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2
FULL
METAL
PANIC!
RAMPAGING ONE NIGHT STAND


"You idiot! I hate you so much!" Kaname's enraged blow hit Sousuke right in the back of the head.
FULL METAL PANIC!
RAMPAGING ONE NIGHT STAND


The arm slave attacked! The ceiling of the facility came crashing down! Tessa could feel herself falling.

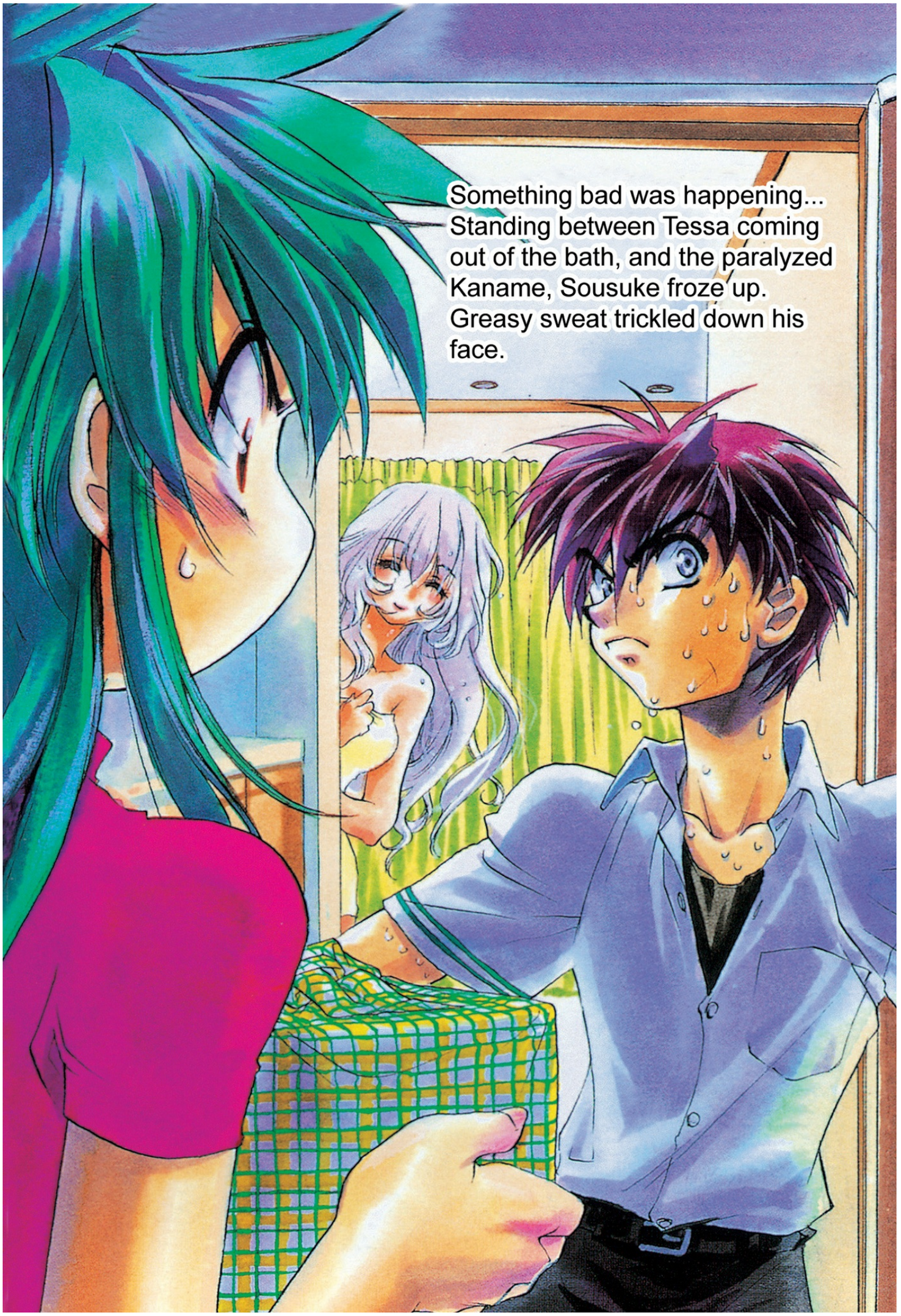

Something bad was happening... Standing between Tessa coming out of the bath, and the paralyzed Kaname, Sousuke froze up. Greasy sweat trickled down his face.

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Prologue

At lunchtime, the school roof served as a sort of student sanctuary; a place where they could act outside their teachers' notice. The rainy season was in full swing, but this particular day happened to be clear, with a blue sky and bright sunlight that seemed to bleach the roof white.

Two people stood at one corner of the roof. One was a girl with short hair; her back was pressed against the fence, her gaze lowered, expression troubled. The other was a boy with long hair; he had the girl pinned between the fence and himself, a lit cigarette in his right hand.

"Come on, Noriko, tell me. You don't like me, is that it?" the long-haired boy asked.

The girl, Noriko, looked up at him pleadingly. "O-Of course not... You know I... I love you, Mikio..."

"So what's the deal?" he demanded to know. "Why won't you go past first base? We've been dating for two months now."

"Well, I'm just... scared," the girl stammered out in reply.

Her boyfriend, Mikio, rolled his eyes and exhaled a jet of cigarette smoke. "What is this, middle school? C'mon, we should learn more about each other."

"We can learn... other things about each other..."

"That's not enough. I want to learn more about—"

Blam! His words were cut off by a sudden gunshot. Stunned, Mikio and Noriko turned to find its origin and saw the water tower, a gray structure jutting out against the blue of the sky. They peered at it curiously.

At the lip of the tower they could see a boy, lying on his stomach, holding a rifle. He had a sullen expression, which was punctuated by a tight frown; his gun was pointed at a corner of the schoolyard. Beside him were various cases of munitions and explosives, and things that looked like small green aluminum

cans.

It was Sagara Sousuke from class 2-4. They knew him as a transfer student, recently repatriated after growing up in war-torn regions overseas... and also as a war-obsessed fool who stuck out like a sore thumb in a peaceful country like Japan.

He was looking through binoculars, probably at the target he'd shot moments ago. He hummed thoughtfully, sat up, wrote something on a clipboard, then loaded a new round into the rifle. He took aim at the corner of the yard once again, then fired. Another gunshot rang out, and Sousuke again checked the results with his binoculars. This time, he shook his head as if unsatisfied, and wrote something new on the clipboard.

It was only then that he glanced over at Mikio and Noriko, as if noticing them for the first time. "Don't mind me. Continue," he said as he loaded another round into the chamber. He seemed to have no interest in them whatsoever.

There was another moment of silence. Then, awkwardly, they resumed their conversation.

"L-Look... I just think it's time already," Mikio insisted. "Are we boyfriend and girlfriend or not?"

"Well... we are, but..."

Blam!!

"I really love you, Noriko."

"I'm glad, but Mikio..."

Blam!

"Isn't it natural for a guy to want to get closer to the girl he loves?"

"It is, but..."

"Really? Then let's do it. Tonight—"

Blam!

"Tonight, my parents are—"

Blam! Blam!

“Tonight—”

Blam! Blablablablam!

“Ah, screw it!” Too exasperated to continue, Mikio mussed up his hair and ran at the water tower. He took a drag off his cigarette, glared up at Sousuke, and shouted, “Hey, you!”

“What?” Sousuke asked distractedly.

“Do you mind?!” Mikio demanded. “Pack that crap up and take it somewhere else!”

Sousuke looked down at him, brow knitted, and seemed to think for a minute. “I can’t do that,” he concluded. “I need an appropriate distance for my sighting shots.”

“What the hell are you talking about?!”

“It’s approximately 300 yards from the roof to the corner of the schoolyard. I have a rifle that I recently purchased, whose accuracy I’m testing with a variety of cartridges. It’s a curious firearm; for some reason, it seems most compatible with rounds made in Egypt, so I decided to test its performance with my own propellant ratios—”

Sousuke’s explanation was thorough, considered, and completely over Mikio’s head. But before he could finish—

“Sousuke!!” The door under the water tower banged open, and a girl came flying out onto the roof.

“Chidori,” he acknowledged. This was Chidori Kaname, vice president of their student council. She was dressed a white and blue uniform, and had long black hair accented with a red ribbon.

She fixed her eyes on Sousuke and said, “I knew it would be you! People are studying for the big test in there! Who can concentrate with all that blam, blam, blam?!”

“It’s been raining so much lately... I wanted to do my sighting shots while I had a clear day,” he explained. “In just ten shots, I’ll be done with the Group A powder mixes. If you’d just let me—”

“Like hell!” she exploded. “Knock it off, *now*!”

“But—”

“I said knock it off, you...!” Kaname yanked off her slipper and chucked it at Sousuke’s head.

“Ah...” Sousuke dodged, but the slipper bounced off his shoulder and hit one of the green cans at his feet. The lidless can toppled off the tower, scattering its contents... in the direction of Mikio, holding a cigarette in his mouth, below.

The cigarette was lit. The label on the falling can read: “black powder.” The two watched it fall, helpless to intervene.

Vwoosh! Mikio had just dropped his cigarette and turned around when the dull explosion occurred behind him. Flames and smoke roared up, and Mikio was blown onto his face.

“What the...” Mikio turned, then suddenly screamed. He started running all around the roof with his back ablaze, like the famous scene from *The Farmer and the Badger*. “Help!” he cried out. “Mommy!”

“Mikio!” the girl shrieked.

Mikio was now on the ground, rolling back and forth. Kaname ran up to him with a fire extinguisher. “Clear the way!” she yelled. She pulled the handle, releasing a spray of white powder that put out the fire immediately. Once the smoke had cleared, Mikio could be seen lying face-down on the floor, twitching.

Kaname let out a sigh of relief (with a little cough mixed in), and then wiped the sweat from her brow.

Sousuke crammed his things into his backpack, touched down lightly on the roof, then walked up to the collapsed Mikio. “It was extinguished promptly,” he said reassuringly. “You should get off with light burns.”

“I know this happens all the time, and he and I are partly to blame in this case, but...” Kaname prefaced quietly before slamming the empty fire extinguisher into the back of Sousuke’s head. *Klonk!*

“That was extremely painful,” Sousuke observed.

“Shut up!” she fumed. “Don’t bring explosives onto school grounds!”

“The rules don’t forbid it.”

“You want another smack?!”

Kaname brandished the fire extinguisher. Sousuke backed up slowly. They stared each other down like a cobra and a mongoose. It seemed like violence could break out at any minute, when...

Bi-beep. Bi-beep. Bi-beep. An electronic trill came from Sousuke’s chest. He held up a hand as if to say, “time out,” and pulled a small mobile phone from his breast pocket.

“Uruz-7 here,” he whispered. “Understood. RV at point echo at 1325. Roger that. I’m on my way.” With his conversation finished, Sousuke shouldered his bag and ran at top speed toward the entrance to the roof.

“Where are you going?” Kaname demanded.

“Something came up,” he told her. “Stay close to home.”

“Wait! You—” But Sousuke ignored her and ran out the door. “Oh come on, Sousuke!” she complained. “Did you forget the promise we made last night? Darn it...”

Kaname stared at the closed door for a while, then put her hands on her hips and let out a sigh. She turned back to the boy on the floor and his girlfriend, who was on the verge of tears.

“So, can... I help you to the nurse’s office?” she offered, weakly.

1: Foreign Customs

24 June, 1401 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

New Tokyo International Airport, Narita, Chiba Prefecture

"Where am I?" he murmured to himself. He was walking, dragging his spinner suitcase behind him, as part of a line of people entering the country. Everything seemed blurry—the corridor, the people, the light through the windows.

I'm at customs, in an airport. That's right... I'm returning to this country after a year and a half away. I received extensive training and conditioning, and I came back to do something...

The next question occurred to him: "Do something? But what?"

Yes... I remember. I came here to operate that thing. That devil machine that no one else can tame... That which, once started, can never be stopped. I will spread destruction and terror... Death upon death, ruin upon ruin. And as for that city I loathe so much... I...

"But who am I?" His irritation grew worse. A sudden swelling of hatred seized at his throat.

I have a name... Kugayama Takuma. That's right. I'm fifteen years old, just returning from a study abroad in New Zealand. That's the story, anyway. But my real name is Tatekawa Takuma. Even within A21, I'm special.

"Yeah..."

I feel sick. I'm so angry. Should I have taken my medicine after all? No, I'm all right... I can bear it in a while longer...

A customs agent approached—No, he was the one approaching the agent.

A middle-aged man, just past age 40. The tie of his uniform is crooked... four degrees askew. I don't like it. Fix it. Hurry up and fix it, you old...! Fighting back

the urge to reach for the man's neck, he handed over his passport with a guileless smile. Without any sign of suspicion—*the great fool!*—the official took the passport from him and glanced through it.

"Homestay?" the man asked.

"No, a short study abroad," Takuma responded calmly, as innocent as could be.

"Wow," the official said admiringly, "by yourself?"

"Yes." *Of course by myself! Fix your damned tie!*

"Your parents weren't worried?" the official inquired.

"Not really. They trust me," Takuma said with a bright smile. All the while, he was thinking, *I want to hurt someone. To tear them to pieces. It would feel so good. Big Sister would say I was good, then, too...*

Oh? Maybe not... What would *Big Sister think?* he wondered. *Big Sister. Dear Big Sister. She's back here already, isn't she? Making preparations for me... just for me... to pilot that devil. I'll be able to see her soon. Big Sister...*

The official stamped his passport. He didn't even try to check his bags. "—can go," the man was saying.

"What?"

"You can go, I said."

"What... What about your tie?" *Fix it. It annoys me. What's wrong with you? You dullard. Imbecile. Trash. Just die.*

"Er, what are you talking about?" the official asked.

Takuma's breathing picked up. *Big Sister. I hate him. Why won't he just fix it?!*

"Are you... all right?" the official asked, sounding uncertain.

Takuma let out a groan, and then a bark. *Unforgivable. He's mocking me. Big Sister...*

"Hey—" the official began to say something.

With a sudden scream, Takuma leaped over the counter. He tackled the

official, punched him, kicked him, then got on top of him. He planted his hands on the man's throat and squeezed. It felt good. *More. More!*

As the customs agent writhed and gasped, Takuma began to laugh. He kept applying force, and the man's eyes rolled back in his head. Security personnel and officials nearby all flew on him. They tried to pull him off, but he wouldn't relent.

Well? Do you realize what a nothing you are, now? Look at you, flapping your mouth like a fish on dry land... You're dying, you see. Looking stupid and ugly... How funny. Big Sister. Big Sister...

25 June, 2255 Hours (Manila Standard Time)

40 km west of Vigan City, Luzon, Northern Philippines

In a jungle clearing, there stood a model of a city. It was comprised of cheaply-made buildings riddled with bullet holes and lit by artificial lighting. It didn't resemble any city in the world; this was a place for staging practice bouts of urban warfare.

"No more games! Take those hostiles out, one shot apiece!" the lieutenant colonel barked to the trainees, his voice loud enough to be heard over the gunshots. "Don't hold back! You're hunting dogs! Run! Plant your teeth in their throats!"

The trainees, budding terrorists from various countries, showed no sign of exhaustion. The bullets their instructors rained down at them inspired no fear as they carried out their roles with speed and efficiency.

"Kill!" the colonel ordered them. "Everyone you see is an enemy! No mercy, not even to children!"

Human targetboards, ragged from long use, popped out from windows, doors, and alleyways. Bullets flew; metal screeched. In a room somewhere, a grenade exploded.

At last, the gunshots began to die out, replaced by reports of "clear" from radios here and there. The colonel, an assault rifle in one hand and a stopwatch

in the other, stared at the timer as he waited for the shots to cease completely.

“Clear!” came the final report at last, and he hit the stopwatch’s plunger with his thumb.

“Hmm...” He checked the time the mock battle had taken, then snorted.

“Line up!” his aide, a nearby captain, ordered. From all over the practice grounds, the trainees came running to line up in front of the colonel. There were a little more than fifteen in all, and one in five were women. The group was made up of all different races and dressed in basic gray urban combat fatigues.

“All right...” The colonel cleared his throat before addressing the trainees. “You’ve been training here for three weeks, now. At first I thought you were all pathetic incompetents, but now I see that’s not totally true. Two of you broke down, two ran away—but that’s fine. You’re becoming tolerable killers. Just don’t get cocky.”

It was the last lecture of the day, so the colonel decided to relish it. He went on and on about how green they still were, how badly they used their equipment, how hard it was to slip past various countries’ security forces—it all went on for about five minutes.

“—Understand?” he finished. “You don’t have enough hate inside. You need more. Hate me, hate the world; if you can do that, there’ll be no military, no police force that can ever touch you. That’s all.”

Once the colonel wrapped up, his aide asked the trainees, “Any questions?!”

After a brief silence, one raised his hand.

“Speak.”

“You’ve been saying, ‘If you graduate from here, you’ll be more than a match for any military or police force.’ But what if we’re fighting something else?”

“What do you mean?” the colonel asked.

“Mithril,” the trainee answered.

His reply caused the colonel’s brow to furrow in confusion. “Mithril. And what, exactly, is that?”

“A mysterious special forces unit that operates independently of any nation. An arms dealer in Singapore told me rumors about them before I came here... They bring together the most skilled personnel, and it’s said that if they come after you, you’re finished.”

The colonel snorted. “Nonsense. Exaggerated tripe.”

“But they say people have actually seen them,” the trainee protested. “That they’ve raided training camps like ours, stamping out insurgencies all over—”

“Enough!” Driven past his breaking point, the colonel unleashed his fury on the trainee, grabbing him by the collar. “Mithril! Hah! You must not have faith in my training if you’re swallowing nonsense like that!”

“Forgive me...” the trainee gasped, choking in the colonel’s grip.

As the exchange went on, the other trainees exchanged glances and whispers.

“I’ve heard of them, too...”

“Same here. That incident in Sunan...”

“What if they come after us?”

The whispers stopped abruptly under the colonel’s sudden glare. “I can see I’ve been laboring under a misapprehension!” the man shouted, with no intention of hiding his rage. “I guess you haven’t learned anything these past three weeks after all! You think this place could be attacked? This camp, which the military can’t even touch? Look around you!”

He pointed to the makeshift base just off the training ground, and the rows of weapons within. Tanks, armored cars, surface-to-air missiles, anti-aircraft guns... and though old-fashioned, they had two attack helicopters as well. The camp also housed two arm slaves—those humanoid beasts—standing eight meters tall and clad in dark green armor. These were the modern day’s greatest land weapon; a single one of them could take the place of a hundred infantrymen.

“Any force strong enough to face down firepower like this would be detected before they got close. That includes the US Army!” The colonel’s confidence was no bluff; there was a high-sensitivity sensor network running 20 kilometers

around their base on all sides. It would truly take an unreal force to slip through all of that and catch them by surprise. “Think about it! The base’s impregnability is why I can train you so hard! No one, under any circumstances, will ever catch us by sur—”

The next instant, it came: an arrow of fire fell from the sky onto a tank parked ten meters away. It was followed by a second, a third. There was a squealing sound of metal.

“Wha—” the colonel began to ask.

The tank sparked before exploding, seemingly from the inside. The colonel and the others were bowled over by the force of the blast. The attacks from above continued, now against the arm slaves kneeling next to the tank. It was like a red rain was falling on the camp.

Something’s coming... from the sky? Who? How? And why didn’t our radar detect the attack?! The colonel looked up. At first, he couldn’t see any sign of their attackers. But as he strained his eyes against the night sky, he noticed distortions in the starlight, almost like a heat haze. “Is that...”

From one of those atmospheric flickers came a sudden surge of blue lightning. Like black ink oozing out from a thin veil of light, three figures appeared. This was ECS—The ultimate hologram-integrated stealth system. But to achieve total invisibility... nobody had that ready for battle yet. Did they?!

The three figures were soldiers, who were dangling from parachutes. Firearms ready, they descended on the base, firing shots sporadically...

Just three soldiers, though? the colonel wondered. No... They weren’t soldiers; they weren’t even human. They were far too big. “Arm slaves?!” he gasped incredulously.

The ASes descending upon them were unlike anything he’d seen before. They had rounded, gray armor plates and a frame that was lithe yet strong, much closer to a human form. These never-before-seen gray machines—was this Mithril? Were they here?!

The three aesthetically pleasing ASes detached their parachutes 50 meters above the base and plunged into furious freefall. Then, like the titans of legend

released from their chains, they crashed onto locations all around the base and began to wreak havoc. Sparing no fire from their giant rifles and shotguns, they tore the armored cars and helicopters to shreds. They routed the panicking soldiers with their head-mounted machine guns, kicked jeeps aside, and broke watchtowers in half.

"You can't run and you can't hide! Surrender!" one machine shouted from its external speakers. To the colonel's shock, it was a young woman's voice.

Her AS's palm unleashed a taser at the fleeing trainees. The electricity knocked them out, one after another. The colonel could only watch helplessly as his base was torn to shreds.

《Destruction and capture of main targets confirmed. Switch to search mode?》 his machine's AI suggested in its deep male voice.

"Affirmative," he answered. "Switch to active mode."

《Roger. ECS off. ECCS on.》 The AI executed the operator's commands immediately.

Inside the cockpit that engulfed him, Sagara Sousuke carefully studied the display on the screen. These gray ASes were the main armament of Mithril, the mercenary force with which Sousuke was aligned. They were known as the M9, or the Gernsback, and they possessed cutting-edge specs that were far beyond those available to rank-and-file armed forces.

Fires continued to rage around the jungle stronghold. With their tanks, armored cars, and invaluable ASes in pieces, most of the enemy soldiers had surrendered. About fifty in all had been gathered in the central plaza of the mock city, hands raised. Now and then, one of them thought they saw an opening and tried to escape, but whenever that happened, Sousuke or one of his companion machines unceremoniously hit them with a taser.

Their mission was almost over; they just had to search the prisoners for the Japanese group they were looking for and hand the rest over to the Filipino government.

The operator of an ally machine, standing back-to-back with Sousuke's AS to

watch over the other side of the base, called him on the radio. “Easier than expected, eh, Sousuke?” The laid-back voice belonged to Sergeant Kurz Weber, Sousuke’s comrade. He was operating an M9 Gernsback, identical to Sousuke’s own.

“That statement seems premature. Remain on guard for ambush units using heavy weaponry,” Sousuke responded steadily.

“Please, we’re fine. Not even a rocket can dent these babies,” Kurz responded, referring to the M9s.

“I’m more worried about the prisoners. We can’t complete our mission if they’re killed by stray fire.”

“Oh, I get it, you unfeeling bastard...” Kurz grumbled. “I’m a man fresh off his sickbed, remember?”

“Stop talking and confirm the targets,” Sousuke demanded.

“Hmm... fair enough.” Kurz’s M9 stepped in front of the prisoners. “Ah, ahem,” he began, his voice blaring out through the external speakers. “Are there any Japanese trainees here? They’ll be young, and from a terrorist group called A21. You won’t be killed or harmed, so if you’re here, please come out.”

The prisoners remained silent to a man, turning to each other questioningly.

“Nobody? C’mon, you there—mask off,” Kurz ordered. “You, too. Hurry it up.” As the M9 began to brandish its taser, several of the men quickly removed their balaclavas.

Sousuke magnified his screen image and studied the men’s faces. “They’re not here,” he said. Some of them had Japanese facial features, but none matched the pictures on the briefing document given to them earlier.

“You’re right...” Kurz trailed off. “What’s going on here?”

Their pre-mission briefing had said a Japanese terrorist group was in hiding here. It was an organization called A21, which had planned some bombings in the city several years ago, but their plan had been exposed and they had fled overseas. It was rumored that they were plotting a new incident of terrorism soon, though...

“They’re not here,” Sousuke repeated.

Just then, the M9 of Master Sergeant Melissa Mao returned from its foray of chasing escapees into the jungle. It was holding four taser-paralyzed terrorists in its arms. “No luck here, either. I couldn’t find one Japanese person. Guess we just got a bad draw.”

“More bogus info from intelligence, huh? Dammit...” Kurz’s M9, relaying its operator’s intent, kicked over a nearby drum. The act sent a tremble of fear through the prisoners.

“It’s not an uncommon occurrence. If they’re not here, they’re not here... We should hand these people over to the Filipino military, then meet up with the transport chopper at the landing—” Suddenly, Sousuke stopped. With his face clouded over in anguish, he let out a sound between a groan and a sigh, and then shook his head.

“What’s wrong?” Kurz inquired, noting Sousuke’s behavior—the M9 was shaking its head in mimicry of its operator.

“I forgot,” Sousuke moaned at last, in tones of sheer agony.

Hearing that, Kurz’s M9 went on the alert, swinging its rifle back and forth. “What is it? You’re usually so cautious... You forget to encrypt your channel or something stupid like that?”

“No, not that. It’s something even worse...”

