me..."

Kyoko's prediction would turn out to be right. Sagara Sousuke had grown up on battlefields. He had traveled all over the world... but tragically, here in this microcosm known as high school...

He was an idiot out of his element.

*I can't believe they searched our belongings...* Sousuke thought as he followed Ms. Kagurazaka down the quiet hallway.

His first thought—when the noncurricular guidance teacher first asked him to show her his bag—was, *have I failed in my mission already?!* His second thought—after his weapons were discovered and confiscated—was, *I suppose now they'll take me to the basement for interrogation.* (He was unaware that most schools didn't have basement interrogation rooms.)

But as it turned out, that kind of inspection was an everyday occurrence at this school.

*Does that mean students regularly try to smuggle in guns and explosives?* Sousuke wondered. *It's hard to imagine, but...* If students regularly brought firearms to school, it would make his bodyguard duties that much harder; a passing member of the volleyball club could whip out a submachine gun and start firing at any moment.

Then again, Kurz Weber had the M9 Gernsback waiting in the copse behind the school. Sousuke had a miniature transceiver disguised as a watch—one call, and backup could be there in ten seconds.

"Uruz-6, what's your status?" he whispered to his comrade through the transceiver.

"Hungry. Want booze," Kurz replied into Sousuke's earpiece. Only morning, yet already brimming with complaints.

*But I suppose my infiltration was successful, at least...* Sousuke consoled himself.

Kagurazaka Eri, the teacher leading him down the hall, was in her mid-twenties. Her hair was done in a short bob, and she wore a trim gray skirt suit.

"Ma'am?" he asked eventually.

"Yeah?"

"That gun you confiscated..."

"Oh, you'll get it back... at the end of the term," Eri responded with a slightly teasing air.

"No, it's not that... I wanted to warn you. There's a shot loaded in the chamber. You need to not touch the trigger under any circumstances."

“Oh, really?” she deadpanned.

“It’s an extremely lethal splat bullet,” he told her seriously. “An accidental discharge would be fatal. Please.”

“I get it,” Eri sighed. “Calm down.”

*You don’t get it and I can’t calm down,* Sousuke thought. But he just shook his head in silence.

When Kaname and Kyoko saw Eri lead Sagara Sousuke into the room, they flew into a conversation of silent gestures.

“Hey! It’s him!”

“The firearm geek!”

The students buzzed, and the teacher raised her voice over the din. “Okay, quiet down! It’s time to meet your new classmate!” She slapped the blackboard with the attendance roll, sending the students of class 2-4 into temporary attention mode. “All right, Sagara-kun. Introduce yourself.”

“Right.” Sousuke took a step forward and struck an ‘at ease’ posture: chest out, shoulders back. “I am Sergeant Sagara Sousuke,” he announced in a clear, resonant voice. Then he realized his mistake, and his face went pale.

“Sergeantsaga Rasousuke?”

“I think it’s one long title, like Hashiba-Chikuzen-no-Kami-Hideyoshi.”

“Sergeant... like a drill sergeant? The army trainer guys?”

Nobody seemed to take the statement very seriously.

“Quiet!” Eri barked. “He’s not done yet! And Sagara-kun, stop fooling around!”

“I... I’m sorry...” He’d never felt this kind of nervousness before. One careless word could condemn his mission to failure. The very thought of it brought beads of sweat to his forehead. “Sagara Sousuke. That is who I am. Please forget the ‘Sergeant’ part. That is all.” Then, he fell silent.

After a pause, Eri asked, “Is that it?”

“Yes. That is it.”

She turned back to the students. “Any questions?”

“Me! Hey Sagara-kun, where do you come from?” one student asked.

“Many places,” he answered. “Afghanistan, Lebanon, Cambodia, Iraq... I’ve never stayed in one place for very long.”

A hush fell over the class, and Eri spoke up to fill the awkward silence. “What Sagara-kun is saying is... he’s lived overseas for most of his life. You were in the United States until recently, weren’t you?”

“That’s right,” Sousuke confirmed. She had likely read his transfer form, which listed his prior residence as ‘Fayetteville, North Carolina, USA.’ It was untrue, of course—He had chosen that location because he knew someone who lived near there, which would make it easier to keep his story straight.

Another student raised a hand. “What are your hobbies?”

Before Sousuke could respond, someone else interrupted, “Model guns, right?” which caused the room to break out in laughter.

“No,” Sousuke corrected, “fishing and reading.” That part was true: he typically spent his free time at Mithril’s West Pacific base, fishing while reading munitions manuals. If it was raining, he’d bring an umbrella, and lock himself up in his own little world... It was a little depressing, really.

“What kind of books do you read?” someone in the back asked. This time, Sousuke’s eyes lit up.

“Mostly technical manuals and trade magazines. I frequently read *Jane’s Fighting Ships*, and I enjoy *Soldier of Fortune*, as well as *Arm Slave Monthly* from Harris Publishing.” He paused to think for a moment. “Oh, and I’ve read the Japanese publication *AS Fan*. I’m impressed by the level of information they get access to... It’s a good magazine. These days, I’ve been more interested in maritime matters, though. I recently acquired the latest ten publications from the Naval Institute Press...”

Silence.

Sousuke trailed off, and looked down at his fingernails. “Forget all that,” he

said at last.

But nobody even remembered it.

Another girl raised her hand. “Um, do you have a favorite musician?”

This was a hard one; Sousuke hardly ever listened to music. Then he suddenly recalled the CDs that Master Sergeant Mao had gathered up on the submarine before they deployed. And so, he proclaimed with confidence:

“Itsuki Hiroshi and SMAP.”

## 20 April, 1508 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

## 2nd Floor, Athletics Club Building, Jindai High School, Tokyo

“He’s a total freak, I’m telling you.” Kaname stressed to Kyoko as she undid the ribbon on her chest. “Have you heard him say *one thing* that’s in tune with reality? There’s no way he’s doing it to be funny, either. He’s just one card short of a full deck, right? First-class crazy?” She talked and talked.

While she did, she unbuttoned her blouse, removed it, and reached out to arrange it on its hanger. But the sleeve got caught, and knocked over the Mizuno bat she had leaned against the locker. “Oh, for the love of...” she grumbled, but then went back to her rant. “And did you see the way he kept looking around all during class? And at lunch break, how he kept going back and forth from the hall?”

Kyoko was next to her, undoing the hooks on her skirt. “Oh, did he do that?”

“Yeah, he did! Ugh, I *hate* watching nervous types like him. It *so* gets on my nerves...”

“Then... don’t watch him, maybe?”

“I wasn’t!” Kaname stammered. “Like I’d ever be watching that geek!” But, as she adjusted her bra, she went right back to it. “Oh, oh, also! I made eye contact a few times. He was totally watching me!”

“Who was?” Kyoko questioned.

“That guy, duh! Then he’d look away like ‘oh, I wasn’t really looking at you,’ but come on, it was so obvious! Ugh, it’s just creepy...”

“Well, you’re pretty attractive, Kana-chan,” Kyoko whispered with the smallest hint of jealousy. She put on her stirrup socks and reached for her orange pants.

“Well, thanks, but that’s beside the point. Those eyes were the eyes of a total sicko.”

“You know, Kana-chan, you’ve been spending a whole lot of time dissing Sagara-kun...”

“I have?”

At that exact moment, Sousuke was striding across the athletic field. He stopped in front of the sports clubs building, looking up at the line of six second floor windows. There should be a staircase... yes, there it was. He checked the paper he was holding one more time, then started to climb.

“You have,” Kyoko affirmed, back in the club room. She knew her friend all too well.

Kaname was a loudmouth, but that was actually something people liked about her; her no-holds-barred attitude was a large part of why last year she’d been dragged (reluctantly) into the student council vice presidency. She also had a fundamentally people-pleasing nature, which was why she was here now, helping out Kyoko’s team. It was odd to see her complain this much about someone she barely knew, and odder still for her to badmouth him behind his back.

“Are you that into him?” Kyoko asked.

“Oh... what? No way!” Kaname denied. “Ah... ahahahahaha!”

Kyoko knew what that “ahahahaha” meant, too. That was her way of saying, “I don’t know, but this conversation is over”—even if Kaname didn’t realize that herself.

“Okay, let’s go.”

With their uniforms on, Kaname and Kyoko headed for the door. But as they swept open the curtain that cordoned off the changing area...

There were two sharp knocks, followed immediately by the club door opening wide. The boy who had opened the door—Sousuke—locked eyes with a girl in the middle of changing.

“Y...” The girls present—eighteen or so in total—all sucked in a deep breath, and then...

“Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!” Their scream was loud enough to shake the windows.

Sousuke stood there, first confused, then alarmed; he was probably more surprised than they were. The first thing he did was clear his mind of the information “most of these girls are in their underwear” (a trivial factor during an emergency). Then he dove into the room, grabbing Kaname’s collar and pulling her to the ground as he passed. In one fluid motion, he yanked the revolver from his ankle holster, shouted, “Everyone, get down! Get down!” and rolled onto his back with his gun aimed at the door.

It had taken less than two seconds in all; his reaction speed was remarkable, honed by years of practice. Sousuke remained just as he was, senses on full alert.

Then after a moment, he switched to confusion. There was no one in the doorway—no one at all. Kaname still on the floor under his back, his gun still pointed at the door, he looked around and around, growing more and more puzzled.

There was no sign of threat anywhere in the room.

Correction: he was surrounded by girls with murder in their eyes.

Ten minutes later, the chaos in the club room had finally subsided.

“You had another one of these on you, huh?” Kagurazaka Eri, who had been

notified by one of the girls, snorted as she picked up his .38 five-shot revolver.

"Yes," Sousuke said. Then he added after a moment, "I'm very sorry." He shrank into the folding chair they'd sat him in, looking completely run-down. His uniform collar was torn, and he could see traces of scratches forming on his flesh here and there. His hands were cuffed behind him, holding him in place—they had used the very aluminum alloy handcuffs Sousuke had brought with him. It was like a prisoner interrogation.

"I'll be confiscating this, too," Eri told him. "I'm sure you won't object."

"Right. But..."

"But what?"

"At least remove the bullets," he pleaded. "They're hollow points. Extremely dangerous."

"Yes, I'm sure they are..." Eri said dismissively. Then she stood up and declared, "Chidori-san, he's all yours."

"Huh? But..."

"I have a teachers' conference to get to. There's a field trip coming up, remember? He's unequivocally in the wrong here, so talk it over with the others and deal with him as you see fit." Whether from her trust in Kaname or a basic lack of giving-a-damn, Eri turned authority over to the girls and stepped out. Sousuke, facing an uncertain future, viewed Eri's exit like the UN peacekeepers' departure from Cambodia.

"All right..." Kaname, Kyoko, and the other girls all glared down at Sousuke.

Anticipating the torture in store for him, he timidly said, "The Geneva Convention specifies..."

"The what?"

"...Nothing."

Kaname had never heard those words before—She actually thought "Geneva" was the capital of Brazil. "All right, Sagara-kun, let's go right to it. What were you *thinking*?" Kaname hissed. "The Peeping Tom stuff is bad enough, but what about that whole scene? You pulled out that model gun, you threw me around

the room... You don't think that's crazy? Like, the first-rate kind?"

"F-First rate?" he stammered. *'Crazy but first rate?' What kind of contradiction is that? Is it I who am mad, or the world? No, wait, what is it I did that was crazy? Crazy is normal, normal is... (abridged).* Such (pointless) philosophical agonies turned over and over in Sousuke's mind, in an instant that felt like eternity.

"First rate, you know? First-rate crazy?" Kaname pointed an index finger to her temple and moved it in a looping gesture. Then she yanked up her sleeve. "Look at my elbow! You broke the skin! What are you gonna do about that, huh?" There was a very slight red spot on her porcelain arm. You'd barely notice it if it wasn't pointed out—The harm they'd caused Sousuke was far more severe, but none of them seemed to care about that.

"It should heal quickly enough..." he said, foolishly.

Immediately, the girls pounced on him. "How dare you!"

"A scar can haunt a woman all her life!"

"I can't believe what a jerk you are!"

He felt bombarded from all sides. It was worse than a crossfire between tank battalions.

"Well? Say something already!"

"Tell Kana-chan you're sorry!"

After a struggle, he managed to put together that they had found his behavior unacceptable. So at last, in the name of good faith, he said, "I apologize for being overly rough with you. I wasn't trying to harm you or your friends."

"Then what *were* you trying to do?!"

"I can't tell you. You don't have appropriate clearance."

And like that, the good faith was down the drain.

"Huh? What clearance?! Tell us!"

"I can't. I'm sorry..."

Kaname mussed up her hair with her hands. "Why did you even come here in

the first place?!”

“I wanted to join the club,” Sousuke said evenly.

In perfect unison, the girls responded, “Huh?”

“I was in this same club at my last high school. I believe the team found me very useful, so I wanted to join your club as well. I’m quite athletic, and I believe I could be an asset to you. Will you let me join?” Confidently, he recited the lines he’d memorized in advance. He thought it was a pretty good performance, all in all.

“Sagara-kun...” Kaname intoned, as if fighting off a pounding headache. “This is the *girls’ softball club*...”

Sousuke furrowed his brow. “Boys aren’t allowed to join, then?”

“Of course not!” she shrieked.

He thought for a minute. Then at last, he spoke, “Isn’t sexual discrimination a serious issue in these cases?”

“*What* cases?!”

The girls cast Sousuke out of the room, chair and all, and sent him flying down the stairs.

## 20 April, 1845 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

## Room 505, Tigers Mansion, Chofu, Tokyo

The viewfinder followed a girl with black hair as she opened a door, went inside, and shut it behind her. The highly directional microphone picked up the sound of a lock clacking into place.

“1845 hours. Angel arrives home. No sign of pursuit.” Melissa Mao, who was stationed to watch Chidori Kaname’s home, reported into a nearby microphone.

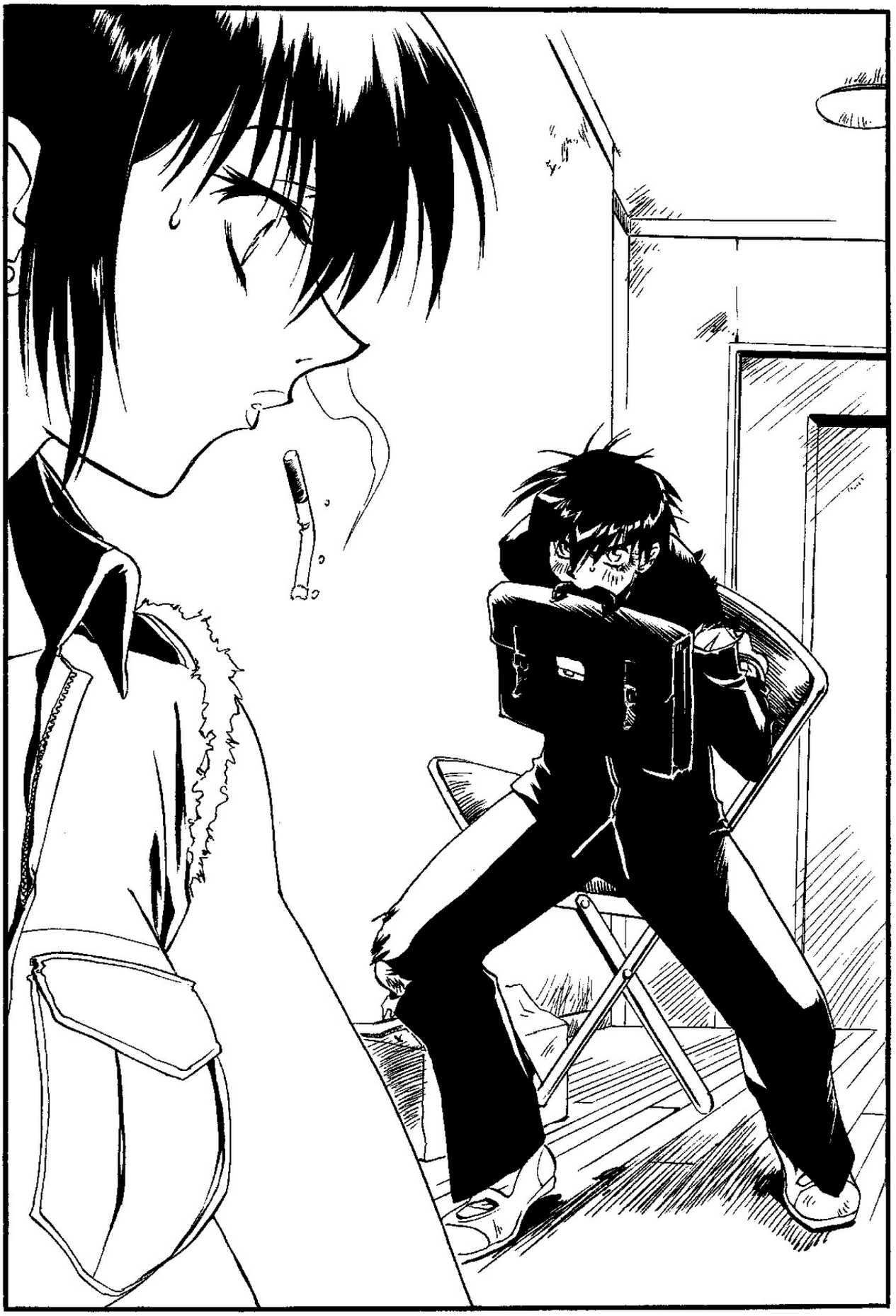
A portable display tracked the location of Kurz’s AS on a map. The M9—

invisible thanks to its ECS—was heading south along the city roads. He'd probably be in the neighborhood within two or three minutes.

Melissa was in an apartment thrown together by Mithril's intelligence department: a safehouse for staging and surveillance. It was positioned across the street from the apartment complex where Kaname lived, at an angle where they could look down on it. It was a large apartment, with no real furniture except for four chairs and a cheap table she'd brought in that morning. Its only other occupants were a few firearms and a small mountain of surveillance equipment.

"Why is everything in Tokyo so expensive, though?" she mused to herself. Having finished her 320 yen hamburger, she pulled out a 240 yen pack of menthols and lit up.

Sousuke returned shortly, and Mao was dumbstruck by the state he was in. He was handcuffed to a folding chair, which he was dragging along behind him.



“What the hell is that?” she demanded.

“It’s a folding chair, obviously,” he said as he managed, with great effort, to remove his shoes.

“Well, sure... But why are you dragging it along with you?”

“Because I can’t remove the handcuffs,” he admitted. “They’re hinged, and the keyhole is facing away from my hands, so...”

“Sousuke, come on...” Mao groaned, and used her own master key to remove his restraints.

“Thank you,” he said. He then proceeded to explain the day’s events. “...And that’s that,” he finished. “The hardest part was buying the train ticket at Sengawa Station...” He paused as he noticed her reaction. “Is something wrong, Mao?”

Mao was clutching her head in her hands. “Nothing, just a headache...”

“I see. Maybe you should get some rest.”

There was a soft electronic beeping sound—a call from Kurz. “Uruz-6 here. I just made it back. Would one of you *please* swap with me?” He sounded like he was restraining a scream. Kurz had just parked his M9 in a large trailer in the parking lot—a camouflaged hangar.

“Kurz, did anyone notice you?” Mao asked.

“I almost kicked an old man,” Kurz admitted. “His dog barked its damned head off at me... A kei-truck nearly plowed into me, I came *this* close to smashing into a pachinko parlor, and I rested a hand on the wall of a cram school and it cracked the freaking glass! Scared the shit out of the kids inside...”

After all, the people around him couldn’t see the M9. To make matters worse, he’d had to navigate an urban area full of narrow streets—a lesser pilot than Kurz might have caused a serious accident.

“Maybe we need to rethink our plan,” Mao said thoughtfully.

“Round-the-clock surveillance might not be possible,” Sousuke suggested. “We could leave the AS here during the day, instead?”

“Hmm. I’d hate to lose the firepower and the sensors, though...” Mao folded her arms and thought.

The M9 was a cutting-edge AS, mounted with billion-yen vetronics. These were so sensitive, they could even pick red flag phrases like “grab her” and “use of force approved” from nearby conversations and radio transmissions. On top of that, the machine had two heavy machine guns mounted on its head that could sweep through twenty or thirty unarmored enemies at once. It was a bit excessive for a mission of this scale—but then, Mao came from the US Armed Forces, who were world leaders in “excessive.”

“I think I’d like to keep the M9 close to Kaname as much as possible,” she decided. “If we avoid rush hours and move along the river... yeah, I think we can work it out.”

“If that’s your decision, I’ll respect it,” Sousuke said, honoring his team leader’s opinion.

“Whatever, just swap with me already. I’m exhausted,” Kurz whined over the radio.

“Hold your horses...” Mao said, then changed focus. “Oh, Kaname’s getting a call...” She fooled with the switches on the monitoring equipment, then offered Sousuke a headset. “Want to hear, Sousuke?”

“I suppose I should,” he said, taking the headset.

The call seemed to be from her little sister, who was living on the east coast of the USA. They joked around a little, and Kaname filled her in on how things were going in Japan. Eventually she brought up the “transfer student,” whom she referred to wryly as “hilarious.” Then at last, with obvious reluctance, she hung up.

“What a sad story,” Mao said wistfully as she flicked off the listening device. “A beautiful girl, living all by herself, gets a pick-me-up once a day from her family thousands of miles away...”

With a thoughtful expression on his face, Sousuke offered the most cloddish interpretation possible: “I’m not sure that I follow, but I agree that routine contact is a wise practice.” Then he thought again and said, “She seemed

different, just then, from when I met her this afternoon. She was much less harsh and combative."

"Of course she was," Mao told him. "She was talking to her sister."

"Is that how it works?"

"Yep, that's how it works."

"Hmm..." Sousuke said thoughtfully. "Also, I'm surprised that she doesn't seem to hate me."

"I guess she doesn't." Mao peered at him closer. "You seem pleased about that."

Sousuke turned to a window and examined his reflection. "Do I?"

## 20 April, 1130 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time)

## Amphibious Assault Submarine Tuatha de Danaan, 50 Meter Depth, Pacific Ocean

"It sounds like he's having a hard time," the girl in the captain's seat mused.

The control room was the brain of the de Danaan. It was about the size of a lecture hall; from within, the submarine was monitored and orders were doled out.

"I think it will be a good experience for him," Major Kalinin said from his place beside her.

The girl was holding the report recently submitted by Melissa Mao. It ran down, in purely businesslike terms, the details of Sagara Sousuke's hectic day. "A good... experience?" she asked. "Even though 'His firearms were confiscated,' he was 'assaulted by the protectee and several civilians,' and he 'returned to the safe house in a state of significant impairment'?"

"All within the allowable range, Colonel."

The girl whom Kalinin referred to as "Colonel" looked no older than her mid-

teens. She had large gray eyes and carefully braided ash-blonde hair that hung over her left shoulder. Rather than a uniform, she wore a simple pale brown skirt-suit that was just a bit too large on her—the cuffs partly obscured her hands. Nevertheless, she had a “colonel” rank insignia gleaming on her collar. Normally, someone of her position would also have a ribbon bar displaying her accomplishments, but on her there was none to be seen.

This was Teletha Testarossa—and though only a select few knew how she had acquired the title, she was the captain of the Tuatha de Danaan.

“Well, I suppose it’s all right...” she responded at length. “Mao-san and Weber-san are with him. And Sagara-san is at the top of his class at dealing with trouble if any occurs.” Teletha Testarossa—Tessa for short—gazed at the large screen that made up the control room’s front wall. The date and time (in both Japan Standard and Greenwich) were displayed at the edge of the screen. “So, Major. How long do you think we’ll need to keep them in Tokyo?”

“A few weeks, Colonel. Until we can cut the problem off at the root.” Despite the girl’s youth, Kalinin answered her with complete sincerity.

Tessa turned her eyes to the nautical map on the screen. “Then it will be up to us here. If all goes smoothly, Chidori Kaname will no longer need protection.”

“Yes, ma’am. And not just Chidori. All potential Whispered will be safe.”

“For now, you mean.”

“Indeed. Regrettably.” Major Kalinin saluted Tessa, then took his leave.

## Same Timeframe, Outskirts of Khabarovsk, Soviet Union

A bridge spanned a frozen river. There was no traffic there—only two vehicles stopped nearby. The freezing silence of a Russian night hung heavy over the scene.

Three men stood at the center of the bridge. One was an East Asian man dressed in an Italian coat. Two were Russians in KGB officers’ uniforms; they bore ranks of colonel and captain.

“I feel a chill,” the East Asian man whispered. He had mousse-slicked hair that he was constantly adjusting. There was a large vertical scar on his forehead—put there by a knife, or perhaps even a bullet. It conjured the image of a third eye, tightly shut.

“You’re the one who chose to meet here. Don’t complain,” said the colonel with the copious jawline.

“That’s not what I meant. I meant your foolish conduct sends chills up my spine.”

“What was that?” The captain—a large, burly man—tried to step forward, but the colonel held him back.

The East Asian man laughed. “That’s right. You know better than that, don’t you, Colonel?”

The colonel snorted. “We’re not here to talk about our mistakes. Our test Whispered was stolen, and there’s a good chance that the candidate list was stolen as well. We can’t continue our research without a test subject...” The colonel’s voice seethed with irritation. He’d been conducting his research without notifying the party leaders; if his failure were made known, he’d be sent to an internment camp for sure. “So now I will ask you, Gauron: have you identified who’s behind it?”

“I’d say so. Have a look.” The East Asian man, Gauron, handed a photograph to the colonel. “I ran one of the photos you gave me through an image processor. I think you’ll find the result extremely interesting.”

It was a faint outline of an arm slave, taken from behind. The image was blurry thanks to the ECS, which caused it to partially blend in with the background. It was running up the side of a mountain with a VIP transport backpack on. It looked slender and nimble, with proportions that were close to a human’s.

The colonel’s brow furrowed. “What’s this? I’ve never seen this model before.”

“That’s a Mithril AS. It’s... probably too much for you lot to handle,” Gauron said with amusement.

“Mithril?”

“A secret mercenary squad with weaponry about ten years beyond that of the rest of the world. They hire only the best, and they’re highly elusive. You haven’t heard the rumors?”

“Only the name.”

Mithril: a special forces team that worked in the shadows of international disputes. They’d strike the strongholds of armed guerrillas, destroy narcotics factories... One minute they were wiping out a terrorist training camp, the next they were blocking a black market nuclear weapons trade. To serve as firefighters for regional strife, independent of superpowers like the USA and the USSR—that was the nature of Mithril.

“Why would that band of do-gooders care about my plans?” the colonel asked with a slightly persecuted air.

“Because they’re dangerous,” Gauron told him. “Your success could upset the power balance of the entire world.”

“Will this make it harder to capture another one?” For their plan to succeed, they needed that girl—that “Whispered.” With their sample stolen away, they would now need to find another candidate.

“I can get you one. Now, kidnapping is harder than killing, and it’s going to require a lot of effort...”

The colonel glared at Gauron. “Fishing for a better fee?”

“I am a businessman, after all. Not a Communist.”

“Don’t make me laugh, you yellow ape!” the captain, silent up until now, suddenly roared. “We have countless other operators we could hire. Be grateful to the colonel for his generosity in choosing you!”

“But I am. He’s a valued customer.”

“Oh, please. You Chinese are all untrustworthy.”

Gauron hummed skeptically. “I’m not Chinese.”

“You’re close enough. But a drop into the coal mines of Ural will blacken that

grinning yellow face of yours! You snobbish little—”

“Ah, you’re getting on my nerves...” Gauron pulled an automatic pistol from his coat. The motion was so casual that the two Russians barely noticed. It looked like he was just pulling out a cell phone—but it was, in fact, a gun. The red dot from a laser sight fixed itself on the captain’s forehead, and then—

The gunshot echoed over the midnight riverside. Brain matter, blood and bits of skull splattered across the snow. The captain’s body fell limply to the ground —absent the top half of its head.

“That’s better. Now, let’s see... I think we were discussing a kidnapping.” He watched the speechless colonel sidelong as he put his gun away. Then he began rooting through his files as if nothing had even happened. “Here we are... What’s the matter, Colonel?”

“Th-That was my subordinate. How could you...”

“You mean that musclebound accessory you keep around to make threats? You really should have left him at home; you look foolish enough already.” As expected, he didn’t seem to feel any guilt about the murder... but he didn’t seem to take any pleasure or pride in it, either. He had the air of a man hassled for smoking in a non-smoking area. “Now, let’s talk business.”

The colonel said nothing.

Gauron pulled out a few documents. There were about fifteen packs in all, each with a photo attached. Boys and girls, all in their late teens, a variety of nationalities and races.

“Now, who to abduct? Just kidding, I’ve already decided... It’s this girl. Cute, isn’t she?” Gauron showed the file and photo to the colonel. At the top were the words “Chidori Kaname.”

Chidori Kaname—That was the name of this terrorist’s next victim.

# 2: The View Below the Water

## 23 April, 1732 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

## South Entrance, Keio Line Chofu Station, Chofu, Tokyo Suburbs

Kaname and her friends sat in a burger joint under a department store. They munched on fries, talked, and messed around.

Sousuke had followed them. He was currently sitting in a corner in the back, pretending to read a Tokyo Sports paper he'd picked up three days ago in the station. But all the while, he remained acutely focused on his surroundings.

There was a figure in his field of vision that concerned him: a man in his late twenties with a medium height and build, sitting behind Kaname at one of the counter seats. He wore a gray beret low over his eyes and had a black attaché case at his feet. He kept checking his watch, as if very conscious of the time.

*That attaché case... could it be...?* Sousuke wondered. It looked a lot like one he'd seen in a War Against Terror weapons catalog. It had a built-in machine gun, and you could press a button to switch it to firing mode.

The man finished off his hamburger and stood up, tray in hand. *Is he making his move?* Sousuke stood up. But the man just threw his trash away, placed his tray in the return, then hurried out.

*Or not,* he thought. *No, wait...* The man had left the attaché case behind. Could it be— *Damn!*

Sousuke had heard about this MO from an acquaintance who'd fought terror in Italy—blowing up an entire business to take out an assassination target. *But... weren't they trying to abduct her?* Sousuke thought. But then, circumstances might have changed... Yes, he didn't have time to question it!

Sousuke broke into run. He turned over a table and shoved a customer out of the way to snatch up the attaché case. It felt heavy in his hands.

Just then, Kaname turned around. “S-Sagara-kun?”

“Get down!” He knocked over a few more customers as he charged out of the shop. *Somewhere free of people...* He looked around. It was a shopping district in early evening, so the sidewalks were packed. But across the street was a parking lot. That might just—

“Out of my way!” Sousuke dashed out into the road. There was a blare of a horn. He turned to see a kei-truck bearing down on him. The driver failed to brake in time; Sousuke was hit and sent flying into a bicycle rack.

*Out of time...* The world was spinning around him. His consciousness fading, he forced himself to his feet. *Throw it... throw the case. Throw the case somewhere safe...*

“Hey, you okay?” Suddenly, the man from before was standing in front of him. He took the attaché case from Sousuke, opened it and looked inside. “Oh thank goodness, my manuscript’s okay... Thanks for trying to bring it to me.”