“What the hell is it?!”

“I... I made a promise to someone,” Sousuke explained. “To meet up at 1900 hours today.”

“Huh?”

“She’s going to be so mad at me,” he whispered. A cold sweat had risen on his brow. He was in complete disarray—It was hard to believe he was the same person coldly carrying out orders just a few minutes ago.

“Who’d you promise?” Kurz wanted to know.

“Kaname. I was supposed to stop by her house so she could help me to study for the term final test. Japanese history is my weakest subject, so...”

The shoulders of Kurz's M9 slumped (third-generation ASes were capable of this motion, thanks to their more complex joint structures). "You are really something..." he said.

"Must be tough... A soldier with a side job," Mao added, as she dumped her unconscious haul into the prisoner ring. "Filipino army transport helicopters will arrive in five minutes. Finish the questioning before then. After we hand over the hostages, we'll start moving toward the RV point. Got it?"

"Uruz-6, roger that."

"Uruz-7, roger that..." Sousuke answered despondently.

This was the other side of Sagara Sousuke, elite member of Mithril's top-secret special forces: he was also a high school student in Tokyo.

25 June, 1518 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time)

Amphibious Assault Submarine Tuatha de Danaan, 50 Meter Depth, Luzon Strait

"It was a bust?" Tessa inquired, her brow knitting, after hearing Melissa Mao's report. She was sitting in the central control room of the massive Mithril submarine, a room the size of a lecture hall, from which orders could be issued to both the submarine crew and their ground forces. From her captain's chair, she had a view of the room's three large front screens and the stations for about fifteen personnel.

Tessa—Teletha Testarossa—was the captain of the amphibious assault submarine, Tuatha de Danaan. She looked like a girl in her mid-teens, with large gray eyes and ash blonde hair, which was styled in a braid that draped over her left shoulder. The rank insignia "COL" gleamed on her pale brown civilian clothing.

"Yes, ma'am. No signs of the terrorist organization A21 found," Mao responded over the radio.

"And no one connected to them, either?"

“We questioned the camp’s instructor. Apparently ten days prior, a Japanese group matching their description came to the camp to observe.”

“Where did they go after that?” Tessa wanted to know.

“He said he heard they were going from Manila to the Gold Coast, but I’d bet that’s BS... The man doesn’t know anything,” Mao told her in disgust.

“So they feigned joining the camp, then took off... They really did get the better of us, didn’t they?” Tessa sighed. The intelligence division had reported that the terrorist group in question was doing its final training in that camp, but apparently, they’d been ill informed. “I’m sorry. I wasted your time.”

“It’s not your fault, Tessa,” Mao responded kindly. “Anyway, we’re about to head to the RV point. Is that okay?”

“Yes. Return here as planned. I’ll be waiting.”

“Roger that. Ending transmission.”

In a window in the corner of the screen that displayed who she was talking to, the word “URUZ2” switched from red to green. Tessa sighed and sat back in her seat. “For heaven’s sake...”

“It’s common enough,” her executive officer, Commander Richard Mardukas, said from nearby. He cast a gloomy glance at the front screen through the black-rimmed glasses that sat on his lean technician’s face.

Noting his expression, Tessa responded. “We can’t dismiss this as ‘common enough.’ The terror group A21 has acquired Soviet-made ASes, hasn’t it? If they unleash them on the city, it will be a disaster.”

“Of course, Captain. But we aren’t omnipotent,” Mardukas protested. “It’s necessary to dismiss some failures with ‘these things happen.’”

“That sounds like indolence to me.” She had been given all of this equipment, all of these people. She and her squad had to be as close to omnipotent as possible. Perfect information, perfect planning—that was Tessa’s ideal blueprint for her organization.

“It is not indolence; it is flexibility,” Mardukas responded humorlessly.

Just then, the ship’s mother AI began to sound an alarm, calling for Tessa.

“What is it?” she asked.

《Channel G1, Major Kalinin.》

“Put him through.”

《Aye, ma’am.》

The mother AI put her through to Major Andrey Kalinin, their operations commander currently in Japan on another mission. The channel opened and the man’s deep voice boomed through. “Colonel, ma’am. How did things go in the training camp?”

“It was a bust,” she answered. “The terrorist group we were after wasn’t there.”

“A21, you mean?” Kalinin didn’t sound especially surprised. “I received word that one of their members was arrested at Narita Airport.”

“I’m glad of that,” Tessa said after a moment. “But it sounds like bad news?”

“Yes. The boy they caught had the expected behavior.”

Tessa’s expression clouded over. “You mean...”

“It’s very likely that he can use a lambda driver,” Kalinin told her.

The lambda driver: an inscrutable device that could prove to be extremely dangerous in the wrong hands. It fed off of the user’s will to unlock such potential as to one day render even nuclear weapons obsolete. It took a special kind of person to use it, but if that despicable terrorist group had one in their ranks...

“He’s currently in Japanese government custody, so we can’t run more detailed tests,” Kalinin continued. “I was hoping you’d come to observe him directly, Colonel.”

“Understood. I’ll make arrangements soon,” Tessa responded, before closing the channel. *Again...* she wondered. *Who is making these dangerous things?*

26 June, 1001 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Schoolyard, Jindai High School, Chofu, Tokyo

The ball slipped just past the metal bat and flew into the catcher's mitt.

"Strike! You're out!" A girl in a gym uniform proclaimed sluggishly. "So, uh... that's three outs, right? Time to change positions!" At the umpire's declaration, the girls swiftly swapped between batting and fielding.

"Whew!" Chidori Kaname, the pitcher who had just struck out her opponent, shook out her right arm as she got off the mound.

Chidori had black hair that came down to her waist. She was on the tall side, with a balance of proportions that was notable even through her gym uniform. She had a strong-willed, noble aura about her—at least, when she wasn't talking.

"Kana-chan, that was three up and three down," Tokiwa Kyoko, Kaname's classmate, said as she sat down next to her.

Kaname flashed the smug smile of feigned modesty particular to girls who do well in gym class. "Easy as pie," she declared, flashing her friend a V-sign.

"That's not what I mean... this is just softball for class," Kyoko explained. "It's not right to take it so seriously. You really freaked Shiori-chan out."

"Huh? I did?"

"You did," her friend confirmed. "Hey, are you in a bad mood or something? Every time I've talked to you today, you've been crabby..."

"Hmm... You can tell, huh? You're sharp, Kyoko..." Kaname had been friends with Kyoko since the first day of school, so it was hard to hide anything from her.

"Did something happen with Sagara-kun?" Kyoko asked, even more sharply. That wasn't just a bullseye, it was a dead center hit—her classmate, Sagara Sousuke, was indeed the one responsible for Kaname's bad mood.

She'd promised yesterday morning that she'd help him study for term finals. Sousuke was supposed to stop by her house at 7:00 that night, but he hadn't come. She had tried calling his cell phone, but she'd just gotten the message

that it was out of range. Then it had gotten to be past eight, then past nine, past midnight. When morning came, the handmade dishes she'd made in lieu of studying the minute she got home were still sitting on her kitchen table. (For certain reasons, Kaname lived alone.)

"Hmm... nah," she lied nonchalantly. "It's not him."

Kyoko saw through her immediately. "I knew it. I notice he's not here today... do you know why?"

They could hear the voices of the boys playing basketball from the gymnasium behind them. Sousuke hadn't been among them.

"Why would I?" Kaname scoffed. "He just ran off yesterday during lunch, remember? I haven't seen him since."

"Then why are you so mad?" Kyoko asked.

"I told you... it's not about him. What do I care what the guy does all day?" This was another lie, of course. She wouldn't have prepared all that food if she didn't care. Baked mackerel, squid and daikon stew, pidan tofu, chawanmushi and more... Kaname found herself sighing.

Kyoko interrupted with a poke to her shoulder. "You're up, Kaname."

"Huh? Oh, I guess I am..." Kaname stood up, grabbed a bat and walked up to the plate. As she went, she heard the vague sound of a helicopter from somewhere nearby. She looked up at the sky, but there was no sign of anything in the area... Still, she was sure she could hear the pounding of rotors and the low roar of an engine approaching. She ended up shrugging. *Ah, well...*

The pitcher threw her an underhand pitch. It came to her so slowly, she could make out every detail on the ball. Kaname projected Sousuke's overserious, sullen face onto it. *Sousuke, you...* She hefted up the bat. "...jerk!" she cried, and swung with all her might. There was a satisfying *thunk* of contact, and the ball flew toward high left field. She'd really gotten a piece of it, and the outfielders ran back in panic.

Her team was cheering. The ball rose higher and higher... Then it stopped, suddenly, and began to fall straight down, toward the left fielder. It was as if it had hit some kind of wall.

Kaname gaped. She had been so sure of her home run that she found herself stopped just before second base. The other students were similarly forced to stop and stare up at the sky. No one could see anything.

Wait... is that a rippling in the air? Just as the thought occurred to her, the persistent sounds of a helicopter suddenly grew in volume, as a fierce wind kicked up over the grounds. It stirred up the dust, reducing her visibility to just a few meters.

“What in the world is...?!” she screamed, but she couldn’t even hear her own voice. The wind was so strong she couldn’t keep her eyes open. She threw herself on the ground, as if to cling to the base.

The mysterious roar finally reached its peak, and then moved away as swiftly as it had come. Immediately after, the wind died down and the silence returned.

Kaname looked up. There was still nothing in the sky— No sign of a helicopter, or any similar craft. “What’s going on? For heaven’s sake...” she grumbled.

She was just picking herself up when she found herself face-to-face with a boy in a summer uniform. He was about 175 centimeters tall, with a slim but toned frame. A large, olive green backpack hung from his right hand, and he carried a black school bag in his left. “Sousuke...?” she began tentatively.

The boy, Sagara Sousuke, gave an alert look around, then said, “Chidori?” in a completely neutral voice. He had a well-proportioned face, but there was an intensity to it, a guardedness that never wavered even for a moment. His eyes always seemed to be looking past her at something else. His brow was wrinkled, and his mouth was drawn into a tight frown. His black hair was cut haphazardly, like a man who didn’t care at all for style.

Sousuke looked at his watch, then at the school’s clock. “It seems I was only two hours late,” he remarked. “The rush back proved worthwhile, then.”

“What are you talking about?” Kaname hissed, resisting the urge to lay him out on the spot.

“I came straight from the South China Sea,” he explained. “I only just arrived.”

Kaname didn’t know what to say.

In response to her silence, Sousuke gave her a shameless once-over, seeming only then to notice her gym uniform. “Were you having a match?”

“Yes. But thanks to *someone*’s bizarre arrival in some weird thing, my home run is ruined!”

“The next time you hear a helicopter, you should be more careful. Well, I should join the boys’ class...” He started to turn toward the gymnasium, then suddenly stopped and looked back. “By the way, Chidori...”

“What?”

“Are you mad about the promise yesterday?”

“Oh, no way! I’m not bothered in the slightest!” Kaname threw her arms open wide and shook her head, sarcasm on full blast. Unfortunately, her intent didn’t get through.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Sousuke said in tones of sincerity. “When I remembered my promise, I felt sure that you would be angry.”

She stared at him. “You forgot?”

“I did,” he replied. “Something very important came up, you see.” Then he turned at last and headed toward the gym, his steps light and backpack swaying. At first, Kaname couldn’t do anything but stand there with trembling, clenched fists. Then at last, she picked up the base at her feet and...

“Why, you...” She cast it at him, frisbee-style. She wasn’t aiming at anywhere in particular, but the base ended up hitting the back of Sousuke’s head—the one part of his body there was no way to train. He made no sound, but dropped his bag and backpack and collapsed onto the ground. “You idiot! I hate you so much!” Kaname yelled at him.

The infielder holding the ball took that same moment to approach and tag her out.

26 June, 1028 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Sayama Suburbs, Saitama Prefecture

It took six hours by helicopter from the Tuatha de Danaan in the Pacific, during which the regular roar of the engine had become like a lullaby. The windows cut out a lot of light from the sky, and the craft was constantly vibrating—an environment that inclined Teletha Testarossa to doze. She wasn't even dreaming; deep beyond the depths of consciousness, the usually hurried currents of her mind now sat as still as a lake.

"Colonel." It took a moment for her to realize that she was being called. "Three minutes, Colonel." Though she captained the submarine that served as their base, the ground forces of the Tuatha de Danaan called their commander-in-chief 'Colonel' rather than 'Captain.' It was a custom unique to Mithril, so as not to confuse it with the military rank.

Tessa stirred in her seat, then quickly opened her eyes.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you while you were resting, ma'am. We'll be arriving in three minutes." The young man addressing her was one Corporal Yang, dressed in his civilian clothing. Born in Korea, he was a member of their combat team, and used the same "Uruz" call sign as Mao and the others. He was currently serving as Tessa's bodyguard.

"Where is Sagara-san?" she asked, looking around the cabin.

"The sergeant landed in Tokyo earlier. He asked me to thank you, ma'am."

"I see..."

Sagara Sousuke... Like Corporal Yang, he was a combatant with the Uruz call sign. He had recently started attending school in Tokyo as part of a certain special mission. She was the captain and he was an NCO, so they didn't have many chances to talk, and they weren't particularly close... and yet, she found herself taking interest in him. Like her, he had a reason for being the youngest in his squadron, and she was a little bit curious about the life he'd made for himself at school.

"Now..." Tessa peeked into her hand mirror and straightened up her appearance. She fixed the collar of her blouse and pulled down the hem of her

pencil skirt. She looked down from the window at their destination.

It was an open plot of white-walled buildings, nestled in the pine-covered hills. At a glance, it might look like a suburban college campus—though most campuses weren't surrounded by tall fences, or patrolled by men in camouflage.

It was a technological research facility run by the Japanese Ministry of Defense, Tessa was told. It was generally unknown to the majority of the populace, designed to handle highly classified research, and it was where the boy in question was being held. The circumstances that had led to his capture might have come about by coincidence, but she was glad he was in custody; leaving him at large could have led to disaster.

"Landing now," came the pilot's voice through her headset as they descended. The facility's helipad looked a bit small for their helicopter, but it was still easier for their pilot to handle than an emergency landing under gunfire.

Once they were on the ground, Corporal Yang helped Tessa down the gangway. Major Andrey Kalinin came to greet her, buffeted by the wind of the rotors. He was the commander of the Tuatha de Danaan's ground forces, and he had arrived at the facility ahead of Tessa. He was a Russian, just past 40, broad-shouldered, and nearly 190 centimeters tall. He had a well-chiseled face, a gray mustache and beard, and gray hair to match, tied back into a tail. Tessa's own hair being ash blonde, they looked a bit like father and daughter when they stood side-by-side.

"Thank you for coming all this way, Colonel, ma'am," Kalinin said, his words managing to pierce through the helicopter's roar.

"Oh, please," she responded. "You called me because you need me, right?"

"Indeed." Kalinin seemed unfazed by her slightly snide tone. On the submarine, he typically wore a uniform of a dull olive green, but now he was in a brown suit; plain though it was, it gave him a slight air of refinement.

"And who is this?" Tessa turned her attention to the Japanese man behind Kalinin. This one wore the utterly unremarkable navy suit of a bureaucrat; he appeared to be just past thirty, on the heavy side, and wore black-rimmed

glasses.

“Shimamura, from the Ministry of Transport,” the man replied in fluent English. “I’m taking the lead on this incident.”

“A pleasure, Mr. Shimamura,” Tessa said.

“The pleasure is all mine, Dr. Testarossa.” Shimamura greeted her with a geniality that skillfully concealed his deep curiosity about her. Most people tended to be either amused or enraged to discover that a sixteen-year-old girl was such an important figure in Mithril’s clandestine organization; the fact that Shimamura was neither suggested that Kalinin had fed him a cover story in advance. “I am surprised how young and beautiful you are,” he was saying. “For a minute, I thought you were a girl in her mid-teens; I can hardly believe you’re really thirty.”

“What?” Tessa asked, surprised.

“Ah, excuse me. It’s bad manners in any country to speak of a lady’s age...” Shimamura then soberly began to walk, apparently expecting them to follow.

Tessa remained where she was, side-eyeing Kalinin. “Major. What *did* you tell him?”

“That you were a genius. As for the age issue, I thought it might be a stretch... but he seems to have bought it,” Kalinin responded lightly enough.

“Thirty...” Tessa looked over her petite frame. If there had been a mirror present, she might have started burning holes in her own face. “Do I really look that old?” she anxiously asked Corporal Yang, who stood nearby.

“I don’t know,” he said with a laugh. “Maybe you just work hard to look that way?”

An unpaved road ran through the forest about a kilometer from the facility. Cars rarely traveled that way, but it was currently home to a large black trailer, beside which a small group of men and women stood. All of those present were young—about twenty years old, give or take.

Despite their rather fashionable civilian clothing, a strange, silent tension

hung over the group. They were watching a large transport helicopter descend toward the facility's helipad. As it disappeared behind the trees, a man standing on the roof of the trailer lowered his binoculars and said, "The American army?" He glanced down at a woman standing on the road below, as if seeking her opinion on the matter.

"No," the woman answered. She, too, was young, and dressed in a long red coat, despite the early summer. She had almond-shaped East Asian eyes and chestnut hair, which had been done in a mushroom cut. She possessed what many might describe as the face of classic beauty. "It lacked a national insignia, and the USFJ doesn't have helicopters like that."

"Then where are they from?" the man asked again.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?!"

"What does it matter?" she questioned. "We're here to get Takuma out. If someone gets in our way, we get them out of it—end of story."

"That's pretty cold, Seina. They've got your dear little brother in there, remember? Aren't you worried?" one of the men said teasingly.

"Of course I'm worried. We need him for the plan," the woman called Seina replied dispassionately.

"That's true..." Another of the men smiled a thin smile. "We can't move that devil, the Behemoth, without Takuma. And once it's up and running, even the JSDF will have to flee for the hills."

"Yeah. No one can stop us," another of the group said.

"We'll burn that disgusting city down. I give it two days until the city center is rubble," added another.

The woman called Seina stood silent at first, then said, "Let's get ready for the raid."

It was at that moment that they noticed a car approaching down the forest road. It was black and white—a police car. It was probably doing rounds in the area.

“What should we do?”

“You take the driver,” Seina ordered.

The car stopped next to the trailer. The driver, a young patrolman, looked like he was going to stay inside, while the head officer in the passenger seat stepped out. “What are you people doing here?” the elderly officer demanded. “Don’t you know civilian vehicles aren’t allowed here? Who’s the driver? I want to see your license. And what are you carrying in there?”

“Just rubbish.” Seina’s right hand, previously thrust into her right pocket, now whipped out. It held a pistol with a silencer, which she fired twice into the officer without batting an eye. It made a strange *shu-shuw* sound, and the officer died on the spot.

The patrolman in the car didn’t even know what had happened until two members of the group fired suppressor-attached submachine guns at him; the breaking of the windshield was louder than the gunshots.

“He’s dead,” one man said, peering at the driver, who now lay in a pool of blood.

Just then, the young patrolman let out a groan. “H... Help...”

With a slightly awkward expression, the man fired a few more times, this time at close range. “Well, these things happen,” he said with embarrassment as the patrolman’s moaning died out.

“Enough,” Seina said. “Clean up the corpses and let’s get moving. I’ll inspect the machinery.” She walked around behind the trailer and opened the double doors. Inside lay an arm slave; a kind of second-generation Soviet AS known as an Rk-92 Savage.

Seina threw off her coat, revealing a skintight orange operator’s uniform that hugged her supple form. It would have resembled a scuba diver’s outfit if not for the clunky G-suit, harness, and lock bolt.

“A prelude to destruction, eh?” she whispered, too softly to be heard.

26 June, 1233 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

South School Building, Jindai High School, Chofu, Tokyo

"C'mon, Sagara-kun. Head trauma can be serious business, you know?" Sousuke's classmate, Kazama Shinji, said to him as they walked down the fourth floor hallway at lunch.

Shinji was an unassuming type, half a head shorter than Sousuke, with pale skin and wide eyes. He used to wear rather shabby-looking glasses, but he'd recently switched to contact lenses, which increased his fashionability a bit—that was the kind of boy he was.

"I'll be fine, Kazama," Sousuke responded glumly. There seemed to be more behind his despondence than the blow to the head he'd taken that morning.

"I hope so... You'll make Chidori-san sad if you die. She'll be weeping, 'I killed him!' while she slits her wrists in the bath."

"I find that highly doubtful," Sousuke replied. The words 'I hate you!' kept bouncing around in his mind. Chidori Kaname had had him on full ignore since the incident that morning, and since Sousuke was an inherently reticent person, he couldn't come up with a pretense to approach her. Instead, he'd ended up agonizing his way through the first half of the day. "Chidori hates me."

"Ahh, there you go again... You grew up in a war zone, but you can't even stand up to Chidori-san? It's pathetic, man, no joke."

"I'm sorry."

It was common knowledge around Jindai High that Sousuke had been raised overseas, in dangerous war-torn regions of the world. Yet most took that with a grain of salt and ended up labeling him "the weirdo returnee" or "the pain-in-the-ass transfer student." Nobody knew that he was a member of super-secret military organization Mithril, and that he was an elite soldier on their special response team to boot. Nobody... except for one person.

The boys came to a stop in front of the student council room.

Sousuke had been granted a dubious title, "Head of School Security and Aide to the Student Council," which mainly meant that they sent him on various errands during meetings and events.

Shinji had the more proper title of “Culture Festival Committee Vice Chairman.” Culture festival season was still a ways away, but June was around the time he was supposed to begin participating in executive committee meetings about preparation and funding.

“The president sure is hardcore,” Shinji remarked. “He still wants to hold meetings, even with term finals next week...”

“It *is* important to receive regular updates,” Sousuke observed before opening the door and entering the room.

Only three students were there: two first-years and one second-year, the accountant, all boys. The president was nowhere to be seen, even though it was almost starting time...

“Hey, isn’t there a meeting today?” Shinji asked.

A student in the corner glanced up from watching the room’s LCD TV. “No one told you it was canceled? He decided to call it off this week, since tests are coming up and there’s not a lot on the table...”

“Yeah, we never got the message.”

“You’re in class four, right? The vice president—Chidori-senpai should have known.”

“Sheesh, that’s mean of her... I guess we’ll head back to class, then. Darn it...” As Shinji turned to leave, grumbling, he happened to bump into a girl on her way in.

It was Kaname. She had been in her gym clothes when Sousuke met her that morning, but now she was in her summer uniform: a blue skirt and a white blouse with short sleeves, secured at the neck with a red ribbon. “Oh, Kazama-kun...”

“Chidori-san,” he said resentfully. “We saw you in class before. Why didn’t you tell us?”

Chidori Kaname, the student council vice president, cast a look in Sousuke’s direction before forcing a cheerful, friendly tone: “Hey, I’m sorry, Kazama-kun. It totally slipped my mind. We’ll really want your help next time, though, so I

hope you forgive me. I'm really sorry. Please?"

"W-Well, I guess these things happen... T-Take care, okay?"

"No, these things *don't* just happen. I promised the president I'd tell you, and forgetting a promise is the worst thing a person can do," Chidori told him pointedly. "It's an act of cruelty to the person you let down. If a man broke a promise to me, I'd never, ever forgive him."

As he listened in, Sousuke found a greasy sweat forming on his temples.

Shinji seemed to notice the tension in the air, and insisted, "No, i-it's really not that big a deal... A-Anyway, I'm going back to class now..." Then he left.

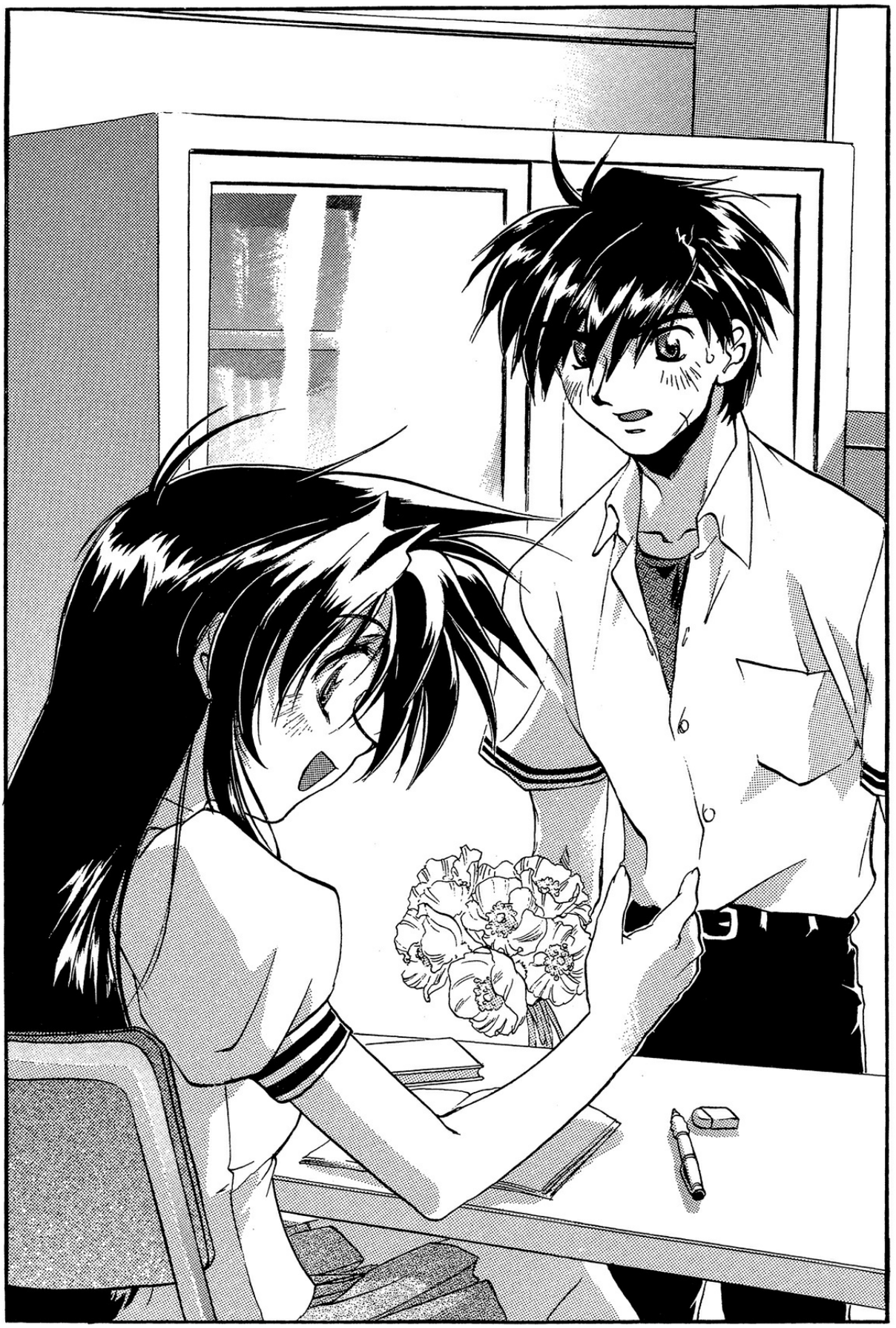
With Shinji gone, Kaname's face immediately lost its cheer. She turned a glare toward Sousuke, gave a "hmph," and then walked toward the back of the student council room. She laid the documents she'd been carrying onto the president's desk, staked out a place at a corner of the large table, and opened her study materials.

Sousuke turned pale, then slid his backpack from his shoulders and began searching around inside it... but Kaname showed no interest. At last, apparently finding what he was looking for, Sousuke pulled it out and approached Kaname.

"Don't hover over me. It's creepy," Kaname said in stinging tones, eyes locked on the blank page in front of her.

Then, as if screwing up his courage, Sousuke offered her a bouquet of white flowers.

"What..." she breathed. The blooms were about the size of a fist; four petals gently wreathing a round ovary. There were six of them, and Kaname found herself taken aback by their beauty.



“I just picked them last night,” Sousuke told her. “Please accept them.”

“Th-Thanks...” She fought hard to keep a smile off her lips. *Maybe I’ve been immature. Maybe it’s time to forgive him,* she found herself thinking. “What kind of flowers are these? They’re beautiful...” she asked in a slightly more mellifluous voice.

“Well, the flowers themselves aren’t important. I’d rather they wilt sooner than later.”

“Huh?”

“Those are opium poppies,” Sousuke explained. “After the petals fall, you can score the seed pod so that it secretes opium. It’s the main ingredient in heroin, so they should fetch a high price in Japan.”

Kaname fell silent. Her face, which had been softening, now tensed again. Of course a war-obsessed fool like him wouldn’t know the custom of giving flowers to a woman you’d hurt. “If memory serves,” she said slowly, “these flowers only grow in dangerous areas in Southeast and Central Asia.”

“They’re also cultivated in certain regions of the Philippines,” Sousuke said helpfully. “I availed myself while I was on a job.”

“A job?” Kaname looked up at Sousuke questioningly. “Wait a minute...” She stood up and pulled Sousuke out of the room. Once they were in the hallway, she checked to make sure no one else was around, then whispered, “A job... for Mithril, you mean?”

“Yes. I had an emergency call. We went to the Philippines and back,” Sousuke admitted readily enough. Kaname was the one classmate of his who knew his “real job.”

It had all started two months ago. Kaname, a supposedly ordinary high school girl, had nearly been kidnapped by cunning terrorists; she had been saved by Sousuke, who had been deployed to their school as a transfer student, and Mithril, the organization to which he belonged.

She still didn’t know why the terrorists were after her, or why a group like Mithril would go out of their way to protect her; all she knew was that she was

a special entity known as a Whispered, that she possessed some sort of important information—and that Sousuke, as her bodyguard, had to be in her life at all times.

To put it bluntly, though, he was a piss-poor bodyguard. Like yesterday, he frequently left her behind to travel overseas. He'd given her a mini-transmitter necklace to wear "even when you're in the shower or sleeping," but she had her doubts about how useful that would prove.

It was all very nerve-wracking at first, but as time passed, she'd grown accustomed to this way of life. In reality, she hadn't been attacked even once in the two months since that incident. It seemed that she could just live a normal life... for now, anyway.

Realizing at last why he'd broken his promise, Kaname let out a sigh. "Darn it... If that's what it was, you could have just told me."

"I was in a hurry," he apologized. "I'm sorry."

"So, did it all work out?"

"Yes. Kurz managed to get back in action, too."

"Oh. That's good."

"Yes, it is. So, do those poppies close the deal?"

This time, Kaname struck him with a closed fist. It was a powerful hook that grazed Sousuke's jaw and sent him staggering.

"That really hurt."

"Shut up! Why do you have to be like this?! Don't you realize there's something you should say *before* you go offering me drugs?! I don't care what kind of awesome mercenary you are, you're a seriously broken human being!"

"Actually," Sousuke remarked, "I'm perfectly healthy."

"I'm talking about your common sense! From the moment I first met you, you've been a pathetic idiot, making trouble for everyone, never showing any reflection, and I just...!" She trailed off into screeches of rage as she took a slipper in each hand and started slapping Sousuke's head with them.

“I understand. Please stop. You’ve made yourself very clear,” Sousuke said soothingly.

Kaname stopped, shoulders heaving. “Do you *really* understand?! I’m talking about sensitivity and good faith!”

“Good faith? How about this, then... In Tokyo, cocaine will sell for a higher price than heroin. If you truly find this unacceptable, I could get you some coca paste to—”

Kaname unleashed a high roundhouse kick to the back of Sousuke’s neck.

26 June, 1310 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Japan Ministry of Defense Technical Research Institute, Suburbs of Sayama, Saitama Prefecture

Across the one-sided glass was a boy. He sat on a chair in a bare-bones interrogation room, staring at a point on the table in front of him. He looked about the same age as Tessa, his small frame clothed in purple pajamas. He seemed like an ordinary young boy in every respect, yet at the same time, he had the aura of someone fundamentally “other.” Was this young man really a member of A21, the terrorist organization which had planned a series of bombings a few years ago? It was definitely hard to believe.

Tessa was watching from the observation room. She knew that she couldn’t be seen from the interrogation room, but somehow, she felt like the boy could sense her eyes upon him.

“It was purely by chance that he was caught at Narita Airport,” Major Kalinin explained, standing behind Tessa in the dim light. “He passed himself off as a student returning from a language study in New Zealand, so Japanese customs didn’t give him a second thought... They frequently don’t even check such passengers’ belongings. If he’d kept his head down, he would have slipped through easily.”

“But he didn’t keep his head down, did he?” she returned. “What exactly did he do?”

“He flew at a customs official, hit him, and tried to wring his neck,” Kalinin said offhandedly.

“*He* did that?” Even Tessa, who had an idea of why it might happen, could hardly imagine the boy showing such violence.

“Yes. Even after his arrest, he seemed excessively agitated, so they ran a drug test. His blood tested positive for Ti971, a drug we at Mithril have been tracking for some time. We learned about it yesterday through some complicated channels.”

“And that’s why you called me,” Tessa concluded.

“Precisely. Someone’s been conditioning him to use a lambda driver, and I believe you’re the only one who can judge whether or not they’ve succeeded.” The lambda driver was a device that could channel a user’s will into phenomena that defied the laws of physics. It was one of the products of “black technology,” unbelievable advancements in tech that far outstripped anything contemporaneous.

Tessa was the only person in the world who could fully understand and utilize black technology to any degree... Or rather, she had thought she was. She’d been starting to wonder if some other power had access to it and was doling it out to dangerous terrorists and authoritarian states. That same power might have given special training and drugs to the boy before her. It was a conditioning that came with side effects—violent outbursts, memory loss—and the boy was showing signs of a few of them, it seemed.

“The Japanese government is unaware of his significance,” Kalinin told her. “They refuse to turn him over to us, but only for legal reasons.”

“I see...” Tessa flipped through the printed documentation that described the tests he’d undergone. It was headed by the name on his passport: Kugayama Takuma. She didn’t know if it was a real name or an alias, but the address and family information were apparently fabricated. “I read through the specific values before, and I didn’t see anything that would rule it out. If he has undergone conditioning, that means they have a lambda driver-mounted weapon ready for him somewhere out there.” The terrorists would have their hands on a machine of unimaginable power—a destructive weapon that

conventional arms couldn't hope to combat.

"In addition to whoever did this to him, I'm curious as to whether anyone else from A21 has returned to Japan," Kalinin said.

"Do you think you can get him to talk?" she asked, referring to the two subjects he'd raised.

"He's keeping mum, and standard interrogation techniques don't seem to work. And cruel and unusual methods are out of the question while he's in Japanese government custody."

Tessa scowled a little at Kalinin's blunt wording. "They'd be out of the question in Mithril custody as well... I would never allow such a thing."

Just then, without any warning, the boy leaped over the table and lunged in Tessa's direction.



Screaming at the top of his lungs, he slammed into the mirror and staggered. Despite knowing he couldn't possibly break through, Tessa dropped the documents she was holding and fell to the ground in shock.

Takuma just bared his teeth and kept slamming into the mirror again and again, perhaps not realizing it was futile. He seemed like a different person—a different *species*, even—as he pounded on the one-way glass, howling like a beast. Security poured into the interrogation room to restrain him.

"Colonel, ma'am," said Kalinin. "Were you hurt?"

"I... I'm fine. I was just a bit startled." With Kalinin's help, Tessa picked herself up. After letting her racing heart slow, she began to gather up the spilled documents; Kalinin helped her there, too. "He definitely wanted to wring my neck..." She was trying to sound casual, but she knew immediately that she'd failed. "Anyway... If we want to do proper testing, we'll have to bring in a portable NILS to measure his reactions. But... I think he's probably one of them. Call it a gut instinct."

"What do you think of an interview?" Kalinin questioned.

"I'll do it. Though preferably not alo—eek!" While bending down to pick up one of the dropped papers, she bumped her head on the corner of a table. A dizzying pain shot from her head to her toes. She moaned and stumbled back.

Kalinin caught her and held her up. "Colonel?"

"I... I'm fine. It's nothing serious," she responded with tears in her eyes. She was acutely aware of her clumsiness—but then, gifted as she was with intelligence and beauty, it would be too much for her to ask for grace as well. "Anyway, let's go... We won't accomplish anything by sitting here."

"Yes, ma'am." Tessa and Kalinin left the observation room.

Her bodyguard, Corporal Yang, was waiting in the corridor. Shimamura, their host, was in front of the interrogation room door, discussing something with Takuma's attending physician. Once he was done, Shimamura approached them. "I'm sorry, they've had to give him a tranquilizer. You'll have to wait until this evening for your interview."

Tessa's heart sank. She'd had a feeling this would happen. "Very well... By the way, if I may ask, are you certain that your security measures are foolproof?"

"I assure you, not even an ant could slip inside," Shimamura reassured her. "Why do you ask?"

"It occurred to me that someone might try to break in."

Shimamura gave her his most condescending look. "Please. You think those terrorists will try to get him back? A simple drug addict? I don't know what interest Mithril has taken in him, but even we just want him back in the police hospital ASAP."

"That isn't what I mean," Tessa began to explain. "What I'm trying to say is that his importance—"

Shimamura cut her off with a dismissive wave. "This facility is far more important than he is; we have the strictest security possible. We have two platoons—you know what that means? It means sixty men patrolling in shifts at all times. Added to the fact that knowledge of his transfer was restricted to the department—"

Shimamura's words were interrupted by a roar. A series of shots shook the air around them; the sound of a massive autocannon. It was followed by a metallic grinding sound and an explosion.

Tessa looked out the window. Fire and smoke billowed from the direction of a distant hospital building within the facility grounds. A security vehicle was in flames, the aftermath of an explosion.

There was the sound of small arms fire, now, coming in short bursts: *ra-ta-tat, ra-ta-ta-tat*. She heard shouts of anger, cries for help...

"What in the world..."

Someone was attacking the laboratory. Was it A21, coming to retrieve Takuma?

"Colonel, get away from the window." Kalinin, automatic pistol suddenly in hand, pulled Tessa by the arm. Corporal Yang moved swiftly to the corner of the hallway to evaluate the situation outside.

Tessa shook herself out of her momentary stupor. “They’re after Takuma. We need to get him out of here.” She immediately headed to the interrogation room nearby.

“I can’t recommend that, Colonel,” Kalinin said.

“Why not?”

“We have no authority here. We should hide out and wait for them to take Takuma away.”

Tessa knew well that this wasn’t simple cowardice; Kalinin was simply a cautious man by nature. He wanted to avoid unnecessary risks.

But she shook her head in response. “We can’t let A21 have Takuma. If they’re going to lengths like these to get him back, it means they don’t have a substitute. I’m sure they have some terrible weapon for him to pilot... Letting them have him would be extremely dangerous.”

“Keeping you safe will take everything Yang and I are capable of,” Kalinin retorted. “And the enemy is—”

“W-Wait a minute,” Shimamura said, recovering from his initial confusion. “He’s right. You aren’t authorized. We can’t have you taking the boy with you.”

“But if you can’t protect him, we’ll have to, won’t we?”

“As I explained to you before, we have a fully-armed security team. No matter how many they send, they won’t succeed.”

As if to punctuate his words, an armored car with a 20mm autocannon chose that moment to pass in front of their building.

“You see?” Shimamura continued. “Let’s see their rifles stand up to something like that.”

“No. Tell them to fall back—” Kalinin tried.

Immediately, the armored car was speared by a line of fire, which sent metal parts flying. Spewing smoke, it first skidded, and then exploded. One of the fragments broke through the window next to Tessa with a crash.

The culprit revealed itself from behind the hospital building, an enormous

figure stepping out of the flames. Its torso was squat and egg-like, its legs and arms spindly. It was the second-generation Soviet AS, the Rk-92 Savage, wielding an unadorned 40mm rifle.

“An arm slave?! You can’t mean—” Shimamura’s voice was close to a shriek. It was a natural reaction; most people only ever heard of them in civil wars in war-torn regions. A sudden AS raid here in Japan was like getting a pound of spare ribs dropped on your plate in the middle of a multi-course traditional meal.

“I can’t believe it...” The gray-painted Savage took step after step toward their hospital building. Its head-mounted machine guns ripped through the assembled security forces; its rifle riddled a nearby building with holes. Tessa could hear the death cries of the men whose lives it claimed.

Two round red eyes flicked in their direction. An inhuman gaze—for some reason, she felt like the AS was laughing at her. The head-mounted machine guns took aim in her direction. The 40mm rifle that had taken out the armored car was pointed toward her, too. It was about to shoot.

“Colonel!” Tessa was frozen to the spot. Kalinin and Yang ran at her simultaneously; Shimamura had already made himself scarce. “Get dow—”

In that moment there was a powerful shockwave. The ceiling collapsed. Glass, steel, and concrete began to fall around them.

There was no sound, and the fragments fell in slow motion. Close by, she could see Corporal Yang speared by a shard of glass... yet he was still running toward her, trying to protect her. *You don’t have to go so far just for me,* Tessa thought to herself.

Then another shockwave hit her.

◆

The Savage had secured the target building and its surroundings. The security forces showed no more signs of interfering. They were all AWOL, dead, or dying —one of the three.

The gray Savage approached the devastated building through the smoke and dust that hung thick in the air. Planting a foot on the rubble, it stretched its

hand through the collapsed wall. Then its joints locked up, holding it in that position. The hatch behind the head opened and the operator climbed out. She was dressed in her orange G-suit, her gaze unemotional, as if indifferent to the tragedy her rampage had wrought.

The woman, Seina, grabbed the submachine gun attached to the bottom of the hatch, then moved lithely down the arm of the Savage to enter the building. The hallway was littered with debris. She stepped on the remains of a corpse torn apart by the Savage's machine guns as she walked, but she paid it no mind.

She came to her destination—the interrogation room where she expected to find Takuma—and opened the door. But it was just a gray, empty space containing a toppled chair and a simple table. Seina said nothing. Her eyes flared with rage.

"Seina. Did you find Takuma?" a masked man, a member of the strike team, asked as he approached.

"He's not here," she replied shortly.

"No way. The transmitter readings said he'd be in this room—"

"He's not. He's been removed." There were faint drops of blood around the room's entrance. A member of the security team, though injured, must have taken him away. But in such a short time? And without anyone on the strike team noticing? "We can still track the transmitter, can't we?" she asked.

"Yes... but it's out of range," the masked man told her. "It will take time to find them."

"Begin the search immediately," Seina ordered him. "We need Takuma to move that devil."

The man nodded, then said: "And... there seems to be an injured person with him. What do we do about them?"

"Kill them."

"But I—"

The masked man made way as another member of the team came by, bringing in one of the casualties. It was a large Caucasian man, dressed in a

tattered brown suit and bleeding here and there. He had several shards of glass sticking out of his back; it was a state that would kill most men. But though his head was bowed as he was dragged along, he still seemed to be conscious.

“He doesn’t appear to be part of the facility’s staff,” the new team member noted.

“Agreed,” Seina said.

“What should we do, Seina?”

Seina didn’t respond, but used her submachine gun’s barrel to tilt the man’s face up. He had strong features and gray facial hair; despite his injuries, his dark eyes glowed with defiance. Instinctively, she could tell that this was a man who made his living on the battlefield. It reminded her of someone—someone she had nearly given her heart to long ago. “Who are you?” she asked.

“Your enemy,” he said, then lost consciousness.

2: The Baton Passes to Uruz-7

26 June, 1831 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Tamagawa, Chofu

It was evening. Chidori Kaname was strolling through a residential district, down the road that led from the station to her home. A sour-looking Sagara Sousuke followed, about five steps behind her.

“When are you going to give it a rest?” Kaname demanded, stopping suddenly in front of a green grocer’s stand. “I don’t need your stalkery bodyguarding anymore, remember? So could you please stop following me?”

“Well... It’s just that my apartment is in the same direction...” Sousuke was still living in the apartment that Mithril had prepared for the purpose of guarding Kaname; it was a one minute walk from hers.

The news that he wasn’t actually following her caused Kaname to frown. “W... Well, obviously.” She started walking again.

Apparently even Sousuke had his limits when it came to Kaname’s obstinacy, because he walked up behind her and said, “There’s something I want to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“What can I do to make you understand? I explained why I broke my promise. I gave you poppy flowers as a sign of repentance. In the interests of ensuring your future safety, I believe it’s best that we mend our relationship.”

A shot of irritation went through Kaname. Why did he always have to talk this way? “Mend *what* relationship? We’re classmates; that’s all. I don’t see why we need to be on speaking terms, do you?”

“It’s my duty to protect you,” Sousuke insisted.

Not again, Kaname thought. This arrogance was so typical. He was so full of himself! She snorted her derision. “Cut the Kevin Costner act. You’re just a loser who gets on everyone’s nerves. And I never asked for your protection.” At times like these, Kaname could turn her venom on full blast.

“It’s true that I never gained your consent. But—”

“But what? I have some weird power and the bad guys want it. That’s all it is, right? You don’t actually care what happens to me.”

“That’s not true. If anything were to happen to you—”

“Stop acting like you care!” Kaname shouted, loud enough to earn looks from passersby. “Work is all that matters to you, and of course it is! You’re a war-obsessed jerk and you don’t care about anything but your missions. If you’re not going to change, at least take your self-sabotaging stupidity somewhere I don’t have to see it.” Her words came so quickly that there was no room for argument.

“Let me tell you extent of our relationship,” she went on. “If you die on one of your stupid missions, I’ll find it in my heart to light a stick of incense in your memory. And when I get a boyfriend, some time when we’re in bed together I’ll laugh and tell him about the weird idiot I once knew at school. Is that good enough for you?!” By the end she was shouting, her shoulders heaving.

It was then that she realized Sousuke wasn’t angry, but silent and standing perfectly still. “I just don’t... care about you,” she said at last. Then, suddenly unable to take it any longer, she turned her back on him. She dashed away, cut across the street, ran up to the entrance of her apartment complex, dove into the elevator, and let the doors close behind her. As the elevator ascended, then, and only then...

“Ugh. What a stupid jerk I am...” she admitted as she banged her head against the wall. *I know he was just trying to say “I’m sorry” in his own way... Why can’t I ever just be honest?*

26 June, 1840 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Tigers Mansion, Chofu, Tamagawa

Sousuke headed for his apartment, racking his brain. He couldn't understand why Kaname was acting this way. She'd told Sousuke she hated him. She'd said she didn't care if he died. She'd said that she didn't want him around.

But how can that be true? he wondered. She'd helped him study, made lunches for him, helped cover for his various blunders at school... Those were expressions of affection, weren't they?

Was she still angry about him breaking his promise last night? He'd explained and apologized for that, of course... but she hadn't forgiven him.

So she really does hate me, then? Perhaps her daily acts of kindness were just a thank-you for his protection. The thought sent a sudden ache spreading from the back of his head down to his shoulders. He'd experienced this sensation a few times before: When he was surrounded by enemies and told that no reinforcements were coming; when he was heading home on a transport helicopter and the pilot shouted, "We're out of fuel!"; when his comrade Sergeant Kurz Weber told him, "Hey, don't worry." It was a deeply unpleasant feeling.

Sousuke was always out of his depth in interpersonal affairs, but he'd found his relationship with Kaname to be a particularly mysterious and baffling one.

"Sounds like love. You're a dead man," Kurz had told him once with a cheery laugh. Sousuke had regretted talking to him about it. Even he knew—albeit from hearsay—that love was supposed to be a pleasant thing; it was logically impossible that the word could apply to this wasting misery he felt right now. With his mind churning all of this over, he trudged down the fifth floor communal corridor and came to a stop in front of his door.

That's when he realized it: There was someone in his apartment. No... maybe two someones? No matter how wrapped up in his thoughts he might be, his trained soldier's instincts weren't about to miss that. He shoved his worries out of his mind and pulled a 9mm handgun from the small of his back.

He remained quiet, evaluating. The door was unlocked. Had they used the spare key he hid in the mailbox? If so, it wouldn't be Kurz or Mao—they both had copies of his key.

Who, then? he wondered. It didn't seem right for an ambush. He took in a

deep breath, then burst through the door with all his might. Like a snake lunging at its prey, low and sharp, he dashed through the short entry hall.

He sprung out into the living room, and pointed his gun at the intruders. There were two of them. One was an unfamiliar boy, gaunt and dressed in pajamas. The other was a girl in a dingy suit, with ash blonde hair and blue eyes. She was holding a large automatic pistol that seemed out of place in her dainty hands, which she was pointing at the boy.

She stood frozen to the spot, wearing her surprise and fear openly. But when she recognized Sousuke, she let out a sigh of heartfelt relief. “Sagara-san. Oh... thank goodness.”

Sousuke’s eyes went wide. “C-Colonel?!”

The girl—Colonel Teletha Testarossa—lowered her gun and slumped against the wall behind her, as if all of the tension had left her body at once. “I thought you were the enemy, and that I was finished. I’m not... very good with firearms.”

“What’s going on here?” Sousuke asked. “Who’s that boy?”

“You can’t let him get away,” Tessa insisted anxiously. “He’s... well...”

Sousuke met the silent boy’s eyes. There was something off about his gaze. *What is he looking at?* The next thing Sousuke knew, the boy stood up, wavering, and took a step forward. Sousuke looked at him cautiously, instinctively pointing his gun at him.

The boy let out a groan. Then, with a sudden bloodcurdling scream, he lunged at Sousuke. Rather than firing, Sousuke leaned over, executing a shoulder throw on the charging boy. As the boy landed on his back, winded, Sousuke plunged the grip of his gun into his solar plexus. The boy gulped, and lost consciousness. *Who is he?* Sousuke wondered, even as he casually secured his victory.