Sousuke just stood there, stunned, as the man clapped him on the shoulder and walked swiftly away.

A dozen people were staring at Sousuke—the truck driver, Kaname, and her friends among them—their faces a mixture of awe, confusion, and concern.

“Sagara-kun... What are you doing?” Kyoko, standing beside Kaname, asked him.

“I thought it was a bomb...” he said. And with that, he collapsed.

## 23 April, 1920 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

## Room 505, Tigers Mansion, Chofu, Tokyo

“You’re gonna get yourself killed before the week is out.” Kurz said as he bandaged Sousuke’s head. “We haven’t seen one sign of an enemy so far, but you keep taking yourself out like this. Can’t you just chill out?”

“I’m trying,” Sousuke moaned.

That incident at the hamburger shop had been just one of many. It had been four days since his mission started, but Sousuke was still floundering at school. Every day he seemed to lose his cool, make trouble, destroy public property, disrupt class—he'd been yelled at both by Kagurazaka Eri and by Kaname, herself.

His injuries were constant. He'd never suffered like this on a mission before. What's more, most of his injuries—falling down stairs, busting through glass, being crushed by library books, getting beaten by busts in the art room—were the result of things he had brought on himself.

He knew that he was just off his rhythm. But that didn't mean he could stop it. Kurz was right: he might die at that school, possibly very soon.

"You can't keep this up. Just tap out for tomorrow—Mao and I will stand watch outside the school."

"What if the kidnapper is inside the school?" Sousuke demanded.

"They won't be. Honestly, we still don't know if they're after her," Kurz breezed.

Sousuke just scowled. "It's dangerous to be too optimistic," he warned. "We should consider all situations as possible—"

"And *that's* the thinking that gets you hit by a truck," Kurz told him. "You ever hear the term 'solo sumo'?"

"Solo sumo?"

"Yeah, solo sumo. Swinging yourself around by your own mawashi?"

"Mawashi?"

"You don't know that either? How are you even Japanese? There we go..." Kurz finished the wrapping and went back to the window. "But here's one thing I don't get."

"What?"

"Kaname. She seems totally normal. I mean sure, she's pretty, but not 'marry the king of Monaco' pretty. Nothing weird in her background, either... Well, compared to you and me, anyway."

“True... I suppose you’re right.” It was only these last few days that Sousuke had realized how different his upbringing was from most of his peers.

“So why would the KGB be after her?” Kurz wondered. “Same with the girl we found last week... I heard she was a totally normal student before they took her. What the hell do they get from kidnapping some foreign girl in high school and drugging the life out of her?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Sousuke told him.

“Right? Same here. What the hell is the major hiding from us...”

## 23 April, 2121 Hours (West Pacific Standard Time)

## KGB Branch Office, Khabarovsk, Soviet Union

“When are you going to get it done already?” the colonel barked into the receiver. He had ordered the kidnapping three days ago.

“Soon,” Gauron responded apathetically from the other end of the phone. The terrorist (nationality unknown) was currently staying in the Soviet embassy in Tokyo. According to reports from the embassy staff, Gauron had mostly stayed inside since his arrival, making only a few brief contacts with his men. “I’m currently laying groundwork. I need to do a lot of preparation to abduct the target safely.”

“Preparation? Just break in in the middle of the night, grab her, and drive her to Niigata. What groundwork could you need for such a simple plan?”

“You need to stop being so impatient.”

“What did you say?” the colonel fumed.

“Mithril will have prepared for such a straightforward operation,” Gauron predicted.

“You think they have eyes on this ‘Chai-dory Kanamm’?”

Gauron chuckled at the colonel’s crude pronunciation of ‘Chidori Kaname.’ “It seems that way. So I need to act carefully to avoid their notice.”

“What for?” the colonel demanded. “If they try to stop you, just eliminate them.”

“Not possible. Even if I sent all of my skilled men at the problem, we’d just end up dead for our troubles.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that they have an AS,” Gauron explained. “It’s staking out the target with an ECS on invisibility mode.”

“Invisibility? Full invisibility? There’s no way those devices are out of preliminary—”

Gauron interrupted him condescendingly. “Didn’t I tell you their technology was ten years ahead? Forcing a fight will just invite trouble. They’ve likely put elite agents on the case.”

“But...”

“Just leave it all to me. I’m preparing a method that will eliminate all chance of interference. You just be careful that you aren’t sent to an internment camp.”

With that, the man hung up on him.

## 24 April, 1438 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

## Classroom 2-4, Jindai High School, Tokyo

“Aaaanyway...” Kaname said, her back to the blackboard. It was afternoon homeroom. “Time to get off our butts and pick duty assignments for the field trip, okay? It’s only four or five days away, now.” She looked around the classroom. Some students were chatting with their neighbors, some were napping, some were reading the day’s manga release... “Hey, are you guys listening?”

There were a few scattered responses.

“We’re listening.”

“Figure it out so we can go already.”

Kaname sighed. “You *guys*... I never should’ve agreed to do the class rep thing... But I figured this would happen, so I made a list in advance. All I need you guys to do is approve it.”

“You rock, Chidori!” one of the boys cried.

Kaname flashed a smug V-sign. “No problem. Okay, here they are.” She pulled out her notebook and started writing names and roles up on the blackboard. *Clack, clack, clack*—the white chalk rang out through the room. “Food duty: Onda-kun and Sanematsu-san. Luggage duty: Aiyama-kun and Omura-san. Communications duty: Kazama-kun and Fujii-san. Event duty: Onodera-kun and Suzuki-san. And trash duty... since there were no volunteers: Sagara-kun.”

Sousuke, seated in the back and half-listening, suddenly sat up, startled.

“What’s wrong, Sagara-kun?” Kaname asked.

“I don’t recall consenting to that,” he frowned.

“Oh, it’s a rule at this school: all transfer students are required to perform trash duty.”

A stifled laugh rippled through the class, but Sousuke didn’t understand what it meant. “I see. Very well.”

“We appreciate your understanding,” Kaname told him brightly. “I’ll explain your duties later. Now, let’s vote!”

And so, in a unanimous vote, elite Mithril mercenary, Sagara Sousuke, was appointed to trash duty.

## 24 April, 1113 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time)

## Central Control Room, Tuatha de Danaan, 50 Meter Depth, Sea of Japan

Teletha Testarossa sat in the captain’s chair of the dimly lit control room. “A... field trip?” She tilted her head.

Major Kalinin, who had come by to file his regular report, opened his folder and handed her a document and a pen.

“Yes, it starts next week. We need you to approve a new secure channel so that we can maintain contact while he travels.”



Tessa signed the document. “It’s a strange school, taking a field trip at this time of year... Where are they going?”

“Okinawa.”

“I see.” Tessa turned her eyes to the military data map at the center of the screen ahead of her. Then, her eyes falling on Okinawa in the corner, she said, “Did I ever tell you that I lived there for a while?”

“No, ma’am,” the major answered.

“My father wanted me to go to a Japanese elementary school. But the children there kept me at arm’s length, so I was eventually moved to a school on the base.” The nearby executive officer of the de Danaan, Commander Mardukas, cleared his throat. Tessa broke from her trance and looked back at the document. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have brought that up here...”

“Not at all...” the fussy-looking XO Mardukas said. But apparently disinclined to weigh in further, he just went back to his work.

Kalinin politely ignored the exchange and resumed his report. “I also have new information regarding the broader issue,” he said, bringing things back to the original subject.

“The Whispered?” Tessa clarified.

“Yes. They’re doing the research at the Khabarovsk facility. Look at this.” He handed her a bundle of documents. It was a long list of chemical substances, some circled in red here and there. “That’s a list of rare drugs circulating in the USSR. According to the intelligence department’s analysis...” Kalinin continued his explanation, handing her one new document after another. Tessa took it all in, quickly scanning through each page she received.

“Is the Khabarovsk facility the only one involved?” she asked.

“That’s what the intelligence department reports.”

“That seems unlikely. Tell them to continue their investigation.”

“Yes, ma’am.” In fact, Kalinin had already given them that order, but he opted not to say it.

“Now, can the Khabarovsk facility’s computer be hacked?” Tessa inquired. It would make things easier if it could be—they could just access it using their computer here. The computer system of the Tuatha de Danaan could perform functions far beyond a standard warship’s control system. Its complexity was on par with a large mammal’s central nervous system, and its processing power put even the communication systems of the US Armed Forces to shame. It would be a trivial matter for a system like theirs to infiltrate a Soviet computer.

But Kalinin rejected that possibility. “The laboratory’s computer doesn’t have an outside line. We’ll need to stomp out their research through physical means.”

“I see... A cruise missile, then?” They didn’t need ASes to take out their target wholesale.

“Yes. A G-type Tomahawk should be enough. One strike from an FAE warhead should devastate the facility.”

“You have my permission,” Tessa told him, “but try to do it late at night on a weekend.” She hoped that would reduce the possibility of casualties; the researchers’ lodging houses were about a kilometer away from the lab itself. “Use Sting to collect the latest pictures,” she continued, referring to their observation satellite. “Find out as much as you can about who goes there, when, where, and in what numbers.”

“Understood. Now, regarding the Arbalest...” Kalinin handed her another document. Just then, the mountain of papers Tessa had cradled in her arms spilled out onto the floor.

“Ah, I’m sorry. I’m sorry...” She quickly moved to pick them up. Kalinin and the XO helped. “I’m sorry to drag you into this, Mardukas-san...”

“Not at all.” XO Mardukas handed the collected documents to Kalinin and said with annoyance, “Major Kalinin... Would you kindly switch away from paper already?”

“I’ll try, sir.”

Rubbing his temples, the XO went back to work.

“So, is this the document?” Tessa asked. “The... ah, ‘The seven oaths of trash

duty'?"

"...No, ma'am." Kalinin said, and gently lifted away the report that Sousuke had sent.

## 25 April, 1635 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

## Hachimoto-bound Local Express, Keio Line, Tokyo Suburbs

Kaname bookmarked her paperback and stood up. "All right, enough is enough." She stomped through the train car to where Sousuke was sitting and planted her feet in front of him. As always, he was reading a newspaper. "What is your *problem* with me?" she said, enunciating every syllable.

"Chidori?" Sousuke feigned surprise. "What a coincidence."

"Are you freaking kidding me?! You're still pulling that?" Kaname snatched the paper out of his hand and looked it over. "'Schwartzie Throws Hat into Governor's Race.' This is from days ago!"

"I can read an old paper if I want to."

"That is *so* not the point!" she fumed. "Why do you keep following me?!"

"Me, following you?" Sousuke questioned. "I honestly don't know what you're talking about... You seem a bit self-involved."

"I'd have to be *more* self-involved *not* to notice this harassment! You've been on me every day from dawn to dusk! If you want to say something to me, say it!"

"I told you, it's a coincidence."

There was a prolonged silence, filled only by the sounds of the train and a conductor's announcement: "Next station, Kokuryo. This train stops at Kokuryo."

Kaname tossed the paper aside, causing an elderly passenger nearby to frown at her. The trained stopped at Kokuryo Station, and the doors opened with a “fwish.”

“You’re saying it’s just a coincidence?” she asked at last.

“Yes, it’s a coincidence.”

“Fine.” A split second before the doors closed, Kaname leaped out onto the platform.

*Fwish.*

Through the glass of the closed doors, Kaname could see Sousuke panic—she’d outsmarted him. She smiled triumphantly and waved. “Bye-bye, Mr. Pervert!”

The train began to move away, carrying Sousuke with it. Bag in hand, Kaname walked toward a bench to have a seat. Just then...

As the train was about to leave the station, Sousuke came hurtling out of the window. He fell back-first onto the concrete, bounced, rolled, and only stopped when he crashed into the fence at the edge of the platform. For a moment, she could only stare. “Are you for real?”

Sousuke’s body just lay there, silently.

Kaname ran up, knelt down next to him, and shook him. “Hey, are you okay?!”

Suddenly, he sat up as if nothing had happened, said, “I’m fine,” and proceeded to stand up and dust off his pants.

“Are you insane?!” she screamed. “What were you thinking?”

“I just realized that I had to get off at this station,” Sousuke explained innocently. “It has nothing to do with you.”

“I can’t believe you’re still trying that...”

“It’s a coincidence.”

“Uh-huh...” Kaname shook her head and sat down on a nearby bench. Sousuke sat down next to her, and resumed reading the paper he’d picked up

intently.

“And it’s just a coincidence that you want to sit here, too?”

“Correct.”

“Boy, you are really something...” She propped her head up on her knees and gave Sousuke a side-eye.

For some strange reason, his presence wasn’t creeping her out. He’d transferred to their school, burst in on her while she was changing, and seemed to follow her every day. Most people would call that stalking—Kaname had, too, at first. But something about that didn’t add up.

There was nothing about Sagara Sousuke that suggested lecherous thoughts, or impure motives. There was too much dignity in his profile. What was the term... “the fire of will”? He radiated the single-minded focus of an athlete before a match; that look of perfect calm that came from focusing all of one’s efforts on one single goal.

But that just made things more confusing: what reason could he possibly have for following her like this?

“Hey, Sagara-kun,” she said after a while.

“Yes?”

“Could you please just tell me what’s going on? I promise I won’t get mad.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. You just happen to be where I am.” It was his standard response, spoken matter-of-factly.

Kaname decided that questioning him was pointless. “Yeah, fine, we’ll leave it at that. Then could your classmate who just *happens* to be where you are ask a question?”

“Certainly,” he told her.

“You lived overseas for a long time, right? Were things like this at your old school, too?”

Sousuke held a moment of silence, then said, “Yes, I had a very uneventful life.”

She pressed on. “But aren’t you lonely? You left all your friends behind.”

“No. We keep in touch via phone calls and letters, so I didn’t strictly leave them behind.”

“That’s a weird way to respond...”

“I found it appropriate,” he protested.

“Okay, well, were you dating anyone?”

“Dating?”

“Yeah, a girlfriend,” Kaname clarified. “A sweetheart. That kind of thing.”

“I don’t know anyone who could classify,” Sousuke confessed. “My comrade... my friend likes to say, ‘You couldn’t find someone to date you, even in a remote Chinese village.’”

Kaname cracked up. “That’s pretty hilarious.”

“You understand what he meant?”

“Yeah, I think so. I mean, you’re a total weirdo, Sagara-kun.”

“Am I?”

“Yeah. Major weird.” Kaname giggled to herself a little more, then said, “But that uniqueness could be a good thing. Maybe there’s a nice girl out there who’ll really get what you’re all about.” She wasn’t even thinking about whether she, herself, would be categorized as being a ‘nice girl’ or not.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he told her. “You’re very nice.”

“H-Hey, don’t take it too seriously. I don’t know anything about it.”

“I see. I’ll forget it, then.”

“Yeah, you’re a total weirdo.” Kaname laughed once again. At some point in the conversation, she’d noticed a warmth spreading through her body. It was like when a stray dog on the street started following you—a pleasant feeling, with a tiny hint of loneliness at its core. She found herself thinking, *Maybe I’ll let this go a little longer.*

A voice over the speakers announced the arrival of the next train.

## 25 April, 1905 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time)

## Tuatha de Danaan, Periscope Depth, Sea of Japan

Diffused moonlight danced just beneath the ocean's surface. Silently rising through it came a hull as black as pitch.

The Tuatha de Danaan—an amphibious assault submarine—resembled a shark with a stubby dorsal fin, increased in size by a few orders of magnitude. It looked like one of Shinjuku's towering skyscrapers, set on its side in the water. The massive thing slid through the sea on its own power—quietly, ever-so-quietly.

Movement could be seen in the vessel's aft: the opening of a cruise missile launch tube hatch, the firing of a silver cylinder. Raising a trail of sea-spray as it burst forth, the Tomahawk missile dropped its rear booster and spread its guidance wings. It rose higher and higher into the night sky, then came parallel to the water, and flew off over the north horizon.

"Launch sequence complete. Now closing MVLS hatch," the fire support officer said, down in the central control room.

"Well done," Tessa responded with a nod. "We'll now dive to 100 meters and shift to a southward course." Green letters on the main screen's status board announced that all hatches were now closed. She confirmed the status of each, then turned to her executive officer.

"We're all clear, Captain," the XO, Commander Mardukas, replied. He was tall, lanky, and pale, with black-rimmed glasses on his nose. He looked less like a military man and more like a technician.

"Then proceed to submerge. Flood main ballast tank," Tessa ordered with perfect confidence. "Angle of descent, ten degrees. Speed, 10 knots."

When given their first command, even ten-year veterans of submarine life would frequently find their voices trembling when it came time to give orders. It

should be even more daunting on the Tuatha de Danaan, the world's most advanced submarine. And yet, this young girl showed no hesitance.

"Aye-aye, ma'am. Flooding main ballast tank. Angle of descent, ten degrees. Speed, 10 knots," the navigator echoed.

Soon, the boat tilted and entered its dive. The cruise missile's launch wouldn't go unnoticed; they had to leave the area as quickly as possible. They could determine whether the missile had accomplished its task through the use of Mithril's surveillance satellite, Sting.

"So... we'll know in three hours, correct?"

"Yes," he replied. "Why don't you rest until then?"

Tessa shrugged off XO Mardukas's suggestion. "I'd like to, but I think I'd just have bad dreams..."

The cruise missile was still in flight, after all. If it successfully hit the facility, it would take more than five years for the enemy to rebuild it. The intelligence department's final report was that Khabarovsk was their only Whispered research facility; they'd checked around the country repeatedly, and found no other location with comparable equipment.

"Now, Major... Once the laboratory is destroyed, can we recall the bodyguards?" Tessa asked, as she sat back in her chair.

Kalinin, who had been watching over the operation by her side, responded, "Yes. However..."

"Is there an issue?"

"Ah... no, I'm sure it's a groundless fear..." But his expression remained grim.

## 26 April, 1038 Hours (West Pacific Standard Time)

## KGB Branch Office, Khabarovsk, Soviet Union

"The laboratory's been destroyed!" the colonel screamed into the receiver. "A missile attack, of all things! Absurd! We've lost all of our experimental data on

the Whispered, as well as all information about them...”

“My condolences,” Gauron said with biting indifference on the other end of the line.

“Well, we won’t be needing the girl anymore,” the colonel fumed. “We couldn’t do any research even if we had her!”

“I see. That’s too bad.”

“That means the kidnapping is off. Which means we can’t pay you.”

“Completely understandable.”

Gauron’s unflappable behavior had the colonel suspicious. “What’s going on here?” he asked at length.

“What do you mean?”

“You seem quite composed for a man who’s lost his source of income.”

“There will be other jobs,” Gauron remarked casually. “I’ll just go back to my former employer... with my little souvenir.”

“Souvenir?”

There came a tap-tap-tap on the other end of the phone. “My dear Colonel. Do you know what this is?”

“What? No...”

“It’s a DVD. Makes a nice sound, doesn’t it? And it’s packed with delicious data.” Gauron let out a muffled laugh.

“Is that our research data?” the colonel asked incredulously. “When the hell did you...?!”

“That’s a trade secret. Of course, I knew you’d be angry, so I took a few other measures... Goodbye, Colonel. Do watch your health in the internment camp.” Gauron hung up.

Someone knocked on his office door. Before the colonel could answer, three armed soldiers burst in.

“Colonel Smirnov?” a young lieutenant asked. “Party headquarters has grown

concerned about your side dealings. They believe you've been siphoning state resources in a way that has proven detrimental."

"Wait a minute, I—"

"You can explain everything at Lubyanka. Come with us."

For a Russian, those words meant death. He'd be sent to an internment camp, undergo merciless interrogations... There was nothing left in his future but suffering. Slumping, the colonel let the soldiers take him away.

## 26 April, 2001 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

## Room 505, Tigers Mansion, Chofu City, Tokyo

*Being cooped up in a room all day is a refreshing change of pace,* Sousuke thought.

Today was Sunday, so Kaname had stayed in her apartment until noon. She'd eventually gone out, nominally to buy things for the field trip, so Kurz had gone to tail her with Mao's arm slave backup. That left Sousuke to monitor Kaname's apartment.

There was no sign of suspicious activity. At one point, a middle-aged woman with a child came by and rang her doorbell, but that didn't seem cogent to their mission.

Kaname returned at last a little after eight o'clock. "2006 hours. Angel returns home. Nothing to report," he whispered into the nearby microphone.

Not long after, Kurz made it back, seeming to be in a lively mood. "I'm baaaack! Oh-ho, I see you're hard at work, Sergeant Downer-Man."

As he approached, Sousuke picked up the distinct smell of beer. Eyes still focused on the camera view monitor, he asked Kurz, "You were drinking on a mission?"

"C'mon, I didn't have a choice. I was only gonna have one, but Kyoko-chan kept insisting..." he said, leering.

“What did you say?” Sousuke said, shocked. “Kaname’s friend Kyoko?”

“Yep! Kaname, Kyoko, Yuka, and Shiori... I went right at ’em with my ‘lost foreigner’ routine. ‘Oh, thank you so much. Japanese girls are so nice!’” Kurz laughed wickedly. His personality wasn’t cut out for tailing people in secret, so he’d apparently just walked up and made friends.

“You idiot. What the hell were you thinking?” Mao radioed from her AS, as she got back to the trailer.

“Aw, but they’re such cutie pies!” Kurz whined. “After days of one stupid bitch for company, I needed an oasis...”

“Kurz, this is a top secret bodyguard mission,” Sousuke said critically. “Why were you socializing with them?”

“Huh? Are you stupid? Becoming friends means you can be up close, which makes the bodyguarding and surveillance tons easier.”

“Emotional involvement can cloud your judgment. To maintain level-headedness and objectivity—”

“Who fights their battles totally on logic?” Kurz demanded to know. “When shit’s about to get real, it’s your gut that tells you, not your head.”

“But...”

“Am I wrong?”

Sousuke fell silent; there was nothing he could say. He felt like the point at argument had shifted, somehow, at some point. “I’m afraid I can’t accept your point of view,” he said at last.

Noting Sousuke’s thoughtful expression, Kurz grinned and said, “They talked about you, too. Boy, did they ever... ‘Oh yeah, we had that weirdo transfer student! Right, Kana-chan?’ and such.”

Sousuke’s ear twitched. “What did they say?”

Kurz smiled triumphantly. “You wanna know?”

“No... Well, actually, for the sake of the mission, I think I should hear it.”

“Wrong answer. You gotta say ‘Please tell me, sir.’”

Sousuke said nothing, but his gaze suddenly intensified.

“Hey, just kidding. Don’t go nuts on me... Oh, whoa.” Kurz also turned serious as he flew to one of the monitors. Sousuke hadn’t gone quiet because he was angry; he had noticed something on the screen.

“2121 hours. Suspicious figure on the balcony. I’m going to investigate,” Sousuke said into the recorder, then stood up.

The monitor’s display was of the balcony side of Kaname’s apartment building. They’d installed a hidden camera on the roof of the building opposite it. On the screen’s left side, they could see a man clambering up the drainpipe. He was dressed all in black, his face obscured by a cloth mask.

“You don’t think... a solo operation?” Sousuke asked, as he screwed a silencer onto his 9mm handgun.

“Can’t say. He could have buddies nearby... We’d better check out the nearby cars,” Kurz responded, pulling out a sniper rifle with a night vision scope.

Through the radio, Mao’s voice chimed in. “Uruz-2 to team. We need to neutralize that man. Uruz-6, head for the building across from the apartment. Get to where the camera’s planted.”

“Uruz-6 here. Roger that.” Kurz would be backing up Sousuke from a sniper position.

“Uruz-7, you go take him down directly. I’ll stand watch in the parking lot.”

“Understood. Give me 120 seconds.” Picking up a rappelling rope and equipment set, Sousuke flew out of the room.

Two minutes later, he had arrived on the roof of Kaname’s apartment. He affixed the rope to the rail, and swiftly wrapped the other end around his body. He looked down and saw the figure climbing from the third floor to the fourth.

Kurz’s voice spoke over his FM radio receiver. “Uruz-6 to team. I’m in position. I don’t see anyone suspicious around... I think it really might be a solo job.”

“Keep an eye out around you,” Sousuke ordered, “especially your six.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to, dumbass?”

Just then, they heard from Mao in the M9 again. “Uruz-7. She’s taking a shower in the bathroom right now. We couldn’t ask for better timing; take him down before she gets out.”

“Uruz-7. Roger that.”

“Don’t kill him.”

“I won’t.” Sousuke threw himself from the roof. He made no sound, except for the slight friction from the climbing rope. He kicked twice off the wall and was bearing down on the “enemy” in an instant.

The intruder, who was just climbing over the balcony railing, didn’t even notice him. Sousuke slowed his descent speed and kicked hard off the wall. Then, with a lithe twist of his body, he pounced on the man from behind. “Don’t move.”

The man gasped in shock.

Sousuke got him in a lock and pressed his gun to the back of his head. “It’s all over. Don’t say a word.”

The man nodded, trembling.

“Good. It’s good that you value your life.” Sousuke directed the man to lie face-down on the balcony. There, he straddled him, and gave him a thorough pat-down. He wasn’t carrying any weapons, but Sousuke did find a wallet in his back pocket. He took it out and looked through it.

He furrowed his brow. Inside the wallet was a student ID: Kazama Shinji, Number 10, Class 2-4, Jindai High School. That was the same school that Sousuke attended. The same class, at that...

“Uruz-6 to Uruz-7.”

“What?”

“Sousuke... Look at what’s in his hands.”

The man was holding bundles of cloth in both hands.

“Hmm. What are...”

“They’re panties,” Kurz told him. “Ohh, the alluring white of purity! Uruz-6

out.”

Sousuke glanced at the building across the way and made out Kurz’s silhouette in the dark. The man waved as if to say, “Yeah, we’re done here,” then started packing up his sniper rifle.

“Give me a damn break,” Mao groaned. Sousuke saw a small rippling in the air in the parking lot, moving away from him. It was the ECS-camouflaged M9, withdrawing to its trailer.

“What’s going on here?” The baffled Sousuke removed the man’s mask.

It turned out it wasn’t a man, but a boy—a boy with a slender, childlike, unassuming face. He was pale with fright, and all he did in response was shake his head.

“You can talk,” Sousuke told him.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” the boy cried.

“Keep your voice down!” Sousuke pressed the gun against him again in panic.

The boy’s voice dropped to a whisper. “I’m sorry. Please don’t arrest me.”

“I’m not with the police,” Sousuke admitted, “but please tell me what’s going on.”

“You won’t arrest me?”

“No. It’s all right.” Sousuke pulled away to let the boy sit up.

“Th-Thanks... Hey, aren’t you Sagara-kun from our class?”

“No.”

“Huh? But...”

“*No*.” Sousuke cocked his gun.

“R-Right...” the boy agreed shakily. “But what are you doing here?”

“Never mind about me. You... Kazama, was it? What are *you* doing here?”

Kazama Shinji showed him the half-dried underwear in his hands. “I’m stealing her underwear, see? Is that why you’re here, too?”

“No,” Sousuke said flatly. “I just happened to be passing by.”

“Oh, I... see.” Shinji tilted his head, but didn’t argue the point.

“Why were you stealing her garments?”

“Well... They’re not for me or anything. Murano’s gang—”

“Murano?”

Kazama Shinji explained the situation. They were apparently one of those delinquent groups—the kind every school had at least one of—and they’d ordered Shinji to steal Kaname’s underwear. Shinji was a member of the photography club, and they’d stolen the negatives for a set of photos he’d spent a whole year taking.

“They threatened you?” Sousuke asked.

“Not quite that bad. It was more of a ‘show us what you’re made of’ kind of thing,” Shinji explained. “And Chidori Kaname is Jindai High’s ‘prettiest girl you don’t want to date.’”

The delinquents likely had some sort of warped affection for Kaname—That’s why they’d come up with this childish prank. It was utterly foolish.

“I think I understand,” Sousuke said at last. “But you’re going to make trouble for her.” He was forgetting all the trouble he himself had made for her.

“I know, but... I really want to get my negatives back.”

“What are the pictures of?”

“Arm slaves. From the USFJ and the JSDF.”

“Oh?” Sousuke found himself leaning forward with interest.

“I took them at bases all around Japan. It was a ton of work...” Shinji trailed off. “You like that stuff too, right, Sagara-kun?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say I *like* it exactly...”

“I even got a picture of a Marine M6 in Okinawa.” The M6 was an AS first deployed in the early 90s. They’d had a role in the Gulf War, so they’d been frequently shown on the news, which had brought them a measure of public affinity.

“Oh?” Sousuke asked curiously. “Did you get the A2, also?”

“Yeah. Wow, you know your stuff. It had a reactive armor shield.”

“I see. How did it move, in practice?”

“Well, the base guys said the balance wasn’t great,” Shinji told him. “It’s got that Rockwell MSO-11 operating system, you know? There’s a lot of flab in the feedback architecture, so with a bilateral angle of more than 3.5, you get swung around by the weight of your gun. And the torque balance with the tip weight is already so clunky...”

Sousuke nodded over and over as he listened to the jargon-laden rant. “I see. That follows.”

“They’re best for ambushes or suicide runs, I think. The new M9’s got much better specs. And with a Bofors 40mm rifle—”

At some point, the two of them had struck up a real conversation.

Kazama Shinji’s knowledge of military matters was stunning, even to a professional soldier like Sousuke. Perhaps because he was an objective party, he had a unique, specific perspective. Sousuke entirely forgot the theft of panties, to let his geek flag fly.

“Your knowledge is impressive,” he commented. “It’s hard to believe you’re a civilian...”

“Oh, no, I still have a lot to learn... You’re very knowledgeable as well, Sagara-kun.”

“Oh, not at all...”

But the blossoming of this sad, nerdy friendship was cut short when the balcony door rattled open.

“Oh...”

Kaname was standing there, wearing nothing but a bath towel. She must not have realized they were there, because as she saw them, she went rigid. The towel exposed her shapely cleavage and long, curvy legs. Her wet black hair clung to her porcelain shoulders.

“What... are you doing?” Kaname asked at length, hand tightening on the towel’s closure.

“Ah...” It was then that Sousuke realized he’d been keeping his hands busy by playing with a pair of her panties. Nevertheless, he was able to say, with a completely straight face, “Chidori. What a coincidence.”

Kaname stormed back to her room to fetch her metal bat.



“That’s quite a mark,” Kurz said as he laid a wet compress on his friend’s arm.

“She really went after me. I tried to help Kazama escape, but he fell into the brush below.”

“From the fourth floor?”

“Yes,” Sousuke confirmed. “He hit a cherry tree first, and then the ground.”

“Were you trying to kill him?”

“I was in danger, too,” Sousuke protested. “I just barely managed to escape. But I wonder what the major would say if I was killed by my protectee?”

“Hmm... I think I can imagine,” Kurz commented.

He would sigh, then fill out documentation regarding the articles of the deceased, then move on to his next duty. Major Andrey Kalinin was not a man to be surprised by death—no matter where, how, or to whom it happened.

“I think she really hates me this time.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.”

A little while later, they got a call from Mao in the M9. “Hey, guys. I was just in contact with the de Danaan.”

“Do we have new orders?”