“Just in time... The tranquilizer must have worn off,” Tessa said.

He handcuffed the boy—his name was Takuma, apparently—and threw him into the bedroom, then brought out a folding chair and offered it to Tessa. There was almost no furniture in his apartment—which meant no sofa, of course.

Sousuke didn't know why a young girl like Tessa was serving as commander-in-chief of the amphibious assault team, Tuatha de Danaan. But most of their squad, himself included, recognized that she had the intelligence and ability for the role. It was why Sousuke was always nervous when speaking to her. Fighting alone in an arm slave felt like a simple task, compared with carrying the fates of several hundred people every day; Teletha Testarossa was on a higher plane of existence.

He asked her if she wanted some coffee. "Please," she said. Sousuke gave her an awkward salute, then headed for the kitchen.

Ten minutes later, Tessa had given him a rough outline of the situation. Sousuke was surprised, but digested the information quickly.

At the same time, he found it hard to believe anyone would take an AS to a government facility just to retrieve this one boy. It felt, to him, like performing a chainsaw appendectomy; the enemy must enjoy such gratuitous violence.

Tessa went on to explain how she'd lost contact with Major Kalinin, how she and her bodyguard, Corporal Yang, tried to take Takuma out of the facility, and everything that had happened after.

"So you borrowed a car from the laboratory and drove off?" Sousuke asked from the kitchen, as he watched the coffeemaker bubble away.

"Yes," she affirmed. "Their possession of an AS made calling in a helicopter the more dangerous proposition... and our transmitters were broken, anyway. Yang-san forced himself to drive despite his injury..."

"And you came right here?"

"No. We were on our way when Yang-san's condition suddenly worsened... He seemed on the verge of losing consciousness, so I was forced to drop him off near Higashikurume. I used a public telephone to call an ambulance, then caught a taxi to get some distance..."

She really is intelligent, Sousuke thought. Mithril had no permanent center of operations in Tokyo; he'd heard that their intelligence division was setting up a Tokyo branch, but it wouldn't be up and running for a while. In other words, this apartment was the one place in the country that contained someone Tessa

could trust. Contacting the Japanese police was out; a supposedly secret laboratory had already been attacked. There was nowhere else she could safely go.

"I changed taxis twice and finally made my way here," she went on. "Melissa had told me where the key was, so..."

Sousuke's comrade, Master Sergeant Melissa Mao, and Tessa were close on a personal level, as fellow East Coast Americans. *But why would the subject of my spare key come up? Just what do those two talk about?* he wondered. "What's the significance of Takuma himself?" is what he said out loud.

"Oh... I'm sorry, but you're not authorized to know that," Tessa said apologetically.

"I see. Forgive me for asking." Sousuke saw nothing suspicious about being denied this information; it wasn't unusual to hear such things when you were part of an organization like Mithril.

"Just know that he's important to them—important enough to spur such drastic action on their part—and that if we allow them to retrieve him, terrible things will result."

Sousuke filled a mug with coffee, returned to the living room and offered it to Tessa.

"Thank you, Sagara-san."



“Not at all. Though I’m afraid it’s an inexpensive brand...”

“I spent close to two hours here watching over Takuma... I’m exhausted,” Tessa admitted. “I didn’t know the personal code required to activate your transmitter, even...”

“I’m sorry to hear it. Do... you think Corporal Yang will pull through?” Sousuke thought back on the highly competent (if sometimes overly trusting) corporal.

“Yes. His injuries didn’t seem critical; it was just the blood loss...” Tessa took a dainty sip from her cup, then sighed. “I feel so worthless. I’m no use at all on land. Because of me, Kalinin-san might...” Tessa hesitated, then glanced at Sousuke. “I don’t know how to tell you how sorry I am... I know he’s like a father to you.”

“It’s not your fault. He was doing his duty,” Sousuke told her. “And besides, we don’t know that he’s dead.”

“Of course, you’re right, but...”

“It’s actually more likely that he’s alive.”

“But...”

“He and I first met as enemies. I’ve never faced anyone more formidable.” This was Sousuke’s attempt at being reassuring, but Tessa’s reaction was different than expected. It was like instead of comfort, she’d found a new source of unease.

“Enemies?” she asked.

“It was a long time ago, during the USSR’s re-invasion of Afghanistan,” Sousuke explained. “We had an encounter in the Panjshir Valley.” Sousuke had been raised as a guerrilla in Afghanistan, while Kalinin was a leader of a Spetsnaz force. With the country embroiled in civil war, any meeting between them there would have had to be on a battlefield. “I knew the terrain like the back of my hand, but he completely beat me. He’s a difficult man to kill.”

“That’s a strange form of reassurance... But I’m sure you’re right. I’ll assume Kalinin-san is safe until proven otherwise.” Tessa smiled weakly. Then, realizing that Sousuke was still standing at attention, she said, “You don’t have to be so

respectful, Sagara-san. Please, sit. This is your apartment, after all."

"No, ma'am," he countered. "This is a Mithril safehouse."

"But you live here, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am. But it was acquired with Mithril funds."

At last, Tessa broke out in a big smile. "You're exactly how Melissa said you were."

"What?" Sousuke was surprised.

"Completely inflexible, utterly straight-laced, and terribly kind... The way you comforted me about Kalinin-san, for instance."

"Ah. Well, I..." he trailed off, frozen with discomfort.

Tessa peeked up at him, a faint light of mischief dancing in her large gray eyes. "Were you aware that I'm the same age you are?"

"Ah... I had heard that, yes."

"If we walked hand in hand," she pointed out, "we'd look like boyfriend and girlfriend."

"Ma'am. Er... I'm honored?" Sousuke managed. He wondered if it would have been better to say something like, "I'm sure I'd be unworthy of you," but Tessa didn't seem offended by his choice.

Instead, she adopted a shy but lovely smile. "As am I. Well, all joking aside, you really should relax more at times like these... it's hard for me to speak to you when you're so tense."

"Yes, ma'am."

"That wasn't an order."

"Understood. Was it a request?"

"Something like that... I'd like it if you'd take it as a request from a friend," Tessa told him.

"I will, ma'am," Sousuke said, barely relaxing at all. "As ordered."

Tessa adopted an expression that was a mix of amusement and sorrow. "Well,

good enough. Now, I have one other favor to ask...”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Could I use your bathroom? You see the shape I’m in...” She tugged at her dust-covered blouse and held up her fraying braid.

“Er?”

“I’d like to take a shower. It’s working, isn’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said with some hesitation. “At your leisure. Shall I contact the de Danaan?”

“Please. It should be in a deep dive at the moment, so have the Merida Island Base send an ELF transmission telling them to rise to periscope depth. My ID code for this week is, ‘A Man from Nantucket.’ Once the ship surfaces and opens a secure channel, I’ll speak to them directly.” Her instructions given, Tessa headed for the bathroom.

It was times like these that Sousuke wished his hearing wasn’t so good. He could hear the sound of clothing rustling in the changing room; the *swish, swish* of it being dropped into the washer; then a much softer rustling. Her legs sliding smoothly out of something; the clack of the bath door opening, then closing. Sousuke remained silent and still through it all. He wasn’t especially trying to listen in, and he wasn’t really trying to imagine her naked... but still, he felt restless.

Teletha Testarossa, the woman who existed on a plane beyond his comprehension, was in his shower. She wasn’t wearing a stitch of her informal civilian outfit. It was like a huge bomb had been placed, safety off, just beyond the bathroom door.

Okay, okay, get back to work... Sousuke thought sternly. He shook his head and committed himself to carrying out her instructions: using the apartment’s satellite transmitter to contact the Tuatha de Danaan in the Pacific. Radio waves didn’t travel well underwater, so he couldn’t talk to them directly; he instead asked Mithril’s West Pacific base to send a short message via ELF transmission; he received a reply two minutes later.

《Roger that. Please contact again at 1020 (GMT) on line G3.》

That was about twenty minutes from now. Sousuke turned off the receiver. Once contact was achieved, either the de Danaan or the West Pacific base would send reinforcements. Then they could take Takuma overseas, where he'd be out of enemy hands, and they'd have won—assuming he and Tessa could just keep him safe until then.

Sousuke checked the bedroom, where he'd left Takuma handcuffed to the simple bed. The boy was where he'd left him, and awake again already. He regarded Sousuke with a surprising degree of calm.

"Are you hungry?" Sousuke asked, probing his reaction.

"No," Takuma responded, sounding more lucid than expected.

"You understand me?"

"Of course I do, Sagara Sousuke-san." Takuma smiled slightly after saying his full name. He'd probably just seen the doorplate on their way into the apartment... but it was clearly meant as provocation, as if to say "I know exactly who you are."

"You seem intelligent," Sousuke said, then returned to the living room. He turned on the TV and began his weapons maintenance routine.

The 7:00 news happened to be playing on NHK, but nothing was mentioned about the laboratory attack; the Japanese government must be trying to keep everything quiet, including the presence of an AS-armed terrorist group at large.

We might want to move sooner than later, Sousuke thought while inspecting his silencer-attached submachine gun. The enemy probably didn't know about his apartment, but that was no reason to let his guard down.

He was using a speedloader to fill a spare magazine with 9mm rounds when he heard the doorbell ring. Sousuke said nothing, but took his just-checked submachine gun and bulletproof vest and headed for the entrance. He held the vest like a shield, just in case they shot at him through the door. Eventually, he looked out the peephole.

Kaname's face filled the distorted view provided by the fish-eye lens. She had changed into her street clothes, and was fidgeting somewhat nervously in front

of his door. He opened it, suspiciously. “Chidori. What’s the matter?”

“Wow,” was the first thing she said. “What’s with the scary gun?”

“Things happened,” he said evasively. “Did you run into anyone suspicious outside?”

“Oh, please, of course not! Look, um...” Kaname hesitated, then looked down, then tapped the floor with her toe, and mumbled vaguely. “Um... I think I was too hard on you before. I mean... y’know... It’s not like you were just off messing around... and I’m trying to be understanding about this stuff, I guess I’m just... stubborn, in a lot of ways. So, um, I’m trying to say...” She gulped audibly, and finished, “Well... I’m sorry.” She bowed to him, then looked at him with upturned eyes. It was the face of someone afraid of total rejection.

Good; the incident is finally resolved, Sousuke thought. The oppressive feeling from earlier was gone without a trace—Perhaps he’d been overly sensitive in assuming that she hated him. “I feel like I’m the one constantly making trouble for you,” he admitted. “It feels strange to have you apologize to me...”

“You forgive me?” she asked.

“There’s no need; I’m the one at fault.”

“Really? Thanks so much!” Kaname’s expression instantly brightened, and she produced a multi-tiered lunch box from behind her back. “So anyway, I’ve got some stuff left over from yesterday. I brought it by; you want it? If you let me use your kitchen, I can heat it up, too...”

“Well...” Sousuke racked his brain. Tessa and Takuma were in the apartment. And Tessa was currently...

He hadn’t technically done anything wrong, yet his stomach churned with feelings of guilt.

“Did you eat already?” she asked.

“No, not yet...” The anxiety that clouded her eyes made him hesitant to lie.

“Then c’mon, let’s eat together. Can’t I come in?” Kaname tried to step inside, but Sousuke blocked her way. “What’s wrong?”

“Well... Your kindness is appreciated, but...”

“But what?”

“I’m currently in the middle of a complicated, sensitive situation,” Sousuke told her apologetically. “It would require time to explain, and I lack full confidence that you would understand...”

“What are you talking about?” Kaname asked suspiciously.

Just then, the door to the bathroom (which was just by the front door) opened. Tessa, naked except for a bath towel, peeked out, her wet hair shedding silver droplets onto the floor below. “Sagara-san. Do you have a T-shirt or... oh?”

Tessa and Kaname’s eyes met. For about three seconds, both stood there, dumbstruck. Standing between them, Sousuke felt greasy sweat form on his brow, and shook his head rapidly. He knew on an instinctual level that something very bad was happening. Yes, whatever this was, it was extremely *not good.*

“Good evening,” Tessa said with a bashful smile and a slight flush in her cheeks. For some reason, she was acting like a leading lady from Hollywood movie, right after a love scene.

“Um. Good evening...” Kaname replied, dumbly. Then, expression blank, she forced the wrapped parcel into Sousuke’s hands. “Here... you two take it.”

“Ch-Chidori?” he stuttered.

“Sorry to interrupt you and your girlfriend. She’s really pretty.” Kaname then spun around and sped down the hall.

Realizing vaguely that things were hurtling in a very serious direction, Sousuke tried to follow Kaname. But...

“Could you please not follow me?” she snapped at him, rooting him in place before he got far.

“Chidori, you have it all wrong,” he told her.

“How, exactly?”

“She’s... my superior. A colonel with Mithril, and the captain of our amphibious assault submarine. She’s out of my league in every possible way.” If

Sousuke had been a little less flustered, he probably would have realized how absurd this claim sounded.

“Do you think I’m stupid?” Kaname demanded.

“Of course not.”

Kaname had stopped. Her shoulders were trembling. Sousuke couldn’t see her face, but he felt sure that she was angry. He was wrong.

“I’m sorry... I didn’t realize. I shouldn’t have butted in... I guess I’ve been a huge pain in the neck this whole time, huh?”

“No, Chidori. That’s not the case at all...”

“Look, it’s fine. You don’t have to soften it. I’m not angry. I’m just sorry. I’ll be more careful from now on, so...”

“Chidori...”

“I’m just sorry, okay?” Kaname said, and then ran for the emergency stairwell.

The colonel is not to blame. The fault lies with the terrorists, Sousuke told himself. At this point, if he ended up in a firefight with A21, he might be forced to keep shooting until he’d discharged every round in his possession.

When he returned, he found Tessa using the satellite transmitter to contact the Tuatha de Danaan in the Pacific. She was talking to her XO, Commander Richard Mardukas.

Since she had no change of clothes on hand, she was currently dressed (rather alluringly) in nothing but a khaki-colored T-shirt. It was his first time seeing her slender legs; her small, adorable toes. The T-shirt’s too-big collar gave him occasional glimpses of her white chest area, which made it hard for him to know where to rest his eyes. Even a walking block of wood like Sousuke could recognize the appeal of a girl like Tessa. Her defenselessness just added to it; Tessa was confusing him in a completely different way than Kaname did.

Apparently having finished her discussion, she turned off the transmitter.

“How did it go?” he asked.

“They’re sending reinforcements; Melissa and Weber-san,” she said, referring

to Mao and Kurz. “They’ll bring an M9 with them. We’ll convey Takuma to the de Danaan, then issue your next assignment.”

“May I ask what that is, ma’am?”

“Recon, to find the enemy hideout. I asked the de Danaan’s mother AI to track transmissions by the police and the JSDF, so we should have a few hints by morning. Once we’ve located them, we can decide whether to leave them for further tracking or subjugate,” Tessa said in her commander’s voice.

“And you, ma’am?” Sousuke wanted to know.

“I’ll remain in Tokyo. There’s a very high chance that the enemies possess special equipment that only I know how to deal with.”

Sousuke chose not to pursue the matter; he knew that even if he asked what the “special equipment” was, she likely wouldn’t tell him.

“So, for now, we just wait. Let’s see...” Tessa sat down in the folding chair and stretched a bit. “Was that girl from before Chidori Kaname?”

“Er?” Her question was so out of the blue that he was at a loss to respond.

“She *was* Chidori Kaname, wasn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“You seem close,” she observed.

“No, ma’am,” he said after a pause. “We’re not, particularly...”

“Really? It didn’t look that way to me. Making you dinner and bringing it by... she seemed almost like your wife.”

“I apologize, ma’am,” Sousuke said humbly. “I’ll be more careful about mixing business and personal life from now on.”

Tessa smiled at Sousuke’s response. “That’s not how I meant it. I’m the one who approved your guardianship of her, and you were never told not to get close.” It was actually Major Kalinin who had given him the order—but of course, as his superior, Tessa would know about it too. “I was curious, that’s all... I thought ‘maybe, even Sagara-san has a girl that he likes’...” There was a strange tone in her voice, as if she were sounding him out somehow. Sousuke

just froze up, unsure of how to answer, so she pressed him a bit more—meekly, for some reason. “Are you dating her, then?”

“No, certainly not,” Sousuke answered.

“Really?”

“Yes, ma’am. The fact of the matter is, I’m having a hard time building up a true relationship of trust.”

“I see. I’m glad.” Tessa linked her hands and smiled.

Feeling as if his superior had accepted his report, Sousuke relaxed. He was about to salute her, but—*No, wait... What does she mean, “I’m glad”? Why would she be happy to hear that things aren’t going well between us?*

Tessa just kept smiling. There was no particular air of malice about her.

I don’t understand, Sousuke thought, and he genuinely didn’t. Perhaps it was beyond the understanding of a mere NCO like himself; he repeated to himself that she was still the commander-in-chief of the Tuatha de Danaan, and then tried to change the subject. “If I may, ma’am, we should discuss Takuma. His personal significance aside, what do the forces of A21 consist of?”

Tessa seemed caught off guard by his question, but quickly recovered. “Well... I’m not completely sure, yet. They have very advanced weaponry, and I imagine they’re well trained.”

“How do they gather intelligence?”

“Unknown. There’s a chance they have a mole in the Japanese government.”

“Should we question Takuma?”

“I thought about that... but he hasn’t been very cooperative, and I don’t wish to resort to violence. I’d like to watch things a bit longer before I decide.”

“But—” Sousuke stopped. His expression was suddenly sharp and dangerous. “It seems we can’t stay here, regardless.” He picked up his submachine gun and shoved two spare magazines into his belt.

Tessa furrowed her brow. “What’s the matter?”

“Get into the kitchen and get down.”

Get down—Those two words must have told Tessa everything she needed to know. She didn't bother asking if she could help in any way; she would know that anything she did would just trip him up. "Be careful," was all she said, then, before moving into the kitchen.

The doorbell rang. He knew it wasn't Kaname. He tapped the intercom button on the living room wall.

"Package delivery," came the response.

"I'm on my way," he answered, but he didn't head for the front door. He remained exactly where he was, a finger on the light switch. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. A quiet tension hung over the room. A murderous intent crackled in the air like electricity. *I'm back in my element,* Sousuke thought.

That status quo lasted all of ten seconds before the veranda window broke, and a grenade flew in. No, not a grenade—a tear gas canister, which immediately spewed its noxious fumes. Its arrival was followed by a man in a black battle uniform, wearing a gas mask and wielding a submachine gun.

This was what Sousuke was waiting for. He shut the lights off in the living room and opened fire at the man in black. The sudden darkness slowed the intruder's reactions enough that Sousuke's wall of fire hit him unguarded. He fell, and fell silent.

More are coming, Sousuke thought. *The room next door—*

Ignoring the tear gas filling the room, Sousuke moved efficiently to the bedroom. He told Takuma to get down, then emptied his clip at the window behind the boy. Glass broke and sparks flew around the frame. He heard a short scream, followed by the sound of someone falling outside on the veranda.

As he replaced his weapon's magazine in a smooth motion, he next heard a soft blast from the front door: Someone had blown off the hinges and knob with plastic explosives. This new intruder kicked down the door and entered the front way.

Sousuke returned to the living room. Through the darkness and thick fog of the tear gas, he could see a figure in a deliveryman's uniform, wearing a gas

mask and holding a large automatic pistol.

“Drop your weapon,” Sousuke said, offering the mercy of a warning that the man didn’t take. He pointed his gun at Sousuke, so Sousuke didn’t hesitate to shoot him. The muzzle flash created swirls in the tear gas; five 9mm slugs took the “deliveryman” down.

Sousuke checked the communal hall, the veranda, and elsewhere, but he saw no sign of more enemies. “Three of them?” he muttered. “It seems a bit—” *Inadequate,* he thought. While it was smart of them to surround him, their timing was slightly off. And reasonably skilled though they were, they’d had the misfortune of facing Sousuke.

He could hear Tessa, coughing violently, turn on the kitchen’s exhaust fan. *It must be awful if you haven’t built up a tolerance,* he thought, before assuring her, “We’re safe now, ma’am.”

“R-Right,” she said through more coughing.

Realizing she wouldn’t be able to talk for a while, he approached the fallen intruder in the living room. He was wearing a bulletproof vest, but shots to the throat and the head had killed him instantly. Sousuke stood there in silence; he felt a pang of something like pity, but it passed. How many security and lab personnel had this man killed in the exact same way? It wasn’t unjust for him to meet a similar end. Cliché though it was to say, this was kill or be killed.

The intruder must have rappelled from the roof to the veranda. His unused submachine gun was loaded with specialized bullets for wars against terrorism; both were far beyond what you could get from local crime syndicates. Sousuke removed the man’s gas mask and looked into his face. He sobered, silently. The man was young and Japanese; not much older than Sousuke. His eyes, wide open in shock, stared emptily past him.

Sousuke checked the other two bodies on the veranda and at the entrance. They were the same way; likely Japanese, and not much older than twenty, if that.

He’d thought the same thing when looking at the pictures in yesterday’s operation... just what kind of terrorist organization was A21, that it was comprised entirely of boys like these? They didn’t seem like a political

organization, but...

Once she was recovered, Tessa came out of the kitchen. She made it to the bedroom and looked down, pale-faced, at the man lying on the veranda. She didn't give voice to her feelings, but simply asked, "How did they know we were here?"

"I doubt they followed you here," Sousuke said. "They would have had countless chances to attack you and Takuma before you arrived."

"True. It's hard to believe they could have an informant in Mithril... Perhaps I underestimated their intelligence network. The only other option is..." She suddenly stopped. Her voice cracked. "Is..."

"Colonel?"

"I'm sorry, I..." As if unable to bear it any longer, Tessa threw herself at Sousuke. Her slender fingers clutched at his button-up shirt. Her shoulders trembled, and her breathing was ragged. "I... I know it's strange to act this way... because of something like this, after all this time... But I'd been... letting my guard down, and..." She squeezed out the words, her head pressed against Sousuke's chest.

Sousuke didn't know that he was the reason she had let her guard down. She'd let herself fall into the mindset of a normal girl, talking to a boy her own age, so this sudden reminder of the world she really lived in had brought forth a surge of emotions. "I'm sorry. I'll be back to normal soon. I'm sorry," she repeated again and again, fighting her tears as hard as she could.

Sousuke just stood where he was, uncertain of how to respond. Just then, he heard a chuckle from the nearby Takuma. "Is something funny?" he asked.

"No... but it's interesting that you think you have time to spend on crying," Takuma replied.

"What do you mean?" Sousuke asked, carefully prying Tessa off of him.

"You're going to share their fate soon enough. There's nowhere you can run... As long as I'm with you, my comrades will find you."

"You must be quite important."

“I am. Very,” Takuma asserted with confidence. “You’d be better off letting me go now... Just a friendly warning.”

“There’s another way to resolve things.” Sousuke pointed his submachine gun at Takuma’s head, suggesting a much simpler way of keeping him out of the enemy’s reach.

“You’re going to kill me?”

“I believe you know that I’d do it if necessary,” Sousuke returned.

“No, Sagara-san,” Tessa warned him from behind. Her crying had ceased by now.

“Ma’am. May I ask why not?”

“Well... I agree that it’s the safest and most logical course of action. But... that’s simply not how we do things,” Tessa said, as if she was the one who needed reminding. “Don’t you understand? If we do that, we’ll be just like they are. The entire point of having an organization like ours, doing what we do, will be lost.”

Sousuke remained in position. He looked at his gun, then at the expression on Takuma’s face beyond it. The boy had seemed arrogant before, but there was emotion on his face now. Most people would miss it—the tiniest sign of fear.

“Sagara-san, do you think I’m naïve?” Tessa asked.

“Of course not.” Sousuke lowered the gun. “Be grateful to her,” he said, then turned around and left.

Takuma watched him go, then looked at Tessa. “Do you expect me to act like I’m in your debt?”

“No. And that isn’t why I stopped him, anyway.”

“So much virtuous posturing...” Takuma sneered. “It’s how you make yourself feel special, I’m sure.”

“Think that way if you wish,” Tessa said indifferently, then followed Sousuke into the living room. “Thank you, Sagara-san.”

“Not at all,” Sousuke replied. “But it’s going to be trouble if more of them

come.”

“You’re right,” she agreed. “We can’t stay here.”

“I’ll dispose of the bodies. Can you contact the de Danaan? For our destination, tell them...” Sousuke thought about where to go next. “Tell them, ‘We’re going to study Japanese history.’”

“Japanese history?” Tessa questioned.

“Sergeant Weber will understand.”

26 June, 2031 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Maison K, Tamagawa, Chofu

Kaname lay on the sofa, staring emptily at the ceiling. She’d wanted to cry at first, but that had passed, and now she just felt tired all over. What she’d seen had been a real shock to her system; she’d assumed he was so standoffish and inflexible that no girl would ever make time for him. “But he had a girlfriend like her this whole time...”

I’ve been so stupid, she thought. *Just because we’ve been through a little life-or-death situation doesn’t mean he really cares about me... I got myself all puffed up, thinking I was the only one who saw any good in him... What was I thinking? Everyone must be laughing at how stupid I am...*

She picked up a hand mirror next to her and looked at her own face. “I’m so ugly...” At least, that’s what that girl must have thought. Compared to her... Sparkling silver hair and big gray eyes; a dazzling smile, like a figure skater or a gymnast. “She was so pretty...” Kaname couldn’t compete.

And given the way she was acting, they were clearly in the afterglow of something. *Is she the real reason Sousuke broke his promise yesterday?* she wondered. *Maybe he lied about it being for work; they were actually doing... things... all night long... and then Sousuke went to school in the morning, while she stayed in his apartment all day...* The idea contradicted a lot of facts as she knew them, but in that moment, she lacked the objectivity to realize it.

“I wonder how they met each other...” she whispered to herself. *The daughter of a dead comrade? Someone he saved once, the way he saved me? It must have been a dramatic encounter, either way... like something out of those new 007 movies. I bet they’ve been together since long before he met me...* The idea was entirely without basis, but in that moment, she lacked the calm to reflect upon that.

“I wonder what they’re doing now...” *Sharing a meal together, maybe? The two of them talking happily across the table, gazing at each other with puppy dog eyes... Whispering “I love you”...* In fact, Sousuke was stoically disposing of terrorist corpses, but Kaname had no way of knowing that.

She turned on the TV, turned it off, stared into space for about ten minutes... and then, the doorbell rang. “Who’s coming by at this hour? Darn it...” Kaname rolled over sluggishly on the sofa, considered pretending she wasn’t home, then at last got up and went to the door. She didn’t check who it was first, so she was surprised when it was Sousuke, looking grim. He was with that girl, who was looking even more grim. They were accompanied by an unfamiliar boy who was... indeed, looking grim.

“Um?” she asked, completely baffled by their presence.

“We need help. Please hide us,” Sousuke said morosely.

Fuming all the while that, “This is a pretty big ask,” and “It’s none of my business, you know,” she nevertheless made them a pot of roasted green tea. It was hard to say if it was the result of good upbringing, or if she was just a pushover... but either way, it was one of her better traits. Even after they explained the rough outline of events, though, her dissatisfaction still wouldn’t abate.

“Okay, so...” Kaname placed the teacups onto the table. “There’s some weird terrorist group out there, and it’s after you because of this jerky-looking guy?” She was referring to Takuma; Sousuke had wanted to toss him in the bathroom, but Kaname didn’t like the idea, so they’d been forced to sit him down within arm’s reach. He was being docile for now, at least. “And you’re saying this girl is your superior officer,” Kaname continued, “and a colonel?”

“Correct,” Sousuke replied succinctly.

“Boy, I knew you were a lousy liar, but this is pushing it, you know?” Kaname’s skepticism was likely exacerbated by Takuma’s presence, which prevented him from sharing any details of Mithril’s situation or internal structure. “So... Testarossa-san, right? How old are you?”

“Sixteen. But I’ll be seventeen in six months,” Tessa answered, then took a sip of her tea. She was now wearing baggy cargo pants beneath her T-shirt, jury-rigged in place with a belt.

“A sixteen year old girl captaining a submarine?” Kaname questioned skeptically. “I’ve seen *The Hunt for Red October*, you know. Submarine captains are hard-edged old guys like Sean Connery. She looks more like ‘Underling A,’ the character who reads out communications.”

In spite of Kaname’s rudeness, Tessa nodded as if in agreement.

“But it’s the truth,” Sousuke protested.

“Look I don’t... I don’t care what happened between you guys,” Kaname continued. “But there’s such a thing as basic consideration, you know? If you’re going to ask me for help, you can’t also be lying to me.”

Sousuke was already regretting his choice to come here. The streets nearby were poorly lit, and he’d assumed the next apartment complex over would be the last place the enemy would think to look for them. But it was foolish of him to think that Kaname would accept the situation just because he’d explained it.

The whole time, Tessa just kept sipping her tea, offering no defense whatsoever. She apparently had no intention of backing Sousuke up. Was it just his imagination, or had she been strangely quiet since he told her they were going to Kaname’s place?

“Colonel... Colonel?” He addressed her, but she didn’t respond.

Then she looked up a few seconds later, as if only just realizing she was being addressed. “Oh, that’s me, right! What is it?” Her reaction just deepened Kaname’s suspicions.

“Colonel, will you please explain?” Sousuke asked, panicking.

“Explain what?” Tessa asked innocently.

“Your identity,” Sousuke clarified. “Your circumstances.”

“Oh, right... Well... I’m a battleship... no, was it a submarine captain? I’m a submarine captain, and a... a colonel, and I’m Sousuke’s commanding officer. Really, you have to believe me, Chidori Kaname-san.”

Sousuke could feel the sweat rising on his back. Why was she explaining things so haltingly? And she’d called him Sousuke, too... It didn’t feel like an expression of closeness; there was malice behind it. Had he offended her somehow? “C-Colonel...”

“Is something the matter, Sergeant Sagara?” This time she gave him a beaming smile—a smile pregnant with meaning.

“Not at all,” he said at last. “Anyway, Chidori... It’s all true, so...”

“I see. I get it. I totally get it,” Kaname said. She didn’t sound like she got it at all. “I’m a very patient person, so if you insist that that’s the story, I’ll leave it at that. Now, let’s move on to the next question...” Kaname glared at Takuma. “Mr. Smirky over here... what’s his deal? He really gets on my nerves, and I can’t explain why.”

“I’m so very sorry, Chidori Kaname-san,” Takuma responded quietly.

Kaname snorted. “You don’t look sorry to me. And you haven’t even tried the tea I made you.”

“I’m not thirsty.”

Kaname struck the table, and Tessa recoiled. Takuma showed a hint—just a hint—of surprise. Kaname leaned across the table to glare down into his face. “It’s a politeness thing.” Her voice was strangely intimidating. “Now drink. This ain’t the cheap stuff.”

“And if I refuse?”

“I’ve got some flat Dr. Pepper in the fridge,” Kaname replied. “I’ll pour it down your throat until you beg for mercy.”

Takuma said nothing.

“I *mean* it, okay?”

Takuma raised the teacup and took the tiniest of sips. “Satisfied?”

“You’re a real piece of work... I’d love to meet your parents. I bet they spoiled you rotten,” Kaname grumbled.

In a second, Takuma’s expression became dangerous. Sousuke tensed, expecting another outburst, but it seemed things hadn’t reached that point just yet. Still, the boy glared at Kaname with dark, inhuman eyes.

Kaname, though, was far from cowed—she looked like a general who’d just spotted a weakness in the enemy ranks. “Ooh, did that make you mad? ‘Don’t make fun of my mommy,’ et cetera?”

“I don’t have a mother,” Takuma told her flatly.

His words gave Kaname a moment of pause. “What a coincidence; neither do I. Neither does Sousuke. Did you think you were the only person in the world like that?”

Takuma went silent again.

“Guess I hit the nail on the head. So typical,” Kaname gloated. “Look at that spoiled little expression of yours... I shudder to think what your family was like...”

Takuma started to moan, and his eyes lost their focus. *Here it comes,* Sousuke thought. He didn’t know the boy’s exact condition, but he’d assumed that certain emotional triggers were what drew out his aggression.

His voice rising to a cry, Takuma lost his cool and tried to jump at Kaname. Sousuke grabbed him and held him back. “Ahhhh! You... you...” Kicking and struggling, Takuma trailed off into more incoherent screams, as he was pulled away from the table.

Kaname was stunned for a moment by Takuma’s rage, but her dropped jaw turned quickly to a grin and a flash of a V-sign. “Made ya mad! I win.”

Sousuke, pinning the raging Takuma to the floor, felt renewed regret about his decision to come here. But as he grabbed Takuma’s left arm to hold it down —

He stopped and stared. There was a lump in the man's upper arm. No, if it was just a lump, it wouldn't have given him pause— It was hard and cylindrical; someone less acquainted with human anatomy than Sousuke might have assumed it was part of the bone. Something was buried in Takuma's arm.

Sousuke knocked him unconscious with a chop to the back of the head; he could hardly examine him while he was struggling like this. "Colonel," he said.

Tessa reacted immediately this time, standing up. "What is it?"

"Look at this..." he said, indicating the lump.

She pressed a fingertip against it. Her expression quickly turned serious. "I see. I've been careless..."

"Do you know what it is?"

"Yes. It's a transmitter... It puts out a signal every few minutes to reveal his position," Tessa clarified. "The model was created to monitor prisoners doing labor outdoors, and it's primarily made of acrylic and silicon. Most screenings wouldn't detect it."

While Tessa explained, Sousuke had already picked up his submachine gun to prepare for combat. The enemy knew where they were already; an attack could come at any time. No one would have detected a transmitter implanted inside of him. There was no informant after all; they'd tracked him with a much simpler method.

"What's going on?" Kaname asked suspiciously.

"Nothing good," Sousuke said shortly. "Keep away from the windows and the front door." He focused his attention outside the apartment. He didn't sense an enemy presence; maybe they were being cautious after the first attack had ended so badly. Perhaps they were waiting for reinforcements...

"Um..."

"Yes, Chidori?"

"So, it sounds like there's something in his arm?" Kaname hazarded a guess.

"Yes. It's telling the enemy our position," Sousuke answered in mild annoyance. He searched through his pocket. "Colonel, can you get it out? I have

a knife on hand... morphine, too."

"Right," Tessa agreed. "I suppose we'll have to... But I know nothing about surgery."

"I'll do it, then." Disinfection, surgery, extraction, stitching... He doubted the enemy would give them time for all of it. But they had to disable the transmitter before they took him anywhere else.

"Hey..." As Sousuke produced a disposable syringe, Kaname tapped him on the shoulder.

"What is it?" he asked. "I'm busy."

"You just need to destroy the transmitter, right?"

"Yes. Please give him room," Tessa responded in Sousuke's place.

"I was just thinking, we've got a big microwave... Want to try that?"

Sousuke and Tessa looked at each other.

He stuck a chopstick in the small hole behind the microwave door's hinge. By tricking the simple safety switch, he could run the device even with the door open.

The arm of the still-unconscious Takuma was wrapped in rubber as an insulator, with a hole that left only the transmitter exposed. Once preparations were complete, Sousuke bent the boy's arm and shoved it into the microwave oven.

"A few seconds should do it," he said.

"Okay, here we go." Kaname spun the timer dial and turned it on. Microwaves—fatal to electronic devices even with the briefest exposure—rained down on the transmitter in his arm. Five seconds later... "I'm turning it off." The microwave let out a "ding" as Kaname turned the dial to zero. Nothing looked different, but he assumed the transmitter would now be disabled.

"What an absurdly reckless idea..." Tessa's repugnance was understandable. One miscalculation and they could have boiled the blood in Takuma's arm.

"But we're safe now, right?" Kaname asked.

“Yes, but...” Tessa didn’t seem to know what to say. The attitude of subtle superiority—or disdain, to put it in less flattering terms—that she had initially shown toward Kaname seemed to be on the wane. It must be hard to maintain one’s pride after being shown up in knowledge of basic cooking appliances.

“We’re not out of the woods yet,” Sousuke said as he drew back to the kitchen door. “The moment they realize the transmitter’s disabled, they’ll be after us. We have to leave, ASAP.”

“But since they’ve known that we’re here,” Tessa said, “they’ll be watching the front door, won’t they?” If they wanted to avoid a fight, they’d have to slip out without being seen.

“Chidori,” Sousuke asked, “Does your veranda have a fire exit?”

“You mean a hole in the floor? Yeah...”

“We’ll escape that way,” he decided. Sousuke heaved Takuma onto his shoulders and headed to the veranda, with Tessa close behind. He peeked carefully through the curtains to check conditions on that side; there was no sign of surveillance from the building across from them, so it seemed safe to assume that the enemy wasn’t watching. Keeping low, he stepped out onto the veranda and located the sliding panel in the floor. Opening it would give them access to the next floor down.

“So you’re off, huh? Take care, I guess,” Kaname said. She apparently intended to remain.

“What are you talking about?” Sousuke demanded. “You’re coming with us.”

“Huh?” Kaname asked in confusion.

“You’ll be a target if you stay.” Indeed, they might torture her to find out where Sousuke had gone.

“Wait a minute. I’m a bystander here!”

“I know, but... I’m sorry,” he apologized. “You’re involved now.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me! I’m not coming along on your little elopement! Don’t you realize how messed up that is?!” Kaname argued, loud enough that the whole neighborhood could probably hear.

“Chidori. As I explained before, we are not—”

“Yeah, yeah. Insert labored excuse here... I’ll be fine on my own, so just focus on your girlfriend, okay?” Kaname seemed absolutely intractable. Sousuke began to panic: how could he convince her?

“Chidori-san. This is all a misunderstanding,” Tessa interrupted, losing her patience. “Sagara-san is telling the truth. I’m sorry that we’ve dragged you into this, but you really do need to come with us. Your safety is important to Mithril.” She now spoke with precision, so unlike her laid-back demeanor before. Anyone—even Kaname—would be able to see that she wasn’t just messing around.

“But... earlier, you...”

“It was a joke that went too far,” Tessa admitted candidly. “I apologize. As unbelievable as it may seem, I *am* his superior officer, and I *do* have several hundred people under my command.”

Kaname said nothing.

“Mithril is a unique organization. Please trust me.”

Kaname glanced between Sousuke and Tessa, then stared hard at Takuma. Maybe she was realizing that the situation, that the grouping, didn’t fit whatever scenario she’d cooked up in her mind... that things couldn’t be as simple as she’d made them out to be. Reluctantly, she nodded. “Something about this still doesn’t add up... but, fine. I’ll come along if I have to.”

“Thank you,” Tessa replied. “Sagara-san, let’s proceed.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Sousuke sighed inwardly in relief. He opted not to tell her that the enemy might still break into her room and rummage through it.

“Wait a minute. I need to pack a travel bag—”

“No time,” he told her shortly.

“Can I at least take my PHS? I gotta ask Kyoko to record a drama for me later.” Kaname ran back to her bedroom and returned right away with her portable phone.

They opened the panel in the floor, and Sousuke climbed down first. Kaname

and Tessa slid Takuma through the hole, Sousuke caught him, and then the girls followed after. Tessa seemed to have trouble with the descent, but she managed it with Sousuke and Kaname's help.

The resident of the apartment below didn't seem to notice them; whoever it was, they were watching baseball with the volume all the way up. *Bottom of the 8th, two outs, bases loaded. It's four to one and—*

"Wow, Hanshin's winning," Kaname whispered as she lent an ear to the broadcast.

"Let's go down one more floor," Sousuke whispered back. They climbed to the next veranda down in the same manner as before. The lights in that room were out; nobody seemed to be home. Gratefully, Sousuke broke a window and entered the living room. Carrying Takuma through the darkness, he made it to the front door, unlocked it, cracked it open just five centimeters, and checked outside.

A black van was parked on the street in front of them. Tinted glass windows obscured his view of the back, but there was a man visible in the driver's seat. Sousuke couldn't be sure it was the enemy... but whoever it was, they didn't seem to have noticed them.

"Let's go," he decided. Sousuke committed the van's plates to memory, then crouched his way down the communal corridor with Kaname and Tessa in tow. He led them down the emergency staircase, vaulted the railing from the first floor corridor, then hid behind the shrubbery there.

Tessa let out a little shriek as she caught her foot on her way over the railing, and ended up hitting the ground back-first. As Sousuke and Kaname helped her up, she said, "I... I'm fine," in a pained voice. Her eyes were filled with tears, but the injuries didn't seem severe.

"So, where to now?" Kaname whispered as she peeked out from behind the hydrangea bushes.

"I'm thinking," Sousuke answered. "We need to go somewhere we won't draw undue attention."

"Yeah, right..." Kaname said, casting a glance at Tessa, who for some reason

looked despondent.

There was a Mithril vehicle in the parking lot nearby, but Sousuke wanted to remain on foot if possible. The police would likely be on high alert after the incident that morning, and Takuma's face would be everywhere by now.

"Ideally it would be somewhere close by, whose layout we're familiar with, but with no danger of getting other people hurt," Sousuke said, laying out the most important tactical conditions.

Kaname seemed to find immediate inspiration, and raised an index finger skyward. "Hey, I know just the place."

"Where?"

"School."

"Not school," Sousuke disagreed. "They'll find us there." They would probably search his and Kaname's apartments and immediately learn their connection to Jindai High.

"Not that one," Kaname explained. "There's a high school even closer to here."

26 June, 2107 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Akami Pier, Koto Ward, Tokyo

After Andrey Kalinin regained consciousness, he ran a full self-inspection of his body. His nervous system seemed to be working fine; at the very least, he could feel the pain he was in. No issues with his skeletal system, beyond a few fractured ribs—this might have caused lung damage, but not enough to be fatal. Six deep gashes on his arms and back. Those had been caused by glass shards, which had since been removed. The bleeding had staunched, but not without significant blood loss. Conclusion: He was depleted, but stable.

His next realization was that he was on a ship moored in the harbor. He could hear the lapping of waves and footsteps echoing faintly through the steel frame. There were no problems with his hearing, then... After judging that there

was no one around, Kalinin opened his eyes and moved his head slightly. Pain shot down his right side, but he ignored it.

He was in a small, amber-colored cabin. He could see a bare-bones bed, naked fluorescent bulbs overhead, rust on the iron walls... There was a metal door across from him too, and his gut told him that it was locked from the outside.

His right leg was handcuffed to the bed frame. He tilted his head to look down at himself, and saw that his wounds had received basic treatment. He was wearing pants, but his top half was bare. His lean, muscular frame was bandaged excessively.

Sloppy, Kalinin thought. Whoever brought him here must not have a dedicated doctor in their ranks.

After about five minutes, he heard a sound outside the metal door. It was unlocked and opened, and a woman stepped into the cabin. It was the woman he had seen before he lost consciousness in the lab; he recalled that she'd been addressed as Seina, then.

"I see you're awake." Her voice was cold and delicate, reminiscent of fresh snow. She was still in her orange operator's uniform. She had delicate features and chestnut hair, worn in a mushroom cut.

"Can I help you?" Kalinin asked, without attempting to sit up.

"I wanted to talk to you," she said.

"If I were you, I wouldn't waste my time," Kalinin offered. "I'd simply kill me and dump me in the ocean."

"Always time for that later." Seina gave a cold smile and leaned against the door. "You have an excellent subordinate. He took out three of our pursuers and absconded with your secretary girl and Takuma."

By "secretary girl," she probably meant Teletha Testarossa, which meant that the colonel and Yang must have gotten the boy out of the laboratory. It was a lot of responsibility for Yang to handle by himself, but at the same time, Kalinin could imagine him giving them the slip.

“He’s one of yours, isn’t he? Sagara Sousuke...”

Kalinin managed not to show surprise at Seina’s words. Not Yang, but Sousuke? Then something had happened to Yang, yet Tessa had made her way to Sousuke’s apartment herself. “Assuming he is,” Kalinin asked, “do you expect me to give you information about him?”

“Not especially,” Seina admitted. “Your injuries are so severe, you’d probably die before I tortured it out of you...”

“Then why did you save me?”

“Because I wanted to talk to you, as I said. Besides, it doesn’t matter to me who you people are.”

“How can you be so sure?” Kalinin asked.

“Because you don’t appear affiliated with the police, or the JSDF. Your actions are sporadic and weightless; you may be a skilled group of individuals, but you pose no real threat to us.” She was commenting on their inability, compared to government organizations, to bring material resources to bear; that was indeed one of the Mithril’s weaknesses.

“You seem an excellent leader as well,” Kalinin noted.

“Do you think so? I know someone much better than me.” Seina didn’t hesitate to admit she was their leader. Then after falling silent for a few minutes, she asked, “Have you ever heard the name Takechi Seiji?” Her hopes didn’t seem particularly high.

“No.”

“He was a Japanese mercenary. He had his start in the Vietnam War, then traveled everywhere... the Congo, Yemen, Nicaragua, Lebanon... ‘Storied veteran,’ I believe is the term. He specialized in reconnaissance and survival.” There was a bit of affection in her voice, now. “After serving with the Republic of Kurdistan during the Fifth Arab-Israeli Conflict, he returned to Japan and launched a certain project. Can you guess what it was?”

“Not a private security company, I imagine,” Kalinin guessed dryly.

“A welfare project. As part of an organization with the strange name of A21,”

she said with a trace of self-mockery, for some reason. “His goal was the rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents. Truly notorious ones guilty of the worst crimes imaginable... Armed robbers, manslaughterers, murderers, rapists, arsonists... et cetera, et cetera...”

Kalinin listened silently.

“Takechi Seiji bought an abandoned island and released these ‘irredeemables’ onto it. He trained them rigorously and thoroughly, teaching them his own survival and combat techniques. Even those who rebelled at first quickly came to follow him, because the island lacked not only electricity and plumbing, but also food—following his teachings was the only way they could survive.”

“It sounds very effective,” Kalinin mused.

“Yes, it was effective. He didn’t preach love to his students. He showed them how to survive in a hostile environment, taught them more efficient methods of killing... and as a result, gave them a resource known as ‘self-confidence.’ They lost the need to dirty their hands with crime.”

“Heartwarming,” Kalinin said. “But I assume there’s more to the story?”

“There is,” Seina affirmed. “A TV station caught wind of his training. They came to the island without permission, entered a warehouse on its outskirts, and poked around in his equipment. It caused an accident; seven people died.” She lowered her eyes, pensively. “He was ruined after that. The media began a feeding frenzy, ignoring the real cause of the accident. They treated him as if he was running a training school for terrorists. Some said he abused them, some said he was grooming them for terrorism. They were like hyenas on a kill. The police came around, and in the end, his training facility was dissolved... and the pasts of his students were publicized.” Her voice burned with cold anger. “Even mine. The story of what a monstrous father did to his own daughter.”

She likely wasn’t just referring to physical abuse, but to far uglier acts. Kalinin could imagine that the father in question was long dead, and he could guess who it was who had taken him out. A21... They weren’t mere terrorists, then, nor an extremist militia.

Seina briskly walked up to him and leaned over, close enough that he could feel her breath from where he lay. “Do you know why I’m telling you all this?”

Kalinin kept his face impassive. “I don’t know,” was what he said, though he had an idea.

“Because you remind me of him,” she answered. “Of Takechi Seiji.”

Kalinin was half-Russian and half-Estonian; he couldn’t possibly look much like the Japanese man in the story. But perhaps he had a similar air. “But that doesn’t mean you’ll release me, I suppose.”

“That’s up to you,” she said. “Could I ask you one question?”

“Certainly.”

“If you were labeled a fraud and killed, and your subordinates went after those responsible... What would you think? Would you be happy?”

“I wouldn’t think anything,” Kalinin answered. “I’d be worm food. The dead can’t think.”

“How dull. Maybe I’ll kill you after all,” she said indifferently, pulling a gun from her belt.