“Yeah. It looks like our mission is over. The enemy has no further reason to kidnap Kaname.”

“What does that mean?”

“Apparently they blew up the base of the people who were after her... all the data and everything,” Mao explained. “So, we can rest easy for now.”

Sousuke had never quite known all the details of the matter, but it sounded like the problem had been cut off at the root. “Will we return to the submarine, then?”

“Actually, we get a week off. We’ll get our next mission after that.”

“You mean it? Yippee!” Kurz joyfully threw his hands into the air.

Sousuke’s reaction was more conflicted. “I was supposed to go on a field trip

in two days. It's a four night affair."

"And you've been told to 'Have fun,'" Mao shared with him.

"The major said that?" Sousuke asked.

"Yeah. They already paid your travel expenses, so go and get your money's worth. Apparently that's an order."

"But..."

"Go on, Sousuke," Kurz coaxed him. "We know Kaname's out of the woods, so why not go and relax a little? Enjoy life as a normal high school student."

Sousuke meditated on Kurz's words. "Very well," he decided. "It could be a valuable experience."

## 28 April, 0815 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

## Passenger Waiting Area, Haneda Airport, Tokyo

"Have fun," they had said. But starting the next day, Sousuke was having anything but. He'd been freed from the constraints of his mission, and he didn't know what to do with that freedom.

Kaname did indeed seem to hate him—Even if they made eye contact, she'd just turn away and storm out with Kyoko or her other friends. She wouldn't even acknowledge his presence

"I guess it makes sense," Kazama Shinji lamented, as they sat together on an airport bench. "She caught you on her veranda, chatting and messing with her panties. Who wouldn't be mad?"

Ever since that night, Shinji never missed a chance to strike up a conversation with Sousuke. It could be an obligation to his 'partner in crime,' or simply an affinity for his fellow geek.

The second year students of Jindai High School were in the airport's waiting area, getting ready to board their plane to Okinawa. Class two had already boarded, and the students from class three were passing noisily through the

gate now. Sousuke and Kaname were in class four.

“C’mon, Sagara-kun,” Shinji told him. “Cheer up already.”

“Sure,” Sousuke agreed. He wished he could go back to the Tuatha de Danaan. He’d have plenty of distractions there, with preparations for his next mission. Why in the world had he agreed to go on a field trip?

“Okay, class four! It’s time, so have your boarding passes ready!” Ms. Kagurazaka, their homeroom teacher, shouted out.

“You heard her, Sagara-kun,” Shinji announced cheerfully. “Time to board.”

“Right,” Sousuke agreed, gazing at the jumbo jet’s fuselage through the windows in the hall.

The stewardess breathed a sigh of relief once all the students were settled on the plane. The flight to Okinawa would be carrying the students of Jindai High School, alongside about 80 unrelated passengers. The regular passengers were sure to complain about the rowdy students; the separation of the seating was a placebo solution. Just thinking about the hours that lay ahead brought her an early morning headache.

“Excuse me.” A question by a boarding passenger snapped the stewardess back to attention. The man held out his boarding pass. “Could you help me find my seat?”

“Of course, sir,” she said after a pause. “Let me show you.” With the will of a professional, she forced her expression into a gentle smile.

“It must be tough,” he remarked, “having so many teenagers on board.”

“Oh, not at all.”

“I couldn’t stand it, myself. I’d end up dumping them all at 8,000 meters.”

“What?”

“You know, I’d kill them. It would make things a lot quieter,” he suggested, “and then I could enjoy a peaceful journey through the skies. Right?”

“Sir...”

“Just kidding. Ah, there I am...” The passenger laughed and headed for his seat.

*What an unsettling laugh,* the stewardess thought.

## 28 April, 0958 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

## JAL Flight 903, Tokyo Airspace

The jumbo jet left Haneda and smoothly finished its ascent.

This was Kyoko’s first time on a plane, so she’d spent the whole time with her face pressed to the window, eyes shining. The sky was clear, allowing a full view of Tokyo stretching out beneath them. “Wow! Hey, hey, is that the Rainbow Bridge? It’s so cool!” she crowed.

“Sure,” Kaname agreed absently.

“Kana-chan, are you listening?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Look,” Kyoko pointed, “the Statue of Liberty!”

“Wow.”

“The Eiffel Tower!”

“Sure is.” Kaname, too, was in no mood for fun.

Kyoko poked at her. “Hey, what’s with you?” she asked. “You were acting weird yesterday, too. Did something happen?”

“Umm... Not really.” Kaname was mad at herself, more than anything. She’d shown Sagara Sousuke a tiny bit of interest at the train station last week, and *that* was her reward? He really was a freak, and a geek, and a pervert-stalker-creep. *I was so stupid to trust him,* she thought, and it couldn’t help but depress her.

“Is this about Sagara-kun?” Kyoko asked, cutting right to the quick.

“Wh-Where did that come from?” Kaname asked shakily. “O-Of course not.

Ahahahaha.”

That was the ‘conversation over’ signal, but Kyoko persevered. “I knew it,” she said. “On Sunday, you were all ‘maybe he’s not such a bad guy after all,’ and then on Monday you had him on full cold shoulder mode. What did he do to you?”

“Nothing...”

“Hey, Kana-chan. If... If it’s you-know-what... you can tell me, okay?”

“Huh?”

Kyoko took Kaname’s hand. “You should really go to the hospital, too. I’ll go with you.”

“Hey...”

“Then after that, you gotta make him pay for it. There are lots of lawyers who specialize in this stuff,” Kyoko advised her. “You’ll be fine since you’re a girl.”

“What are you talking about?!” Kaname cried.

Just then, the plane bucked; it rocked first to the left, then to the right. Kyoko let out a shriek.

“It’s okay. This stuff is pretty normal,” Kaname said casually. Indeed, the rocking had already stopped. “It is a little weird, though, with the weather this nice...”

The students in the seats at the front were whispering about something. Finding it odd, Kaname tapped the shoulder of a friend in the row ahead of her. “What’s going on?”

“I’m not really sure,” her friend told her. “Someone said they heard a pop before the shaking started...”

“A pop?”

Just then, there was a cabin announcement: it was a man’s voice, and it sounded like the captain. “Attention, passengers. We had a little turbulence from an approaching low pressure area. There may be a little more shaking as we change course, but there’s no need to worry.” That was all.

“That’s strange,” Kaname whispered.

Kyoko looked concerned. “Why?”

“I think they usually say, ‘We appreciate your patience,’ not, ‘No need to worry.’”

Indeed, Kaname was correct.

# 3: Bad Trip

## 28 April, 1000 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

## JAL Flight 903, Tokyo Airspace

The captain set down the cabin mic and looked behind him.

A man was standing before the cockpit door, holding a gun with a laser sight and smiling brightly. “Well done,” he said. “We don’t want the passengers worrying, after all.” The suit-clad man tossed his glasses aside. His face was haggard-looking and covered in stubble. He had black hair and bangs that covered his forehead, behind which a large scar could be seen.

“Are you crazy?!” the pilot asked. “Using explosives on a plane in flight?”

“It was only a little blasting powder. Just enough to blow the lock off the cockpit door.”

“You could have killed yourself, too.”

“Killed myself? Hmm, I suppose you’re right...” The suit-clad man let out a chilling laugh. Then, noticing the way the pilot’s eyes were running over the instruments, he said, “Plotting a new course?”

It was as if he had read his mind. “The blast might have fouled up the electronics,” the pilot answered. “We’ll need to make an emergency landing.”

“Ohh. You think something’s broken?” The terrorist gazed with interest at the pilot’s console, eyes narrowed.

“Yes. I’ll pass on your demands, just let me take us back to Haneda.”

“Is this what’s broken?” The man pointed the laser sight at the captain’s head and unceremoniously pulled the trigger. There was a crunch of shattered flesh and bone, and the pilot died instantly.

“Hmm, yes, it does seem broken.” The man let out a cackle, then made a

sound like an emergency alarm.

“What have you done?!” the copilot cried, covered in his companion’s blood.

The man flicked the red laser to the copilot next. Laser sights weren’t much use in real combat, but perhaps he enjoyed the way it inspired fear in his targets. “Are you broken, too?”

“D-Don’t do it. You won’t have anyone to fly the plane!”

“You think? But I’ve always wanted to fly a plane like this. Is it fun? What do you think? Give me your expert’s opinion.” Grinning, he leaned in close enough that the copilot could feel his breath.

“D-Don’t kill me...”

“I asked you if it’s *fun*, stupid...” But just before he pulled the trigger—

“Gauron!” A new voice prevented him. Another man entered the cockpit. He was enormous—close to two meters tall. He wore a suit and glasses, and looked just like a businessman on a work trip.

“Oh... Is that you, Koh?”

“What are you doing? Why did you kill the pilot?!”

“He lied to me. The little fool was mocking me.” He made a show of poking at the corpse.

The large man, apparently named Koh, snatched Gauron’s gun away and said, “And who did you expect to fly the plane?”

“I’ll do it. I’ve flown transport craft before, after all.”

“A passenger jet isn’t like a military plane,” Koh told him. “And if you really had to kill someone, you should have used a knife!”

“A knife?” Gauron protested. “How barbaric; I’d never touch the vicious things.”

Koh grabbed the contemptuously grinning Gauron by the lapels and hoisted him upward. “If you enjoy killing people, that’s your business. But don’t forget, it’s my home country that’s giving you people this chance. Stop adding new risks to the plan.”

“Don’t be like that. If they’d do as I told them, I’d be perfectly civilized. Right?” Gauron tapped the shoulder of the copilot, who was frozen in terror. “Hey, Mr. Copilot. What’s your name?”

“M-Mori...”

“Mr. Mori. Did you hear all that, then? Out of respect for my comrade, I’m going to try not to kill you. If you *do* defy me, I’ll just kill someone else. How does that sound?”

“Please don’t kill anyone!” the copilot begged.

“Perfect. Then you’ll do exactly as I say, won’t you?”

“Yes. I’ll do it.”

“I didn’t tell the corpse there, but I have more of my men mixed in with the passengers... And they all carry dangerous weapons,” Gauron informed him. “So just keep that in mind.”

“How did they get the weapons—”

“We enlisted someone in the cabin cleaning agency. Wasn’t that smart of us?”

“Y-You paid him off?”

“No, we just got a little close to his family. He got them all into very hot water... Or should I say, very cold water.” Gauron laughed at his own joke. He’d kidnapped and threatened the cleaner’s family. Then when the job was done, he’d killed them all mercilessly, without a second thought.

“That’s terrible,” the copilot said. “Why would you—”

“Because it was logical. Anyway... here. Fly along this route, would you?” Gauron took a flight map from Koh and showed it to the copilot.

The blood drained from the copilot’s face. “North from... MIMOD? Final destination... Sunan? That’s North Korea!”

“Yes, a country famous for its poverty. I’m sure you’re aware of it.”

“They’ll shoot us down,” the copilot wheezed.

“No, they won’t. They know we’re coming. If you follow my instructions to the

letter, they'll even send an escort. And they do use ILS, though it's not the most accurate, given the state of the country... Now, listen. Once we pass this point, you'll identify yourself as..." Gauron laid out his detailed instructions.

It took time for the various authorities to understand the scope of the problem: a passenger plane entering Naha's FIR had suddenly turned north and flown into the FIR of Daegu, South Korea. At first, the Civil Aviation Bureau of MLIT was in chaos. Flight 903 wasn't responding to communications, and the bureau broke out in long arguments over whether it was a hijacking or a malfunction.

While MLIT argued, the South Korean Air Force scrambled its fighters. They received a terse communication from Flight 903 telling them simply "it's a hijack," but that message, too, had to traverse a complicated series of channels. MLIT only received the message 20 minutes later, at which point, leadership for the issue was passed to the Cabinet Office for National Security Affairs.

While all that was going on, Flight 903 entered North Korean airspace. The ROK Air Force were forced to give up pursuit and return to base. Mysteriously, the North Korean army did not intercept them.

The Metropolitan Police Department had numerous anti-terrorism units, known as SATs. But with the plane in foreign soil—worse yet, in North Korea—they were helpless.

The Prime Minister first learned of the incident when questioned by an NHK reporter at a campaign stop. He responded, "I'll wait for more information to comment," and foolishly went back on the trail—The media and the opposition were happy for the new scandal. No one took responsibility for the crime.

The USFK AWACS eventually announced that Flight 903 had set down at Sunan Airfield, 20 kilometers north of Pyongyang, but the hostages themselves didn't know that at the time.

## 28 April, 1155 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

## Sunan Airfield (Pyongyang International Airport), Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Something wasn't right here; most of the passengers had picked up on that by now. They should be getting close to Okinawa, but the scenery down below was all mountains.

They tried asking the stewardesses, but that got them nowhere. All they offered was, "Don't worry" and, "We'll be landing soon" and, "It's because of the weather."

Eventually, the plane started landing procedures. An urban region was visible to the right of the runway. It looked deserted and dingy, though; there were lines of old factories, pouring black smoke into the sky. It seemed like a city rife with pollution sickness. It was like they'd traveled forty years into Japan's past.

"I knew something wasn't right," Kazama Shinji said, looking out the window. "This isn't Okinawa. It's not even Japan."

"I believe you're right," Sousuke responded.

The two of them had been the first ones to realize something was wrong. When they were still over the ocean, they'd caught sight of an ROK Air Force F-16 out the window. What would a South Korean fighter be doing over the Pacific, en route to Okinawa?

Soon, the jumbo jet landed. A few dozen meters away stood rows of warehouses, in front of which old-fashioned military aircraft could be seen—silver-bodied tubes, like carp streamers with wings.

"Sagara-kun," Shinji observed, "those are MiG-21s... no wait, J-7s." There were tanks, too—two of them with strangely old-fashioned makes. "Look at that!" he cried. "Are those T-34s? Those hunks of junk from 50 years ago?" Then, at the same time, there were arm slaves. They could see at least three from where they were sitting. "And then all of a sudden, cutting-edge Rk-92s. Talk about a tech gap..."

The long-limbed Soviet ASes with khaki-colored armor carried a brand of AS rifles that were common in the East. Western armies codenamed them

“Savage,” and they were often seen in countries supplied by the USSR. Sousuke knew those ASes very well too. He’d piloted them—and he’d fought them.

Seeing the weapons scattered across the runway, Sousuke now knew for sure: they were in a North Korean airfield.

*What’s going on here?* he wondered. Mao had said that Kaname was in the clear, yet their plane had been hijacked. It couldn’t be a coincidence. Some unknown enemy had chosen this method of kidnapping her. It was flawless—With several hundred hostages to worry about, even Mithril would be hard-pressed to intervene.

To make matters worse, they’d landed in North Korea. The interests of Japan, the ROK, the USA, the USSR, and China all tangled together in such a complicated way that any rescue operation would wind up bogged down in red tape. To use that old-fashioned terrorist method, hijacking, in such a perfect way—

“It’s brilliant,” Sousuke muttered.

“Huh?” Shinji asked.

“Nothing,” Sousuke responded shortly. There was nothing he could do. He didn’t have a gun at the moment—and even if he did, it wouldn’t help him much.

Around the time that the passengers began stirring uneasily, there came another cabin announcement: “Attention, passengers. Thank you for flying with us today.” It was a man’s voice again, but it was different from the one who had spoken to them after takeoff. “I’ll be taking over for the captain of this plane. Now, as many of you will have already realized, we are not at Naha Airport. We’ve been forced to land at Sunan Airfield in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.”

“What did you say?!” their homeroom teacher Kagurazaka shouted out loud.

“Catch on a little earlier, ma’am...” Shinji clutched his head.

“As you may know, the armed forces of the imperialist United States and their puppet state, the ROK, will be holding joint maneuvers next week. Their twisted intent is, as ever, to intimidate the glorious People’s Army. In order to crush the

American Empire's ambitions, I've brought this little show of solidarity to my comrades in the People's Army... et cetera, et cetera, even I'm embarrassed by that spiel. The point is that you're hostages; please look out the window."

They looked and saw the plane surrounded by armored cars, arm slaves, and uniformed soldiers.

"You're welcome guests here, but you must do as you're told. If you try to escape or show any signs of resistance, we *will* shoot you all without hesitation."

Another stir ran through the cabin.

"In addition," the man resumed, "there are no appropriate facilities in this airport to hold you. Please wait inside the plane until your release can be arranged. We appreciate your patience."

## 28 April, 0405 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time)

## Central Control Room, Tuatha de Danaan, Periscope Depth, Tsushima Strait

Dizzying arrays of data swirled on the control room's central screen. As militaries across the globe began to mobilize, there was a swift increase in communications available to tap; words in red, green, and yellow danced and overlapped in complex patterns.

"They completely outwitted us. I should never have put my faith in the intelligence department." Tessa—Teletha Testarossa—said to Kalinin. Her eyes darted back and forth among the dozens of map layouts, which were visible on her personal screen. "It's as if we're always one step behind," she lamented. "It's shameful."

"It's like whack-a-mole, what we do. There's no way to guard against all possibilities," Kalinin answered. Perhaps he had known this was a possibility.

Perhaps that's why he'd sent Sousuke on the trip... but even he was caught off guard, it seemed, by the audacity of the method they'd employed. "And it doesn't seem as if the KGB are behind this."

"North Korea, then?" she mused. "Unlikely..."

"Indeed. Both have been exploited by another entity."

They thought they had destroyed all of the KGB's research data, yet someone must have smuggled it out. That someone must have powerful connections in the North Korean military, as well as a facility for Chidori Kaname—for the Whispered.

"Any speculation on who this 'Mister X' and his friends might be?" Tessa asked.

"None at all," Kalinin told her. "At least, not yet."

"The North Korean government is denying responsibility," Tessa said, after some thought. "They claim the hijackers just showed up at their door. But they also won't agree to return the hostages—They want concessions on the upcoming US-Korea joint exercises." All the while she was speaking, she was flipping through diplomatic papers that had arrived, by way of Sweden, on her screen. To read at a pace close to speedreading, while speaking so smoothly on a completely different topic—it was the act of an extraordinary mind. "Now, Major. How long do you think it will take for the hostages to be safely returned?"

"Chidori excepted, I assume?"

Tessa nodded immediately. "That's right. If we interfere too soon, we might complicate the return of the 400 others."

Kalinin thought. "I doubt the North Korean government is eager to escalate tensions. They had a bumper crop last year, they are bringing their palladium reactors online, and their failing economy is beginning an upturn. The needless deaths of hundreds of Japanese citizens would not be to their benefit."

"Exactly. We should follow their lead for now," Tessa said. "Once the hostages are freed via standard diplomacy, we can locate and rescue Chidori." She knew full well, though, what kind of treatment Chidori would face in the meantime—

assuming their rescue was even successful.

Kalinin caught the glimpse of self-loathing that crossed the girl's face in that moment, but he pretended that he hadn't. "Entirely logical. However—"

"For now, we'll wait, watch, and see," Tessa declared, interrupting him.

"Very well," he agreed. "We do still have time. How shall we prepare in the meantime?"

"Let's have transports on standby at Merida Island Base—Three C-17s," she decided. "And within the next two hours, get a KC-10 refuel tanker in the air. I'll send it its flight plan later."

"Yes, ma'am," the officer in charge of communications replied, and went to work, forwarding her orders.

"Major, order Mao and Weber back here," Tessa continued. "Get six M9s and three FAV-8s warmed up by 0700. And... prepare the Arbalest for usage."

"Yes, ma'am."

"We can kick ourselves another day," she said. "We are fully prepared for situations like these."

Kalinin nodded. "And the enemy has already ingested poison."

Poison—Yes, he really was like poison, in a situation like this...

"That's true. Let's wait until we hear from him first."

Tessa decided to keep her vessel at periscope depth.

## 28 April, 1718 Hours (Japan/North Korea Standard Time)

## JAL Flight 903, Sunan Airfield, People's Democratic Republic of Korea

Inside the plane, you would hardly know there was a hijack in progress.

About a quarter of the passengers sat nervously in their seats, as one might

expect. But the rest—the students of Jindai High School—had been driven by boredom to begin acting out. Some were playing cards, hanafuda, and mahjong, while some had board games, like Life and Monopoly, spread out here and there among the seats. Some sang on portable karaoke machines, some kicked off the classic field trip "late night chats" early, some ran Mini 4WDs down the aisles. The stewardesses were at their wits' end—they could scold them all they liked, but the play resumed the moment they looked away. Even the teachers had given up on trying to restrain them.

"Hey, Kana-chan. Are you getting hungry?" Kyoko asked.

They were playing old maid. Kaname responded while plucking a card from another friend's hand. "Huh? Yeah, I guess... I wonder how we can get food."

"You think there's convenience stores around? Maybe we can pay someone to buy us some stuff..."

"Yeah, for real! Though, if they do have convenience stores, I bet they're crap... Instead of 'Seven Eleven,' I bet they have 'Seven Il-Sung,' right?" she snickered.

"I don't get it."

"You don't? Sheesh, kids these days! By the way..." Kaname glanced over her shoulder. Sagara Sousuke was sitting nearby, gazing out the window with an air of nonchalance. *Even at a time like this? What the heck is he thinking about?* With a feeling of vague disgust, she plucked a card from Kyoko's hand. It was the Joker. "Oh, dammit!"

"Yes!" her friend cackled. "Sucks to be you!"

Suddenly, a hush fell over the plane. To be more precise, it fell across each row of students in turn, like a shockwave that emanated from the entrance.

Three men, armed with submachine guns, had entered the cabin. They were led by a man who was unarmed, but smiling brightly. This man wore an expensive suit—probably Italian—and adjusted his lapels before spreading his arms magnanimously. "Now, we didn't come to stop the fun. Continue."

But except for a few, who were just that brazen, the kids didn't feel much like going back to their games now. The leader whispered something to one of his

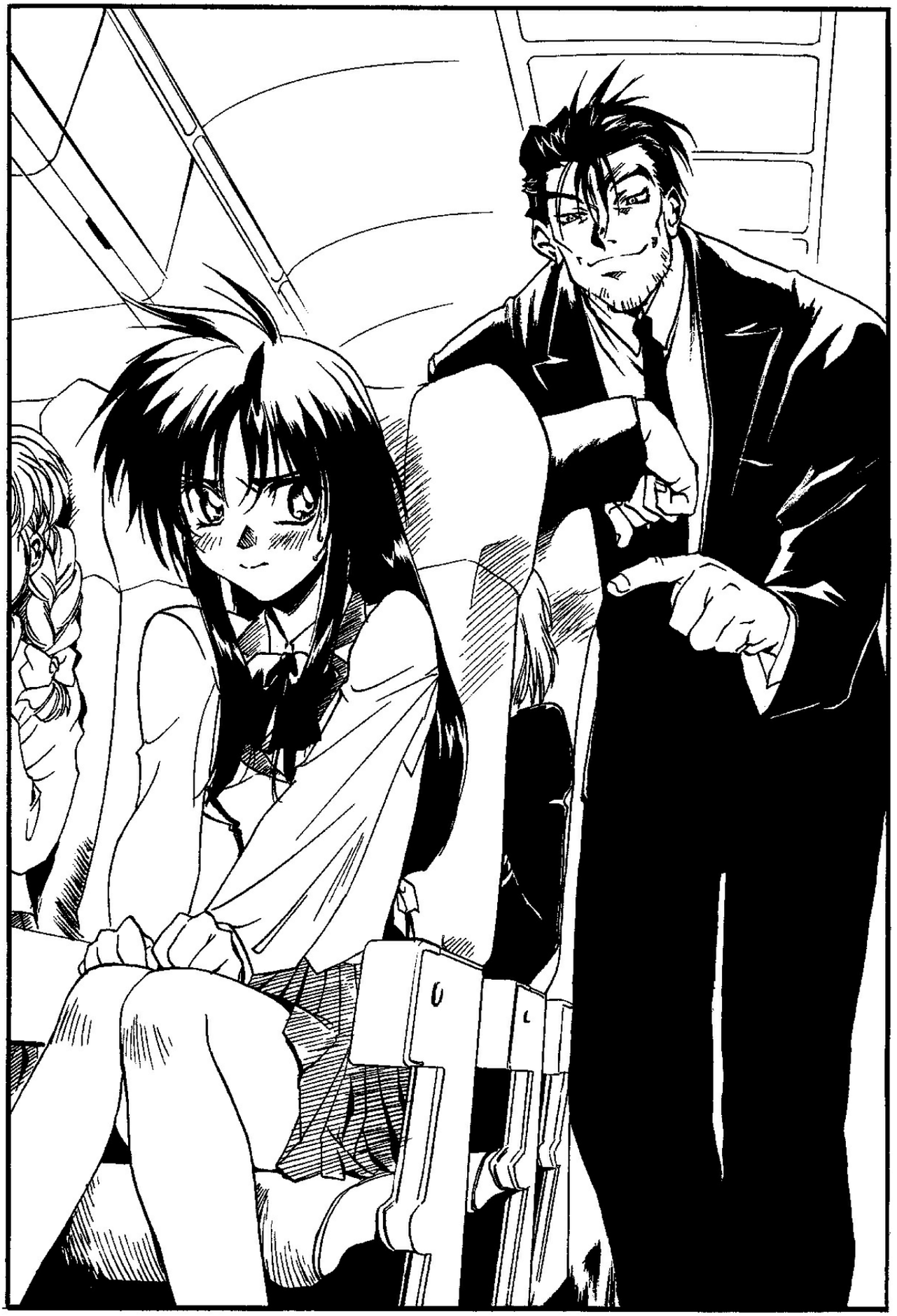
men, then pointed in Kaname's direction.

"What's all this about?" Kyoko looked nervous. The other students had started whispering among themselves, as well.

The man in the suit took a few steps in their direction, then stopped. "You there," he said evenly. He was close enough now that she could pin him as the man who had made the cabin announcement earlier. But who was the 'You there' he was referring to? "Didn't you hear me?" he said. "You, the pretty one, with the long hair."

Kaname just stared dumbly.

"I'm talking to you." The man walked even closer and loomed over Kaname. He had a vertical scar on his forehead, and there was something doll-like about his gaze. It gave her the creeps.



“What do you want?” she asked him at last.

“We want to make a video for the press,” he told her, “and we need someone to star in it.”

“Oh, yeah?” she said. “Good luck with that.”

“We want you to be that star,” he insisted. “We think you’d be perfect.”

Kaname waved them off. “Oh, no way. Well, um... you can probably tell, I’m not exactly nation’s sweetheart material. I’ll turn the viewers off, for sure.”

“No need to be modest. Come on, now.”

“Um, hey, I...” The man’s subordinates flanked Kaname and began to drag her away. “I just really think it’s a bad idea, I’m... Hey, let me go! I said no! Why do you want *me*?!”

“Kaname-chan!” Kyoko’s voice was close to a scream.

Kagurazaka Eri ran up and confronted the man. “Excuse me! Where are you taking my student?”

“She’s going to help us out a bit, that’s all,” the man said. “I’ll return her right away.”

“No! Absolutely not!” the teacher protested. “If you’re going to take someone, take me!”

“You’re not what we’re looking for. The press—”

“That won’t work with me, you coward!” The man’s face twisted into a sneer, but Eri ignored him and persisted. “You people are monsters! First you hijack our plane, now you’re using our children? I don’t give a damn about what you want! There’s no justification on God’s earth for—”

“Goodness...” The man shot his subordinates a conspiratorial smile. Then, as Kaname watched, he pulled a gun from his suit. It was an automatic pistol with a laser sight, which he pointed straight at Eri’s head. “You *are* annoying.”

Eri’s eyes widened. “What are you—” A point of red light fixed itself on her forehead. The terrorist’s finger tensed on the trigger—

A bang echoed through the cabin, and Kaname trembled. Then she realized:

the sound wasn't a gunshot; it was a clang. Everyone turned to look at the source.

A boy was casually picking up a cup he had dropped in the aisle. "Sorry," he muttered as he noticed the attention. The boy—Sagara Sousuke—then slouched back to his aisle seat as if nothing had happened.

The man fixed his eyes on Sousuke. His gaze was careful, penetrating. Sousuke remained silent, eyes focused on the cup in his hands.

The students looked back and forth between the two.

At last, the man let out a sniff and returned the gun to his coat. It was as if, robbed of his thunder, he had lost all interest in the execution. "Let's go," he said shortly. "We have no further business with these people."

The terrorist headed for the exit with his subordinates and Kaname in tow. Kagurazaka Eri stayed behind, standing limply in place. When the realization hit her of how close she'd come to dying, she fainted away dead on the spot.

While the other students called for a doctor, Sousuke strode through the cabin indifferently. It was only when he made it to the unoccupied galley that he let himself breathe. He leaned over the sink and let out a groan. *Just how stupid am I?* Even he knew it was madness to intentionally draw your enemy's attention. But he also knew it had been the only way to save Eri.

In that split second just before he'd acted, there were two choices battling it out in his mind: the first had been, "Let her go; she's not part of your mission." The second had been, "Save her; there's no reason to, but save her." He had ended up choosing the latter—He still didn't know why.

After he'd dropped the cup, then, the enemy had spent a few seconds staring at him. Those seconds had been an eternity. *Don't project any malice,* he'd thought. *Act oblivious and calm, yet slightly anxious...* Even for Sousuke, a paragon of willpower and self-control, those few seconds of performance had been exhausting.

*That was close; incredibly close. It's a miracle he didn't recognize me...* Sousuke spent about a minute lost in thought, then took in a deep breath and

straightened up. *I can't stand around here forever,* he told himself. *Chidori Kaname has been taken. I need to act.*

There was no one monitoring the cabin itself; as long as they didn't leave, the hostages were free to do as they pleased. The plane was out of fuel, so it couldn't take off. The terrorists had likely destroyed the long-distance radio equipment, so they couldn't contact the outside. It was a perfect prison. And yet, Sousuke needed to escape it.

First, he'd get his things from the cargo hold. Then he'd do some recon and contact his allies. After that, he'd have to find Kaname.

Once he'd confirmed that no one was watching, he crawled into the galley's elevator and took it down to the cargo hold. The hold was pitch black, lined neatly with containers—a few dozen of them, each as tall as a person. Sousuke pulled a penlight from his pocket and began to go through them, one after the other, searching through the luggage inside. In the thirteenth one, he finally found his bag. He didn't need the clothes or the toiletries. He needed...

*There we are...*

A satellite communicator with a powerful encryption function; a 200,000-volt stun gun, powerful enough to knock out most men in one hit; a medical kit and a survival tin, which he jammed into his pockets. It was too bad he hadn't packed a gun or a knife.

He'd gotten it all in order and was about to close the container when a loud whirring sound filled the hold. The cargo doors were opening! Hurriedly, Sousuke closed the container. He tried to sneak away, but had to settle for jumping behind a pile of bulk bags.

With the cargo doors now open, a group of men filed in. Sousuke wasn't sure if he was fully hidden or not, but he couldn't afford to move now. All he could do was lie behind the bags and hold his breath.

The men were heading right for him. Their footsteps sounded purposeful; firearms clinked against the metal in their belts. He counted one, two... three of them. They moved as if they'd had combat training. If they found him, he'd have to fight. But unarmed? And without knowing how many more were outside?