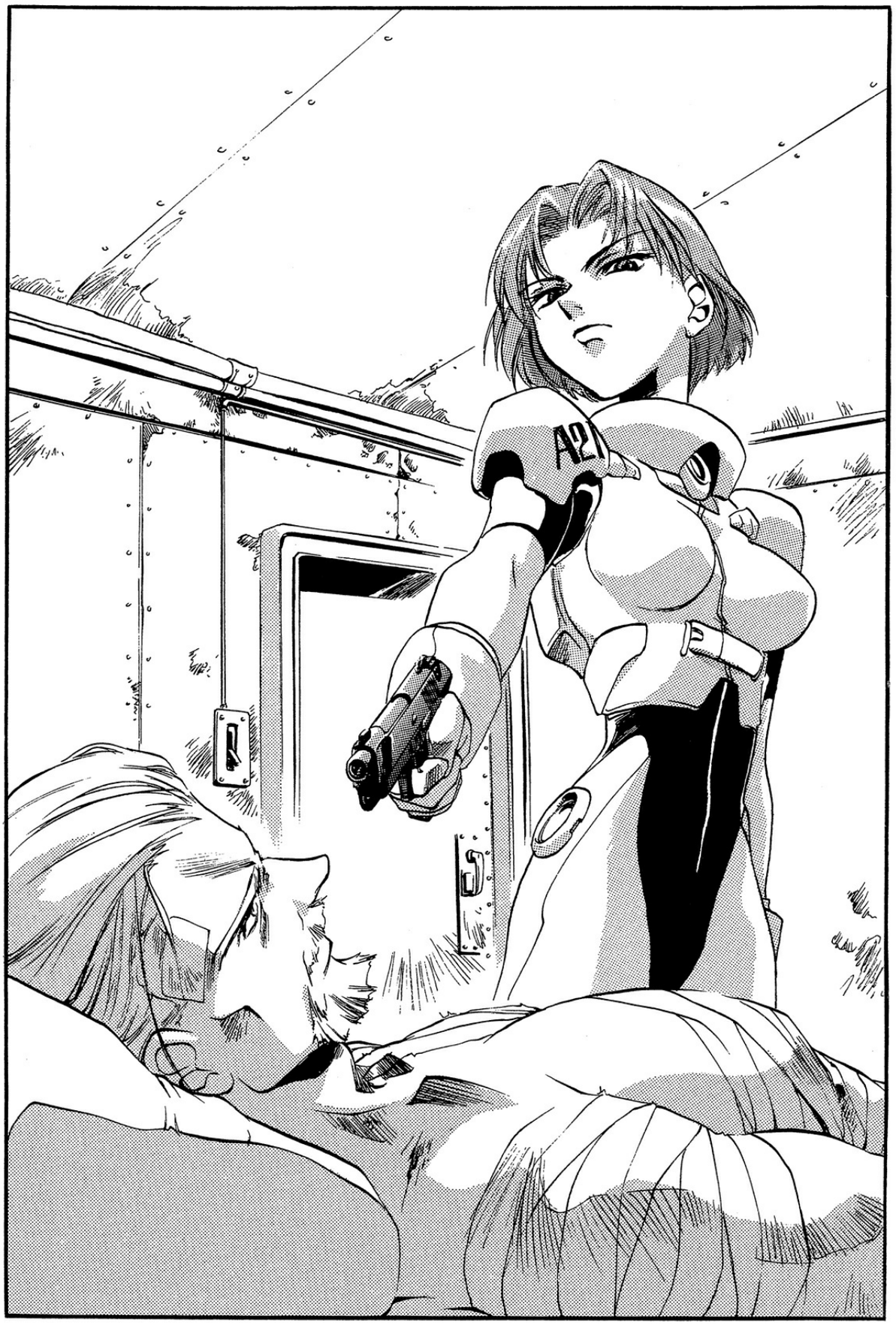
“I told you the conversation was pointless.”

“Yes, I was a fool to think otherwise. We have other things to focus on.”

“Revenge, you mean?” Kalinin asked.

Seina thought for a moment. “I never thought about it that way. We just want to add a bit of our own color to a city saturated with peace... if you call that revenge, then I suppose that’s what it is. To spread all-consuming destruction, to tear the town apart with flames of fear... That’s what I desire.” Her motivation was an all-abiding emptiness. The others were likely the same way. This wasn’t a spur-of-the-moment thing; it was the product of a cold fury, built up over years. A fundamental rebellion against the world itself... that was her sole driving force. Kalinin had seen many like her in his time.

Seina pointed her gun at him.


A21

“I’m going to find your subordinate, Sagara Sousuke. I will kill him and anyone else with him. Then I’ll bring Takuma back.”

“To use the lambda driver?” Invoking that word was a calculated risk for Kalinin, an expert in escaping such dangerous situations. Given what was about to happen, his had to make him and his associates as interesting to her as possible. Inclining them to keep Tessa for interrogation could mean the difference between life and death for her.

Indeed, Seina’s thin eyebrow moved just a tad, registering surprise. “You know about that, too? I’m surprised.”

“You must be curious about me now.”

She returned the gun to its holster and looked down at him with an air of detachment. “I am. Far more than before.” She turned around and headed for the cabin’s exit.

“By the way...” Kalinin asked her as she left. “What’s Takechi Seiji doing now?”

Seina stopped. “He’s dead. Hanged himself in jail... It was a tragedy.”

3: He Who Chases Two Hares...

26 June, 2140 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Fushimidai Academy High School, Chofu

“I came here a lot for student council in my first year,” Kaname explained. “It’s a hoity-toity escalator school, but the uniforms are uggo... Also, the teachers are the worst. Every time we came by they were all, ‘You aren’t from this school! What are you doing here?!’”

“Hmm...” The school looked more or less like Jindai from the outside: an unadorned facade of reinforced concrete.

Sousuke easily got them through the school’s basic security system. They avoided the custodian’s office and made their way to the student council room on the north building’s second floor. Kaname had insisted that she knew it very well, and that it was the most comfortable room for them to hole up in for now.

At last, they were able to sit down and breathe easy. Takuma, conscious again already, had been sat down next to Sousuke.

“Want some tea?” Kaname asked, rummaging around in a corner of the dim room.

“No... thank you,” Tessa responded. It seemed that wherever she went today, there was always a hot drink of some kind on offer.

“Oh, yeah?” Kaname replied huffily. “So anyway, we just need to kill time here, right?”

“Yes. We have reinforcements on the way as we speak,” Sousuke confirmed. He’d already contacted them again through his satellite communicator. A transport helicopter carrying Mao, Kurz, and the M9 had left the Tuatha de Danaan over the Pacific and was expected to land on the school lawn within two hours.

“My allies will be here first. Changing your hiding place won’t save you,” Takuma said.

“We fixed that problem, actually,” Kaname said.

Takuma looked at her questioningly.

“My microwave took out your little transmitter,” Kaname boasted.

For the first time, Takuma’s expression became serious; he must have known about the transmitter. There was no need to tell him it was broken, Sousuke thought... but he also couldn’t see how it had done any harm, so he refrained from comment. The enemy currently had no way of finding them; it would be one thing if they had gone to Jindai High, but there was no paper trail tying them to this school. They could probably rest easy, for now.

“Anyway...” Kaname pulled her PHS from the back pocket of her denim miniskirt.

Sousuke scowled as he realized what she was doing. “Who are you going to call?” he asked.

“Kyoko.”

“Why?”

“I told you before, I gotta ask her to record a drama,” Kaname said impatiently. “It’s starting soon.”

“Don’t tell her where you are,” Sousuke commanded.

But Kaname bristled. “You know, I *could* watch it on the TV in here. But if I did that, the custodian might find out and get us in trouble. I’m trying to be considerate! You’re the one who got *me* mixed up in all this, remember?”

Sousuke fell silent.

“You’d better adjust your attitude around me in the future, O great and wise Sergeant Sagara Sousuke. Get it?” Whenever Sousuke treated Kaname as an ordinary civilian and rank amateur, it usually backfired on him like this. Lacking a proper response, he just looked down and began to play idly with his submachine gun.

Tessa just stared in disbelief.

Kaname spun the jog dial on her PHS and pressed the button. She must have had it on silent mode, because it didn't even beep. "The second there's a crisis, you immediately promote yourself to coolest guy in the room. It's a gross habit. You should work on it," she said nastily, then immediately switched to a cheerful tone. "Oh, is this the Tokiwa residence? Hey, it's Chidori! Oh, hey! Yeah, I got it. It was *so* good, yeah! Hahaha... Yeah, could you? Thanks a bunch! By the way, Kyoko... hey, I've got a *huge* favor to ask you..."

"Sagara-san... does she always yell at you like this?" Tessa whispered to him.

"Ah. Not... technically always," he hedged.

"I don't understand," she said. "You're far more experienced and knowledgeable than she is."

"Well... that's not necessarily always the case."

"Really?"

"Really. She's very quick-witted at times... um..." Sousuke slumped over a little, fiddling with the rear sight adjustment knob.

Tessa looked at him with a scowl. "I feel like you listen to her more readily than you listen to me, Sagara-san."

"No, ma'am," he denied automatically. "That's not the case at all."

"I wonder... I'm not convinced." Tessa turned away.

This is so nerve-wracking, Sousuke thought. He was just trying to do what he had to in order to see his mission through. How had he ended up with Tessa and Kaname butting heads? *Just what did I do wrong?* He'd never looked forward to reinforcements so much in his life. *Mao, Kurz, anyone... just get here as soon as you can!*

Before long, Kaname finished her call. "Boy... schools sure are creepy at night, huh?" she mused, slipping the PHS back into her pocket. Then she leaned forward. "I dunno about this place, but Jindai High has a lot of ghost stories, you know? You know, typical stuff like Toilet Hanako."

"What's frightening about her?" Sousuke wanted to know. "Does she have a

bomb strapped to her chest?”

“That sounds like the title of an indecent video...” Tessa frowned.

Kaname was disappointed by their ignorant responses. “Fine, whatever. There’s also the epic tale of the yokai, ebizori-kozo. It’s a terrifying ghost story told only at Jindai High...”

“What is it about?”

“Heh heh. Well, you see...” Responding to Tessa’s interest, Kaname leaned over the desk and began whispering in her ear. Whatever she said caused Tessa’s ears to turn red for just a moment before all the color drained from her face.

“That’s perverted,” she gasped.

“Well? Scary, huh?”

“Oh, my God... I would die if I met someone like that.”

As Tessa shuddered, Sousuke watched, head tilted in confusion.

Just then, they heard footsteps in the hallway. They seemed to be coming from far away, around the stairs. They were headed their way, slowly and leisurely, then they stopped in front of a room. A door opened, then closed again.

“It’s the custodian. He’s going to check in here, too.” Kaname clicked her tongue.

“Hide under the desk. Hurry.” Sousuke pointed the gun at Takuma and got him to hide under the desk. “Keep your voice down.”

“Let’s see. Will I, or won’t I...” Takuma said with his usual faint smile. There were a number of document-filled cardboard boxes stored under the desk, leaving barely enough space for the four of them to cram in together.

They held their collective breaths as they heard the custodian unlock the door and open it.

His flashlight pierced the darkness of the room. *If he’s just on patrol, he should move along quickly,* Sousuke thought. And yet...

“Hey, you there. Come on out,” came a hoarse voice. Sousuke followed the flashlight’s beam, and at the end of it, saw Tessa’s little cargo pants-clad behind poking out from beneath the desk.

“That’s what they call hiding your head but not your ass,” the old custodian chuckled as he led them down the dark hallway. “But I didn’t expect the head to belong to a pretty foreign girl. This is quite a night. Playing war with your toy guns, were you?”

“Uh-huh...”

The four of them were following the old man in a line. Tessa brought up the rear, looking stricken.

“Come on in,” the old man said as they arrived at his office on the first floor. The others followed him in, despondently. It was a small but modest Japanese-style room; they took off their shoes as they entered, then found seats around the low table.

“Would you like some tea?” he asked.

“No, thank you,” the four of them (sans Takuma) replied in chorus. They were definitely sick of hot drinks by now.

“Don’t be that way. I’ve got the good stuff.” Without waiting for their assent, the custodian brought some teacups from his kitchen. He poured hot water from a pot next to the table into a teapot with the leaves already inside.

“This school...” Takuma said suddenly, without prompting. “You called it Fushimidai Academy, didn’t you?”

“So what?” Sousuke wanted to know.

“Oh, nothing...” Takuma replied innocently. “I thought maybe I’d been here once before...”

Sousuke narrowed his eyes quietly.

“Probably just my imagination. Forget I said anything.” It was Takuma’s first time talking like this. Something was wrong.

“What are you plotting?” Sousuke demanded.

“What do you mean?” Takuma replied.

“Do you think you can escape us?”

“No. I’ve seen how good you are.”

Sousuke continued to scrutinize Takuma, who seemed unfazed by his attention.

“Sousuke, you need to stop being so suspicious of everyone,” Kaname scolded. “Even if they are creepazoids who lose their temper over stupid things...”

The old custodian set out their tea. “I don’t know what brought you all here; just make sure you get back before the trains stop running. Your parents will be worried. Don’t worry; I won’t tell the school.”

“We’re sorry about all the trouble we’ve caused.” Kaname bowed low to him. Of course, neither she, nor Sousuke, nor Tessa (probably) actually had parents worried about them, but they weren’t about to point that out.

“Takuma-san. Do you have any family?” Tessa asked.

“A big sister. That’s it.”

“What kind of person is she?”

“I see no need to talk about it,” Takuma answered, with greater irritation than really seemed warranted.

“I see... But we’re only running around like this because we’ve chosen to keep you alive,” Tessa explained. “The least you could do is to make conversation to help us pass the time.”

Takuma said nothing.

“I have an older brother,” Tessa said, gazing at the tea stalk at the bottom of her cup. “I don’t know where he is right now, but he’s a much more impressive person than I.”

“Ahh. So I guess he doesn’t trip over railings or try to hide behind desks with his butt sticking up?” Kaname interjected with a laugh.

Tessa shot her a glare. “Let me ask you this, Chidori-san. Can you solve

Einstein’s field equations? With no prior knowledge?”

“Huh?”

“I did that at six years old,” Tessa told her. “But my brother did it at four.”

Kaname’s mouth dropped open. “I don’t know what that means, but I guess it’s pretty amazing?”

“Yes, quite amazing. I’ve always had an inferiority complex regarding my brother.” She took an indifferent sip of tea.

“And?” Takuma asked out of nowhere.

“What?” Tessa looked over in surprise.

“And?” he repeated. “How did you get along with your brother?”

“Well... I suppose the closest way of putting it would be, he protected me. It... wasn’t exactly a healthy relationship,” she said in a rather gloomy voice. “But that was a long time ago. Takuma-san, do you have an inferiority complex about your sister, too?”

“Wh-What did you—”

“You do, don’t you?” Tessa peered into Takuma’s face as he snapped back to reality and tried to deny it.

He seemed a little flustered at first, but perhaps realizing it was foolish to get worked up, he just shrugged. “Yeah. Maybe it is an inferiority complex. I worship my big sister.”

“That’s the first time you’ve told us anything about yourself,” Tessa observed.

Takuma fell silent, pursing his lips and looking down at the floor. That was the end of their talk about families.

The next forty minutes passed uneventfully. There was no sign of the enemy coming; this was only natural, since they had no way of finding them.

Kaname watched her drama with the custodian. Tessa rested her head on the coffee table and slept, citing sleep deprivation. Takuma sat quietly next to Sousuke, legs crossed and eyes closed. Once, his shoulders began heaving and

he showed signs of agitation, but he seemed to reclaim his reason before it escalated to an outburst. The show ended, the commercials played, and Kaname stood up.

"Where are you going?" Sousuke asked as she headed for the door.

"What kind of jerk asks a girl *that*?" she retorted.

"What do you mean?" Sousuke furrowed his brow; he genuinely didn't seem to understand her objection.

Kaname turned red, and stammered, "The bathroom, okay?"

"Ah... I'll accompany you." Tessa got up abruptly and followed after her.

"For safety's sake," Sousuke began, "I should also—"

"Stay here," Kaname and Tessa commanded in unison.

"Boy, talk about a lack of tact!" Kaname grumbled.

"I'm sure we'll be fine, Sagara-san," Tessa said to reassure him.

"All right," Sousuke relented. "But don't turn on any lights, and keep your voices down." Reluctantly, Sousuke sat himself back down. The two left him behind and headed for the first floor girls' bathroom.

The corridor was dark. The only illumination came from the streetlamps outside, and the red lights over the school's fire hoses. The fluorescent lights over the emergency exits let out a dull, eerie hum. Schools really were creepy at night.

"You tagged along awfully quickly," Kaname observed. "Afraid of going by yourself?"

"Well, yes..." Tessa admitted. "You said all those awful things before..."

Kaname gave a sinister chuckle. "It appears in hallways just like this, you know. The ebizori-kozo..."

"S-Stop it."

They arrived at the girls' bathroom before too long. Kaname left Tessa to take her own stall. She reached for the hem of her miniskirt, then started in confusion. Her PHS was no longer in her back pocket. She tried her other

pockets, but it wasn't there, either.

Maybe I dropped it in the custodian's room? she wondered. That seemed unlikely, though; there had been nothing on the tatami floor when she got up from the TV. Could it be in the student council room, then?

She finished her business, then went out to wash her hands, feeling uneasy all the while.

Tessa was still in her stall. "Um, Chidori-san... Please don't go yet," a voice said nervously through the door.

"Oh? Hmm, let me think about that..." she replied with exaggerated meanness, then strode into the hallway.

Suddenly, she felt a presence behind her. She turned around to face it. A man stood there, dressed in an all-black combat uniform and wearing a mask. There was a glinting combat knife in his hand.

Kaname sucked in a breath, but before she could scream, the knife flashed. Its honed point stopped a millimeter short of cutting open her throat. Then the man grabbed her shoulder and pulled her toward him.

"Not one sound," came a vicious whisper. The eyes visible through the holes in the mask flashed a clear warning: "If you try to scream, I'll kill you." There was another man in black moving around in the darkness, too; he was standing next to the door to the girls' bathroom, drawing a knife from a chest sheath. He was probably waiting for Tessa to come out.

A sticky sort of fear began to bind around her heart. Nevertheless, her prevailing thought was the surprisingly cool-headed *I'm glad I went to the bathroom first.*

There was the sound of running water, and then, of the door opening. "Chidori-san? Are you still here?"

Kaname wanted to shout "run!" but her instincts stopped her. If she screamed, she was dead; besides, screaming wouldn't guarantee the other girl's escape. The only way out would be through the bathroom window, and there was no way someone so clumsy would be able to make it out that way.

Sousuke, she thought. *So it was all true...* He'd said they were being pursued, but she'd written him off, assuming he was exaggerating, the way he always did. But she'd been wrong. And now she was back where she had been two months ago. This was his house, now—the battlefield.

"Chidori-san? Please stop teasing—" The clueless Tessa stepped out, and the man lying in wait swung his arm down.

They're late, Sousuke thought, looking at his wristwatch. Fifteen minutes had passed since they had left. Were they wandering around the school building? Were they discussing something? He opened the door and looked out into the hallway, but there was no sign of the girls heading back.

"I wonder what happened," the custodian said idly as he watched the news.

"I'm going to go check on them. Hey... get up," Sousuke ordered Takuma. There was no way he could leave him alone in this room.

Just then, he heard an electronic beeping. It was a Mozart melody, tinny and cheerful—the "incoming call" sound for Kaname's PHS. It was coming from Takuma's pocket.

"Got me, eh?" Takuma pulled the phone from his pocket, smiling in triumph. He must have swiped it when they were cramming under the desk in the student council room.

Everything then became clear for Sousuke. That suspicious line from Takuma before: *This school... You called it Fushimidai Academy, didn't you?* He must have been on the line with his allies at the time. He'd kept the line open and spoken the school's name, revealing to them his current location.

"Damn you..." Sousuke fumed. He'd been careless. Takuma might be inclined to lose his mind and lash out, but in his lucid state, he could be quite clever. He wasn't stupid, by any means.

Close to one hour had passed since then. An hour since the enemy had learned their location! There was no sign of anyone around the custodian's room, but Kaname and Tessa—

"Don't you want to answer it?" Takuma proffered the ringing PHS. Sousuke

took it, submachine gun still at the ready. He pressed the call button and heard an unfamiliar man's voice on the other line.

"Sagara Sousuke?"

"Yes," he said at last.

"I have the two women. Bring *him* out to the yard. You have one minute." The call cut off.

They "had" Kaname and Tessa—which meant that they were alive. Sousuke allowed himself a moment's relief. Perhaps the enemy hated indiscriminate attacks that resulted in casualties. They'd also lost three of their own already; it was natural they'd want hostages this time.

The situation was serious. There was good visibility on the lawn; it would make Sousuke a sitting duck for sniper fire. Only a fool would just walk out into an environment like that, even with hostages on the line, and he wasn't the kind of man to just walk into a trap and take his chances.

If he was going to go out there, he needed a plan of his own. But what kind of plan? One minute was hardly long enough to think of effective countermeasures.

I'll just have to gamble, then. Sousuke turned back to the custodian. "Could I ask you for a favor?"

"Yes?"

He explained his request, and the old man looked suspicious. "So... if I hear any loud sounds, I'm to turn on the field lights, you say?" The idea was to temporarily blind the enemies, whose eyes would be more adjusted to the dark. "I'll get a tongue-lashing, you know."

"I know that... but something much worse will happen if you don't." Sousuke couldn't force the man to say yes. He just held his breath while the old custodian gazed into the night in deep contemplation.

"Well, all right. But just for a little while." He stood up, saying no more than that.

"Thank you." Sousuke immediately turned around and headed swiftly toward

the school's exit with Takuma in tow. On the way, he used handcuffs to lash Takuma's wrist to his own. His submachine gun hung off his shoulder. He took a grenade out of his pocket and removed the pin with his mouth. If he released the lever now, it would explode on the spot.

"Why don't you just stop resisting already?" Takuma wanted to know.

"I commend you for your clever trick back there. But now, be quiet," Sousuke advised him. "I'm a little on edge." As he came outside, he could see four silhouettes across the dark athletics field, just under the high bars: two men in combat uniforms, with Kaname and Tessa bound up behind them. He could sense someone on the school's roof; one on top of the gymnasium as well. Those were perfect sniping positions, but that that also made them easier to spot.

Sousuke held up his hands—both the one shackled to Takuma's, and the one holding the grenade. "If you shoot me, he dies," he shouted. If Sousuke was shot, his hand would release the grenade lever, and it would explode. Since Takuma was handcuffed to him, he would invariably die as well.

The man in front of Kaname took a step forward. "Just give him to us and we won't hurt you. Remove the handcuffs."

"You call that a negotiation? Balance the tables a little more," Sousuke said, rebelliously. He understood how a terrorist with a hostage felt now.

"All right," the man said after a moment. "I'll send one of the girls over to you. Will you take off the handcuffs then?"

"Very well," Sousuke replied curtly.

"If you're lying," the man said, "we take an ear off the other."

"As you wish."

"So? Which woman should we release first?" the man asked.

Sousuke considered. Whoever was released first would be safer, since she would be with him. That meant the second would be in danger; a fight could break out while he was swapping the second girl for Takuma.

Kaname or Tessa? Logically speaking, Kaname should come first. She wasn't

part of Mithril and had nothing to do with any of this. Basically, she was an innocent victim.

But... if he left Tessa behind, would she be able to get to safety if hostilities broke out? He felt a little bad thinking it, but she wasn't exactly athletic. If he didn't release her first, her chances of survival would be low—no, almost certainly nil.

By comparison, Kaname was a swift runner; she was often asked to help out with the school's athletics clubs. Releasing Tessa first and betting on Kaname's athletic abilities to carry her through would be a more surefire way to save them both, wouldn't it?

This is... a dilemma, he thought.

Who should he choose: Tessa or Kaname? They were both staring at him across the dark field. What were they thinking? What were their expectations? He had no way to ask, so in the end, he decided to go with the best chance of saving both of them. In other words...

"Release the Caucasian woman first, the Japanese woman second."

Both looked equally surprised by his choice; he felt like Kaname's eyes had widened at him questioningly.

I just have to trust in Chidori, Sousuke thought. *I know that she... she can do anything.* He wanted to shout that to her, but he couldn't; it would be like telling the enemy that he was about to make trouble.

"Very well," the man responded, removing Tessa's handcuffs and nudging her in the back. She put up a show of resistance, but he shoved her again, harder. She had no choice but to begin walking toward Sousuke. As she got closer, he could tell that she was angry—extremely angry.

"Colonel," he said tersely, "get behind me."

"I appreciate it, Sergeant Sagara. But this was the wrong decision."

"To ensure the safety of both of you—"

"Did you think I'm not prepared for moments like these?" Tessa demanded coldly. "It's insulting."

Sousuke had no response to that. His decision to prioritize her safety in defiance of conventional logic must have badly wounded her pride, and the tentatively amicable relationship they'd built had collapsed as a result. "You can scold me for it later," he managed, then addressed Takuma. "The key is in my right pocket. Use it to free yourself."

Takuma silently reached into Sousuke's pants pocket, found the key and unlocked the handcuffs.

"They're off," Sousuke shouted to the man.

"Start him walking. I'll start her walking at the same time. Acceptable?" The man released Kaname's restraints as he made his offer. If he believed it would be that easy, Sousuke would gladly have acted in good faith... but he had killed three of this man's comrades. There was no way that the exchange could end peacefully.

"Very well," Sousuke said. "Let's proceed."

It was time for Sousuke to abandon his lifeline; to return Takuma to the enemy. Tessa showed no objection to this, so Sousuke shot him a signal, and the boy began to walk. Kaname came toward them, likewise, from the other end of the field.

A sniper's bullet could strike any second now. Takuma's proximity was likely the only thing staying their hands.

"When I give the signal, run into the school building," Sousuke said.

Tessa's refusal was immediate. "Run and hide, you mean?"

"You'll be in danger if you don't."

"I did what you said back at the apartment," she said flatly, "but our circumstances have changed."

"Colonel!"

While they argued, Kaname and Takuma passed each other at the center of the field. Sousuke could sense a new wave of hostility coming from the snipers positioned on the school and the gym. He was out of time. They were in danger. He had to—

He released the grenade's lever, shouted "Run!" then threw the grenade toward the gym, right into the sniper's sight line. It detonated in midair; the explosion would hide him from the sniper on the roof.