A jeep had brought Kaname to another part of the airfield. It looked like an apron, but instead of parked planes, it was home—at the moment—to two large trailers and a truck. The truck was emitting a noisy hum; maybe it was serving as a generator. The area was illuminated by blinding mercury-vapor lamps, while three or four men in suits with machine guns seemed to be standing guard over the trailers. The trailers themselves looked like OB vans, but she couldn't find any sign of an antenna.

"Um... What is all this?" she asked.

The apparent leader smiled faintly, but didn't respond.

She was taken from the jeep and led toward the black trailer. Inside, it was packed with electronic and medical devices. She saw a sort of drum large enough to hold a person, various modules connected by a confusion of cords, and a computer with exposed circuit boards. Kaname couldn't begin to guess what it was all for. A woman in a lab coat stood in front of a console. "Is this her?" she asked.

"Yes. Begin the tests at once," the apparent leader responded.

"Tests?" Kaname asked nervously. "What are you—"

"Put this on." The woman cut Kaname off, and held out a blue hospital gown.

"Why should I?" Kaname demanded.

"Your uniform has metal in it. If your bra has hooks, you'll need to take that off, too," the woman said, ignoring her question. "Basically, anything metallic has to go." The woman's Japanese was perfect. Almost all of the terrorists, including the 'leader,' appeared to be Japanese.

*What in the world is going on?* Kaname wondered. "Um... Are you going to take X-rays or something?"

"Something like that, but far more advanced. PETs, MRIs, MEGs with SQUIDs... Then I'll be measuring your NILS response," the woman told her. "This is all preparation for that."

Kaname's mind blanked on most of those words. "They said they were filming

a PR video.”

“They’re not,” the woman said. “Get changed.”

“No,” Kaname protested. “Why should I—” A second later, she felt a sharp pain in her neck, and lost consciousness.

“That should speed things up. Now get her undressed,” Gauron said. He was holding Kaname’s weight with one arm after knocking her out with a stun gun.

“Be careful with her!” the woman admonished him. “What if this affects the tests?”

“We don’t require that degree of precision,” he told her. “We just need to know if she’s the real thing or not.”

The woman shot Gauron a scornful glance. “How blissfully ignorant of you. You don’t even understand what Whispered are, or their importance.”

“Oh, but we do,” he told her.

“Do you?” the woman questioned. “That’s hard to believe from the man who brought that top-secret Codarl along...”

“Incomplete though it is, that one machine could fend off a whole battalion,” Gauron argued. “It’s a necessary precaution, in case our hosts have a change of heart.”

“You’re really quite a coward, for someone living on borrowed time—”

Suddenly, Gauron tossed Kaname aside to grab the woman by the throat.

“Hnn...” she squealed.

“Don’t push your luck, pig,” His tone was ice cold, but there was a note of enjoyment in it as well. “Just keep quiet and do as you’re told. Or do you enjoy angering me and forcing my hand? Do you?”

He continued to choke her. Her eyes filled with tears and she let out a wheeze, like pain mixed with ecstasy. Gauron clicked his tongue and relaxed his grip, then shoved the woman against the console. “When will you have the results?” he asked, looking down on her.

“Tomorrow morning,” she managed to say, through fits of violent coughing.

“That’s too long. Can’t you speed it up?”

“Even if I... use drugs...” she croaked, “they won’t take effect for... at least six hours. And there are tests and... procedures to be done first...”

“Hurry, then. If I think you’re wasting time, I’ll kill you, too,” Gauron snapped, then left the trailer.

Thankfully, the three men didn’t seem to notice Sousuke among the bags. They passed by, so close he could have reached out and touched them. From the corner of his eye, he could make out their backs. The suits they wore suggested that they weren’t soldiers from the base, but terrorists who’d come mixed in with the passengers.

“Where is it?” one asked. He was speaking Japanese.

“Should be around here. It’s the only yellow container... ah, there it is.”

They seemed to have business inside the cargo hold. Sousuke could hear the container roll out on the ball bearings that covered the floor.

“There’s no chance of it going off, right?”

“Of course not. It’s perfectly safe until triggered manually.”

He heard them open the container. One of the men whistled when he saw what was inside. “Would you look at that. Didn’t think it’d be so big...”

“In case we need to activate it on land, I guess. You’d need this much to be sure... Now, get around behind it. You’ll see a red cord; remove the jack insulator tape and plug it into the socket marked ‘three.’”

“Found it. Plugging in now.”

“Hold on. Let me get things ready here... There. Okay, now plug it in.”

Sousuke heard a click followed by three soft electronic beeps.

“Did that do it?”

“That did it. Now don’t touch anything else, and don’t use your radios within thirty meters.”

The men closed the container and returned it to its original position. Their business apparently complete, they dusted off their suit jackets and headed back to the cargo doors.

“Who knows about this?” one asked as they went.

“Just you, me, Sakamoto, and the boss. None of the Koreans.”

“Ahh... Well, it feels like a waste. All those feisty high school girls up there... I’d love to take one out and really give it to her. It’s not as if they’re gonna count the bodies—”

“Don’t be stupid. That would tip off the locals, and the boss would kill you.”

“Only if he found out.”

“Then I’d report you. I don’t want the boss to kill *me*.”

“Fine, I’m just kidding anyway...”

The terrorists left and the cargo doors closed. The hold sank into darkness again.

*What were they doing here? And what did he mean, “count the bodies”?* Sousuke pulled out the yellow container the terrorists had been discussing. Then after a moment’s hesitation, he opened it. His penlight revealed the contents inside, and he gasped. *Damn them...*

Inside was a bomb—a massive bomb.

There were two tanks, 1.5 meters tall, and filled with explosives—the binary liquid kind, most likely, the same stuff used in an AS’s rifle. Beside the tanks sat a case with a small electronic circuit inside, and what looked like two backups.

The red light was on—the bomb was armed. This much high explosive, if detonated, would blow the plane to smithereens. A single press of a button from one of the terrorists in the airfield, and all four-hundred-something passengers would be dead.

Sousuke doubted that he could disarm or disable it. He knew more about bombs than most soldiers, but he wasn’t exactly a specialist, and he didn’t have any of the tools that he’d need for testing and disarmament. If he messed with it too much, he would just end up setting it off.

*They're going to blow up the passengers to cover up the kidnapping?* he thought. If the hostage group made it back to Japan and Chidori Kaname wasn't with them, problems would arise. The Japanese government would seek her return, and North Korea would have to address the issue. That would be bad for the terrorists.

Instead, they'd send the jumbo jet back to Japan, then blow it up over the ocean. The government wouldn't be able to confirm the bodies, so Chidori Kaname would be presumed dead. No one would even suspect that a kidnapping had occurred.

This plan would put the North Korean government in a difficult position, but it probably wouldn't escalate to armed conflict; the terrorists had even taken that into account. What reason could they have to go to such lengths to abduct her and cover it up? Was whatever secret she possessed really worth the lives of hundreds of civilians?

"No..." That man just loved killing people; that was the only way he could ever have conceived of this scheme.

Sousuke closed the container and returned it to its original location, then moved swiftly in the direction of the nose of the plane. Deeper in the cargo hold was a door to the front landing gear storage. If he could scale down the wheel from there, he could escape the plane safely. He had to contact the de Danaan.

A cylindrical coffin—that was the best way to describe the device Kaname found herself in. It had walls made from plexiglass that looked brand new. From time to time, the platform she was lying on moved, letting out a low hum.

Kaname's head was fixed in place with a strap, and she was wearing a goggle-like head-mounted display. Its screen kept showing her symbols and pictures, one strange image after another. A star, a circle, a square, a tree, a bottle, a stick... Occasionally, she'd see an image that looked vaguely obscene.

She found herself yawning. She couldn't help it; she'd been lying there for close to an hour.

"Don't sleep," the doctor said.

“Yeah, yeah...” Kaname groaned back.

After being knocked out, she’d awakened to find herself strapped to this machine, wearing nothing but a blue hospital gown. Even her bra was gone—she was about to start kicking and screaming when she thought about it being removed in front of that man, but the woman reassured her that she had been the only one present.

*Rationally,* she thought, *I should be more afraid than I am. I’ve been isolated in a crisis situation. And that terrorist... he was really going to shoot Ms. Kagurazaka. If Sagara Sousuke hadn’t dropped that cup then, something really awful might have happened...*

The hand of death. That long-forgotten sensation she had first felt when witnessing her mother’s death was reviving, slowly but surely, inside of her. “No one in this world is invincible,” it told her. “You could be the next to go.”

*That’s right,* Kaname realized. *I might never make it home...*

In a storehouse on the edge of the airfield, 500 meters from the plane, Sousuke unfolded the antenna on his satellite communicator. He looked at his compass watch, made a few simple calculations, then pointed the antenna toward the southern sky. He put on his headset and tapped a few things on the keypad. Five seconds later, he was connected to Mithril’s West Pacific base, which was 3,000 kilometers away.

“Yes?” It was a woman, an officer in charge of communications. He’d talked with her several times before.

“This is Uruz-7 of the de Danaan. Sergeant Sagara, B-3128.”

“Confirmed. Sousuke, are you all right?”

“Affirmative, Shinohara,” he said. “Can you put me through to the Tuatha de Danaan?”

“Yes, just a minute.” The transmission cut off. She was forwarding the satellite signal, putting him through to where the Tuatha de Danaan was now, hiding somewhere in the ocean.

“Sagara-san, are you all right?” It was another woman’s voice—Teletha Testarossa, their commander-in-chief.

“Affirmative, Colonel, ma’am.”

It was an absurdly formal way to talk to a girl his own age. But to a mere NCO like Sousuke, Colonel Testarossa was on an entire other plane of existence. She was the captain of their vessel—he didn’t know why she was also their commander-in-chief, but regardless, she was someone to whom even Major Kalinin paid respect. She must possess incredible intelligence and leadership.

“Good. Hold on a minute.” Her voice grew more distant. “Major?”

A man’s voice took over. “Sergeant Sagara, this is Kalinin. Report.”

“I’m at Sunan Airfield,” Sousuke answered. “There are roughly two factions of hostiles: one, a Japanese organization that perpetrated the hijacking; I believe the other is the local military. As far as I can tell, the base’s security level is low. Their forces include...”

He outlined everything he’d learned about the base from his hour and a half of recon since escaping the jumbo jet: what parts of the facility were active, the number of security forces, the morale and discipline of the soldiers... He gave them information about the plane’s location and situation, as well.

The two officers listened calmly to his explanation and pressed for more information on the most vital points. The revelation that Chidori Kaname had been taken didn’t change their responses. But when he told them about the bomb in the cargo hold, Tessa’s voice became tense. “What did you say?”

“It looks extremely difficult to disarm,” Sousuke told her. “I can’t do it with what I have on hand.”

“Understood,” Tessa said at length. “We’ll find a way to deal with it ourselves.”

“Ma’am,” he responded in acknowledgment.

“Sergeant. Do you happen to know where Chidori is?” Kalinin asked.

“I don’t,” Sousuke answered. “I’m going to search for her after this, but I don’t even know if she’s still at the airfield.”

“See if you can find her, but don’t put yourself at risk,” Kalinin ordered. “We’ll be needing you to create a diversion.” It sounded like the de Danaan was planning a rescue—and that they were prioritizing the safety of the people on the plane over Kaname.

“Roger that,” Sousuke said after processing that.

“Your information has given us a number of insights,” Kalinin continued. “We’re going to formulate a plan now. Contact us again soon. Make it...”

“2200 hours local time,” Tessa said.

“As she said, Sergeant Sagara.”

“Roger. I’ll contact you at 2200 hours. And Major, sir...”

“Yes?”

“The leader of the hijackers is Gauron,” Sousuke said. On the other end of the line, the major fell silent. “He’s acting very differently than he did when we fought him. But it’s him, I’m sure of it.” When Sousuke said ‘we,’ he didn’t mean Mithril—This fight had taken place before Kalinin and Sousuke joined that organization.

“I thought he was dead,” Kalinin said.

“He must have survived,” Sousuke told him grimly. “He has a scar where I shot him in the forehead.”

“Did he recognize you, then?” the major asked.

“No. My appearance has changed too much, I think.” Back then, Sousuke’s hair had been longer; he’d been scrawnier and smaller, and more tanned. That was probably why Gauron hadn’t recognized him.

“All right. I admit, the bomb and all... it does sound like something he’d do. Remain vigilant,” Kalinin ordered.

“Roger that. Ending transmission.” Sousuke turned off the communicator and folded up the antenna. He put his things away and was just about to move, when—

“Hold still,” said a voice, in slightly accented Japanese. From behind him,

there came the sound of a gun cocking.

## 28 April, 2032 Hours (Japan/North Korea Standard Time)

## Corridor, 3rd Deck, Tuatha de Danaan, Periscope Depth, Yellow Sea

"What was that all about?" Tessa asked Kalinin as they walked down the hallway to the planning room.

"Gauron, you mean?"

"I would appreciate an explanation." She stopped, back to the door, facing Kalinin.

"He's a dangerous terrorist," the man eventually admitted. His tone was heavy. "His name is a derivation from the Chinese Jiǔ Lóng, 'Nine dragons'; it's said to come from the fact that he has citizenship in nine countries. He's been tied to over thirty VIP assassinations and at least two aircraft detonations, yet he remains virtually unknown in Western counter-terror circles."

Tessa recalled that Kalinin had once been part of the Soviet special forces.

"Sergeant Sagara and I faced off against Gauron before we joined Mithril," Kalinin went on. "That was several years back... We were on the run from the KGB, and we ended up taking shelter with Islamic guerrillas in Afghanistan."

Tessa knew this story: Andrey Kalinin had been caught up in an intrigue concocted by the Soviet military and the KGB, and they were still after him, even now.

"The KGB hired Gauron to bring me in. One day, while I was out, he brought two arm slaves and attacked the guerrilla village. As the guerrillas had no ASes of their own, he all but annihilated them."

Tessa said nothing. ASes were currently the world's most advanced land weapons. Unlike tanks, they could work in just about any terrain—jungles, mountains, anything—and infantry were effectively helpless before them.

“Many people died, including innocent children. It wouldn’t have happened if I’d been there.”

“What then?” she asked.

“I swore revenge,” Kalinin answered. “My chance would come two weeks later—Gauron was pursuing me through the mountains of Pakistan. We set up an ambush: I played the decoy and Sousuke sniped him. Complications ensued, but eventually, Sousuke put Gauron down.”

“Except that he didn’t,” Tessa observed.

“It does appear that way.”

“He must be a brutal man.”

“Indeed,” Kalinin confirmed.

She couldn’t believe anyone would kill hundreds of innocent people, just to cover up a kidnapping. Yet this man was going to do just that. If not for Sousuke’s report, they might have walked into the worst outcome imaginable. *It’s like he’s mocking me for thinking about waiting for the hostages’ release...* she thought.

“Perfect, then,” Tessa said with a cold smile. “It seems this Gauron person has amassed quite a debt to be collected.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Tessa typically acted quite warm and laid-back, but at times like these, her true self rose to the surface, like ice. It was at such times that she revealed herself to be of a kind with Kalinin and Sousuke—of a kind, even, with Gauron. But perhaps that was inevitable—After all, Teletha Testarossa controlled the Tuatha de Danaan, the strongest and most precise killing machine ever made. She could slaughter millions of innocents on a whim.

“Let’s get through the planning meeting for now, Major,” she decided. “You can tell me the rest later.”

They opened the door and entered the meeting room. Pale blue light shone down on a round table; the six heads of the various departments were already seated.

“Now,” Tessa announced, “let us begin.”

The officers nodded and turned to face the screen.

## 28 April, 2033 Hours (Japan/North Korea Standard Time)

## Sunan Airfield, People’s Democratic Republic of Korea

“Turn around. Slowly.”

Sousuke did as he was told.

The man pointing the gun at him was enormous, close to two meters tall. He had a striking appearance—thick, burly arms and narrow, wide-set eyes—and he wore an officer’s uniform. “Are you one of the students from the plane? How did you slip out without my men noticing?” The officer was maintaining a cautious distance, the corners of his mouth slightly upturned. He was alone, and Sousuke couldn’t see any other soldiers in the area—perhaps he’d been doing rounds to double-check airfield security. “You were contacting someone, weren’t you? Tell me,” the officer pressed him.

Eventually, Sousuke spoke. “I was contacting—” he began, and then with a natural motion, he threw the transmitter at the man. The officer, who had unconsciously leaned in to listen, found his reaction time just a little bit delayed. When he turned to knock it away, Sousuke used the moment’s distraction to rush the man and kick the gun out of his hand. It hit the wall of the warehouse and fell to the ground, but his opponent wasn’t shaken.

The officer grunted as he reeled back, then lashed out with a full-powered punch. Sousuke blocked it with a hand; the blow was heavy and sharp, and it threw him off balance. Before he could even catch his breath, it was followed by a spin-kick aimed at his head.



Sousuke managed to deflect it, but the man's combos were merciless. Strike, kick, elbow—a fluid mixture of hard and soft attacks. The man was skilled, and he had power to boot.

"You thought you could beat me if I was unarmed, you brat?!" the officer demanded.

Sousuke didn't answer, but took a few steps back, jumped off a concrete block and snapped a dropkick right to the man's jaw. The man grunted, arched back, and toppled; the back of his head hit the asphalt. Sousuke wasted no time. He straddled him, drew his stun gun from his belt and jabbed the man with it.

The man moaned, writhing and convulsing under the electricity. "D-D-Damn... y-y-you..."

*Not as effective as I thought...* Sousuke tilted his head. Maybe the battery was low?

"Y-Y-You... wh-wh-who are... y-y-you?"

"I'm the trash duty officer," he answered.

"T-T-Tra..." At last, the man fell silent.

Sousuke carefully bound his arms and legs with wire from the storehouse, then checked to see if his transmitter had survived: the outer shell had broken in the fall, and the innards were exposed. The LCD panel was cracked, too. He pressed the power switch, but it wouldn't boot up.

"Drat..." He couldn't contact the de Danaan, now.

Sousuke picked up the man's gun, checked to make sure there were no more soldiers around, then took out his pocket medical kit. Packed into a box the size of his palm were antidotes, sulfuric acid, aspirin, morphine, syringes, and other tools. Among them was a small bottle, filled with alcohol.

Kaname had been stuck for hours in the stuffy drum thing. She couldn't move due to her restraints, and her shoulders and butt cried out for relief. She had begged repeatedly for a chance to rest, but the doctor turned a deaf ear to her

pleas.

Meaningless images continued to scroll past her. When she tried to close her eyes, the doctor seemed to notice it. She would scold her, telling her to keep looking forward; a refusal to focus would just prolong the tests.

Suddenly, without warning, the parade of images stopped, and the world around Kaname went black. “Are we done?” she asked hesitantly.

“Not yet,” the doctor told her.

Soon, she heard a strange noise. Thump, thu-thump... a low, distant, throbbing. She felt like she was watching a movie with surround sound, and it filled her with a strange anxiety.

“What’s going on?” Kaname cried out. There was no response. Something new was on the screen in front of her now—words, written in English letters. About every two seconds, they changed.

[sea]

[campaniform sensillum]

[tree]

[intrinsic coercivity]

[decagonal phase]

Words that she couldn’t even pronounce, let alone recognize, were mixed in with words that anyone would know. This incomprehensible content flashed before her, on and on, seemingly without end. The pace gradually picked up, until the nonsense words were blinking in and out at a rate of ten per second.

Eventually the simple English words were phased out, replaced almost completely by specialist jargon—chemical formulas and numerical expressions. At some point, Kaname found herself enraptured.

*What’s going on?* she wondered. Then, it occurred to her: *I know this. I’ve... seen this before?* She knew what these words meant. She hadn’t really seen them before, yet she understood them well... better than anyone in the world, better than the greatest scientists...

*2D quasicrystal-structured alloy,* something in her head told her.

*rgon and ninickel∩titaQtanium. ノ“naαframe’s Ith structural material. partpar stabilizing zingzirconia リヤ2 magnetic anisotropy 8in rare earth ion directionaΓity in toskna nonlinear キA deviatEK. prasiodymium, terbium, dyspδrosium. NO千teY polyΦpolyalamide gel and mfome, flexRGze sechC flexible naficial musclcle—*

On and on, her mind raced. *ΔD-TfeDfeGPfpalla palladididium reactor YP sealed at GsectiontGフ cubebical lattice triple hydrogen℃ JHI—electromagnetic hologramam camouflage. 130 one thir tee IIIIX□MGOe maximum magnetic energy compres essionP stage Kイ W former partial derivative BB ラ—barium titanate, perovskyte-type tyRpe, reversible phase transmission. carboKKδUn composite armor, naNANnonanocompoWPCJζ. dome sensasation-based pressKaure detectionR bium, dysp. halt elemnt in 1O0 sqsqsquare mete—*

Knowledge burst into her head like an erupting volcano, setting her consciousness aflame. She had never heard any of this before. Yet she knew it—she understood it. It was like someone was there in the back of her mind, whispering it to her. It made the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

“Ah... ah...” she moaned.

Then, the deluge cut off as abruptly as it started. The display went black and the strange, low throbbing stopped. The drum lifted off her head, and the platform on which she was lying slid out of the device.

She felt exhausted. Her face was on fire. She struggled for breath. What was it she’d been looking at? Had it all been a dream? She felt like she’d been thinking about something extremely complex...

“How do you feel?” The doctor removed her head-mounted display and peered into her face.

Kaname found herself squinting against the ceiling lights. “Like shit,” she said at last.

“I see. Well, I’m sorry to say this, but we aren’t finished,” the woman said, without the slightest hint of sympathy.

“Please, just let me go,” Kaname pleaded. “I don’t wanna do this sleep-learning stuff...”

“Learning? Ridiculous... You’ve known all of this since before you were born,” the woman said cryptically, then pulled out a syringe...

## 28 April, 2205 Hours (Japan/North Korea Standard Time)

## 1st Briefing Room, Tuatha de Danaan, Periscope Depth, Yellow Sea

“We need to act quickly,” Major Kalinin said, turning away from the screen. “We need to regain the initiative before things get any worse.”

The briefing room was nearly at capacity, with over 30 personnel present: AS operators, helicopter and VTOL pilots, and infantry, all comprising a variety of races, ethnicities, ages, and sexes. Melissa Mao and Kurz Weber were there, too; they’d rushed back to the de Danaan when they heard about the hijacking.

“Mithril typically prefers to avoid incidents so in the public eye, but the unfortunate truth is that we failed to prevent this. We are responsible. Therefore...” The major paused to look out over the group. “The Tuatha de Danaan will now run a rescue operation. I will explain how things are to proceed.”

The large screen now displayed a satellite view of Sunan. It was their most recent image, taken at 1530 hours that day. It was overlaid with symbols and letters providing detailed information about the placement of enemy forces, as well as the hostages’ jumbo jet.

“We’ll deploy a six-AS team, to be preceded by air support: attack helicopters, transport helicopters, and VTOLs, in that order. First...” Kalinin went on to describe the operation in great detail: where the helicopters were to land, how the ASes were to deploy; the timetable he gave went down to the second. “The ASes will employ XL-2 emergency deployment boosters to launch directly from this submarine. If any of our operators have imbibed alcohol in the past eight

hours, tell me now."

"Emergency deployment boosters" were a one-way, expendable launch system that could propel a single AS up to 40 kilometers. They were used to rapidly deploy an AS into a theater to catch the enemy off guard.

At the mention of alcohol, Mao and Kurz exchanged a glance. Kurz whispered, "That was ten hours ago. We're safe."

Kalinin fixed his eyes on them a moment, but continued on with his explanation; "Our greatest issue is this large explosive device." The screen switched to a transparent CGI rendering of a Boeing 747; the location of the giant bomb that Sousuke had mentioned was highlighted in red. "We expect it to employ a remote detonator with a VHF band frequency. After your initial assault, you'll need to regroup quickly, then disable this bomb before the terrorists can trigger it."

"How do we do that?" one of the attack helicopter pilots asked. Kalinin gave a rough outline of how the bomb would be dealt with, at which point the soldiers exchanged glances; some grinning, others nervous.

"But that'll mean Flight 903 is grounded," one protested.

"Correct. But it's out of fuel regardless, and refueling during a firefight is out of the question. The solution is to move the hostages to another craft, but that raises another issue: the sheer number of them."

The passenger and crew manifest scrolled across the screen: four hundred and twenty people, the largest hostage count in modern terror history.

"Even if we sent every transport helicopter we have, we wouldn't be able to carry them all," Kalinin explained. "That's why we have two C-17 transport aircraft from the Merida Island Base in the air right now. They're already en route, and they'll have a midair refueling over the Yellow Sea just before the operation begins."

"Don't those have a recommended seating of 150?" one of the squad asked.

"'Recommended' is the key. We're not running a pleasure cruise," Kalinin deadpanned, then resumed the briefing. "The second the operation begins, those transports need to hit the runway. You have five minutes to transfer the

hostages, then take off.”

“Five minutes? That’ll be tight,” the corporal tasked with directing the hostages grumbled.

Nearby, Kurz spat out, “It’ll feel like forever to the people guarding the damned things...”

“There’s a reason for the tight timeframe,” Kalinin said as he pulled up a map of the base’s surroundings. “Sunan Airfield is adjacent to a highway, and it’s close to their capital, Pyongyang. We can expect a prompt arrival of enemy reinforcements. The capital guard are well-trained, and we need to avoid engaging them. The de Danaan will be laying smart mines along the road, but that won’t hold them off for long.”

“What if one of the transports is destroyed on the runway?” Mao asked. “Or it’s prevented from taking off?”

“Then get the other off the ground, empty seats or no,” the major said coldly. “Pack as many of the remaining hostages as you can onto the transport helicopters. Abandon the ASes if you have to—but if you do, make sure they’re destroyed first. This is a crucial detail that takes priority even over your lives... though, of course, we hope that it won’t come to that.”

The room fell into heavy silence.

An operator from the 2nd AS platoon raised his hand. “Any word from Sergeant Sagara?”

“No. That’s another reason we need to hurry. The longer we take to execute our plan, the more likely it is that circumstances will turn on us. Weather, intelligence, enemy readiness, the safety of the hostages—there are countless elements at play. We don’t have time to do a dry run.” Kalinin explained further the details of the operation, how the withdrawal should proceed, and other issues they could expect to encounter. Then he turned the screen off and began the wrap-up. “As you may have realized, this plan contains very little redundancy; the slightest slip-up could be fatal. But if there’s any team in the world who could make it work, it’s ours. I have faith in your abilities.” He looked over the room. “Any other questions?”

The soldiers of Mithril said nothing.

"Then start getting ready," he ordered. "Noise regulations are in effect. Dismissed."

The group stood up, all at once.

## 28 April, 2229 Hours (Japan/North Korea Standard Time)

## Sunan Airfield, People's Democratic Republic of Korea

Hidden behind a rusty container, Sousuke surveyed the vehicles parked on the apron: a high-powered generator truck and two large trailers. *Is that it?* he wondered.

The officer Sousuke had captured had told him that Kaname was in the trailer with all the power cables running to it. He had injected the man with enough alcohol to intoxicate, and then talked the location out of him (not the most reliable form of interrogation, he knew, but it seemed to have yielded results in this case). Then, once he was done with the officer, he'd knocked him unconscious and thrown him into a nearby manhole, still bound in wire; he wouldn't be found for some time.

The area was brightly lit by mercury-vapor lamps, and Sousuke had a clear view of everything. Security was three men with submachine guns; there was a man resting in the trailer's cabin, too. They were all wearing suits or casual clothes, which suggested that they weren't part of the airfield staff.

He looked at his watch: 2230 hours. It was past the time he was supposed to contact the de Danaan. *What should I do?* Sousuke thought.

The safest thing would be to stay here and lie low; then, when the rescue plan kicked off, he could storm the trailer and save Kaname. That would give them the best chance of meeting up with the others.

*But what's going on in that trailer?* he wondered. He thought back to the girl he'd saved in Siberia two weeks before. They'd pumped her with drugs full of alkaloids and other dangerous chemicals; substances often used in truth

serums. Sousuke knew the kinds of scars they could leave on a person's mind.

He thought of Kaname's face, her brow furrowed in anger. Her disgusted look, her disappointed look, her thoughtful look... and that smile she'd shown him on the station platform. *That smile, like a cloudless blue sky, now crushed to bits, never to return... In its place, sunken eyes, a slack jaw, unattended drool and snot... Tormented by hallucinations, she'll gnaw her own skin raw. They might not kill her, but they will tear her very being to shreds...*

Sousuke felt a burning impatience rising up inside of him; the urge to rush to her rescue. He couldn't remember feeling anything so strongly before. It surprised him, and confused him.

*Calm down,* he told himself. *Your priority is the safety of the hostage group. Kaname is a secondary mission objective. Besides... those men might be monsters, but they've gone to great lengths to get her here. They won't destroy her in just one night. They'll experiment on Kaname, but they won't destroy her. It will be more like... a slow strangulation with a silk cord...*

"Dammit..." he found himself whispering. Just then, he was drawn out of his thoughts by a sound from the trailer—a gunshot, from a medium caliber handgun.

*You want to jump out now, but that's not necessarily the right move,* his instincts as a professional soldier reminded him. *Your interference now will make things worse. You don't know when the operation is scheduled to start. You don't even know if the rescue will happen. Just grit your teeth and watch for now. Don't sabotage your comrades' plan. Remember your mission priorities.*

*That's right,* he reminded himself. *Only a fool and an amateur would leap out now. That isn't who I am. But. But...*

*But what if Kaname was just shot inside that trailer?* Sousuke found himself wondering. *What if she's badly hurt? If I go in and treat her now, she could still pull through. I must know more first aid than whatever quacks they have here...* His thoughts began to spiral. *And what if those terrorists plan to shoot her a second time?! What if she's in that trailer right now, crawling along the floor. What if Gauron points a gun at her head and—*

"Kaname would... She'd..." A feeling he'd long forgotten began to coil around

his heart. He'd left it behind so long ago that he'd almost forgotten its name.

What Sousuke felt in that moment... was fear.

*Still, you can't just run out there. You'll just get yourself killed. Don't forget your mission,* his reason commanded him. But...

A second gunshot came, and the next thing he knew, Sousuke was flying out from behind the container; he wasn't even thinking. For the first time in his life, he was ignoring his mission priorities.

Two minutes earlier...

Kaname kicked and screamed inside the stuffy drum.

"Settle down! Open your eyes and look at the screen!" The doctor called to her, but Kaname continued to writhe, flapping her arms and legs and jerking her head against its restraint. She was drenched in sweat, her breathing was ragged, and her ears were ringing.

"Shut up! Let me out of here!" Kaname hadn't lost her mind; she was simply enraged. She still didn't know what was going on... but did they really think she was going to lie there, trapped in this nightmare, hopped up on strange drugs, following orders forever?! She was sick of being trapped in her thoughts. She was sick of being docile. If she didn't get to cry out, move her body, and vent, she really was going to go insane. "Put me back with the others!" she screamed. "Do it before I break your stupid machine!" She was struggling so violently that the goggle display slid off of her head.

"Enough! That's enough!" The platform Kaname was lying on slid out of the drum once more. The doctor ran up to her, irritation on full display. She pressed Kaname's head down and shouted, "You conceited little brat! I should never have been nice to you!"

"There's nothing nice about you, you *hag*!" Kaname retorted.

"What did you say?!"

"I finally remembered who you remind me of!" Kaname ranted. "You're like my science teacher in middle school! She got so focused on her experiments

that she got too old to get married, so she took it out on us and gave us the meanest homework! But when we had a student teacher in she'd get all dressed up and flirty...” She hit the woman with a barrage of abuse, struggling all the while. One of her arm restraints had started coming loose, so the doctor tried to refasten it. She held her down by the wrist, used her free hand to remove the belt, and—

“Eek!” All the sweat caused her hand to slip, allowing Kaname's right arm to go flying. Momentum slammed her elbow into the chin of the doctor, who staggered, hit the back of her head on the medicine cabinet, and then slid slowly to the floor.

“Ah...” Kaname sobered immediately. “Hey... you're not dead, are you?” No response came. It was then that she realized that her right arm was free. Slowly, she tried removing the nylon strap that was holding down her left arm. “Wow,” she mumbled, “easier than I expected...” With her hands liberated, she removed the strap holding down her head, and sat up. From this position, it was easy to free her legs. Once she was out of her restraints, she checked the floor and saw the doctor, who was just coming to, moaning and trying to sit up.

*Wh-What should I do?* she wondered. *Run away? But where to?* She took one step toward the trailer door, then another. She managed to make it in front of the door, but then...

“Where do you think you're going?” The doctor, standing up with great effort, pointed a small pistol at her. “Come back here. Do as I say, or you'll regret it.”

“N-No way,” Kaname told her shakily. “I'm not doing any more of your tests. I—”

The woman fired, putting a bullet hole in the trailer wall.

“H-Hey—”

The doctor fired again. This time, the shot cracked an LCD screen behind Kaname, who realized that the woman's face was locked in cold anger; she really might shoot her.

Suddenly, the door opened. Two men charged in, both of them wielding submachine guns. “What's going on here?!” A man in a suit—probably one of

the guards outside—held Kaname at gunpoint as he surveyed the condition of the trailer.

“We had a little bit of trouble,” the doctor explained. “I needed to teach the brat some manners.”

“So you *shot* at her? Don’t you know how much this equipment—”

“—Costs? 580 million yen. I don’t need you fools to remind me of that.” She turned back to Kaname. “Now, come over here.” The doctor put her gun away and beckoned to Kaname. The man snorted, and gave her a push.

The woman took a bottle out of the medicine cabinet and sucked some of its contents into a syringe. “Hold the girl on the bed, would you?”

The men forced Kaname down on the dais, and she watched the woman squirt some clear fluid from the syringe. “Wh-What are you going to...”

“A little change in tactics. This is medicine that makes people compliant,” the woman explained, as if enjoying her fear. “It can also cause various impairments—especially to a growing young girl—so I had planned to hold off during the testing stage, but...”

“P-Please, no...” Kaname begged.

“Don’t blame me,” the doctor gloated. “I tried to be nice...”

This time, Kaname knew there would be no struggling her way out of it. The men holding her down were too strong; they could snap her arms like twigs. “No, please,” she tried again. “I’ll be good, I...”

The woman chuckled. “Too late.”

But just as the needle touched Kaname’s arm, the men holding her—first one, then the other—both collapsed with a cry.

“What?” Kaname looked up, stunned by her sudden freedom. The first thing she saw was the doctor, who was drawing back in panic; she wasn’t looking at Kaname, but at something behind her. Curious, Kaname turned around, and was stunned by what she saw. “S-Sagara-kun?”

It was indeed Sagara Sousuke. He had a pistol in his right hand (which was pointed at the doctor), and a stun gun in his left. A submachine gun hung from a

strap around his neck. Beneath his open uniform jacket, he had two spare magazines stuck into his belt. “Were you hurt, Chidori?” Sousuke asked, his voice shockingly calm.

“Huh?” she stammered, disoriented. “I... N-No, but...”

“I see,” he said. “Then get behind me, and stay close.” With Kaname behind him, Sousuke carefully approached the doctor.

“You... You’re one of the students from the plane, aren’t you?” she asked, weakly. “When... did you...”

“I’m the one asking the questions here,” he told her abruptly. “Talk: what is this facility? Why did you kidnap her?”

“There’s no way I would tell—”

Sousuke put two shots into the electrical equipment beside her. It sparked and shut down. “Talk,” he demanded. “The next one goes into you.” He pointed the gun at the woman’s head.

The doctor’s hands shot into the air. “Don’t!” she screamed. “I’ll talk! This equipment... it’s to determine if she’s a true Whispered or not.”

“‘Whispered’?” Sousuke asked. “What’s that?”

“It’s difficult to explain,” the doctor answered him. “Whispered are storehouses of ‘black technology,’ knowledge that could shift the power balance of the world. It’s still difficult to draw it out on command but, someday, we’ll form a living database to—” She’d only gotten that far when, suddenly, Sousuke grabbed Kaname by the hand and dove behind the CT scanner.

A split second later, a thunder of gunshots rang out, sending sparks and shards of plastic flying all around them. Kaname and the doctor both screamed. Sousuke turned over, stuck his gun over the lip of the machine, and unloaded the clip at the trailer’s entrance.

Kaname heard another scream; this time, it was from an unknown man. Sousuke tossed aside the emptied pistol and, while pulling and releasing the submachine gun’s cocking handle, stood up and checked on the state of the man at the entrance.

Kaname gasped as she saw the doctor, who was now lying prone on the floor. She must have taken a stray bullet—she was moaning weakly, as a pool of blood spread out from her body.

“We need to go, Chidori,” Sousuke said.

“I-Is she dea—” Kaname started to ask.

“She’s alive,” he cut her off. “But we have no time, and no obligation to treat her.” With one hand holding hers and the other readying his submachine gun, Sousuke began running to the entrance.

Kaname, still completely disoriented, asked him, “Hey, why are you—”

“I’ll explain later. The enemy will be coming.”

There was a man collapsed just inside the door to the trailer. He was clutching at his side, struggling desperately to get up. Hands trembling, he tried to point his submachine gun in their direction, but Sousuke mercilessly kicked him down. The terrorist fell out of the trailer, his gun clattering away helplessly.

“That looked like it hurt...” Kaname observed.

“Let’s go,” Sousuke ordered.

“W-Wait. I can’t go around like this,” Kaname said in protest. “Let me change first.” The gown’s hem ended halfway down her thighs and was incredibly flimsy; even a little running around would put her underwear on full display.

“We don’t have time. Forget it,” Sousuke told her.

“Don’t order me around!” she insisted. “And don’t leer at me like that!”

“I wasn’t,” he said obliviously. “I was examining your outfit to identify the problem—”

“Liar! You’re gonna take advantage of this craziness to do stuff to me!”

“I’m not. Now, you need to follow me—”

“No way!” she shrilled. “Who even are you, anyway?! This goes way beyond panty theft!”

“Listen to me, please. I’ve gone to these unwise lengths to try to save—” he was interrupted by another gunshot from outside. The bullet ricocheted off the

trailer door, and Sousuke threw himself at Kaname. He slammed her to the floor, where they ended up, entangled, with him on top of her.

She shrieked. “G-Get your hands off of me!”

“I told you,” he bellowed, “it’s not like that!”

“Get off me! Pervert! Groper! Rapist!”

“Enough!”

It was a truly pathetic sight. In spite of the enemy gunfire outside, inside the trailer, the two of them continued to grapple and argue.

# 4: Field of Giants

## 28 April, 2241 Hours (Japan/North Korea Standard Time)

## Sunan Airfield, People's Democratic Republic of Korea

In the end, Sousuke offered his uniform jacket, and Kaname was mollified.

Weaving between carefully aimed shots, Sousuke bounded out the other side of the trailer, leading a grumpy Kaname by the hand. They were heading for the nearby generator truck. "Get in!" he urged her. "Hurry!"

"But... yeek!" she yelped.

He threw Kaname into the passenger seat, revved up the engine, and then slammed the gas. A moment later, more shots came from behind. The rear license plate was blown off, and the cables connecting them to the trailer snapped as they drove away.

"Keep your head down!" he ordered.

"What now?!"

The new wave of soldiers behind them kept firing, but the generator vehicle was already speeding at 80 kilometers per hour toward the north end of the base.

"Who are you? Where are we going? Where are you taking me?!" Kaname peppered him. "Tell me what's going on!" Her shouts carried over the wind rushing by.

Sousuke responded, casting glances into the cracked rear-view mirror all the while. "The truth is, I've been tailing you since I first came to your school."

"Oh, is that supposed to be news?" Kaname wanted to know. "I already knew that! Now would you please tell me *why*?!"

"I don't know all the details myself," Sousuke admitted. "All I know is that

you're special, somehow, and that an intelligence organization wants to use you as a guinea pig."

"Intelligence organization?" she objected indignantly. "Guinea pig?!"

"Yes, I'm a soldier. I was dispatched as a bodyguard to prevent your kidnapping."

Kaname looked at him dubiously. "A soldier? With the JSDF?"

"No," he responded shortly. "With Mithril."

"Mithril?"

"A secret military organization, unaligned and elite," he explained. "We act to stop regional disputes and terrorism, independent of national interests. I'm part of their SRT—Special Response Team—specializing in recon, sabotage, and AS operation. My rank is sergeant. My callsign is Uruz-7. My ID number is B-3128." Sousuke rattled it all off smoothly, but Kaname looked at him with concern.

"Um, Sagara-kun," she began cautiously. "I know you love all this military stuff, but... I think you've really lost it now."

"What are you talking about?" he asked, bewildered.

"I've read about this," she went on. "A traumatic event can sever a person's connection to reality, causing them to regress into fantasy. I don't know how you got out of the plane, but right now, you're just confused."

"Confused?" It seemed to Sousuke that Kaname was the one who was confused.

Nevertheless, she continued, soothingly: "Yes, confused. You need to calm down and tell yourself, 'I am a normal high school student.' Okay? Let's both take a deep breath and—"

Suddenly, Sousuke wrenched the steering wheel to one side. A wall of machine gun fire ended up hitting just to their right, bringing asphalt raining down on their heads. The armored cars pursuing them had begun to open fire.

Kaname shrieked again. "Stop the car! Let me out!"

"Stay quiet and hold on tight." Sousuke threw the car into zigs and zags, just

barely avoiding the enemy fire. And all the while, the hangar on the north half of the base came closer and closer. “Get down,” he commanded.

“Wh... Why?”

“We’re breaking through.”

“What—” In almost the same instant that Kaname braced herself, the generator truck crashed through the shuttered hangar door. The rusted old metal gave way without a fight. Their truck flew into the hangar, grazed a large tow tractor parked in the middle, skidded, and slammed into a large compressor vehicle, which brought it to a stop.

Sousuke stood up in the driver’s seat. “Chidori, can you move?”

“I’m dead,” she groaned.

“Get up,” he told her. “The enemy is coming.”

Kaname looked around the hangar. The front wall was lined with massive humanoid figures; three in total, each about three stories tall. They were surrounded by scaffolding and strung up with a mess of pipes and cables. They were machines, long-armed and khaki-colored.

“Are these... arm slaves?” she wondered. They were featured in the news and in Hollywood movies from time to time, so even Kaname knew what they were called.

“You hide in the back,” Sousuke ordered.

“Y-You’re not going to... take one of them, are you?” Kaname asked suspiciously.

“Yes, I am.” He ran to the foot of the AS and climbed the ladder to the cockpit.

“Hey...” Kaname felt the blood drain from her face. A military geek, regressing into a dangerous fantasy that he was a soldier in a secret organization... he had dragged her into a suicide run, and now he was planning to wreak havoc in a robot.

She was done for. Reinforcements would be here soon. A mere enthusiast couldn’t win against professional soldiers. He was going to get her killed at this

rate. “Stop it!” Kaname begged him. “An amateur can’t move a robot like that!”

Sousuke looked down at her from the top of the ladder. “Amateur?”

In the darkness, she couldn’t properly make out his face. But for just a minute, she thought she saw his eyes glint. And... was it just her imagination? A ghoulish smile seemed to appear on his face.

“I’m not an amateur; I’m a specialist.”

Sousuke climbed to the AS’s shoulder, then pulled the lever to open the cockpit hatch.

There was a sound of a pressure release. The head of the AS slid open, exposing the cramped cockpit in the chest just below. It was large enough to fit a human body with not much room left over; you didn’t so much sit in it so much as you were ensconced.

That was how an arm slave’s cockpit—otherwise known as the “master room”—worked; it read the pilot’s movements, and replicated them in the machine. The slightest movement by the “master” was exaggerated in the “slave”; a 10 degree bend of the pilot’s elbow would cause a 30 degree bend in the machine’s. The designation of “AS” originated from the full name, which was “Armored Mobile Master/Slave System,” and most AS employed this basic piloting formula.

“Just get back, Chidori,” Sousuke shouted, as he slid into the cockpit of the Soviet-produced Rk-92 Savage. He gripped the sticks at the ends of his arms and clicked the lever under his thumb. There was another sound of rushing pressure as the cockpit hatch closed, and the endoskeleton locked in with a sound of grinding metal.

A monochrome screen in front of Sousuke’s face lit up, displaying lines of words:

[Cockpit Block: Closed | Master Suit: Adjusting]

He felt it tighten slowly across his body, but he didn’t have time to waste. He smoothly worked the buttons on the stick, scrolling through the boot-up procedure.

[Movement Mode: 4 | Bilateral Angle: 2.8 → 3.4]

He heard shots from their pursuers outside, sparking as they blasted large holes in the shutters. The size of the holes was strange—Did they have more than just armored trucks out there?

[Main Generator: Activated | Main Capacitor: Charge increasing]

Inside the shutter, a compressor car burst into flame. Beyond the crackle of the fire, Sousuke heard heavy footsteps approach. Footsteps? That wasn't an armored truck—it was an AS. Not good.

More words flicked on and off the screen. Almost there...

[Vetronics: Initiated]

[Actuators: Connected]

[Final Startup Checks: Omitted]

"Get moving already..." He cursed the startup speed of these Russian computers. There was a roar, as the bullet-riddled shutter flew off its hinges. An AS identical to his, an Rk-92 Savage, stepped in. Its inorganic red eyes were locked on him.

[Joints: Unlocking]

"Hurry..." Sousuke muttered, as the hostile AS pointed its rifle at him. It knew he was here. It was about to fire—

[Combat Maneuvers: Open]

The enemy rifle's fire and the movement of Sousuke's AS came in the same instant: the bullet missed by a hair's breadth.

Sousuke's machine lurched forward, knocking the enemy rifle away and shoulder-slamming it in the same action. The hostile AS crashed, back-first, through the hangar wall, and the pulverized concrete beneath it sent white smoke into the air.

Sousuke picked up the rifle he'd knocked out of its hand and checked the remaining rounds inside. Then he pointed it at the enemy machine, which was trying to right itself, and whispered, "Battle, commence."

Then, he pulled the trigger.

“There’s no way...” Kaname whispered to herself from her hiding place behind a tractor.

The AS Sousuke hijacked had just knocked the other one down, stolen its weapon, and then torn off its arms and legs, neutralizing it with all the speed and precision of an Olympic gymnast. With one enemy vanquished, the khaki-colored giant left the hangar to bathe the armored cars outside in rifle fire. Sparks and shards flew; one after another, each car began to smoke, followed by a small, delayed explosion.

Kaname gasped as she felt a tremble run through the bonnet of the tractor beside her. Another AS had appeared behind Sousuke, approaching from a blind spot behind the building.

Then, the next thing she knew, the AS was falling back, decapitated and delimbed. Sousuke’s AS had fired over its shoulder without even a glance back. It didn’t even check on its new fallen foe before going in search of new prey; it carried a rifle in each hand with confidence, moving smoothly, lyrically... There was no sense of someone fighting for his life. The movements of Sousuke’s electronic marionette looked almost out of place in their sheer sense of ease.

*Is that really Sagara Sousuke?* she wondered. *Why is he so good at this? He’d said that he was a soldier in a secret organization... I didn’t believe him in the car, but now... I have to accept it. He was telling the truth.* Sagara Sousuke was not a military geek with delusions of grandeur. He was a soldier, and an incredible one.

The hijacking—That was a serious incident. The secret she possessed—That was a major mystery, too. And then the clincher was this transformation. Kaname felt like she’d been cast into the world of a dream. But... the wind in her hair, the smell of gunpowder, the red of the flames, the sound of tank treads approaching... together, they cried to her, “this is reality!”

His AS looked down at her. *Welcome to my world,* its massive machine-eyes seemed to say. *This is who I really am. Perhaps at school, you thought you were my better... But here, it’s the other way around. This is not the world you come from. Your so-called common sense does not apply here. One wrong move and you’re a stain on the pavement. There’s no reset button; there are no do-overs.*

*Now, join me on this journey through hell...*

"No..." she whimpered. *I want to go home. How did I end up here?*

"—ot safe. Stay back," Sousuke was shouting over the external speakers. "Can you hear me, Chidori?!"

"What?" Hearing her name snapped her back to reality.

"It's still not safe," he repeated. "Stay back!"

Was the voice she'd heard before a hallucination? Sousuke's tone was so serious; there was no hint of enjoyment in it. Kaname looked up and saw two tanks approach down the landing strip; their turrets rotated slowly. They were planning to fire.

"R-Right..." she agreed shakily.

Yes, that was one thing she could say for sure; it wasn't safe here at all.

## 28 April, 2246 Hours (Japan/North Korea Standard Time)

## Tuatha de Danaan, Surface, West Korea Bay, Yellow Sea

It was a cloudy night, and not a star could be seen. Heaven and earth seemed to merge together as one. Then, oozing out of that blackness, there came a large submarine.

The Tuatha de Danaan surfaced, beating back the waves. Its prow faced east-southeast, toward the faint shore beyond. Without warning, its back split, moving slowly, with great weight. The engine rumbled; its massive gears churned. The double hull opened to expose a flight deck.

There was almost no light to be seen; only meager illumination from LEDs the size of a pinkie scattered here and there. The idea was to keep anyone who might happen to be on the shore from spotting the boat. The deck personnel wore night vision goggles as they moved things along swiftly; helicopters large and small and VTOL fighters began to take off.

Once the air squads were all deployed, an alarm began to sound. An elevator

carrying an arm slave rose from the hangar below. It was an M9 Gernsback with “101” on the shoulder: Melissa Mao’s machine.

“Looks like our turn’s up,” Mao whispered from the cockpit.

“Feels like we should have some mood music. *Flight of the Valkyries* is the standard, right?” That comment came from Kurz’s machine, coming up in the next elevator down.

“Hmm,” she mused. “Wagner’s kind of overdone, isn’t it?”

“How about Kenny Loggins? *Danger Zone*.”

“How about something not for hot-rodding jerks?”

“Shut up,” he grouched. “I guess you’d prefer Sada Masashi?”

“Who?”

The elevators came to a stop. Across the flight deck, Mao’s night vision sensors could see the catapults, billowing mist like open freezers. On her screen’s right side, she could see Kurz’s AS; he was in an M9, too, but the shape of the head was different. As the squad leader, Mao’s came mounted with an electronic warfare pack and transmitter. Both were wearing rocket-powered retractable wing modules—these were the emergency deployment boosters, designed to dispatch an AS directly into a battle zone. Mao began walking her machine toward the catapult’s shuttle blocks; these were like a sprinter’s starting blocks, but scaled to an AS’s size.

“You think that self-sabotaging sourpuss is still kicking out there?” Kurz asked.

“Don’t jinx it,” Mao said shortly.

“Hey, Big Sis. You’re not worried, are you?”

“Of course I am. Unlike you, Sousuke has his charms.”

“I’ve got my charms, too,” Kurz protested. “I’ll show you later on. In private.”

“You’re a real scumbag,” Mao told him, “through and through.”

There was a quiet electronic beeping, signaling a message from the launch officer. “Uruz-2. Thirty seconds to launch.”

“Uruz-2 here, roger. You hear that, Uruz-6?”

“Sure did. I’ll be ten seconds behind you, Big Sis.”

Mao’s machine braced itself on the shuttle blocks as its pilot swiftly ran through her checks. The fuel pump trembled. The larger main wings and smaller stabilizer wings rotated back and forth. Mao checked the lock on the pedal and the stability of her armaments... Everything was where it should be. “All green. Let’s go.”

Blast fences emerged from the deck behind her, and the deck personnel shot her a hand signal; she could leave at any time. Her AI confirmed that on-screen and announced to her, vocally: 《Counting down.》

The machine sank slightly. 《Three...》

The steam catapult built up power. 《Two...》

The nozzles contracted. 《One...》

Trails of flame shot out. 《Go!》

The catapult and the boosters roared with a combined 120 tons of thrust. In a mere two seconds, Mao had accelerated to 500 kilometers per hour; her machine’s feet left the ground. The M9 Gernsback ripped through the night air, gaining more and more altitude.

Enduring the harsh vibrations all around her, Mao licked her upper lip. “Battle, commence.”

## 28 April, 2249 Hours (Japan/North Korea Standard Time)

## Sunan Airfield, People’s Democratic Republic of Korea

The soldiers climbed over each other, fighting to be the first one out of the decimated tank.

“All right...” Sousuke muttered. Having dispatched both tanks, he ran his Savage back to the hangar where Kaname was waiting. More reinforcements would be here soon; he had to get her to safety. “Chidori,” he called to her through the external speakers.

Kaname crawled out from behind a crumbled wall; she was white as a sheet. She must have finally grasped the situation they were in, because she looked up at the machine like a cornered rabbit. “Did you beat them?” she asked, her voice so soft that the Savage’s audio sensors just barely picked it up.

Sousuke extended his machine’s left hand. “Grab on. We’re getting out of here.” Northwest of the airfield, he could see a low hill past the river and the road. Thick with conifers, it looked like a perfect place to take shelter for a while.

Kaname touched one finger, which was as thick as one of her legs. “You want me to get... on this?”

“Yes,” he told her. “Sit down in the palm. Go on.”

“B-But...”

“Hurry.”

Responding to his urgency, Kaname crouched down timidly in the AS’s hand. Sousuke carefully lifted her up, then sent his machine into a run.

Kaname shrieked and grabbed tight to its thumb.

Sousuke could imagine how frightened she must be, raised to the height of a telephone pole and jostled up and down while hurtling forward at 60 kilometers per hour. But for now, she’d just have to endure it. “Don’t look down,” he instructed, “and close your eyes.”

Kaname, trembling in the Savage’s hand, said, “Wait! What about everyone else? We can’t just leave them back there!”

“We’re in more danger than they are right now,” Sousuke disagreed. “My allies will help them.”

“Allies?”

“A rescue team,” he assured her. But in reality, he couldn’t be sure. He’d done what he did to save Kaname, but his commencing hostilities before the team’s arrival could easily have thrown a wrench into the works. He’d managed to get the AS out of the hangar the captured officer had told him about, but... pursuers would be coming soon, and the circumstances weren’t at all in their

favor.

Holding Kaname to its chest, the Savage vaulted the airfield's fence, broke through a thicket and made its way to the wide highway. As it crossed, the alarm in the cockpit began to ring:

[Missile Warning | 4 o'clock]

A guided missile was on its way, behind him and to the right.

"Guh..." Sousuke spun his machine around, jerking Kaname away from its chest as he turned its two head-mounted machine guns to full blast. Kaname screamed.

The force of 80 shots per second took the guided missile out in midair, then Sousuke whipped his Savage around and took off through the trees. He knew he was being rough with her, but he didn't have a choice; the Savage's machine guns had been less than 50 centimeters from Kaname's head—if he'd fired with her there, the muzzle flash would have burned her. It might have burst her ear drums, too.

Kaname moaned. Likely disoriented and overwhelmed, her body had gone rigid, clinging to the AS's arm.

"Hang in there just a little while longer," he told her. "I need to shake them off..."

Kaname didn't seem to have it in her to respond. She remained huddled in the machine's hand, her face ghostly pale. Despite this, Sousuke had to admit that he was surprised it wasn't worse; a normal girl might turn frantic, screaming and crying and lashing about. She might even try to escape the AS's hand—But Kaname was staying put without a single complaint.

*Impressive,* he thought to himself before picking up speed. Dashing across the ground, he broke through the trees. *But...* He couldn't stop thinking about that missile. Whoever fired it should know that those old-fashioned ATGMs wouldn't work on an AS. And they'd only fired one, and there'd been no followup...

*Were they testing me?* Sousuke wondered. He couldn't see any pursuers. His optical and infrared sensors revealed nothing. He had an awful feeling of foreboding, though... He was sure there was something there. That general

sense of danger in the air, perceivable only by well-honed soldiers' instincts—It was the one thing those high-tech sensors couldn't detect. He had just made it over the embankment and was about to cross the river when—

Sousuke gasped. A shot came from a completely unexpected angle: downriver; two o'clock.

Sousuke spun his machine around. An orange shell brushed his armor, and smashed a nearby tree to splinters. It was followed by a grenade in a leisurely arc, a high-powered explosive that would blast away everything within 10 meters. If it went off... Maybe his machine could take it, but the exposed Kaname wouldn't stand a chance!

"Da—"

The grenade landed in front of the Savage. Sousuke turned his machine away and held Kaname to its chest, hoping to shelter her from the explosion. He felt a crash. His machine's right leg went flying off at the knee, causing it to lose its balance and plunge into the river.

Kaname screamed as she slipped from the AS's grip and hit the water with a splash.

Suddenly, Sousuke noticed it. The ordnance hadn't detonated; the fuze assembly had been removed in advance. His leg had been blown off by a targeted shot—the grenade had just been a decoy!

Kaname burst out of the water, spluttering.

"Chido—" Sousuke tried to crawl his Savage closer, but three more shots held him in place. He threw his machine to the ground, but it had taken shells in its right arm and side.

[Right Lower Arm: Damaged | Disabled]

[Main Capacitor: Destroyed | Auxiliary Capacitor: Output reduced]

"Damn..." Sousuke fumed.

Out of the darkness, there came a silver AS. It looked nothing like the ones he'd been fighting before. It was about 300 meters away, but that distance was shrinking as it charged down the embankment, kicking up gravel.

Sousuke swapped his rifle to his Savage's other hand and returned fire, but it was ineffective. Losing his right arm and right leg made it hard to hold steady.

The enemy fired at him again. Each shot was carefully aimed, as if it was trying to preserve ammunition. Since Sousuke's only options were crawling or ducking, he couldn't prevent his machine from taking more and more punishment.

[Main Sensors: Destroyed | Fire in latissimus dorsi actuators]

"Damn!" he cried again. On top of everything, he'd run out of ammo. With only one arm, he couldn't reload.

The silver enemy machine bore down on him. Balancing on one knee, Sousuke swung his rifle like a club, but the enemy machine brushed it away and pressed its carbine against the Savage's chest—against the cockpit—and fired.

Sousuke moved his machine just in time; a split-second later, and his body would have been vaporized. But the shot still tore off the Savage's armor plating, gouging out the electronics in the chest and the generator in the abdomen. With its control system shredded, the Savage collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut. It fell onto its back, kicking up a plume of water, its arms cast onto the riverbank.

Sousuke hissed. He felt the night air on his cheek. Blood dripped from his forehead into his eyes, and there was a burning pain in his side. He moved the levers and his legs, but the machine didn't respond.

Kaname swam up to the devastated Savage and grabbed onto its tattered arm. "S-Sagara-kun...?"

"No! Stay back!" Sousuke shouted through his agony.

The silver AS towered over him. It was a model he'd never seen before: it wasn't Eastern; it was the slender design of a Western AS. The silver color wasn't a design decision, either—it was simply unpainted. *Some country's test model?* Sousuke pondered.

"You looked impressive out there, until just before the river," came a voice from the external speakers. Its operator was Gauron; he was sure of it. "Too bad you got sloppy. We're trying to capture that girl, you know... Did you really

think I'd blow her up with a grenade?"

"Of course not," Sousuke managed after realizing his mistake. He could hear two ASes and an armored car approaching from the direction of the airfield. There was nowhere left to run—He had lost.

"Oh, are you that student? I didn't expect them to have an agent in the class... You even fooled me," Gauron admitted. "Are you part of Mithril?"

"I am not obligated to answer you," Sousuke told him shortly.

"Hmm. Die, then..."

"Wait... what are you doing?!" Kaname screamed.

Ignoring her words, Gauron's AS pointed its carbine at Sousuke. But the shot didn't come. After a moment of silence, Gauron's muffled voice came over the speakers. "You've got to be kidding me! You're Kashim?!" The AS's shoulders trembled, and its massive left hand smacked itself in the head. Reflecting its operator's emotions, it threw its chest out and shook its head again and again. It was laughing.

Kashim. That had been Sousuke's name, once.

"I had no idea!" Gauron chortled. "I can't believe you joined Mithril! How's Captain Kalinin doing? Is that coward still alive and kicking?"

Rather than answer, Sousuke asked a question of his own. "How did you survive?"

The silver AS tapped a fingertip against its forehead, right where its laser sight was fixed. Its pilot chuckled. "I had a titanium plate in my head from an old wound. That, and the shot's weak angle, are what saved me. Ahh, I can't believe I get to see you again like this! I'm so happy. This is wonderful!" He let out an ear-splitting laugh.

"You're more cheerful these days, Gauron," Sousuke observed.

"Why, thank you! I've been through a great deal since then, you see..." Another chuckle. "Ah, so much I want to tell you, but so little time. My job is to finish you off and then poke around in her brain... It's going to be a bit of a treasure hunt." A sort of hatred-tinged nostalgia seemed to have loosened

Gauron's tongue.

"What are you talking about?" Sousuke demanded to know.

"Her head... it's chock full of 'black technology'... Lambda driver application theory and such..." Gauron answered. "I've heard that, once complete, it could make even nuclear weapons obsolete."

Sousuke listened in disbelief. "What?"

"Oh, is this the first you've heard about it? But that's the last I have to say... When you reach the underworld, tell the ferryman that the rest of your party will be joining you soon. So long." Gauron fixed his gun on him again.

"Sto—" Kaname tried to shout, but she was interrupted by an explosion. Gauron's rifle burst into two.

"Hmm?!" Gauron's machine jumped back, as a couple more sharp, aimed shots came from the sky. These shots were merciless, with the intent to kill. Gauron dodged them without hesitation.

There came a roar from overhead; Kaname looked up, and saw a gray AS descending toward them. It released its parachute and went into freefall.

"Yyyyyyyahoo!" The AS—an M9 Gernsback—continued firing off its massive rifle as it splashed down in front of Sousuke and Kaname, soaking them with the ensuing tsunami. "Uruz-6 here, touchdown complete! I found Uruz-7 and Angel!" the voice shouted, even as its AS continued to unload with gusto on the enemy. Again and again, the 57mm rounds hit their target. They blew away the armored car and knocked down the two Savages. Gauron's AS was forced to focus on dodging as it disappeared over the ridge.

"Kurz!" Sousuke cried.

Kaname furrowed her brow. "Kurz? Wait, is that..."

"Yeah, it's me," Kurz answered cheerfully. "How's it hanging, Kaname-chan?"