By the time the explosion came, Sousuke had already turned his submachine gun toward the second sniper on the school building. He could see the man through his sight, aiming back at him. The sniper was faster. If he pulled the trigger—

Just then, light flooded over the field; the old custodian had flipped the switch. Sousuke could now see the sniper very clearly. The man fired desperately, blinded by the light; his bullet hit the ground thirty centimeters to Sousuke's right.

Sousuke steadied his aim and let out a burst; three casings spat out from his gun, falling to the ground. The sniper reeled back and fell out of sight. *Now, the one on the gym—* he thought, turning around. That's when he saw it. His jaw dropped.

Out on the brightly illuminated field, Kaname was doing the unbelievable. She hadn't run to safety; she had turned to grapple with Takuma! Was she trying to use him as a shield? He'd been right to believe that she would take the initiative, but he never dreamed that she would go this far. What in the world was she—

"I'll help!" Tessa cried, and ran directly toward the fray. He had no time to stop her. She made a beeline to Kaname, who was tangled up with Takuma on the ground.

"Colonel!" Sousuke bellowed. He didn't have time to stop her. The sniper on the gym, having recovered from the initial explosion, was taking aim again. Sousuke threw himself forward as a bullet's impact raised a cloud of dust behind him.

He came out of his roll and returned fire, but the motion compromised his aim, and the man was too far away; his bullets sparked futilely against the gym's curved roof. A rifle had a range and power far superior to that of a submachine gun; the enemy sniper must have realized this advantage, because he stayed right where he was and kept firing.

Two shots, three shots, four—herded along by the close-range assault, Sousuke ran past a flowerbed. Chips of brick, clumps of soil, and vines from morning glories burst around him. He managed to make it to a concrete drinking fountain and hid behind the waist-high basin to check on Kaname and Tessa.

Kaname was still grappling with Takuma at the center of the field; Tessa had run up and was trying to separate them. Their former captor was also on his way, pistol in hand.

With a feeling of dread, Sousuke aimed his submachine gun at the man running toward the girls. His attempt was checked, though, by another shot from the gym; it chipped a shard off the basin that cut his cheek. The sniper seemed to have no interest in the girls—because they were tangled up with Takuma, most likely—his focus was on keeping Sousuke down while his comrade secured their target.

There's nothing I can do... Sousuke thought. He'd made two serious miscalculations: one was about Kaname; the other was about Tessa. Neither had tried to run away. If they had, he might have been able to escape while keeping the sniper in check. He'd never expected his plan to backfire like this.

Sousuke looked up to check the conditions at the gym, and his heart sank. The sniper was readying a new weapon: a disposable MPATS. It was a weapon that could put a hole in a steel wall or a pillbox; the basin wouldn't stand a chance.

The rocket fired. Trailing smoke, the shaped charge flew toward Sousuke. There was an explosion, and the sink was blasted to smithereens.



A few seconds before...

“Get away!” Tessa yelled. “Get to safety!”

“Wh-Why did you come back?!” Kaname shouted in surprise as she yanked on Takuma’s cheek and ear.

“I’ll be the decoy. You go and—” Tessa was interrupted by a massive explosion. She felt the shockwave in her stomach first, just before the wall of heat slammed into them. She looked over in shock.

Black smoke was rising from a corner of the field where there had once been a water fountain. Shredded concrete rained down. Water geysered from the broken pipe, giving rise to a thick mist. Sousuke was gone. There was no sign of him anywhere. Could he have been... could the blast have...?

“Ah...” Kaname and Tessa were dumbstruck.

While they stood there, the man in black caught up to them. He had a large automatic pistol in his hand. At this range, there could be no escape. “He’s dead,” the man declared. Tessa said nothing.

“Run, if you want,” the man in black suggested, “or don’t. All that it’ll change is if the bullet goes in your front or your back.”

Then Takuma got up and said, “Wait. You can’t kill them yet.”

“Why the hell not?” the man in black demanded to know.

“She’s... no, never mind.” Takuma lowered his eyes again.

The man tilted his head, then spoke into his headset. “Target secured. I’m killing the others.” He listened for a response, then snorted dubiously. “What? But, Seina... Well, if you insist.” The man sighed and threw a set of handcuffs to each of them. “Put those on. You’ll be coming with me. Don’t run, or you’re dead.”

26 June, 2327 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Akami Pier, Koto Ward, Tokyo

Andrey Kalinin lay in bed, staring up at the reddish-brown ceiling. There was no clock in the room, but he could tell it wasn't midnight yet. Straining his ears, he heard the sounds of factory machines: the roar of motor tools and condensers, the operation of cranes, the scraping of metal against metal.

A cargo hold, Kalinin deduced. From time to time came the faint whir of turbines. There must be a generator—a big one—undergoing tests nearby.

They were building something in the cargo hold. Or... maybe they'd already built it, and they were running final checks? An AS, most likely; a special one. A machine they would use to wreak havoc in the city.

The metal door opened and Seina stepped in. "How are you feeling?"

"Do you really have to ask?" Kalinin asked, with a glance at his blood-darkened bandages.

"You're not dead yet," Seina shrugged. "Gentleman though you may be, you can clearly take some punishment."

"True," Kalinin agreed. "I'm tough enough not to hang myself, at least."

The reference to her teacher didn't alter Seina's expression. She just walked up to him, and put her left hand onto his arm—his bandaged left arm. She pressed a fingertip into his wound, and pain shot down his left side. "Are you calling him a coward?" she asked.

"That's entirely up to you," Kalinin responded, enduring the pain with a will of iron.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked.

"Your teacher, Takechi Seiji, exists nowhere now except inside of you. Your behavior determines what's true about him. That's all," Kalinin returned. When a line like that hit a nerve, it suggested it was on the person's mind. If Seina truly believed that he wasn't a coward, she'd have brushed the comment off with a scornful laugh.

Seeming to realize that he was right, Seina relaxed her grip and turned away. "You're a curious one. Less of a soldier and more of a clergyman."

"You're the first one who's ever said that. But I can't say I find it unappealing,"

Kalinin responded.

Then, surprisingly... Seina smiled. It was a real smile, not the cold, derisive smile she flashed him from time to time. “A priest’s garb and a Bible... It really might suit you,” she said.

“Perhaps,” he allowed.

“It would.” She put a hand on his chest, this time, gently. “It’s a shame...”

“What is?”

“If only you and I had... no.” She took a step back before the fatal words came out.

“It’s not too late,” he told her.

“No, it *is* too late.” Her voice was its usual ice again. Seina turned back to the door and told him, “You were my enemy from the start, spared only by a moment’s caprice. Once you tell me what you know about the lambda driver, I’ll have no further need for you.”

“I won’t tell you anything,” Kalinin disagreed.

“Won’t you?” Seina stopped. “Sagara Sousuke—your man is dead. The girls accompanying him are headed here now, with Takuma. Perhaps I’ll get it out of them, while you watch.”

Kalinin said nothing.

“Takuma is going to pilot that devil,” she announced. “He’ll use its power to rebel against the world that rejected that man. It’s very clear, isn’t it? I am your enemy.”

26 June, 2334 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Fushimidai Academy High School, Chofu

How long have I been out? Sousuke wondered. He was lying face down, his back peppered with glass and concrete fragments. He picked himself up and took stock of his injuries: some mild scrapes and bruises, no more. His body

armor had stopped most of it.

Sousuke knelt there silently. He'd been lying on the floor of the ground level nurse's office. It was right behind the water fountain, and he'd thrown himself through the window just before the rocket went off. Though he'd managed to get clear, the blast and the shockwave had still knocked him unconscious. *Chidori... and the colonel. Where are they?* He stood up, shaky on his feet.

He peered through the soot-stained window frame. The field lights were already out again, the girls nowhere to be seen. They must have been taken away with Takuma. That was better than seeing them both laid out dead, but...

Damn. What a mess. There was no excuse for the degree to which he'd failed. He'd shamed the name Uruz-7, the call sign given only to Mithril's most elite SRT combatants. (In reality, a less-brilliant soldier would have been killed during the initial shootout, but Sousuke wasn't going to think of that just now.)

"What in the world is going on here?" the custodian, who'd just arrived, asked.

"It's just what it looks like," Sousuke told him grimly. "They got me."

"How am I going to explain this to the principal?" the custodian wondered.

"Make something up," Sousuke suggested. "We'll reimburse you."

"Hmm..."

Just then, the long-awaited arrival came. He heard the roar of rotors and turbine blades spinning at high speeds. A gentle wind brushed the field, which quickly became a punishing gale.

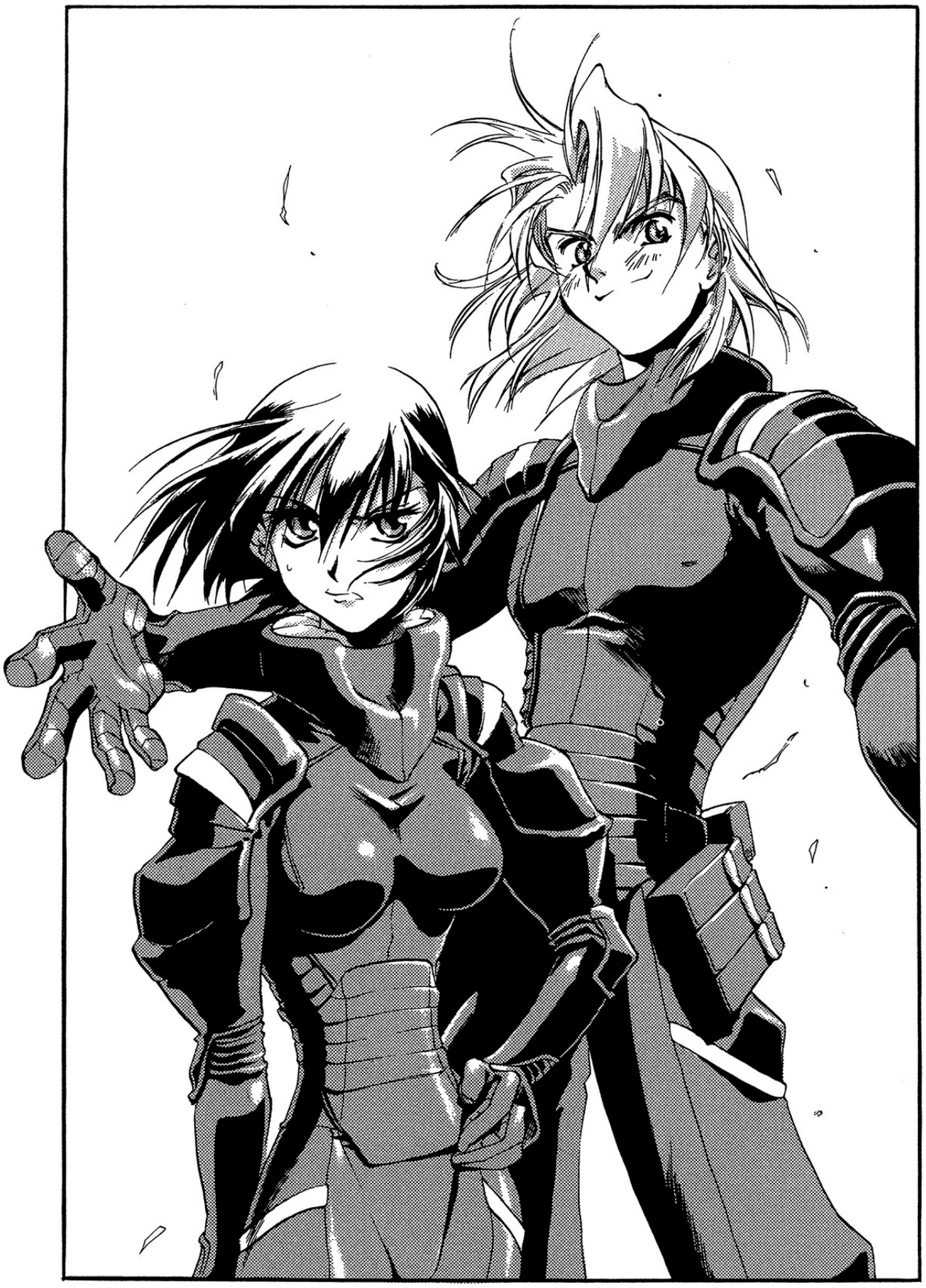
A CH-67 transport helicopter, rendered invisible via ECS, was descending on the school grounds. It was too late. If it had only come ten minutes earlier...

"Gebo-9 to Uruz-7. The package has arrived," he heard through his earphone radio. It was from the helicopter's pilot.

"Uruz-7 here. Roger. I'm on my way," Sousuke responded sullenly, climbing out of the window and into the yard. It had been invisible the entire time, but the helicopter had apparently landed. It quickly dropped its cargo, then flew away again. Silence returned to the schoolyard.

Once the dust had settled, Sousuke could make out a large silhouette crouching in the dark. Standing straight, it would be roughly eight meters tall; it was one of Mithril's cutting edge arm slaves, the M9 Gernsback. It was dark gray, with a complex array of armored plates that combined both curved and straight lines. It had a slender silhouette, with a pinched waist, and its head—mounted with dual machine guns and copious sensors—resembled a person in a fighter pilot's helmet. The hardpoint on its back held a short-barreled rifle and a capacitor pack to store excess energy.

At the M9's feet stood Sousuke's colleagues, Master Sergeant Melissa Mao and Sergeant Kurz Weber. Mithril typically worked in teams of three, and these two were frequently paired with Sousuke: she was an East Asian with black hair and dark eyes, and he was a young, blond, blue-eyed German. Both were dressed in their Mithril AS operator uniforms; ninja-like outfits which doubled as combat uniforms. Each had rich pops of color on the collar and shoulders; Mao's were violet, and Kurz's were cobalt blue.



Kurz Weber was the first to speak. “So, where are my cute girls?”

Silently, Melissa Mao kicked him in the rump.

27 June, 0021 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Tama Riverbank, Kokuryocho, Chofu, Tokyo

They had decided to get away from the battle site before getting into details.

The sniper that Sousuke had shot had no longer been on the roof—Maybe he was dead and his friends had carried him off, or maybe he had only been injured; there was no way of knowing.

The M9 had an invisibility-capable ECS, so if they moved carefully, they could get around unnoticed. As always, of course, there were missteps—they’d come just short of kicking a drunkard, for instance, and gotten tangled up in some power lines.

They’d stopped by Sousuke’s apartment on the way and picked up their kei truck—purchased secondhand, in the name of a Mithril intelligence agent—in the parking lot. Once they’d made it to the Tama River, they gathered around the vehicle on the bank.

The M9 remained invisible; the burning ozone smell of the ECS hung in the air around them. It was dark around the river terrace, but they could see young people playing with fireworks in the distance. The constant *bang, bang, bang,* kept Sousuke on edge.

He completed his explanation, and Mao let out a sigh. “If only we’d gotten here just a little sooner. I could’ve had the M9 trace them back...”

“Any chance of more reinforcements?” Sousuke asked.

“Not for a while,” she told him gloomily. “It’s been a madhouse for the de Danaan, these last few days. And we don’t have the major...”

Major Kalinin was missing, which meant that Mao was in de facto command. Normally, one of the captains that served as Kalinin’s aides would step in, but they were all in the south of China on a top secret operation, as were the other

Uruz codename combatants. It was unusual for the Tuatha de Danaan to have so much to do at once, and that was before you even got to the fact that its operational commander was MIA, and its commander-in-chief was in mortal danger.

“We just don’t have enough people...” she lamented.

Not enough people. Sousuke lowered his eyes, taking her words as a criticism of his inability to protect the girls. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t get the wrong idea, Sousuke. I know there’s only so much you could have done,” she disagreed. “You had three people in tow, fighting alone against a heavily armed enemy organization. Nobody could have done better, outside of maybe James Bond.” Mao stretched out on the hood of the truck.

Sousuke was stunned by her take on the situation. He didn’t know a lot about Melissa Mao; she was in her mid-twenties, but she looked a little younger, and had large, vaguely feline, almond-shaped eyes. Though her short black hair gave her a brisk, lively air, she typically moved with a kind of leisurely grace; maybe she’d been more rugged as a child.

Mao was a New York-born Chinese-American, and before Mithril, she’d been in the US Marines. Most armed forces wouldn’t let women on the front lines, but she must have gained combat experience somehow—Mithril wouldn’t have scouted her for their active forces, otherwise. She clearly had some kind of complicated past. She was every bit the combatant Sousuke was, and on top of that, had a specialist’s knowledge of electronics and AS tech.

Mao’s solid judgment and ability to foster amicable relations with others was what made her an effective team leader. She was always finding offhand ways—as now—of being considerate of Sousuke; there were probably even times she did it and he didn’t even notice. Of course, there was probably no more to it than a general sense of responsibility she felt as their team leader.

That more or less summed up Mao.

“We can’t count on much support,” she continued, “so we’ll have to work this out by ourselves. First, we’ll pursue. Then, we’ll monitor. Then, we’ll... take them down, probably.”

“I guess that’s our only choice...” Kurz broke off in a yawn.

Mao glared at him. “You want to maybe take this seriously?”

“Hey,” he protested, “I am taking it seriously.”

“Kaname’s in trouble too, remember? The girl who saved your life?”

“I know that. ’S why I’m fighting so hard to stay awake. If it was anyone other than Kaname and Tessa, I’d be home, in bed, with a drink by now,” Kurz grumbled. “I’m serious.”

“You little...” Mao growled.

“What’s the deal with this Takuma brat, anyway?” Kurz asked, attempting to move on. “Has he got superpowers? Can he pour vodka up his ass and fart fire, or fit a stack of coins up his nose?”

“Not sure I’d want to fight a terrorist organization that fought to retrieve someone like that...” she sighed.

“I was kidding.”

“I’d take you off the team if you weren’t.”

Kurz folded his arms, as if ignoring her. “Anyway, getting serious. I wonder if Takuma’s... you know, like Kaname. One of those ‘Whispered’ types.”

“Hmm, it’s a thought...” Mao considered for a bit, but Sousuke spoke first.

“The colonel seemed to know, but I don’t think Takuma is like Kaname. He’s something even more unusual.”

“What are you basing that on, Sousuke?” Mao asked curiously.

“Well... instinct.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard you talk about instinct before,” she frowned. “It’s refreshing, yet unsettling.”

“Leave me alone,” Sousuke sulked.

Just then, they each got a call on their radio headsets. It was coming from the M9 right beside them.

“There we go. What’s the word, Friday?” Mao said, licking her lips. “Friday”

was the call sign for the machine's AI.

《Master Sergeant. Information on subject B-3, received by Tuatha de Danaan: the Metropolitan Police's monitoring system sighted the car in question fifty seconds ago.》 Acting under the assumption that the girls had been taken by the black van Sousuke had seen on the way out of the apartment, the de Danaan had hacked the local speed cameras to look for it. Mithril had the tech to infiltrate most police and army computer systems.

"Where is it?" Mao asked.

《Shuto Expressway, Route 11. Koto Ward. Rainbow Bridge. The lane headed for Odaiba.》

"Good. Tighten the net and continue surveillance. If it pings any more monitoring systems in the area, let us know."

《What do I get out of it?》

"Candy."

《Roger.》 The AI fell silent.

"Big Sis," Kurz asked suspiciously, "are you teaching it weird words again?"

"Got a problem with that?" Mao retorted. "It's my AI. Now, we basically know where they're headed..."

"The harbor?" he guessed.

"Most likely. If they don't trigger cameras for any of the surrounding roads, we'll know they're near Odaiba. And once we're in the area—"

"Her tracker."

"Precisely."

Their enemy wasn't the only one using that hoary old method of tracing someone with a homing device. With Kaname at risk of being kidnapped at any time, Sousuke had her wearing a necklace with a miniature transceiver in it. Mithril had a few other safeguards in place to protect her, but even Kaname wasn't likely to know about those.

Even if the enemy realized she had that necklace, it would be too late. The

team already knew they were in the harbor district; they'd just have the de Danaan's mother AI run a search on the warehouses and boats entering port.

"I'll take the M9. You two take the truck," Mao ordered. "I'll send you our RV point later. Got it?"

"Roger," said Sousuke.

"Yeah, yeah," replied Kurz.

"All right. Initiate counterattack," Mao declared, and jumped lithely off the hood.

27 June, 0025 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Shuto Expressway Route 11, Minato Ward, Tokyo

The van carrying Kaname and Tessa crossed the Rainbow Bridge, then got off the Shuto Expressway at the Ariake Interchange. There were relatively few cars for a Friday night.

Four years had passed since budget issues forced the cancellation of the World City Exposition, but the development of the waterfront was still ongoing; massive skyscrapers and shopping centers stood side-by-side with empty lots, rife with weeds.

Takuma was sitting in the van's passenger seat. Kaname and Tessa were side-by-side; across from them was a man holding a gun. He didn't look like he would let his guard down for a second.

Tessa's eyes were pointed downward. She looked fragile and tortured. From time to time she froze up as if enduring something, after which she'd grip the end of her braid and press it against her mouth.

Kaname had been shocked when Sousuke had chosen Teletha Testarossa to be released first during the hostage exchange. It wasn't that she'd wanted to be saved first; her feelings were more simple than that—the basic fact of "he chose her."

Does it mean he cares more about her? Or is it just a sign that he trusts me?

Her heart swung like a pendulum between the two. *Which one is it? I wish I knew. It hurts so much...* But no answer came.

She remembered the sight of the water fountain getting blown to pieces, along with Sousuke. She was relieved to realize that she hoped he was okay. *Thank goodness. I don't hate him. I don't despise him.*

It occurred to her, vaguely, that this might be the most important thing right now. She still had her faith, and faith could make anyone invincible, even at times like these.

The car passed through Odaiba and went south, heading for an isolated pier in the back of the harbor. Everything she could see—massive warehouses, bridge cranes, silos—was dimly illuminated by orange light. They passed through a logistics center gate and came out into an area free of people. Rows of carefully piled containers created an abandoned city that towered over the car, as if to hide it from view.

They turned a few corners and reached their destination, a cargo ship at the end of the pier. It was red with rust and over 100 meters long, but the length itself wasn't especially unusual. As the van neared the prow, the boat's name could be seen: The George Clinton. There were lights on inside the ship, signaling that it was inhabited.

The van came to a stop at the ship's gangway. At the men's urging, Kaname and Tessa got out and were escorted on board.

Waiting for them on the deck was a woman in a skin-tight orange suit. Kaname knew from past experience that the suit was for operating arm slaves.

"Takuma," the woman said, and he stepped past Kaname to approach her.

"Big Sister. It's just been awful!" he said. He sounded more cheerful in that moment than Kaname had imagined from him, yet his joy was repaid with a hard slap across the face. "Big Sister?" Takuma said, staggered, a hand to his cheek in dismay.

"Why didn't you take your medicine on the plane?" she demanded.

"I'm sorry. I spilled it in the bathroom and it grossed me out, so I just threw it away..."

“You were caught as a result, and we lost four men getting you back,” she told him coldly. “Oi and Ueda and Yashiro and Hatano. Were you aware of that?”

“But those guys were always talking back to you,” Takuma protested. “They made fun of me, too. They said I was a coward—”

She seized his left cheek between her fingers. “But they still went to save you. And they died in the process.”

“I... I’m sorry...” All through the exchange, Takuma was casting occasional glances at Tessa, as if he felt ashamed to be seen this way. Tessa, though, had already averted her eyes. It didn’t look like she was embarrassed for him, though; it was something deeper—there was a sense of loathing that flitted in and out of her expression. Like she was looking into a mirror...

Pathetic. Ti-tic.

Huh? Kaname looked around for the source of the sudden whisper, but nobody seemed to have said anything. It had sounded a little like Tessa’s voice, but the other girl’s mouth was firmly shut.

I-Ike that. No-No-Not li... I’m not like that.

The voice reached her again. For a minute, Kaname thought maybe she was the one talking, and she quickly clamped a hand over her mouth. But it wasn’t her; nobody else seemed aware of the voice.

Was it because it was too far away? Or because it was terrifyingly close? Kaname didn’t know for sure, but that was the last of the voice that she heard.

“I really am glad, though.” The woman pulled Takuma into an embrace, expressionless. The discrepancy between the gesture and her tone suggested something deeply off about the siblings’ relationship. “I was so worried. I thought that they might realize how important you were, and then hurt you.”

“Big Sister...” Takuma trailed off.

“Did you get your medicine?”

“Yeah. I took it.”

“Then go downstairs and rest,” she ordered. “You’ll have things to do soon.”

“Okay. I’ll do that.” Takuma went below deck, accompanied by one of the men.

“Now, you two,” the woman began, turning her gaze to Kaname and Tessa. “Why do you think I let you live?”

“Why else?” Kaname said, going over retorts even as she spoke. “All bad guys need to spill their big plan before they die. It’s like, a total cliché.”

“You’re quite the little idiot.” The woman turned away, not smiling. “Take them away. I’ll let you handle *his* interrogation as well.”