"What in the hell?!" Kaname screamed.

Sousuke remembered: Kurz and Kaname had met before. Last Sunday, he had pretended to be a tourist to go around town with the girls.

Kurz Weber's haughty voice called out, "Sousuke! Can you move?"

"I think so..." he answered. Biting back the pain, Sousuke pushed the twisted frame aside and pulled himself out of the cockpit.

Up in the sky, there were fireworks going off; these were MRLs, fired by the Tuatha de Danaan, that peppered the area with small bombs. Parts of the base caught fire, a prelude to a chorus of explosions.

Kurz's wasn't the only AS descending on them, either; five other M9s had detached their boosters to dive into the night-cloaked airfield. They were followed by the sound of rotors shaking the air; attack and transport helicopters appeared over the ridge, following the M9s' path in the skies high above.

The de Danaan's squad had arrived. They'd made it; the rescue was on.

"Listen up, Sousuke. Take Kaname and run for the airfield. The south side of the runway!" Kurz swapped the magazine in his high-caliber rifle and turned to face the AS fleeing up the hill.

"The airfield?" Sousuke questioned.

"We'll have C-17s touching down soon. They'll only wait five minutes," Kurz told him. "Leave this to me—I'll pick you up later."

"What about the bomb on the plane?" Sousuke asked.

"Mao and Roger are on it," Kurz told him.

"Understood. Watch out for the silver AS; its operator is a cut above."

"No worries. I'll blast his ass into next week." Kurz's M9 crouched to focus its power, then leaped.

"What's going on?" Kazama Shinji whispered, his eyes on the ceiling of the shaking plane. He could hear a series of explosions outside. Sporadic conflicts had been breaking out for a while now, but whatever it was seemed to be kicking into high gear. What was going on out there?

A massive figure strode by his window. The students on that side of the cabin launched into an uproar. As he made out the shape of the creature, illuminated by the airfield lights and the surrounding fires, Shinji's jaw dropped. "A... An

M9?!” he squeaked.

It wasn’t just a Western AS, but a cutting-edge M9 Gernsback! Not even the US Armed Forces were deploying those in combat. Yet here it was, right out of the blue! On top of that, it had an unusual head design; the bulge must be from a cutting-edge ECCS and EHF radar...

“Everyone, get away from the windows!” came a voice from the machine’s external speakers. It was hard to hear inside the plane, but the words were Japanese, and the voice was a woman’s.

The M9 drew from its back a katana with a six-meter blade. The monomolecular cutter was a standard AS melee weapon; it employed an ultra-thin chainsaw blade that could slice through most armor like a boxcutter through cardboard. They were normally sized more like a combat knife, but this one was custom-made with proportions like a Japanese sword.

“What’s it gonna do?” Shinji wondered out loud. While he and the others watched, the M9 activated its mechanical katana and unceremoniously stabbed the jumbo jet in its flank. There was an ear-splitting metallic wail, followed by a vibration. The passengers screamed and clung to their seats and the walls.



It wasn't the passenger cabin the M9 was tearing into, but the cargo hold beneath. It screeched its katana through the fuselage, jerked it around, then mercilessly tore off the bulkhead.

"There it is!" The M9 plunged its hand into the cargo hold, yanked out a yellow container, and passed it to another M9 waiting in the wings. The second machine immediately turned, got a running start toward the apron area across the airfield—and threw the container with all of its might.

Shinji watched in confusion, not understanding the purpose of their actions. But everything was made clear when the container exploded on impact, releasing a shockwave that rocked their plane even from over 500 meters away. The girls of the class continued to scream. Some of them clung to nearby boys, who managed to enjoy it despite the situation.

"Uruz-2 here! The bomb is disposed of, and we're commencing combat—oh, whoops." The M9's external speakers suddenly fell silent.

The door clanked open, and a dozen or so black-clad soldiers poured in. They were armed with large handguns, wore blue berets, and ran around the cabin, shouting in accented Japanese. "Please remain calm! We're a UN rescue squadron! We've laid out yellow tape leading from the exit! Please follow it to the awaiting transport planes! Remain calm and do not panic! We will not leave anyone behind! I repeat, we are a UN—"

Now that Mao was past her first hurdle, she could focus on her next one: guarding the transport craft. "Friday!"

《Yes, Master Sergeant?》 the machine's AI replied to her audio order.

"Cut the ECS! Activate EHF radar! Give me active IR and strobe lights!"

《Such actions will increase the chance of an enemy preemptive strike.》

"Perfect. I'm going to be the decoy!" She had to soak enemy fire by drawing as much attention as possible.

《Roger. ECS off. Active sensors on.》

Mithril's transports had already landed, and they were starting their

turnaround near the jumbo jet. Their other M9s were nearby, wreaking havoc, as their attack helicopters stalked the skies above.

Mao dashed her M9 away from the plane and began to dance it around on the taxiway. An enemy tank soon appeared from behind a building 500 meters away, and fired at Mao's machine. Its blast just missed, opening a hole in the building behind her.

"Why, you..." Mao pulled an ultrafast missile from her back and pointed it at the tank. It was a large tube, resembling a human-sized disposable rocket launcher, and it was known as a Javelin. *Target locked,* Mao thought. *Fire.*

Moving 1,500 meters per second, the missile hit its target and blasted it to pieces. Mao cast aside the now-empty tube, readied another Javelin, and went in search of new prey. The area around the runway was littered with the smoking remnants of enemy ASes and tanks. "Less resistance than I expected..." she observed. It had been unintentional, but before their arrival, Sousuke's little rampage had divided the enemy forces between the north and south sides of the airfield.

Behind her, the hostage group had formed a line and was hurrying to the two transports. She cast a glance at the clock at the edge of her screen. "120 seconds left..." Things were looking dicey. Kurz had broken off before the drop; had he managed to get Sousuke clear?

Kaname supported Sousuke as they dashed down the runway. "Hang in there," she said.

"I'm fine," Sousuke responded mechanically, his expression as blank as a Noh mask. The cut on his forehead wasn't especially deep, but the wound on his side was throbbing with pain.

"Will we make it?" she asked.

"I don't know," he admitted. "I thought Kurz would be by to pick us up soon..."

"So he's one of you, too?"

"Yes. He's a member of my team... a sergeant."

A stray shot landed about thirty meters behind them, pelting them with concrete fragments. Kaname screamed.

“Ignore it,” Sousuke advised. “Keep running.”

The transports were still three kilometers away; there was no way they’d make the takeoff time on foot. If Kurz’s M9 hadn’t caught up with them, that meant he must be struggling. The enemy would want to come after Kaname, so it was probably taking everything Kurz had just to hold him off.

If only Sousuke had a communicator, he thought, he could contact one of the transport helicopters above...

“Gotcha!” Kurz fired his massive rifle. The recoil caused his machine’s frame to creak and the nearby trees to bow.

The silver AS threw itself to the ground, disappearing behind the bushes. Both events seemed to happen simultaneously, but in fact, its pilot had changed course just before Kurz fired.

“Slippery little bastard...” Kurz clicked his tongue and changed his magazine. Several minutes had passed since the battle began, but his silver foe hadn’t fired a single shot. Kurz had blown away its rifle when he first arrived, so it was probably stuck with close-range weapons. “Heh... You’re crazy if you think I’d let you close in on me, though...” He fired two shots: blam, blam. Both seemed to just barely miss. “Hey, is my targeting off or something?” Kurz asked skeptically.

《Negative,》 his M9’s AI replied. 《Ballistic margin of error is within specified levels.》

That’s what he’d thought. Kurz always personally tuned his targeting system settings before a deployment, and this time had been no exception. “Which means...” The enemy’s agility—its maneuvering, technically—was just on another level. It was rare to see anything capable of dodging for this long without either running away or fighting back. The specs of the enemy AS might, then, be equal to or greater than his own. But greater than the weapons of Mithril, which were ten years ahead of the rest of the world?

“There’s no way,” Kurz muttered. The enemy AS seemed to enjoy dodging his shots. It ran right, and then left, seeming to anticipate his every move. “Shit. Damned thing’s mocking me...” He was running out of time. He had to finish the enemy off and pick up Sousuke and Kaname.

“Maybe we’ll try a little performance, then...” Kurz worked out a plan. He made a show of putting more distance between them, popping off a few shots as he went, as if he was shaken by the enemy’s capabilities. Once he’d gotten his distance, he knelt down and readied his gun again. He didn’t fire, though; he just lowered the gun and manually pumped the bolt a few times. He took aim again—and again, didn’t shoot.

The enemy seemed to realize that something was wrong. Kurz dropped the rifle and pulled a monomolecular cutter from his belt. It was a close-combat weapon, shaped like a combat knife. The enemy machine drew its own monomolecular cutter and began its charge.

“Gotcha!” Kurz had planned to make it seem like his rifle had broken down. He braced his M9 in position. Then, as the enemy closed in, he suddenly threw the knife. Caught by surprise, the enemy knocked it aside, but the act threw off its balance. By the time it had righted itself, Kurz already had his rifle back in hand. His movements were swift, fast, and smooth. At this range, he couldn’t miss. There was no dodging this one.

“Die!” Kurz fired. The 57mm shot burst out of the barrel, streaked for the enemy AS’s torso, and—

“Run, run, run!” the soldiers in charge of guiding the hostages shouted, as the group poured into the idling transports.

Mao’s M9 was nearby, kneeling to protect them. There were no enemies in sight; the area appeared to be secure. With their armored cars and ASes gone, the airfield’s soldiers had fled the scene in terror.

“One of my students was taken!” A hostage broke out of the line to shout at a guide soldier. It was a woman in a suit who seemed about Mao’s age. “Please, let me find her! She’s the vice president of our student council—”

Mao interrupted on the speaker. “Kaname will come back on a different

flight, ma'am."

"A... A different flight?" the teacher asked in confusion. "And how did you know her name?"

"Never mind," Mao yelled at her. "Just get on the plane!"

The teacher looked flustered, but did as she was told. Mao had meant to reassure her, but time-wise, things were looking dicey; Sousuke and Kaname hadn't shown, and Kurz was still locked in combat. Just thirty seconds ago, he'd contacted her to say he was "having a little trouble," but...

"Uruz-6, you still out there?" Mao called on the radio. There was no response. Once the hostage group and the guides were all on board, the transports' back doors began to close.

"Uruz-6, bring Sousuke and the girl here, quickly!" Mao demanded. Once again, there was no response.

She tried again. "Uruz-6, respond. Uruz-6." No response.

"Quit screwing around, Kurz!" she exploded. "Are you trying to piss me off?" Still, Kurz did not respond.

On the runway, Sousuke looked back; Kurz wasn't behind them. Meanwhile, the transports were starting their takeoff runs. There was no way they could get on board, now; they'd have to get one of the AS transport helicopters to pick them up on their way out. But would they even realize they were there?

*There's no way...* he realized. Visibility was poor from all the smoke and fire around them. There was no way they would be seen from the air.

Just then, from the east, a dozen or so shells came flying. They landed here and there around the airfield, unleashing massive explosions. One fell about 50 meters from where Sousuke and Kaname were standing.

"What... what's going on?" she cried.

"It's... enemy reinforcements," Sousuke said, wiping the sweat off his forehead. They crouched down low and hid behind a building. Now that enemy reinforcements had arrived, not even the transport helicopters could afford to

wait for them. They had to find some way to meet up... But Sousuke couldn't think of anything. While he racked his brain, the jet transports roared past them.

"Ahh... There they go," Kaname observed.

"They didn't have a choice," he told her.

A dark reality was sinking down on them; Sousuke and Kaname had lost their chance to rendezvous with their allies.

The two C-17 transports gained speed down the pocked runway surface. There was a lot of shaking. Small rocks battered the fuselage. The engine roared; the wings shook. An explosion came about thirty meters ahead of the right wing, and the passengers screamed.

"Stay seated! Remain calm!" one of the soldiers shouted. Most of the students simply sat there, paralyzed, but Shinji alone had tears pouring from his eyes.

"Are you afraid, Kazama-kun?" Kyoko, who had ended up next to him, asked.

"No... I'm overjoyed," he wept. "I got to see an M9 in live combat, and now I'm riding in a C-17. I can die a happy man..."

With almost shocking speed, the transport reached Vr—the speed at which the nose could pitch up—and then rose into the skies. The second transport followed right after, and liftoff was soon achieved.

The enemy infantry fired MPADS missiles at the second craft, but the transport had engaged its ECS. The surface-to-air missiles failed to get a lock, and ended up exploding on the airfield's northern half.

The transports flew away toward the western sky. The VTOL fighter escorts kept a tight formation, protecting them.

Mao watched them go. "The trickiest part is over, I guess," she muttered.

"Party's over," said the pilot of a large AS transport helicopter as it descended toward her. "There's an enemy battalion on the way."

“Wait,” she protested. “We haven’t heard from Uruz-6, or Sousuke or the girl...”

“This is Teiwaz-12,” came a communication from an attack helicopter on watch overhead. “I just found the remains of an M9. I think it’s Uruz-6’s... It’s in a river, north of the airfield.”

Mao went pale. “What did you say?”

“It’s in pieces,” Teiwaz-12 clarified. “The torso’s been cut in half.”

What was he saying? The torso... in other words, the cockpit? It couldn’t be... “Is the operator safe?!” Mao demanded to know.

“Unable to confirm. There’s too much smoke...”

“Find the operator! Find Uruz-6!” she shrilled. “Is there any sign of Sousuke?”

Over the radio, she heard the pilot gulp. “Mao. I want to find Kurz and Sousuke too, but we don’t have time.”

“We just need a minute,” she argued back. “I’ll help—”

A new voice interrupted them. “I forbid you from searching. Withdraw immediately.” It was an order from Major Kalinin, who was leading the operation from a small recon helicopter.

“Major!” Mao cried in protest.

“Their reinforcements have crossed the bridge and interceptors are heading this way. In one minute, we could all be dead.” His tone made it clear that there was no room for argument. Then he said, “Teiwaz-12. Fire everything you have into the M9’s remains. Don’t let one screw fall into enemy hands.”

After a moment of hesitation came, “Teiwaz-12, will comply.”

“No...” Mao said weakly. The attack helicopter fired a rocket at the northern river. She saw the distant explosion as Kurz Weber’s AS was blown to flaming bits.

“Uruz-2, hurry up and dock with your transport chopper.” The major’s unwavering calm made Mao so angry that for a minute, she almost lost her mind. The word ‘murderer’ rose in her throat like bile. With a struggle, she

managed to swallow it down, but it took all her strength to do so.

Eventually, she managed, “Uruz-2, will comply.” The major was right. The enemy was on their doorstep.

Gauron slid out of his non-functioning machine and landed with a grunt on the damp ground below. He looked up at the silver AS collapsed on the hillside. The chest armor was crushed, leaving the interior exposed. Stabilizer fluid dripped from the actuators like blood, and smoke rose here and there from the joints. The AS—the Codarl—had overheated. His sudden activation of the incomplete lambda driver had shorted out its power system, such that he’d only just made it to the forest to hide before the enemy attack helicopter arrived.

The lambda driver was a system that produced a power unprecedented in the history of human invention. It amplified the operator’s offensive and defensive instincts, channeled their will into forces that defied the laws of nature. Specialists called it the Pseudostring Repulsor Field Generator System; if it got out into the world at large, it would transform modern warfare. But that day was still a long way off—They lacked too much data and know-how. A wellspring of knowledge was needed. That was why they had to kidnap that Whispered, but...

“Useless thing,” Gauron cursed at the broken-down machine, his eyes turned in the direction of the airfield. The Mithril helicopters and VTOL fighters were vanishing into the western sky. “Kalinin... That smug bastard.”

Gauron hadn’t expected rescuers to arrive so soon—less than twelve hours after the hijacking—let alone to dispose of the bomb on the plane. He had wondered how a special response team could come in so quickly, without warning, and without deploying a single recon team. The involvement of Kalinin explained everything; if he’d known that man was part of Mithril, he would have taken appropriate measures. Now he’d let the Whispered girl and Kashim get away... It was a horrible failure on his part.

“You’ll pay for this,” Gauron promised. “Dammit...” Just then, he got a call from one of his subordinates. Gauron answered in Japanese, “It’s me.”

“It’s me,” his subordinate responded. “One of the soldiers fighting the fires

saw something strange.”

“What was it?” Gauron asked.

“He says he spotted an intruder around the airfield’s western fence. They were with a girl, and they were running toward the wilderness.”

“Was it a young man?”

“I don’t know,” the other man answered. “They went west, either way.”

Gauron chuckled to himself. He was in luck: Kashim and the girl had failed to meet up with their allies. To the west was the shore; did he expect to be recovered there? But that was about 30 kilometers away. No matter how fast they went, they wouldn’t get there on foot until morning. That was more than enough time to get the AS—the Codarl—up and running again. “I see...” he gloated. “Things aren’t over yet.”

In the dark mountains away from the airfield, Sousuke and Kaname were walking. They could no longer hear the flames, or the explosions, or the cries of the soldiers. The only sounds were the wind, and the crunch of their feet on the pine needles.

“Hey, is everything okay?” Kaname asked, supporting Sousuke’s unsteady body.

“We aren’t safe yet,” he grunted in response, “but getting away from the airfield was our only choice.”

“I didn’t mean that,” Kaname clarified, “I meant you. You don’t seem to be doing so hot...”

Sousuke’s expression was as blank as ever, but his forehead was drenched in sweat. He was covered in mud, and his uniform’s shirt was caked with blood.

“I think we should take a break. If we keep going like this, you’ll...” Kaname trailed off fearfully.

In response, Sousuke stopped and turned his eyes to the darkness behind him. After a few moments of silence, he said, “You’re right. Hang on... just a minute.”

“Huh?” Kaname was surprised that he had acquiesced so quickly.

Sousuke sat down on a tree root and removed his bloodstained shirt, revealing just a tank top underneath. She almost screamed at what she saw: there was a sharp piece of metal sticking out of his left side. It was about the size of a CD broken in half, and it glistened with fresh blood. It must have happened when the silver AS shot him earlier. Kaname could only imagine the agony he must be in.

“Is... Is that...” she began shakily.

“I got... lucky. It didn’t hit any major arteries or organs,” he explained, then moved on quickly. “There’s a case of small bottles in my jacket pocket... Give it to me.”

With a stifled groan, Sousuke yanked out the metal shard. Kaname searched the pockets of the jacket he had lent her, found the small case, and handed it to him. From it, he produced a vial of alcohol, which he used to clean the wound inside and out. It looked so painful that Kaname couldn’t look directly at it. His movements were purposeful, but his eyes stared emptily into the middle distance.

“There’s another case in the other pocket,” he told her. “I need the tape inside of that.”

She produced the tape. “This?”

Sousuke wordlessly took it and patched his wound before tearing his shirt into strips, which he then wrapped around his torso in a makeshift bandage.

Kaname continued to search through the case. “D-Does it hurt?” she asked, trepidatiously. “It looks like there’s morphine in here, if, um...”

“No.” The word was monotone, lifeless.

Kaname felt a sudden sense of wrongness. It was like she was talking to an insect, a robot—and it made her afraid. “But you’re—”

“I can’t fight the enemy if I’m asleep,” he told her flatly.

“But...”

“Let’s go,” Sousuke said, cutting her off. “The enemy will pursue.” With great

effort, he stood up, and set off again into the dark forest.

*What in the world?* Kaname felt a sudden sense of disorientation. *Who is this person? How can he just act this way?* He treated his body like it was a machine. He didn't feel any pain. Every other word out of his mouth was "enemy, enemy, enemy..." Wasn't he just like that humanoid weapon—that AS? What was it that drove him to such lengths? She couldn't understand it at all.

That indescribable fear of Sousuke that Kaname had first felt during the battle in the hangar began surging up inside of her again. She was in the presence of a completely alien being—some unknowable thing that only looked human. He frightened her more than any of the terrorists pursuing them.

"What's wrong, Chidori?" When he noticed that Kaname wasn't moving, Sousuke turned back to face her again. "Hurry up. The enemy is coming."

Still, she hesitated.

"Are you not feeling well?" he asked.

"S-Stay back." As Sousuke came toward her, Kaname took a step back. "Stay away from me."

Sousuke froze.

Silence.

*Is he angry?* Kaname wondered. *Annoyed? Will he scream at me? Hit me? Or more likely... will he just drag me off into this cold darkness, saying nothing?* The urge to turn and run shot through her. But just then, she realized it; Sousuke's expression, across that vast gulf of darkness—it was like someone who'd just been slapped by the person they least expected it from.

For a moment, it looked like Sousuke was about to say something, but he reconsidered, turning his eyes to the ground. Then, at last, he spoke: "You're... afraid of me?"

Kaname couldn't answer.

"I suppose that's a natural reaction," he said slowly. "From your point of view, I must be..." A shadow of inconsolable loneliness flicked across his bloodstained profile.

*What?* Kaname was shocked. *Why does he have that expression?* That all-too-common human expression... Rejected by someone he longed for, understanding why, and sighing in loneliness. The expression of a person in pain, not from injuries to the body, but to something else. An expression of sorrow, tempered by the strength to endure it.

Sousuke slumped over to hold his injured side. “Regardless, I’d like you to bear with me, for now,” he said wearily. “My priority is to get you back safely to Japan. I can’t guarantee we’ll make it, but... I was hoping you’d trust me.” His eyes were averted, and his voice was somehow frail. His face was no longer that of an inanimate fighting machine. “If we make it through this... I’ll leave you alone forever. I promise. So...”

“I can’t believe it...” Kaname whispered. This young man, wounded and battered from battle, but still trying desperately to save her... She felt seized by a powerful guilt over her initial rejection of him. *He’s been trying so hard to save me,* she realized. *Enduring all the pain he’s in, staying on alert for “the enemy”... Trying to think logically, like a machine, about everything... All to save me. Because that’s the only way he can...*

*The way he tailed me since his first day at school,* Kaname thought. *All the trouble he kept causing, even when people yelled at him... Because he knew the danger that enemy posed.* “So that’s what it was...” she whispered. A choking mix of sorrow and affection hit her with the force of a tidal wave. A warmth blurred into being at her core, spreading into a full-body flush. Her heart began racing, pumping blood into her face. She had never felt anything like it before.

It was a swirl of new, turbulent, illogical emotions. But without knowing how to express them... in the end, she just responded, “Okay.”

“Thanks. Let’s go, then.” But despite his words, Sousuke’s expression remained grave.

His steps were more certain now than before. When the shrapnel was still in his side, every step he’d taken must have been a jolt of pain, but that, at least, seemed to have eased. After about ten more minutes of walking, Sousuke stopped, without explanation.

“What...”

“Quiet,” he ordered. With his right hand, Sousuke readied his machine gun. He pointed the barrel toward the brush ahead, then carefully inched forward. Kaname also sensed a presence in the darkness—there was the sound of hushed breathing, the rustling of clothes. *Our pursuers?* she wondered.

Sousuke turned on his Maglite. Through the shrubs deeper in the grove, a man was walking toward them. He looked like he was struggling to breathe. His entire body was soaked, and he wore a black jumpsuit. No, it wasn’t a jumpsuit... it was an AS operator’s uniform. His long blond hair was disheveled, and his pale face was caked in blood and dirt.

“Kurz,” said Sousuke.

“Hey... Took you guys long enough.” The corners of Kurz Weber’s mouth quirked upward. And then, he collapsed.

# 5: Black Technology

## 28 April, 2332 Hours (Japan/North Korea Standard Time)

## Tuatha de Danaan, Surface, West Korea Bay, Yellow Sea

The second his helicopter hit the flight deck, Kalinin was on his way to the control room. Muffled sounds of machinery roared around him as the vessel's double hull began its closure. As he strode down the second deck passage, Melissa Mao caught up to him, still in her operator's uniform. "Sergeant Mao. You're supposed to be on standby in the hangar," Kalinin said, not slowing his pace.

Ignoring his comment, Mao fumed, "Are we just going to pull out now?"

"Yes."

"Abandoning Sousuke the way you did Kurz?"

"This *was* in their contract."

Nevertheless, Mao persisted. "They're my subordinates. My responsibility. Let me go. I only need two... no, just one hour. I'll find them and bring them back. Please."

"Do you think I'd expose a five billion dollar sub and its crew of 250 to danger for an hour over 'please'?" Kalinin scoffed.

"I know it's reckless," Mao pleaded. "But the ECS's invisibility mode..."

"The weather team's report says it's going to rain soon," he answered, "and that it will last for two days."

Although it was an incredible stealth device in many ways, the ECS still had a few weak points. One was that it emitted a faint smell of ozone. Another was that exposure to large amounts of water—rain, for instance—caused it to spark, taking it from "invisible" to "lit up like a Christmas tree." It was one reason why

Kalinin had wanted to hurry the rescue operation along.

“It’s just a forecast, isn’t it?” Mao insisted. “Those things are never right.”

As they reached a sturdy watertight door, Kalinin stopped and turned back. “This compartment is for control room authorized personnel only.”

“You’re always like this,” she accused him. “How can you be so calm?”

“Because I need to be.” Kalinin turned away from Mao. He passed through several doors before arriving at the control room, where Teletha Testarossa, in the captain’s chair, had just finished issuing their course.

Without a glance to Kalinin, she said, as if it were obvious, “You’ve come to ask how long we can wait?”

*She really is good,* Kalinin thought, and meant it. “We don’t even have a minute to wait, right now. The enemy has three armed patrol boats loaded with mines heading our way, and we’re in a shallow area with nowhere to hide. We need to get over 50 kilometers away as quickly as possible.”

“Of course,” Tessa answered. She gripped the braid on her left shoulder and pressed it to her mouth. The tip of it tickled her nose as she glared at the screen in front of her. It was a bad habit of hers in times of stress, similar to chewing on one’s nails. “But I do want to save the girl and Sagara-san.”

“Yes, ma’am. It’s possible that Sergeant Weber is still alive, as well.” If Kurz were the kind of man to die that easily, Kalinin wouldn’t have put him on the SRT.

“If I can buy us a few minutes before dawn, on the surface near the coast... can you think of something?” Tessa brought a sea chart up on her personal display. Her plan was to get far enough away, brush up against the Chinese navy in their territorial waters, then change course and return here at top speed.

Kalinin was a novice when it came to submarine tactics, but even he could see that this was an outrageous plan. “Is it possible?” he questioned.

“Not for a normal submarine,” she replied. She was smiling confidently, like a mother bragging about her son.

It was possible, then. He decided to trust his captain. “I’m concerned about

the fact that Weber's M9 was disabled," Kalinin added. "If my thinking is right, we might have to use *that*."

"'That'?" Tessa asked politely. "To what do you refer?"

"The ARX-7. The Arbalest." The moment the word left Kalinin's mouth, he thought he heard the mad beast tied down deep in the vessel release a cry of joy.

## 29 April, 0226 Hours (Japan/North Korea Standard Time)

## Mountains of Taedong County, South Pyongan Province, People's Democratic Republic of Korea

An attack helicopter roared across the skies above. A blinding light brushed by Sousuke's head. The pilot didn't seem to have noticed him, though, because the craft kept going, clearing the summit and disappearing into the southern sky.

The silence returned. A gentle rain had begun to fall, and wind rustled the branches around them.

"Is it gone?" Kaname asked. They were hiding in a hollow at the base of a low tree.

"I think so." Sousuke responded, then pulled Kurz out of the hollow.

Kurz had passed out from a morphine injection. His right arm was broken, and there were deep lacerations along his femur and left arm. Most people wouldn't have made it even this far, with wounds like that. The bleeding had stopped, but the treatment alone seemed to have exhausted him.

"Chidori, can you still walk?" Sousuke asked.

"We won't get anywhere if I can't, right?" Her response was determined, but she looked exhausted as well.

Sousuke and Kaname were on either side of Kurz, practically dragging him along the mountain road.

“Could you guys walk a little more carefully? You’ve got an injured man, here...” Kurz whispered through a wince, apparently having woken up at some point.

“I’m impressed you managed to walk as far as you did,” Sousuke told him.

“The river carried me. It also erased my scent,” Kurz replied. “Guh... The major’s such a bastard. If I’d gotten out of my machine just thirty seconds later, I’d have been blown to bits.” Kurz smiled a masochistic smile. “Well, I guess that would’ve been easier than this.”

“Did the silver AS take you out?” Sousuke asked.

“Yeah.” Kurz let out a frustrated noise. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“What happened?”

“I lured it into close range, then slammed it with a 57mm. I felt sure I’d gotten it, but... next thing I knew, I was the one in pieces.”

“A directional mine?” Sousuke wondered.

“No... I don’t think so. It felt more like... an invisible hammer.” Kurz whimpered again in pain.

“It’s all right. You don’t have to talk.”

Eventually, they made it over the ridge. Beneath a tree that could have easily been a thousand years old, Sousuke spoke up. “I think that’s the last of our climbing.”

At the bottom of the slope before them was all open space: a farm settlement, beyond which were rice paddies. Beneath the starless sky, here and there, they could see the headlights of military trucks as they drove between the fields.

Kaname narrowed her eyes. “It’s wide open. If we walk out into that...”

“Yes,” Sousuke confirmed. “It’s very likely that the enemy will spot us.”

As Sousuke eased Kurz’s body to the ground, the man let out a moan and a barely audible stream of curses. Kaname crouched beside them with a stifled cough; she hadn’t complained, but she didn’t seem to be feeling well at all.

Kurz's breathing slowed to the rhythms of sleep as the morphine seemed to take effect again.

They'd spent three hours walking down awful roads in the middle of the night. To be sure, it was an impressive effort, but... *There's no way we'll make it to the shoreline like this,* Sousuke concluded.

Even trained soldiers in perfect condition would be hard-pressed to cross that open field unsighted. For the three of them, in their present condition, it was impossible. Even if the de Danaan was trying to save them, there was no way to contact them from here; the range of Kurz's mini-transmitter topped out at a few kilometers, and they were still twenty from the coast.

Also, Sousuke was tired. His mind was cloudy and the pain from his wounds was getting worse. He couldn't move. He couldn't contact anyone. The enemy was closing in. *No way out, I guess...* He felt the familiar hand of death tapping him on the shoulder. "Chidori," he said.

"Yes?"

"Listen to me." Sousuke explained their situation: how they couldn't contact their allies, how the enemy was drawing near, the weather, Kurz's condition, his own condition...

She listened quietly through it all. "I see..."

"So... here's what I propose," he told her. "Kurz and I will stay here, make a lot of noise, and draw the enemy's attention. We'll buy you as much time as we can while you run west."

Kaname was stunned. "What did you say?"

"Run west," he said firmly. "Take this transmitter and head for the shore. If our allies have come for us, they'll be calling on that channel." There was no guarantee that she could make it that far unseen; no guarantee their allies would come for them. But it was better than nothing.

"But then won't you guys—"

"That doesn't matter. Protecting you is our job. And it's better for one to make it out than for all three of us to get captured."

“But...”

*Don’t worry about me,* Sousuke thought. *I’ve accepted my fate. I knew this is how I’d go out eventually, and so did Kurz. His dog’s death will be the result of the choices he made. But you...* “You deserve to live,” he insisted. “Go.”

*My duty. My mission. They don’t matter—I just want to get her back safely,* he realized. *Even if she’s afraid of me, even if she hates me, I want to send her back to that joyful school building. Yes. If she didn’t make it back, I think I’d feel... sad.*

“Go... without you?” There was a long silence. Kaname looked at Sousuke, then at Kurz. She seemed genuinely uncertain, even though she had nothing to be uncertain about.

If there was a way to save any one of them, they should take it—that logic was universal. No one would blame her for leaving the wounded behind, Sousuke thought. Running away was the natural choice.

The silence lasted for about a minute. Then, at last, Kaname answered: “No.”

“What?” Sousuke asked incredulously.

“I said no. I’m not going to run away and leave you here. There’s got to be another way out of this, so let’s put our heads together and figure out what it is.” Her voice was different now than it had been before. It was quiet and cool, backed by a deeper, resonating strength.

But Sousuke persisted. “Listen, Chidori; I’m a specialist. There’s no way all three of us will escape under these circumstances. Just getting you to safety will be difficult enough. Those are the facts.”

“The facts? You don’t get to decide what ‘the facts’ are.” Her voice had a slight anger behind it.

“But—”

“Shut up!”

Sousuke stared in disbelief at her bracing rebuke.

“The entire time we’ve been walking through this mountain, I’ve been thinking... and I’ve finally worked out how I feel.” She took in a deep breath, then proclaimed her diagnosis: “Sagara-kun, you are a huge idiot.” She

continued, “I’m grateful that you wanted to save me, but don’t you see that you’re forgetting something? Something really, really, *really* important? I bet you don’t, because you’re a pathological downer and a fool... and there’s nothing nice about being saved by someone like that.”

“Hey...” he protested.

This was no longer the frightened girl of moments before. This was the Chidori Kaname from that school bursting with life, the one constantly blowing her top at Sousuke’s every transgression. She was standing before him now, feet planted and brimming with confidence.

“You want to know why?” she demanded. “I’ll tell you: it’s because you don’t care if you die. And that’s stupid! You don’t care about how I feel; you’re forcing this on me so that *you* can feel virtuous. Did I ask you to pine for me? Did I ask you to die for me? No, but I guess you think it makes you super cool, when it really just makes you a stupid downer jerk.

“Giving your life for someone only means something if you *value* that life. This is just a death wish! If you valued yourself, you’d at least *try* to fight this, but you don’t even care enough to do that! Think about it, okay? Who are you saving me for? Don’t you dare say ‘the mission’... and if you say it’s for me, I’ll kill you right here!”

The force of her rant sent Sousuke’s head swimming. He felt indignant, shocked, embarrassed, incredulous, confused... He had no idea what she was talking about. The one thing he understood, if vaguely, was that she was pointing out some flaw of his... and that she was right.

While his mouth flapped helplessly, Kaname just waved in annoyance. “Oh well, forget it. *I’ll* save us.”

“Wh-What?” he stammered.

“You said your idea was ‘the only way,’ right? That means you’ve thrown in the towel, and *that* means it’s all up to me. You got a lighter?”

“Yes,” he replied helplessly, “but what do you intend to do with it?”

“Oh, you know, set the mountain on fire,” she said. “It’ll draw loads of attention. In the chaos, we’ll steal one of the fire trucks or jeeps and beat it to

the airport. Then in the chaos *there*, we'll steal a plane. Don't worry; I'll fly it."

"You, fly a plane? Do you have experience—"

"Of course not! But I've played flight simulators in arcades, so I'll work something out. Once we have our plane, we'll make for South Korea or Japan... anywhere south of here, really. Simple, right? So just shut up and follow my lead."

Kaname's proposal went beyond absurd into incoherent, yet her tone was completely serious. What might sound at first blush like a rant born of ignorance was something she clearly understood the full weight of. Flickers of tragic heroism passed across her face.

"I'm not giving up," she said defiantly, and put a hand to her chest. "No way. You say there's no way to save everyone? Well, I don't accept that. I'm going to make it happen. You and Kurz-kun are coming with me. We'll get out of here together, and make it back to Kyoko and the others. And then we're going to live long, long lives. That's my decision. You got a problem with it?!"

"Will and determination aren't enough to make this happen," Sousuke pleaded. "You need to listen to me."

"How many times do I have to say it?! No!"

At last, Sousuke pointed his submachine gun at Kaname. "You have to go," he told her flatly. "Leave us here and go."

She tensed for a second, but then immediately relaxed, and looked straight at him. Her harsh tone from before was replaced by soothing calm. "If I don't go, you'll shoot me?" For some reason, there was pity in her voice.

"Yes," he managed. "You'd be better off dead than captured and broken."

"Oh, please... Talk about your tortured logic." Kaname smiled and took a step toward him.

*Why isn't she afraid?* Sousuke was starting to panic. His dawning realization that she was never going to obey him sent him plunging backward into despair.

"You're wondering why I'm not afraid, right?"

"Um..."

“It’s simple,” she said kindly, pushed the gun away, and slowly pulled Sousuke into an embrace. She held him softly, with no trace of forcefulness. Her arms twined behind his back, and her cheek rested against his bloodstained shoulder. “I’m not afraid because I decided to trust you, just like you asked me to before...”

Sousuke could feel her heat against his chest. The pain of his wounds seemed far away, and his mind went blank. The blood pounded through him and all of his muscles tensed. He didn’t even noticed that he’d dropped his gun.

“So... So I don’t want to abandon you.” Her wet bangs tickled Sousuke’s nose.

“Chidori...” he choked out.

“It’s true... I was scared of you before. I felt like one of my classmates had turned into a completely different person. You were so strong, and so...” She balked for a moment, and then, as if to cast off her hesitation, continued, “But... you told me to trust you, right? So I told myself: ‘He’s doing everything he can to save me. So instead of being afraid, I’m going to trust him.’ Pretty noble of me, huh?”

“Yes,” he said at last. “Very noble.”

“Right?” she coaxed. “This is a major meet-in-the-middle thing for a teenager, okay? So you need to put in your effort, too. Don’t think things like, ‘I don’t mind dying.’ It’s too sad... Come back with me.”

*Go back... with her?* The thought was certainly appealing. If there were any way to do it, he’d try it in a heartbeat. How wonderful would she look in the morning light?

Why was he trying to save her? Who was he trying to save her for? Sousuke knew the answer. *For myself,* he admitted. *I want to go back with her. I want to be with her. I want to live.*

He realized he had never wanted anything more in his life. With that realization, his tired, battered body began to well with new power. “Chidori...”

“Sagara-kun...”

Just as their eyes met, awkwardly—

“Er... Mm. Ahem.” Kurz, who was lying beside them, cleared his throat apologetically. Sousuke and Kaname gasped and sprung away from each other.

“You... You’re awake?” Sousuke asked.

“’Course I am...” Kurz said. “Pretty hard to sleep through all that shouting...”

“You jerk!” Kaname yelled. “Why didn’t you say something?!”

“It wasn’t an easy thing to interrupt...” Kurz grumbled, scratching at his temple. Then, teasingly, he added, “Or maybe I should’ve laid low a little longer? I feel kinda like I ruined a good thing. I mean... whew. You two. Man, oh man...”

Kaname’s face went red. “It’s not like that!” she shouted. “I just got carried away in the moment. I don’t have any feelings for him! None at all! I... I mean it!”

*She... doesn’t?* Sousuke was stunned by her desperate denial.

All through this, Kurz couldn’t stop himself from chortling; he only stopped when he began to wince. “Ugh, even laughing hurts... But you lose this round, Sousuke. The girl says your plan’s a no, so it’s a no. Besides, I think hers is better anyway.”

Sousuke furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“Y’know, a mountain fire. It’s a good idea,” Kurz opined. “Way better than just dying here, at least. Of course, there’s no way it’d get going in rain like this. Think we could scare up some gasoline? But it still wouldn’t get far...”

“Right,” Sousuke agreed, “We’d just be giving the enemy our location.”

“You don’t know that,” Kaname interrupted. “An allied plane could fly overhead and see us from the sky.”

“We’re in enemy airspace. There won’t be any friendlies overhead.”

Kaname thought. “What about higher up, then? I saw it in a Harrison Ford movie, once... Spy satellites can see things from space. Do you guys have one of those?”

Sousuke had a moment’s hesitation about the thought of telling an outsider

about Mithril's recon satellite, Sting. But he quickly reconsidered, and said, "Yes. But it's not as if it simply hovers over us. The orbits of recon satellites are highly classified; grunts like us aren't told about them."

"Actually," Kurz whispered after a moment, "at the briefing before I shipped out, they showed us a satellite photo. It was of the airfield, taken yesterday at 1530 hours... What time is it now?"

Sousuke, eyes wide, looked at his watch. "0248 hours. Almost twelve hours since. Which means..."

Typically, a recon satellite took 90 minutes to complete one revolution. Given the rotation of the Earth, this meant they typically ended up above the same place once every twelve hours. If Sting had been over this area at 1530 hours yesterday, then it might make another pass very soon! And since they knew almost the exact time it would be here, why couldn't they send a message in fire revealing their location?

Sousuke and Kurz looked at each other. "Heat signals" and "recon satellite"—these two key phrases, which might just snatch them from the jaws of death, had come to them from the mouth of a total amateur.

"What is it?" Kaname asked.

"I can't believe we missed it..." Sousuke sighed.

"Kaname-chan," Kurz said jubilantly, "you're a genius!"

"Where did that come from?" she wondered.

Even so, the odds of the plan's success weren't great; lighting a fire would signal their enemies, as well as their allies. There was no guarantee that the satellite would see them, and even if it did, who knew if rescue would come in time? Letting Kaname run off on her own remained the better gamble.

Nevertheless, this was what she wanted: for them to go back together, or not at all. It was worth a try.

Sousuke stood up and shouldered his submachine gun. "I'd better go and do it," he decided. "You stay here."

"Okay," Kurz said. "Don't be... or, y'know what, *do* be reckless. If not now,

when?”

“True.”

“Sagara-kun...” Kaname worried. “Are you going by yourself? You’re wounded...”

“I should be able to handle a little sneaking around. And...” Sousuke patted Kaname’s shoulder to ease her worries. “I don’t know why, but I feel re-energized.” And then, he vanished into the darkness.

With Sousuke gone, Kaname used a few extra scraps of cloth to wipe the dirt off Kurz’s face.

“Whew... thanks, Kaname-chan.”

“You’re welcome. By the way... did they tell you? The reason... they’re after me?”

“I can’t say I know much,” he admitted. “I got ordered to protect you, and I followed those orders. That’s pretty much it for me.”

“I see...” Kaname hung her head, then coughed. Her head had been feeling heavy for a while. It wasn’t so bad when she was talking to Sousuke, but an unpleasant feeling had begun to assert itself, washing over her and receding, like waves on the shore.

She felt vaguely like she was floating. Her mysterious dream from the medical trailer was coming back in fits and starts. Or was it even a dream? She couldn’t be sure.

Kurz seemed to have noticed Kaname’s state. “Not feeling well, huh? Did they drug you while you were in their custody?”

“Yeah... I don’t know what it was,” she told him. “They said it was a nutrient shot. It didn’t really do anything, but... my head’s been feeling strange ever since...”

“What else did they do?” Kurz asked.

“They... made me watch a movie.”

“A movie?”

“It was weird. All these words... they kept flashing in and out. I shouldn’t have known them,” she said wonderingly, “but I did... Basic elements for intervertebral disc dampers and palladium reactor reagents and such. The ECS’s invisibility mode is imperfect because excessive burden on the laser screen’s oscillation system creates an ozone smell—”

Kurz’s eyes went wide. “How did you know those words?”

“Um... Huh? What was I just saying right now?”

“You mentioned intervertebral disc dampers,” Kurz told her.

“Interver... what?” Kaname asked, feeling perplexed. “What does that mean?”

“It’s an AS part. You were speaking in jargon just now. And the flaws in the ECS... that’s something only military personnel should know.”

“W... Wait...” Kaname pressed her hands to her temples and shut her eyes tightly.

Kurz seemed agitated. “There’s no way a normal high school student could know that stuff. Where the hell did you learn about it?”

“I d-don’t know...” Was there some kind of secret stored in her brain? She thought back to the conversation she’d had with the doctor in the trailer. “Actually... one of them said something strange to me... She said I’d known those words since before I was born... She said I had something called black technology, and that... gradually, the knowledge... the knowledge...” As she spoke, Kaname felt the sensation returning. For the first time, she was consciously aware of what she knew.

“Knowledge... know... le... lelele... ah...” Nothing was rising in her mind, but something was sinking. She felt a vague of revulsion. There was also a sensation like déjà vu—the feeling when you come to a place for the first time, yet you feel like you’ve been there before. This was like that, but stranger, darker, heavier... So vague, yet so ever-present... “Can’t reme... mbe... r-r-r? Ber-r-rer...”

There was a monster hiding deep in her mind, and she couldn't view it head-on. The more she tried, the more something in her soul revolted. It felt like her world was going to turn upside-down, and now it was all she could think about. *I can't do it. Can't do it. Can't. Can't. Cacacacan't can't can't...* "Can't... can't-t-t... wha-what's... going on?" It took everything she had to keep from shouting out hysterically.

"Hey, cut it out. Look at me... Hey, Kaname!" Kurz's voice pulled her back to reality.

She realized that at some point, she'd begun ripping at the chest of her hospital gown. "Ah... what was I... I'm... I'm acting pretty crazy, huh?" Kaname laughed weakly, trying to sound self-effacing as she moved to hide her partly exposed chest. Instead, she just sounded half-dead.

"Listen, Kaname. Maybe you shouldn't think about that stuff right now," Kurz urged her. "Put it out of your mind. Don't even... ugh." His face contorted suddenly as if he was in pain.

"Are... Are you all right?" she asked.

"Of course not." Kurz tried to lift his head, but it took all the strength he had. "Ahh, it's frustrating. Dammit. Of all the times to be totally immobile..." He looked so helpless. Tears even began to form in his blue eyes.

Kaname leaned over a little more to blot away Kurz's tears. "It's not your fault," she told him soothingly. "You're really badly hurt..."

"But I just... I hate it so much," he cried. "If I were feeling... just a little bit better, I'd have the perfect view..."

"Of what?" she asked him.

"Your cleavage."

As Sousuke made it to the bottom of the mountain, the farm settlement came into sight again; he sneaked in and siphoned the oil out of an old tractor's engine. He would have rather had gasoline, but all the tanks were empty—the economic crisis at work, perhaps, though the mere presence of a tractor signaled that the area was still fairly prosperous.

He ran out with the container of oil to one of the fallow fields. The wound in his side continued to throb, but it wasn't so bad that he couldn't bear it. Sousuke began splattering the oil over the ground there. He looked at the time: 0328 hours.

*All right...* He pulled his survival kit out of his pocket and crushed up the permanganate pills, which were used as disinfectant. He sprinkled the powder on the oil and lit his lighter. The oil soon caught fire, and the flames began to spread.

Sting captured images at extremely high resolutions; on a cloudless day with the sun shining, it could even read the print on a newspaper. It was the rain and the dark that would make them indistinguishable from the local soldiers, which was why he would write his message in fire: "A67ALIVE." The A referred to Kaname's code name, Angel; the six was Kurz, Uruz-6; the seven was Sousuke, Uruz-7. The message would convey that Chidori Kaname, Kurz Weber, and Sagara Sousuke were all safe and sound. Being careful not to leave footprints, Sousuke made it back to where Kaname and Kurz were waiting.

He didn't need to tell them where they were. If Sting could see those burning letters, then all they had to do was track the movements of Sousuke, the one who set them, from space.

The oil fire went out in just a few minutes. Had the enemy noticed it? Had their allies? All he could do was hope.

## 29 April, 0345 Hours (Japan/North Korea Standard Time)

## Sunan Airfield, People's Democratic Republic of Korea

"An unexplained fire?" Gauron's brow knit as he received his subordinate's report. He was sitting by the maintenance trailer in a corner of the airfield, watching the Codarl's repairs proceed.

"Yes. They say someone set a fire in a farm settlement fifteen kilometers west of here."

“Hmm...” A diversion? No, some little bit of arson wouldn’t do for that. But it was surely Kashim who set the fire, either way... Gauron didn’t know what he was after, but he must be hiding nearby.

“The military is tightening the search ring,” his subordinate continued. “It’s only a matter of time before we find the runaways.”

“The man is expendable,” Gauron told him. “As for the girl... they’re free to break some bones or rape her if they want, but warn them not to kill her.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ll be joining them soon.”

“In the Codarl?”

Gauron glared at his subordinate. “Do you have a problem with that? Hmm?”

“C-Certainly not, sir... But Dr. Kaneyama warned us to avoid using it in front of the locals...”

“A warning isn’t a prohibition,” Gauron said. “Besides, we’re dealing with Mithril... with Kalinin. Things could still get messy.” The navy had reported that Mithril’s submarine was far from their shores by now, having retreated to the outskirts of Chinese territorial waters. Even with emergency deployment boosters, it should be impossible for them to stage a rescue, but... “Let’s just be cautious,” he decided, “for safety’s sake.”

An engineer shut the maintenance hatch, and called out that the repairs were finished.

## 29 April, 0355 Hours (Japan/North Korea Standard Time)

## Mountains of Taedong County, South Pyongan Province, People’s Democratic Republic of Korea

When Sousuke returned, Kaname came to meet him, relief in her eyes. For some reason, she was hiding her exposed chest with both hands. Kurz seemed to be asleep.

“How is Kurz doing?” Sousuke asked.

“Pretty well, I think?” Kaname mused. “People like him never seem to die, anyway.”

Sousuke looked at her questioningly, but sat down on a tree root without prying.

“Well? Do you think it’ll work out?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “Our odds aren’t great. You still would have a better chance running off on your own.”

“Well, too late for that. I’m not changing my mind.”

“I know. I won’t be giving you any more orders.”

“Thank you,” she said simply.

They could hear the sound of rotors in the distance. They didn’t seem to be getting closer, and in fact, about ten seconds later, they started moving away.

The dark forest was gloomy and cold, like a maze with no way out. “Hey. If... If we do make it back home, what will you do then, Sagara-kun?” Kaname asked, apparently finding the silence unbearable.

“Take on my next mission,” he replied absently.

“You’ll be going somewhere else, then?” she wanted to know. “You won’t come back to school?”

“Likely not. My assignment as a student there was merely temporary; to remain would compromise my other missions. I likely won’t ever see you again.”

“I see...”

Just then, Sousuke heard footsteps; he looked around. They weren’t human—They were faster and softer. There was panting. Animals? Dogs.

And then, even further away, he could hear human footsteps. Three, four... no, more. He held his breath. The sound of cracking branches grew closer and closer. There was a mad barking now.

“What—”

“They’re coming,” Sousuke hissed. “Get down.”

Almost just as he said it, two dogs jumped out from behind a rock. They were large and they were black, but the dark made it hard to say anything more. They rocketed toward them like a shot.

Sousuke did not hesitate to start firing. There was a whimper from the army dogs; one was moving so fast that it slammed into Kaname’s body before letting out its death rattle. Kaname shrieked.

The pursuing team had heard the shots, and began firing at them from deeper in the pine forest. Rifle fire bounced around, breaking rocks and snapping withered branches.

“You were followed? You idiot!” Kurz, awake again, scolded him.

Sousuke traded fire while he responded. “Time was of the essence. I didn’t have a choice.” Injured and with limited equipment, he’d had no way of covering the smell of his blood.

He caught sight of an enemy soldier peeking out from behind a big tree. He shot at his leg: a hit. When the man toppled, Sousuke intentionally fired a few more shots into the area around him. The soldier screamed and called to his comrades for aid. Another soldier—a friend of his, perhaps—risked his life to run out into the open and pull the soldier back behind the tree.

“That takes two out,” Sousuke noted calmly.

“Just kill them, dammit...” Kurz growled.

The enemy gunfire was getting more severe; reinforcements were probably coming from all directions. “At this rate,” Sousuke observed, “enemy ASes will be here soon, too.”

“Time to face the music, huh?” Kurz let out a dry laugh. Sousuke’s gun only had about ten bullets remaining, as well.

“I guess it’s over...” Kaname whispered.

“It does seem that way. I’m sorry,” Sousuke said while returning fire.

Kaname tried to force a cheerful tone. “But, no regrets here.”

“I see.”

“I’m glad I met you, Sagara-kun.”

“Right,” he responded gloomily, just as his bullets ran out. His only weapon now was the butt of his gun.

Kurz moaned, “Is it over?”

“No...” Sousuke said, looking up. “Salvation from heaven.”

A hundred meters above them was a parachuted capsule. Explosive bolts sparked, breaking the capsule open and dropping a white AS down from the dark sky. Its arms were raised over its head, as if to let it maintain balance as it descended.

“Here it comes...”

The AS landed on the slope about five meters away. There was a grinding mechanical noise as mud and pebbles went flying. The impact absorbent released steam from its joints, leaving the machine wreathed in a faint haze. They stared, stunned, at the snow-white AS.

“What is that thing?” Kurz wondered. It was a model the men had never seen before. Its frame resembled an M9, but the plating was different.

ASes’ forms were aerodynamic by nature, but it was even more striking in the case of this machine: sharp and powerful, the silhouette brought to mind a vicious bird of prey. Its countenance was knife-like, full of honed tension, and there was cold savagery there—once spotted, its prey would never escape. It felt less like a land weapon and more like the world’s most dangerous work of art. Fixed on its hip pylon—the armament storage—was a short-barreled shotcannon, and its armpit pylon held spare magazines and a monomolecular cutter.



“Who’s in there?” Sousuke asked, “Mao?” And where were their other allies? Was it just the one machine?

As if to address his questions, the white AS knelt. The cockpit hatch behind its head opened, but nobody came out. They waited a few seconds, but nothing changed—The white AS remained kneeling in place, unfazed even as enemy gunfire struck its armor.

“Hey, you don’t think...”

Without waiting for Kurz’s words, Sousuke flew toward the white AS. He climbed up to the cockpit. Enemy fire grazed him, but he couldn’t worry about that now. He looked inside and... “Unmanned?” There was nobody inside the machine. The cockpit had the same structure as the M9 and ASes like it, with only enough room inside to snugly fit the pilot. He slid inside; the multipurpose screen in front of him blinked, ready to activate at any time.

《Initiating voice print check. State name, rank, and identification code,》 the machine’s AI requested in a deep male voice.

“Sergeant Sagara Sousuke. B-3128.”

《Confirmation complete. SGT Sagara Sousuke recognized. Please issue orders.》

“Close the hatch. Begin adjustments to mode four. Bilateral angle: 3.5.”

《Roger. Running mode four. BMSA: 3.5. Procedure complete,》 it echoed. The cockpit hatch closed and the semi-Master/Slave control system activated. The machine was now like an extension of Sousuke’s body.

*This thing works just like an M9,* Sousuke realized. *I can do this.* He stood the machine up. “Chain guns, crowd control.”

《Roger.》

The two head-mounted machine guns roared, hissing out 100 powerful shots per second. They shredded the pine forest before his eyes.

Trees toppled; soldiers fled. The tide of battle had turned on a dime. From below, Kaname and Kurz stared up at the machine Sousuke was piloting.

Then Sousuke noticed red letters in the corner of the screen:

[Data recorder files | Review A-I—High priority.]

Sousuke ordered the AI to play the data, and Major Kalinin's voice echoed around the cockpit. "Sergeant Sagara. If this message is playing, then I'm going to assume the AS has reached you. When our recon satellite, Sting, noticed you, the de Danaan was sixty kilometers from the coast. That was too far away to mount a standard rescue, so we fired this AS off in a modified ballistic missile, which is why it's unmanned."

"I see..." Sousuke mused. A ballistic missile could bridge the gap in minutes, but you couldn't put a person inside one. The initial G-forces would be too much for the human body to handle.

"The de Danaan is currently on radio silence, speeding to the coast of the West Korea Bay. The plan is to brush by, pick you up, then escape with all speed," Major Kalinin's voice continued. "For one minute starting at 0430 hours, the de Danaan will surface at the shoreline—Find a way to reach the pick-up point by then."

Said point was displayed on the digital map. It was on the coast, south of a village called "Hasanbuk," which Sousuke didn't know how to pronounce. It was about 20 kilometers from their current location.

The time was 0413 hours—only 17 minutes until their allies arrived on the shore.

"In addition, this AS is known as ARX-7 Arbalest. The AI's callsign is 'Al.' It's an extremely valuable test type, so make sure you bring it back," Kalinin's voice concluded. "That is all. Good luck."

ARX-7 Arbalest. So that was the machine's name... Sousuke tested the feel of it. Strength pulsed into his electromagnetic muscles from a palladium reactor. His every slight movement conveyed to him this AS's superlative power.

《Approximately five enemy ASes approaching,》 Al reported. One window in the screen displayed their estimated locations and distances: straight ahead, a bit to the right, and to the left. They were approaching swiftly in formation to surround the Arbalest.

The auditory sensors picked up the roar of the enemy machines, gas turbine engines like a deep growl of warning. The optical sensors pierced the darkness to catch the shape of the coming enemy: khaki-colored armor plating, with two red eyes—Rk-92 Savages. They seemed to ski down the midnight slopes, rifles ready. They wouldn't let him go without a fight, it seemed. It was five against one. And yet...

His fate was in his hands now, and his choice was to go home, with her. Finding the pain of his wounds strangely pleasant now, Sousuke whispered, "Al, you said your name was?"

《Yes, Sergeant.》

"Let's finish these guys off in one minute."

《Roger.》

The next instant, the Arbalest jumped.

"Wah!" The mud it kicked up splattered over Kaname and Kurz. They looked up and saw Sousuke's AS land on the other side of the mountain, charging the approaching enemy.

*He went that far in an instant?* Even Kaname could tell that the machine's jumping power was incredible. It was cutting-edge technology in the truest sense—The AS he'd piloted at the airfield couldn't compare.

"Amazing." She could make out about two enemy machines; they were khaki-colored ASes, which leaped off the dark slope toward Sousuke's machine. They readied their rifles and fired.

"Ah..." she whispered. The next moment, one of the enemies went flying. She didn't even have time to work out what had happened before the white AS was tearing at the next machine, sailing forward like a swallow in flight. It released a flash as it passed by—probably Sousuke firing a shot—and the enemy machine was sent spinning upward before it slammed into the ground and exploded. That was the last she could see with the naked eye.

The white AS cut through the valley, streaked through the air. It collided with an enemy, then seemed to bounce away. Wherever the white figure went,

fireballs scorched the night sky. It was like watching a spark in the darkness, dancing and leaping every which way.

“It’s like a ninja manga...” Kaname said in awe. She couldn’t tell how many enemies there were; probably four or more. Each was promptly shot, smashed, or torn apart by Sousuke. There was a flash as the white AS bore down on the last machine, and it fired twice from its shotcannon.

“That’s five,” Sousuke whispered, breathing heavily. The enemy machine hit the ground, spewing smoke, and didn’t move again. It had taken exactly 58 seconds to silence the pursuing AS squad. With the caution of a cat, he remained alert for more attackers, but even ten seconds later, no more enemy machines revealed themselves.

*Okay, now’s our chance...* Sousuke started moving back to where Kaname and Kurz were. His plan was to pick them up and run.

Just then—suddenly, from behind the mountain to his left, that silver AS showed itself. It was extremely close and firing bursts from its carbine, its frenzied hostility on full display.

Sousuke strained with effort as he rolled his machine forward, barely dodging the shots before returning them with his shotcannon. The enemy seemed to anticipate this maneuver, and ducked before springing up again. It fired three more three-round bursts from above, but the Arbalest kept rolling forward, managing to dodge each one.

The silver AS landed with a shrieking laugh. For some reason, it had its external speakers turned on. “Nice dodging, Kashim!” Leaving no room for response, Gauron immediately resumed firing. Sousuke responded in kind. Every single shot missed, tearing trees out of the ground.

Normally, a battle between ASes was decided in a handful of shots: you made your choice between remaining still and sniping, laying out cover fire on the go, or focusing on evasion. You had to make those choices quickly and flexibly, based on the needs of the moment. Whoever made the wrong decision first would pay for it immediately with a fatal blow.

But battle between these two was different: neither one gave any ground.

They ran, jumped, ducked, rolled, fired and fired, unceasingly. Every single shell missed, yet no matter how fiercely they moved, the machines wouldn't grow tired. Until one machine fell—or until its operator had a breakdown—the battle would go on. It was almost like a dogfight on the ground.

"That silver one... that's the one from before," Kaname found herself whispering, as she watched from the mountaintop. The white and silver figures rose out of the darkness and disappeared again. One moment they'd gone over the ridge; the next, they rushed out from the rocks on the opposite side, bursting with fire. They danced through the air, toppled trees, and scorched the dark valley in red.

"Stay low. A fragment from a stray shot could kill you," Kurz advised.

Kaname ignored his warning, and stood up to watch the distant fireworks. "Who's got the advantage?" she asked.

"In a normal battle, they'd be evenly matched," he replied. "But..."

"But?"

"That silver AS isn't normal. It's got some weird secret weapon..."

"The one that took you out?" she asked, her eyes locked on the battle like a woman hypnotized.

"Yeah. It just deflected my shells in midair, you know? Hell of a magic trick..."

"Magic trick? No... That's not what it is." Her head felt heavy. That strange sense of floating had enveloped her again.

A voice was there, whispering to her. It echoed around vaguely in her mind: *That's not what it is... it's not what Kurz is saying... What that AS has... that's not what it is...*

"It's not... a magic trick," Kaname managed to say. "It's a technology." The enemy had it. But he... he also... "He'll lose," she declared at last.

"Huh?" Kurz blinked.

"He'll lose at this rate," Kaname said again.

A grenade thrown by Gauron burst in close proximity. The Arbalest dropped its weight to endure the blast and the shrapnel. Then, as it stood up, it grabbed a fallen tree and threw it. The tree fell between the two machines, allowing each to hide from the other's sight. Then without taking proper aim, they simultaneously opened fire.

The pine was quickly shot to splinters. The Arbalest took a hit to the upper right portion of its head, which set off his machine gun ammo and took out half of his main sensors. At the same time, Gauron's AS had taken a hit to its rifle; the tank of binary fluid explosives had cracked, rendering it unusable.

In terms of damage to the machine, the Arbalest was worse off. But...

*I've won,* Sousuke thought. His weapon still worked, and he was too close to miss. He fired his shotcannon at Gauron's machine, which was still reeling from the blow. The eight-fragment DPICM launched from his gun barrel right at the enemy AS, and then—

Something unbelievable happened. The shot that should have hit its upper torso seemed instead to collide with an invisible wall, blowing it into sparking pieces in midair.

Sousuke didn't even have time to cry out before a powerful shockwave hit the Arbalest. He felt jerked forward at great speed, then whipped back. His machine arced through the air, then spun into the mountainside. Gauron's laughter echoed through the valley.

"Damn, that's it!" Kurz growled.

What had happened? It was impossible to comprehend, even from this distance. It wasn't a Claymore mine, or reactive armor. It was an invisible wall. Some kind of shockwave... that was the only way to express it.

The white AS didn't move. It was hard to see from their current position, but it was probably trashed. If a hit from that had scrapped a sturdy M9, there was no way some dicey prototype machine would survive it.

Kaname just stood there, perfectly still. In a lifeless tone, she breathed, "What in the world..."

Silently, Sousuke sat up and shook his head. The world around him looked crimson; the gravitational acceleration from the fall had caused a redout. Numbness spread from his head to his toes. It took all he had just to move his fingers. His side felt wet and sticky; the wound he'd patched had torn back open, and the dizzying pain had returned.

He remembered Kurz's words: *Like an invisible hammer.* That's what this was.

He had also said it had torn his machine apart, and Sousuke's had likely suffered the same fate. There was no way it could survive an impact like that. Now, without his AS, Gauron would kill him, and—

*Over at last, eh?* he thought. Then his red-tinted vision returned to normal, and his eyes regained their focus on the screen display. Blue letters? But that meant—

[Damage Minor: No reduction of battle capacity]

This time, it was Gauron who couldn't believe his eyes. The white AS was slowly rising to its feet. Its head was half gone, but the rest appeared nearly pristine. He'd blasted that last Mithril AS to pieces, so...

"Hmm, why didn't it work?" Gauron shook off his adrenaline high and checked his engine output. This time, he had a little extra latitude with the lambda driver—he'd charged the dedicated capacitor—so he didn't lack for fuel supply. "A misfire?" he mused. "Most likely..." The device was still in the testing stages, after all; malfunctions were to be expected.

Gauron had the machine switch to one of the new, dedicated disposable capacitors mounted in its back. The cylinder rotated, like the barrel of a revolver, bringing a fresh capacitor into contact. "All right..." he chuckled. He'd use the lambda driver's repulsor field once more time. This time, it would finish the job.

"What in the world..." Sousuke whispered, staring at the damage report. Other than the head injury from earlier, his machine was practically unscathed.

What was going on here?

He heard the sound of a mechanical process taking place in the Arbalest's back—the rotation of a cylinder?—followed by a sharp snap of contact being made. "What did you do?" he asked the AI. "What just activated?"

Rather than answering his question, the AI merely said: 《Lambda driver initialization complete.》

"What? What are you talking about?"

《Unable to respond. Please resume battle.》

"Answer me, Al."

《Unable to respond.》

Though his screen, Sousuke saw Gauron's AS unsheathe its knife-like monomolecular cutter.

Kurz was stunned. "He's alive. How in the world..."

Was Sousuke safe? How could this be, when his own machine had been torn to pieces?

"I see..." Kaname whispered sluggishly, right hand pressed to her temple. "I... I think I... understand."

"Kaname?" Kurz asked. "Hey, you okay?"

She slumped against a tree trunk and coughed, then spoke again, gaze fixed on the distant AS. "Feel sick. TAROS... He... He doesn't know how to use it. P-P-Powerful defensive i-instinct, enough to of-off-offse... offset? The opponent's..." Kaname's shoulders heaved; her voice died to a mumble. It looked similar to her symptoms from earlier. Her eyes had lost the glint of sanity.

"Cut it out, Kaname," Kurz begged her. "Come back to reality."

"I... can't. I want... to give... a hint..."

"A hint? What are you—"

"You're always... saving me. This time... a hint..."

At last, Kurz understood: Kaname knew something, some valuable information that would help Sousuke win. Was she fighting some kind of internal battle, to wrench it out from the back of her mind?

“A-Artif-ficial n-no... s-s-s... interfere-rence w-w... TAR... ROS... No... N-No... Can’t...” She breathed out the words, mixed with sobs and moans. There was something almost carnal about it, as she arched her back and clutched her disheveled hair.

The mad display sent a chill up Kurz’s spine. “Hey!!”

Kaname spoke again, but not to him. “You won’t... beat me!!” she cried, then rushed for a tree and hit her head hard against the trunk. The recoil sent her pitching back; she did an end-over-end tumble. Curled into fetal position, she continued her ranting, incomprehensible, her voice breaking with tears.

“K-Kaname!” Kurz was starting to feel crazy, too. *What am I doing here?* he wondered. *I’m a soldier, not a mental health worker! What am I supposed to do about this?!*

“Ahh... ahh... mm... nngh?” While Kurz lay there at wits’ end, Kaname sat up again. She looked like she wanted to say something, but her tongue was too heavy to move. With a bloodcurdling look in her eyes, she took in a deep breath, and said, “Kur... Kurz-kun. Give... me... the transmitter!” Her manner had done a 180, and now her tone was urgent.

“Okay, but what—”

“I need to tell him!”

“Tell him what?!”

“Just do it!”

Sousuke kept asking, but the Arbalest’s AI wouldn’t answer. He didn’t have time to press the issue further; the enemy was coming. Having dropped his shotcannon in the earlier shockwave, Sousuke drew his monomolecular cutter from the machine’s underarm holster. *But if he hits me with that thing again...* The machine might be fine, but he wouldn’t. The mere thought of it put him in a full-body sweat.

Just then, a new voice intervened over a short-range communicator. “Sagara-kun, can you hear me?!”

“Chidori?” he asked, bewildered.

“Listen to me! Your opponent’s machine has a special device in it! It converts the pilot’s offensive instincts into physical force! And this i... is the important par... part...”

She seemed to be fighting for every word. Was she hurt? Was she all right? “Chido—” he began.

“L... Listen to... me!” she demanded. “N... Now... I don’t know why, but your AS also has one... a lambda driver! That’s why you’re okay!”

He had the same device? In the Arbalest?

Gauron’s AS had closed to a few dozen meters away.

“You were thinking about protecting yourself earlier, right? It reacted to that,” Kaname said quickly. “Whatever you imagine, it puts into practice!”

“Whatever I imagine?” Sousuke argued. “There’s no weapon that can—”

Gauron’s AS was in front of the Arbalest now, its red monoeye staring into his soul. With no prior warning, the air around them warped. A powerful wind kicked up, sending trees, grass, mud, and rocks flying. It was that shockwave from before—Sousuke was helpless. In the blink of an eye, the Arbalest was at its mercy.

“Whoa!” Sousuke cried out. The machine pitched back. But this time, he was prepared. The Arbalest merely stepped back a few paces and righted itself immediately. “Was that...?!” he called in shock.

“Yes,” Kaname confirmed. “He tried to tear you to pieces just now, but he couldn’t. You can fight back, too! Wish hard!”

“Wish?” Sousuke asked. “For what?”

“To beat your opponent! Focus all your spirit in an instant! Pretend it’s a kamehameha!”

“A kamehawhat?”

《Proximity alert!》

The silver AS bridged the gap between them, thrusting with its knife. The Arbalest just barely managed to dodge. Laughter poured from Gauron's machine. "I see! That explains it!" he cackled as he sliced, launching into a dizzying display of melee proficiency. "Of course you'd have one! You've been harboring a Whispered! Right?!"

"What are you—" Sousuke started to ask.

"Oh, and did you know what my specialty happens to be? That's right, it's knives!" Gauron stabbed, swept, sliced, and thrust. He baited Sousuke for strikes and then dodged them. Each time the monomolecular cutter grazed his armor, it let out a peal of white light. "Well, what's the matter? No time for delay!"

Gauron's skills were incredible. A typical AS operator wouldn't last three seconds against an assault like this, and with half of his main sensors destroyed, Sousuke was gradually getting overwhelmed.

"Do you remember, Kashim? I diced up everyone in the village, too! Just like this!" Gauron's knife sliced through the Arbalest's chest armor.

"What are you doing? Channel your spirit!" Kaname screamed over the radio.

"I'm trying!" Sousuke yelled back. "The force field won't activate!"

"Here's how you use it!" Gauron screamed, and hit Sousuke with another shockwave.

The Arbalest tumbled back over the ground. Sousuke's vision went dark; he saw stars in his mind. But he got up immediately, readying himself for the continuing assault.

More sadistic laughter rang out. Sousuke's enemy seemed to enjoy his struggle. "Isn't this a stupid fight?" he cackled. "Two grown men trying to kill each other in toys they barely know how to use! Right?!"

Sousuke saw the shotcannon he'd dropped before lying on the ground about three meters away. He ran his machine low to the ground and scooped it up.

"Oh? And what will you do with that?" Gauron taunted. "Shoot me?"

“Ngh...”

“You realize it’s futile, don’t you? *And* you barely know how to use that device...”

He was right. Even if Sousuke fired the shotcannon, the enemy would use its force fields to deflect the shells. Gauron seemed to know a little how the system worked, and he had some practice with using it. But Sousuke... Even if he managed to avoid his enemies’ attacks, he had no way to fight back.

The silver AS gave its knife a skillful twirl as it strode slowly toward the Arbalest. Gauron wouldn’t pull his punch this time; he’d stab right into the cockpit and kill him.

“Listen, Sagara-kun. It’s all about a moment’s focus!” Kaname shouted desperately. “Breathe in slowly, then let it out all at once. In that moment, imagine pouring your will into the shot!”

“But...” He couldn’t do it. He just didn’t understand what she was saying.

“Okay, let’s try this,” she said. “You lose: I’m captured, stripped naked, poked and prodded, then killed. Imagine that sight!”

“What?”

“Just imagine it!”

Sousuke went silent. He didn’t have to try for long for the horrific image to come to him.

“You don’t like that, right?”

“Yeah.”

“It makes you mad?”

“It does...”

“That’s what he’s trying to make happen, okay? So, are you going to let him do it?!”

A simmering anger began to displace the desperation that had been fueling him moments ago. “I’m not.”

“Of course not! Now, point your gun at him!”

Sousuke aimed the shotcannon at his enemy. He stopped telling himself it was futile. He stopped caring about where this was leading, or about how she knew what she knew. *She trusted me. This time, I'll trust her.*

"A last-ditch effort? How disappointing... Ah, well. Time to die." Gauron swung back his knife and charged straight for the Arbalest. It seemed he was ready to finish things at last.

"Don't worry. Close your eyes," Kaname said, her voice perfectly calm. "Imagine punching him with your bare fist."

To close one's eyes before the enemy was the height of recklessness, yet Sousuke did as she said. His machine's AI continued to blare proximity alerts, but he blocked them out. He was visualizing himself punching that AS.

"Now, open your eyes..."

He saw the image on the screen. The raging enemy machine entering close range; his shotcannon pointed at it.

"Die!" Gauron screamed ferociously.

Meanwhile, Kaname spoke quietly, "Breathe in..."

Sousuke took a deep breath.

"Imagine it..."

He imagined his will filling the shell.

"Now!!"

"Hgn!" The shot fired off at close range. Gauron's machine launched its shockwave to block it, but at the same time, the Arbalest's mysterious device activated, giving form to Sousuke's own image.

What happened next, Sousuke wasn't exactly sure. Two somethings collided, warped the air around them, twisted, and shrieked. Gravity seemed to lose all meaning as he felt himself pulled one way and then the other. And then, at last, the shotcannon's blast collided with the silver AS.

"What..."

The eight-splinter HESH blasted Gauron's AS back, tearing off its arms. It

exploded before it could even hit the ground.

The force of the blast sent the Arbalest tumbling head-over-heels before stopping on its back. Sousuke heard metal shards clink against his armor; he held silent, for a few moments, then sat his machine up amidst the rain and fire and wind.

Gauron's AS was in ruins. Its arms and head were gone, and most of the chest was blown off. What had moments before been a giant roaring with savage life was now a twisted heap of scrap. Gauron must have died instantly.

"Sagara-kun," Kaname cried out. "Are you all right?!"

"Affirmative," he managed after a moment. Sousuke turned his back on the wreckage and ran back to where the others were waiting. "I'm on my way. We're getting out of here."

They'd have to hurry. He'd lost close to five minutes on that battle.

Sousuke returned to where Kaname and Kurz were and knelt his machine down. "Are you feeling all right, Chidori?"

"Yeah... better than before. I forgot... almost everything I said, though..."

She must have pushed herself so hard to give him that advice. If not for her strength, what would have become of him? He could hear rotors pounding from the eastern sky: helicopters, to reinforce the pursuer squad.

"Let's go," he said shortly. "We don't have time." He snapped the shotcannon to the Arbalest's back, freeing up its hands, then picked up Kurz and Kaname and started running. 20 kilometers in ten minutes—With a machine like this, he could make it in time. The Arbalest crossed the slope in an instant, one person in each hand. Kicking up gravel, smashing through low trees, it burst out onto the open farmland.

"Ngh..." A groan leaked from Kurz's throat. The pain must have been agonizing.

Sousuke tried to be gentle, keeping his speed at just about 120 kilometers per hour. But there was no way to make them completely comfortable—an AS was

more or less the world's worst vehicle for transporting the injured.

Crushing fertile rice paddies beneath its feet, the Arbalest continued west. Sousuke ran into armored cars here and there, but he ignored them all; even if they fired, he could just outrun them.

But as they got within a few kilometers of the shore... 《Enemy helicopter approaching. Relative bearing: 7 o'clock. Distance: Eight,》 the AI warned. His rear alarm sensors displayed a heat source: an attack helicopter was after him. "Here we go!" he yelled.

《Rocket warning! Two, one...》

Emergency maneuvers. Sousuke swung his machine hard to the right, dodging the air-to-surface rocket launched at him. Kurz let out a scream, but it was swallowed by the explosion.

《Enemy helicopter approaching at matching speed: 130. Necessity of counterattack: High.》

"I know, but... dammit..."

The helicopter launched another rocket at him. He managed to dodge this one, barely, but avoidance would become impossible if it came any closer.

*What now?* he wondered. With his machine moving at a mere 120 kilometers per hour, the helicopter would catch up shortly. He couldn't use his shotcannon; his machine's hands were full. In his right hand was Kaname, in his left hand, Kurz. He didn't have time to set them down, and the helicopter was right on his tail. What now?!

"Kaname!" he said urgently.

"Wh-What?"

"Sorry!"

The Arbalest tossed Kaname into the air, mid-run. Kaname's mouth opened wordlessly.

Now Sousuke's right hand was free. He drew his gun, whipped around, and fired two shots. Then he cast the gun aside, turned forward again, and charged with all his might.

Kaname's silence broke into a prolonged scream as she hit the peak of her arc and began to plummet. Pitching his machine forward, Sousuke managed to catch her. He nearly toppled completely, but he strained and managed to maintain control. At almost the same instant, the now-trashed attack helicopter plunged into the field and exploded.

Sousuke, meanwhile, just kept running. "Kaname?!" he called. There was no response.

"Mm..." She seemed to have lost consciousness, but at least she was breathing. He'd offer treatment and apologies later; for now, he just had to move. They had only one minute left.

At last, the shore came into sight. "There it is!" he breathed. The sea beneath the ink-black sky was darker than the night itself. To their right was a beach. To their left, a cape. Sousuke steered his machine toward the latter.

《Two AS sighted. Relative bearing: 11 o'clock. Distance: Six.》

There were two Savages in front of him, blocking his way to the cape. They must have sent them to guard the shore; there was an enemy force coming from the beach side as well. Four machines, five—no, more. He was surrounded.

These were ASes, too; they were more difficult opponents than the attack helicopter from before, and on top of that, he had no way of fighting them. He couldn't count on that strange force field, either. He muttered a curse.

The enemy machines just ahead were pointing their rifles at him. Just then—

"Uruz-7, keep running," a woman's voice said over his radio.

"M—" Before he could finish her name, the two machines ahead of him took hits and collapsed.

The shots had come from the sea; he turned. In the gaps between waves 300 meters away, he could make out an AS holding a massive rifle. It was Mao's M9, kneeling on the ocean's surface. No, it was on a boat—The Tuatha de Danaan was surfacing. Cutting through the pitch black sea, parallel to the coastline, the massive vessel revealed its back.

“Hey, Sousuke?” Mao called. “We only get one chance at this. Jump right off the cape!” The M9 beckoned him from the back of the enormous submarine.

The Arbalest ran, moving from sand to rocky ground as the two enemy AS squads pursued from behind. Sousuke climbed up the rocky slope. The cape was shaped like a ski jumper’s hill.

He dashed over rocks and grass, as his pursuers fired from behind. A pine tree to his right exploded into splinters. Still, he picked up speed. He couldn’t turn back.

He quickly came to the tip of the cape. Just beyond was the cliff and the sea. Casting off all hesitation, holding his two charges carefully in either hand... He jumped.

The ground below disappeared. Sousuke felt weightless. There were only dark waves below him now.

The de Danaan drew nearer. Mao’s AS spread its arms and...

“Okay!” It caught the Arbalest neatly.

“Uruz-7 retrieved! Admission via hatch four... complete!” Mao’s report echoed through the control room.

“Initiate closure of hatch four. Two seconds remain. Closure complete,” the officer in charge reported. The front screen displayed the words, “Pressure Secured.”

Teletha Testarossa nodded. “Hard to starboard, heading 2-0-5, flank speed. Be careful not to ground us.”

“Aye aye, ma’am. Hard to starboard, heading 2-0-5, flank speed,” the navigator repeated. The submarine banked right as enemy shells roiled the sea around it. Each wave that slammed into them sent a vibration through the hull.

The speed display on the screen quickly rose over 50 knots—close to 92 kilometers per hour. Even the fastest submarines usually topped out at 40 knots, yet the de Danaan broke that easily. The speed display continued to rise.

“Current speed, 65 knots,” the navigator said. 120 kilometers per hour. It was

this incredible propulsion system that had brought the de Danaan back so quickly from distant waters. The Tuatha de Danaan pulled away from the shore. “Taking sub to depth 50. Flooding main ballast tank. Dive angle, five degrees. Maintain current speed.”

“Aye. Initiating dive.” The helm officer executed the orders given. Tessa and her XO, Mardukas, monitored the submarine’s dive process closely.

“We’ve never worked it so hard before,” Mardukas muttered.

“The superconductive propulsion system?” Tessa asked.

He nodded. “Yes. It’s tougher than I expected. It seemed so delicate when we were first testing it...”

“It surprised me as well. Which feels strange to say, as the one who designed it...” Tessa smiled and turned back to the screen. The task of breaking through the patrol boats remained.

Kaname and Kurz were still asleep in the sickbay, but after a quick patch-up, Sousuke returned to the hangar. It was quiet there; with the boat running on silent, not even the maintenance crew were present.

He was wrapped in bandages as he looked up at the kneeling ARX-7 Arbalest. Its once-pristine white armor was covered in mud and grass stains. Its plating was scarred, with the right upper half of the head missing. In this light, it looked like a normal AS—your run-of-the-mill test weapon based on the M9 Gernsback. But what in the world...

“I see you’ve been through hell.” Sousuke turned toward the voice and saw Major Kalinin walking up to him. “What happened to Gauron?” the major asked.

“He’s dead,” Sousuke answered. “This time, I’m sure of it.”

“I see. I wish I could have been there to see it,” Kalinin said with rare sincerity. “You look like there’s something else on your mind.”

“There is, sir. Just what is the lambda driver?”

It was a blunt question, but one Kalinin seemed to be expecting. “Gauron

really did have one, then?”

“He did. And this AS does, too... Doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” Kalinin confirmed. “When I heard about the way Weber’s M9 was destroyed, I had an uneasy feeling about it... That’s why we sent the Arbalest: an AS equipped with that device can only be opposed by another like-equipped AS.”

That explained why they’d sent such a valuable test-type unmanned into hostile enemy territory. But... “You haven’t answered my first question,” Sousuke said. “What is the lambda driver?”

“You don’t need to know that,” Kalinin replied. “Not yet, anyway.”

“Major. I know how basic physics works. I’ve never heard of a device producing power like that.”

“Of course not. Its conception is beyond anyone in this world.”

Sousuke was confused. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure how this comes off to your generation, but...” The major’s voice was heavy. “The weapons technology we currently employ is unnatural. It went off the rails around the time ASes came on the scene. The lambda driver is one extreme example, but the ECS, this vessel’s propulsion system, its computers and sensors... they’re all too advanced. It’s all wrong. Robot weapons, once the purview of science fiction, now dominate the battlefield. Haven’t you ever found it unnatural?”

It was a surprise to hear those words from Kalinin, a man who regularly commanded and coordinated missions with those very weapons. “I never thought about it... until today,” Sousuke admitted.

“I’ve harbored these doubts for a long time, myself. I’m not the only one who feels that way, either... Many people feel these things should not exist,” Kalinin told him. “Yet, they do. I don’t know who came up with them, but the theory and the technology exist, and society has accepted them.”

Sousuke remained silent.

“But I’ll say it again, for good measure: these things shouldn’t exist.” The

major indicated the Arbalest with his gaze; what seemed minutes ago like a trustworthy ally was suddenly grotesque to Sousuke's eyes. "The technology that produces ASes and other modern weapons—black technology—who came up with it?" Kalinin continued. "More importantly, where did it come from? You have an idea now, don't you?"

"People like Chidori, sir?" Sousuke hazarded a guess. "The ones they call 'Whispered'?"

"You didn't hear that from me, but keep it in mind." Kalinin walked up to the Arbalest and appraised the battle damage. "As for Chidori, we'll likely leak a false report through our intelligence department."

"A false report?"

"We'll say that Gauron's men investigated her and determined that she wasn't a Whispered," Kalinin told him. "If someone happens to try to abduct her anyway, they'll reap the consequences: we'll crush their hideouts and retrieve her as many times as it takes."

Things were going to go back to normal for her. Sousuke was glad, but at the same time, he felt a powerful sense of loss. He'd have his next mission coming up; there was no place left for him in Kaname's life. That school, that town, those people... all those things he'd found so bewildering were receding further and further by the moment.

"However," Kalinin added, interrupting his thoughts, "given this latest incident, I think insurance will be necessary."

"Huh?"

"You did well today. Get some rest." Putting an end to the questioning, the major left.

# Epilogue

The ground approached. The steel hand was all around her. And then—

*Huh?* The next thing she knew, Kaname found herself with her face buried in a pillow. There was an IV drip stand in front of her. Beyond it was a window. It looked out on cherry trees, soaked by falling rain. She was in a hospital room.

“Oh, hey, you’re awake.” A young nurse was sitting next to her bedside. She was beautiful, yet radiated a sense of willfulness.

“Where am I?” Kaname asked.

“A hospital in Tokyo. It’s 5:35 PM on May 1st. You’ve been sleeping for two and a half days,” the nurse answered. “An ‘ambulance of unknown origin’ brought you here yesterday—You had some bruises and sprains, but no broken bones. If they only drugged you that once, then—”

“Um, who are you?” Kaname interrupted.

“Heh... The nurse act wasn’t convincing, huh? These uniforms make me feel so stiff... You know, Sousuke could’ve been more careful and spared me all this...”



“Sousuke? You know Sagara-kun?”

“Sort of,” she shrugged. “Anyway, Kaname. Now that you’re awake, here’s a word of advice: those bad guys at the airfield drugged you. You lost consciousness, and when you woke up, you were in the hospital here. You don’t remember anything that happened in between. Forget Sousuke, forget Kurz, forget that white AS. All of it.”

“You mean... you want me to keep Mithril a secret?” Kaname asked.

“Well, it’s up to you. I think the Japanese military knows our name, at least. But if the police catch wind of us or what happened to you, they’ll want to hold on to you for a while... The police will probably be by tomorrow to question you, so between now and then, keep pushing the I-don’t-remember line.” The nurse stood up. “And, one more thing; I want to thank you.”

“Thank me?”

“Yes, Chidori Kaname-san. You saved two of my men. They owe their lives to you.” She held out her hand for a handshake.

Kaname felt flustered by the sudden attention. “I d-didn’t do anything...”

“Actually, Kurz told me everything. I know that if you hadn’t been there, neither he nor Sousuke would have made it back alive. I think you might be the strongest out of all of us.”

“N-No way. You’re making me blush...” Kaname laughed awkwardly, then tentatively took her hand. The nurse had a powerful grip, despite her delicate, tapered fingers.

“Well, I should get going.”

“Um...”

“Yes?”

“What’s going to happen to... Sagara-kun?”

“Sousuke?” The nurse answered. “He’s already been assigned to his next mission.”

“Um... did he leave a message?”

“For you? Hmm... I don’t think so.”

“Oh...”

“Well, goodbye.” The woman from Mithril left the room.

Outside, the rain continued.

*Is Sousuke on another mission right now?* Kaname wondered. *Is he off somewhere, trembling in this rain? He could be in danger. He could be in pain. And then some day, like a stray dog, he might...*

“He could have at least left a goodbye...” she muttered. She found that the thought caused her eyes to fill with tears, which she wiped at with her sheet, then buried her face back in the pillow.

About five minutes later, the real doctor and nurse arrived. They gave Kaname a clean bill of health and permission to check out in a day or two. They also told her that her father had stayed in her hospital room until just after noon, but had then had to return to New York for work.

They left, and five minutes later, her friends from Jindai High School began flooding into the room. Ten boys and girls from class, five from the softball team, four from the student council, the principal and the vice principal, Ms. Kagurazaka and...

“Kana-chan!” Kyoko hugged her as tightly as she could. Her other friends crowded around, too, expressing joy at her safe return and peppering her with questions.

“We really were worried, you know?”

“The transport plane let us off at an airport in Fukuoka...”

“The rescue squad disappeared after that. They said they were UN or something!”

“It all smells like a conspiracy to me...”

“Also! Also! Hey! None of us knew where you were or who to ask...”

“Ah, I’m sorry, Chidori-san! I should have let them take me instead! I feel like a failure as a teacher!”

“Ugh... Kana-chaaaaaan!”

They jostled her mercilessly, but this was how Kaname knew she was loved. She was glad to be back—Truly.

“H-Hey... I’m still recovering, you know! Hey!” Kaname shouted, bearing their weight.

“That’s right. They’re only mild contusions, but you should still treat her gently,” one of the visitors said.

Kaname nodded. “Exactly! Be nice to me! Of course, they said I can go home tomorrow...”

“That’s good. You should be grateful to that rescue squad.”

“Yeah, though it stinks that the field trip was a bust...”

“But you’re alive. That’s what matters.”

“Yes, yes, the important thing is—huh?” Kaname turned to the visitor in realization. Behind Ms. Kagurazaka (who was welling up with tears) stood a male student. His mouth was drawn into a tight, sullen frown. He had unstyled hair and— “S-Sagara-kun?!”

Confused by her reaction, they all turned to look at Sagara Sousuke.

“What is it, Chidori?”

“What... What... are you doing here?!”

“How rude. I came to see you. You see? I even brought a gift.” He walked up to Kaname with a pack of spicy pollock roe from Hakata.

“What in the world are you—”

“I’m insurance,” Sousuke whispered.

“Insurance?”

“Yes. For a while, at least.”

“How dare you...” She couldn’t bring herself to say, “Thank you” or, “I’m sorry for the trouble” or, “I’m so glad to see you.” His bluntness just made her so angry. But... there was something pleasant about the anger. Kaname took in a

deep breath, and... “Hey, Sousuke! There’s a whole lot I want to say to you! How dare you—” As she prepared to lay into him, Sousuke looked around the room, flustered.

The rain outside looked like it would clear up that night.

**The End**

# Afterword

A story set in the modern day... but a very strange modern day. Elite soldier Sagara Sousuke, a member of the world's most high-tech mercenary team, is given a new mission: infiltrate a Japanese high school and protect a girl. But Sergeant Sagara, having spent all his life on the battlefield, doesn't know how to get along in peaceful Japan. On top of that, he's dealing with a teenage girl! Shenanigans ensue, and the girl ends up hating him... That's the story of *Full Metal Panic!*

What genre would this story fall into? Hmm, that's a tough one. It's a bit of a hodgepodge; a mulligan stew. It's not quite a high school love comedy. Pegging it as a robot story seems a bit off, and it's not serious enough to be a military thriller. If I had to choose, I'd say it's an action-adventure. Just turn your brain off and enjoy it like you would an action B-movie.

By the way, as of August '98 we have a series of short stories about *FMP* running in *Dragon Magazine*. They're set after this book, and consist of simpler comedic school stories. It's more about Sousuke being in full clueless mode, and Kaname's struggles to deal with him. Apparently they're doing well in the *DM* reader surveys, so I recommend them highly if you're reading this right now.

On the other hand, those who know the setting from the short stories might be surprised by the more hardcore developments in the long-form piece. If you're thinking "Wow, Sousuke's not just some fool, he's really amazing!" then I've done my job.

By the way, notes on a few things...

One: No ill will was intended toward a certain country portrayed in this story. It's just, there are only so many dictatorships set within a domestic jet's flight range. Please don't abduct me, members of that country. At the same time, readers, if I go missing or I'm found dead, or someone sets fire to Fujimi Shobo, you can assume they're the ones behind it.

Two: For dramatic purposes, I intentionally fictionalized elements of real-

world weapons, machines, organizations, and terrain. Just think of it as the real-world weapons being altered using the fundamental technologies used in ASes. Please don't take the specs and such too seriously.

Three: For dramatic purposes, I intentionally fictionalized elements of real teenage girls' psychology and personal lives. Just think of it as the teenage girls being altered using the fundamental technologies of love comedies. Please don't take it too seriously.

Now, I have a lot of awful things planned for Sousuke & Co in the future. And I'm sure they'll make it out by the skin of their teeth each time. They're tough and stubborn, after all. I hope you'll continue to enjoy the adventures of Sousuke and Kaname.

I think I'll cut my rambling comments short here, and offer up some words of appreciation.

To the editor of *Dragon Magazine*, Takumi Suganuma, who offered funky words of advice and soulful assistance in crafting this story. To the writer Kazuma Shinjo who offered groovy advice and powerful suggestions. To the manga artist Tomoyuki Sano, who offered cool images and dope ideas. To Kato, Koyama, Watanabe, and Ensign Y.A., who offered valuable materials. And to my co-conspirators at the Chuo University Science Fiction Society who inspired me to choose this line of work.

I also like to offer my absolute gratitude to Takahara Masaki. I didn't think you'd **** to this degree. Thank you so much. Some day I'll ****.

Also, to Shikidouji for taking time out of a busy schedule to put so much effort into beautiful illustrations. To Kumiko Sato, who gave my work such a wonderful, thorough edit. And to the little girl Kathy. If you hadn't spilled cocoa milk on my rough draft, things might have turned out differently (just kidding).

Well, goodbye. I hope you'll join us next time for more of Sousuke's personal hell.

Shouji Gatou, August 1998

Addendum: This year, for the first time in a while, Hourai Gakuen World is

reviving as a net game. In the case of this net game, you can easily join via post even if you don’t have a computer. If you’re curious, write to postal code 168-0072

3-13-20 M1, Takaido-Higashi Suginami Ward, Tokyo

Elsewhere “I saw Gatou’s advertisement.”

Send an envelope with your name and address to that location with an 80 yen stamp.

You will receive more detailed documents in two days.

Also, this address has nothing to do with Fujimi Shobo editorial, so please send other requests to Elsewhere.

*Notice The announcement on the right was during the first and second printings. Post-third printing, the Hourai Gakuen net game submissions are no longer being conducted. But Elsewhere itself is still active, so if you’re curious, please send requests to the same address.


RX-7




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Full Metal Panic! Volume 1

by Shouji Gatou

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis Edited by Dana Allen

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