The man nodded silently in response to his orders. He prodded Kaname and Tessa from behind, urging them into the ship. They walked through a few passageways, which were lined with doors, before being led into a dreary cabin and locked in.

27 June, 0110 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Shuto Expressway Inner Circular Route, Minato Ward, Tokyo

“So, you let Tessa go first?” Kurz asked from the driver’s seat. He held an Ito En green tea in his left hand while his right nudged the wheel, taking them smoothly past taxis and trucks. He was getting every ounce of speed he could out of the secondhand vehicle.

“That’s right,” Sousuke responded from the passenger seat. Expression despondent, he gazed out the window at the patterns of lights rushing by them. The red of taillights, the orange of street lamps, the green of neon... In the back of his mind, they all blended together into two faces. “Maybe I was stupid,” he muttered.

“You were *totally* stupid,” Kurz responded offhandedly.

“I don’t enjoy hearing that from you.”

“Oh, yeah? I really enjoyed getting to say it, for once.”

Glaring sullenly out the window, Sousuke asked, “So, what would you have done? Would you let the colonel go first, or Kaname?”

“Let’s see... I’d let the girl I liked more go first,” Kurz decided. “The sweet little object of my raging hot passion. That’s the most important thing, y’know.”

Kurz Weber could be described as follows: roughly twenty, with blond hair, blue eyes, a narrow jaw, and symmetrical features. He was a good-looking man, but utterly lacking in social graces. He hated hard work and discipline, and he never approached his missions with anywhere near the seriousness they required.

What made him even more insufferable was the fact that, despite all this, he was Sousuke’s equal in combat skill. There was even one area in which he far outstripped Sousuke: He was a master sniper, capable of putting a hole in a 500 yen coin from one kilometer away without breaking a sweat.

He had no experience in a proper military; like Sousuke, he came out of the mercenary game. Sousuke still didn’t know where he’d trained, or where he’d fought. Kurz frequently spoke of his time in Japan, but he never mentioned how that had led him to the life of a soldier of fortune.

Bringing up Kurz’s past, then, was about the only thing that could put a damper on the man’s typical cheer. Sousuke had seen that melancholy cloud his expression more than a few times, but when asked, Kurz’s standard reply was, “ah, things just didn’t go my way.”

Of course, right now he was hiding behind his usual mask of irreverence and annoying his comrades to no end...

“Nonsense.” Sousuke furrowed his brow at his partner’s response. “It’s not a question of personal preference. I’m talking about the most efficient decision.”

“That’s what makes you stupid.” Kurz chuckled and took a sip of his tea. “If you ask me, neither choice was going to change the situation much.”

“But...”

“At times like those, you gotta follow your instincts. It’s a sixth sense sort of thing; trying to calculate everything like a game of chess is a waste of time.”

Sousuke said nothing.

“Or are you going for the harem ending?” Kurz asked slyly. “‘I’ll make them all

happy!’ and such? If that’s the case, I’m all for it. Behind you all the way. Go get ’em, Sagara-kun.”

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” Sousuke grumped, and Kurz smiled again.

“Well, at the end of the day, it’s a pretty ‘you’ way of doing things...”

Just then, they got a call on the radio. “Uruz-2 to Uruz-6 and Uruz-7. Bad news.” It was Mao, on the move in the M9.

“What is it, Big Sis?”

“The JSDF and the police have gotten involved,” she told them. “I think they just pinpointed the enemy location.”

“What’s bad about that?” Kurz wanted to know.

“It means police cars with sirens will be storming the pier. We’ll lose the element of surprise. That puts Tessa and Kaname in danger.”

“That *is* bad news.”

“Can you stop them?” Sousuke asked.

“I can try to hack them from here and give them dummy orders,” Mao said, “but it won’t do more than buy us time. Anyway, get a move on.”

“Got it. Damn...” Kurz tossed the can into the back seat, gripped the steering wheel anew, and slammed the pedal to the floor.

4: The Fuse of Battle

27 June, 0110 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Cargo Ship George Clinton, Akami Pier, Koto Ward, Tokyo

The ship looked like it hadn't been used in a long time. The lockers were empty; the bunk beds were bare. In the corner sat an old, dead CRT TV.

Tessa was overwhelmed by fear and and a sense of powerlessness. Takuma had fallen into the enemy's hands; now, they might be able to use that lambda driver-mounted weapon.

She had to do something, she thought, but no ideas were coming. She was helpless while a horrendous act of terrorism was being plotted just a few rooms away.

She'd been a fool. She'd made so many mistakes, had so many lapses in judgment. And because of her, he... Sousuke was...

While Chidori Kaname inspected the cabin's various furnishings, Tessa sat on the bed, clutching her knees and staring vacantly at the opposite wall. At last, after making sure there was nothing in the room they could use, Kaname took a seat on the bed across from her.

The silence was awkward. It was Tessa who chose to break it first.

"Chidori-san."

"Yeah?"

"You're a very strange person."

"Oh, yeah? I'd say I'm pretty normal, actually," Kaname responded, gazing up at the ceiling.

"No, you *should* be normal... But even in the situation we're in now, you're searching for a solution," Tessa observed. "You provoked that woman. And back

at the school, you tackled Takuma...” Those weren’t things that a ‘completely normal person’ could do.

“Is that weird?” Kaname asked.

“Yes, it is. I...” Tessa looked down for a while, falling silent. She decided that now was the time to say it. “You completely throw me off my rhythm when you’re around. I did so many foolish things tonight that I normally wouldn’t do. I teased and tormented my subordinate, and tried to spring into action in the most pointless ways...”

“Spring into action? What do you mean?” Kaname didn’t seem to understand what she was getting at.

“In the schoolyard, I ignored Sergeant Sagara’s instructions and charged out. I’ve never made such a foolish decision before in my life. Trying to save you from your foolish actions turned me into a fool as well.”

Rather than acting insulted, Kaname nodded in remembrance. “Oh... yeah, you did do that. How come?”

“Because...” Tessa hesitated. *Why did I run out to save Kaname then? Why did I do that, knowing that it would be pointless at best and harmful at worst? Because I was frustrated. Because I wanted to show him, as forcefully as I could, that I wasn’t useless.*

The reason Sousuke had asked for Tessa’s release first was because he trusted Chidori Kaname. That meant, by implication, that he didn’t trust Tessa—that he didn’t see her as reliable. Given her utter lack of athletic ability, she couldn’t claim that his decision was wrong.

But even so, *why* did he trust her more than Tessa? Her trained intellect offered her a variety of logical answers, but her feelings rejected all of them. Those foolish feelings she couldn’t fully control...

This isn’t like me at all, Tessa thought. *I’m a better person than this. I should get along with this girl...* But despite telling herself that over and over again, for some reason, she couldn’t bring herself to care for Kaname.

Have I always been such a rotten person? she wondered. The thought of it sank Tessa deep into depression. Realizing there was a possessive side to her

she'd never knew she had filled her with self-loathing.

After all... just what kind of person was this Chidori Kaname? She'd earned so much trust from a soldier of Sagara Sousuke's caliber. She was an ordinary person, yet so decisive in her actions that she sometimes slid into recklessness. She maintained these traits even in situations that would send most girls to pieces, trembling and crying.

In the end, rather than answering Kaname's question, Tessa asked one of her own. "You truly are strange. You aren't afraid at all?"

At this, Kaname made a big show of thinking. "Let's see... I mean, sure, I'm afraid. It's more, just... when I'm put in a situation like this, it makes me want to fight back?"

"Fight back?" Tessa questioned.

"Yeah," Kaname answered. "Everything that challenges me or tries to get me down... they're like enemies, in a way. Enemies aren't all people with guns; you find them in normal life, too."

Mountains of homework, morning drowsiness, nighttime loneliness, bullying... She had her monthly agony; she had fears about the future; she had fears about heartbreak.

"If one of those enemies attacks you," she continued, "you have to do something, right? Whether it's grinning and bearing it, or fighting back... I guess that's kind of how I try to live my life."

"But those mundane problems are surely of a completely different magnitude," Tessa observed.

"Yeah, true. I don't know how to explain it, exactly," Kaname admitted. "It's just, well, I don't know how you were raised, but... even if you're living a normal life in Japan, you'll probably end up in situations where you end up thinking, 'I'd rather be dead than here.'"

Tessa found that surprising. "Really?"

"Totally," Kaname said, half-joking, then leaned back against the wall. "It started for me back in middle school. I'd just come back to Japan after four or

five years in New York with my dad. I'd transferred to a local middle school... and after that, it was the typical story, I guess. I'd picked up the habit of saying whatever was on my mind, so I got treated like a freak."

Tessa was starting to see what she was getting at. She said nothing.

"I know I wasn't exactly a saint myself. But... they were just so vicious... It was awful. I really did want to die," Kaname recalled, distantly.

"But you still fought?"

"Yep," she replied promptly, bouncing back. "It wasn't the most dignified way of doing things, and I'd be lying if I said I don't have any regrets... Maybe it would've been smarter to run away. But I learned a lot from doing things my way, I think."

"I see," Tessa said neutrally. "Such as?"

"Just lots of stuff." Kaname didn't seem inclined to explain any more than that. "Anyway, things did a 180 when I got into high school, and now I'm pretty happy. The school's pretty chill, the people are cool, and I've even got a best friend. If Sousuke'd just dial it down a little, it'd be perfect." She laughed.

With that, at last, and with great effort... Tessa felt a small amount of affection for Kaname. A very small amount. "Does Sagara-san cause you that much trouble?"

"Oh, he's the worst. He's got no common sense; it's always a string of disasters around him. I know he doesn't mean any harm, but the fact that he doesn't... honestly kind of makes it harder for me." Kaname narrowed her eyes. It wasn't the expression of someone whose sole emotion was annoyance. "He's trying his hardest, in his weird, awkward way. It makes me want to help him..."

Tessa fell silent. *Awkward. Earnest. Makes you want to help him. Exactly...* For some reason, Sagara Sousuke inspired those same feelings in her.

Tessa was reminded of when they were discussing Kalinin's fate, and he had said, "Not even I could kill the major. I'm sure he's fine." It was a terrible way to comfort someone, but she could tell that he was trying. He was strange, and charming, and just a bit reassuring to have around.

Seeing him appear so detached, yet so earnest... In that moment, Tessa had found herself growing fond of him. She wanted to be with him, to navigate him through all of his social awkwardness. And yet it was Kaname who was with him, doing that...

That explained it. At last, the answer to her earlier question—why am I so off my rhythm?—was starting to come into view.

“You’re right...” Tessa whispered, “Sagara-san is a strange person, isn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Kaname agreed. “A total weirdo.”

Their eyes met. For some reason, they found themselves smiling at each other. For just an instant, they shared the same feeling.

Chidori Kaname isn’t some alien being. She’s an ordinary girl, just like me.

The realization took a weight off Tessa’s shoulders.

“So, what about you?” Kaname asked.

“What?”

“You seem pretty weird to me too, Testarossa-san.”

“Ah... Please, call me Tessa. That’s... what my friends call me.” It took her a bit of courage to say that.

But Kaname’s response was as breezy as could be. “Sure, Tessa then. You can call me whatever.”

“All right then, Kaname-san.” Once she’d said it, Tessa found that she liked the sound of it.

“So, what do you actually do?” Kaname asked curiously. “I get that you’re with Mithril, but...”

“Well, as I explained earlier—” Before Tessa could finish, the door to the cabin unlocked, and a man in a combat uniform poked his head in.

“Get out,” he ordered. “Come with us.”

A man entered Andrey Kalinin’s room. He wore one of their black combat uniforms, but his mask was off; this revealed him to be a young man with his

black hair done up in dreadlocks. “Time for questioning, old man,” he said haughtily. Seina wasn’t with him; perhaps she had other business, or perhaps she just didn’t want to see Kalinin again. “You get a tearful reunion, too... Bring ’em in.”

Teletha Testarossa and Chidori Kaname entered, prodded on by two other men. Each girl had her own reaction to the sight of the heavily bandaged Kalinin on the bed.

“Kalinin-san!” Tessa exclaimed.

“Who’s that?” Kaname asked curiously.

They seem unharmed, at least. My insurance must have worked, he thought.

Chidori Kaname had never seen Kalinin before. He’d visited her in the infirmary when she’d been taken onto the Tuatha de Danaan after the incident two months ago, but she’d been unconscious through all of that.

“Kalinin. That your name, old man? Let’s get down to business, then,” the man with dreadlocks said before signaling to his comrades with his eyes. They grabbed Tessa and Kaname and forced them to their knees. “All right. Seina said you can’t be tortured, seeing as you’re already at death’s door. That’s why I thought we’d get some help from the girls... Know what I mean?”

Kalinin held his silence.

“First, I’m gonna warn you... I’ve got no scruples about this kind of thing. It’s what got me thrown in juvie ages ago.”

The man behind Kaname chimed in, “Yeah, be careful, old man. He’s a major perv. There was a lady office worker in the neighborhood where he lived in middle school. He dragged her into the forest, popped her in the face half a dozen times, then used it for... y’know.”

“Aw,” the man in dreadlocks gushed mockingly. “Cut it out, you’re makin’ me blush!”

The men shared a laugh, while the girls lowered their eyes in disgust.

Still, Kalinin reckoned, these men were a cohesive squad—there was no chance they would actually do something that recklessly impulsive. Indeed, the

man’s joking expression immediately sobered, and he pulled out his gun. This was the face of a soldier, not a sex offender.

“Okay, start talking. What organization are you with?” He shoved the muzzle against Tessa’s temple. She managed to keep her gaze fixed forward; perhaps she was mentally fortified for this.

“Don’t do it, Kalinin-san,” she said in a tone of command.

“That’s... not your call, Testarossa-kun,” he said, speaking her name in a slightly strained voice. He was trying to conceal the fact that Tessa was actually more important than he was; if they learned that Teletha Testarossa was more than a secretary, they might decide to torture her directly. “Since when do you... order me around?”

Tessa fell silent, seeming to have decided to leave it to him.

“Cut the chatter and answer the question,” the man in dreadlocks demanded. “What’s your organization? Wait, maybe you need to see that I’m serious first... Yeah, let’s do that.” Unceremoniously, he pointed his gun at Tessa’s leg. It was clear he really would pull the trigger.

“Mithril,” Kalinin said, before he could manage it.

“What’s a Mithril?” the man asked, without withdrawing his gun.

“It’s a military organization designed to check regional conflicts and terrorism,” Kalinin strained. “We offer information gathering and training to militaries and police in various countries. If needed... we even take physical action. I’m a part of the operations division, and I was... doing some consulting with the Japanese government.” Kalinin paused several times during his explanation, gasping as if enduring some terrible pain. Indeed, the wounds on his back really were torture.

“You in pain? I guess you got it pretty bad before. Poor guy,” the man with dreadlocks said, without a trace of sympathy. He turned to the men standing behind Tessa and Kaname, “You guys ever heard of Mithril?”

“Just rumors. That they’re an elite execution squad not affiliated with any country’s armed forces, and such,” one of them offered.

“We... We spread those rumors... intentionally,” Kalinin choked out. “To help... check terrorism...”

“So dumb,” the man in dreadlocks scoffed. “Who’d ever be scared of rumors? Okay, question two.” This time, he pointed the gun at Kaname’s leg. She stared at the glossy black barrel, face pale. Her eyes welled up a little, but no more—she was far from the blubbering wreck he might expect.

I see. She’s a strong-willed girl, Kalinin thought.

“How much do you know about the lambda driver?” the man in dreadlocks demanded to know. “Do you have anything to fight it?”

“Well...” Kalinin hedged.

“I’ll shoot her.”

“I’ll talk. The lambda driver...” He grunted, strained. “We... we...” Kalinin’s voice began to fade. His back really was hurting, and so were his ribs.

“You what? I can’t hear you.” Dreadlocks strode up to Kalinin in annoyance.

“The technology... we... possess...”

“What about it?”

“Technology... that shouldn’t... exist...”

“Talk so I can hear you,” Dreadlocks ordered, “or I shoot the girl.”

Kalinin tightened his throat and flapped his mouth open and shut.

One of the other men scowled. “Hey, I think he’s in bad shape. He might be dying.”

“Shut up. I’ll make him talk before he bites it. Hey, old man. Tell me everything, or after I’m done here, I’ll give that girl an ‘education.’ You got it?” Dreadlocks seized the throat of Kalinin, who lay limply on the bed.

“What we know... is...” Kalinin’s words faded. The man leaned in close, straining his ears to hear.

That was his cue. Kalinin dropped the act and grabbed the man’s right arm—the wrist of the hand holding the gun—and twisted it unceremoniously.

“Hey—” Dreadlocks began.

Kalinin wouldn’t give him time to react. He twisted the gun, still in the man’s hand, toward his stomach, and fired. Three shots rang out. The bullets pierced the man’s body, bursting in red trails out the other side.

It took the other men a few seconds to even realize what was happening. They could do a few things, now: shoot Kalinin, even if they harmed their comrade in the process; use the girls as shields; or run out the door and back into the ship. Those were their three available options, but their hesitation left them with none.

Kalinin fired two more shots from the bed. The act was swift and mechanical: one bullet in each man’s head, as easily as one might hammer a nail. Without even knowing what hit them, the men sank to the floor.

Smoke rose from the gun’s muzzle; empty shell casings landed on the bed. Kalinin’s gunplay had left Tessa and Kaname wide-eyed in shock. “I’m glad to see you’re all right, Colonel.” Kalinin said, returning to his usual speaking pattern as he lowered the gun.

“K-Kalinin-san,” Tessa said shakily. “Your injuries...”

“They won’t kill me,” Kalinin told her. “But when this is all over, I’ll need a long rest.” His wounds roared a protest as he sat up, pressed the gun against the cuffs binding his leg, and fired. With a spark, the chain broke. Though every movement invited pain, his body would obey him for a while yet, he wagered.

Kalinin then realized that Kaname was still shellshocked. “Chidori Kaname-kun,” he said as he rifled through the men’s pockets.

“Y-Yes?” she stammered.

“I need to thank you for looking after my subordinate for so long.”

“Um... thanks. But Tessa and I only met today.”

“I’m not referring to her.” Kalinin screwed the enemy’s knife and spare clip into his belt, then ran a quick check on the gun.

Kaname stared in confusion, and Tessa clarified. “Kaname-san, the subordinate he’s referring to is Sagara-san.”

“Huh? But...”

“She’s not my subordinate; she’s my superior.” After stealing everything noteworthy, Kalinin stood up. “Shall we, Colonel?”

So it was true. At last, Kaname had to accept it. It made sense to her that this old man, Kalinin, could be Sousuke’s commanding officer. But now Kalinin was calling Tessa *his* superior... He spoke to her politely, and referred to her as “Colonel.” In other words, this clumsy girl had the highest rank out of all of them.

Sousuke had been right. He hadn’t been lying. Teletha Testarossa was their leader. She was a captain, a colonel, and a commander-in-chief. But...

“Something about this doesn’t add up,” Kaname whispered, while walking side-by-side down the passageway with Tessa. “What the heck is Mithril’s deal? You sent that know-nothing war-obsessed dummy to our school; you made a girl who can’t walk two steps without doing a pratfall your commander-in-chief... It makes no sense.”

“You don’t have to put it like that...” Tessa said unhappily.

“It is a sensitive issue,” Kalinin, who was walking ahead of them, said with a sort of dry humor.

The cargo ship’s passages were dimly lit and narrow, and low enough that the tall Kalinin’s head seemed in constant danger of banging into a pipe. His v-shaped torso was wrapped in copious bandages, which were in turn soaked with browning blood. Despite the excruciating pain he must be in, though, his movements remained smooth, and he showed no sign of awkwardness.

He carries himself a lot like Sousuke, Kaname found herself thinking, falling deep into thought.

Suddenly, Kalinin stopped.

“What is it?” Tessa asked quietly.

“This way,” he answered. “Don’t speak.” Kalinin opened a nearby metal door and pushed them through. They found themselves in a cramped bathroom that stank of a mix of oil, saltwater and feces.

Kaname nearly screamed out of reflex, but Kalinin clamped his free hand over her mouth. He quietly closed the door, and they heard footsteps outside. They held their collective breaths.

There were men, several of them, running down the corridor outside. At last, they seemed to run past.

“It seems word of our escape has gotten out,” Kalinin noted.

“Well, it was only a matter of time. I’m more concerned about... ugh.” Tessa let out a slight retch, straining against the rotten stench.

“The ship’s cargo, yes?” he inquired.

“Yes,” Tessa confirmed. “I heard a sound earlier. It was like a large gas turbine engine... And not the kind used in aircraft.”

“Generating power?” Kalinin guessed.

“Most likely. I heard something like a torque converter,” Tessa agreed. “But... it doesn’t make sense. It was too large to be an AS’s generator.”

“Could it have something to do with the lambda driver?” he wondered.

“I can’t be sure,” Tessa told him. “I only know it’s for a device that requires greater than normal output. And they have Takuma now... so we need to do something.”

Kaname looked between them, feeling completely out of her depth. “Um, what are you talking about?” she asked, holding her nose.

Tessa looked annoyed about having her train of thought interrupted, but immediately recovered and said, “I’m saying... this ship may contain a weapon of incredible power. A weapon incorporating a technology that defies imagination.”

“Ahh...”

“You don’t understand?”

“Yeah, not really.”

“I thought not.” Ignoring Kaname’s glare, Tessa put a hand to her slender jaw. “Conjecture will get us nowhere, I suppose. Kalinin-san, I’d like to scout out the

cargo hold. Would that be possible?”

“I think it’s necessary,” he agreed. “If they have a lambda driver-mounted AS, or something like it... we’ll need to destroy it before it activates.”

“Then let’s proceed,” Tessa decided. “Is that all right, Kaname-san?”

“Huh?”

“We’d like to take a little detour.”

“Oh... sure. Whatever you want.” Kaname was, in fact, extremely eager to get off the ship, but she couldn’t bring herself to argue. Tessa’s ability to talk on even terms with Kalinin, an obvious veteran, imbued the clumsy girl with an all-new sense of gravitas.

After checking conditions in the corridor, Kalinin took the lead. They passed through several doors and descended the stairway. They passed down another hallway, then abruptly came out into a wide open space.

“Ah...” Kaname trailed off.

This was the ship’s cargo hold. It was structured a lot like a school gymnasium, and ringed by a catwalk—a thin metal corridor, suspended halfway up its towering walls. If it were empty, it could probably be used to hold basketball games.

The stinging smells of fuel, burnt plastic, and metal filled the air. There was no sign of anyone there. It was dark in the room, but with the faint light from the windows, they could make out the vague forms of machines of all sizes. Small cranes and compressors, large batteries, storage tanks of some kind... Cables and pipes were strewn messily about the floor.

At the center of the hold—or rather, taking up nearly all of it—lay a massive machine. Kaname looked at it curiously. At first, she thought it was a large submarine, but the structure was far too complex for that. It couldn’t be an AS, either. This was much larger than an AS could ever be—ten standard-size ASes could fit easily into the space taken up by this one machine. It was so large, in fact, that from their current vantage point, they couldn’t even take in its entire scope.

Was it meant for water, air, or land? Kaname couldn't even work out that much. The smoothly curving exterior—was that armor?—was dark red. It was made up of a complex arrangement of interlocking parts, and it seemed to have enormous weapons attached to it.

"What is this thing?" Kaname asked, but Tessa didn't answer her. In the dim light, she could see her face frozen up in shock and tension.

"Preposterous," Tessa whispered. "If it were to activate... there would be no way to stop it. So many people would die. We have to do something."

"But we'd need more than a grenade to even make a dent," Kalinin observed.

"It has to have a fuel tank," Tessa argued back. "If we can—"

Just then, the cargo hold's lights went on. Mercury lamps brightly illuminated their surroundings. Kalinin silently readied himself, hiding Kaname and Tessa behind him.

The catwalk was lined with their enemies. Each carried a rifle or a shotgun, and all were pointed straight at them. They lined the opposite corridor, as well, and two blocked the entrance they had come through. They were completely surrounded.

Above them, Kaname could make out one familiar face: It was Takuma, dressed in an arm slave operator's uniform. She was a little surprised to see him like that. *That gutless wonder is gonna fight?* she wondered. Kaname had seen the power and maneuverability of an AS firsthand. She couldn't even imagine Takuma in the pilot's seat.

"I knew you'd come here," Takuma said. "You have many skilled acquaintances, Testarossa-san. Yang-san, Sagara-san, and now the wounded gentleman there... You know how to cycle between men, I see."

"And you're very capable of sarcasm," Tessa responded.

Takuma smiled and gazed down at the giant machine. "What do you think? They call it the Behemoth." His voice had a monotone quality, as if his interest was only passing.

"You're all mad," Tessa retorted. "This thing has no purpose but destruction.

There can't be a strategic objective. It can only spread terror, like nuclear or chemical weapons."

"Terror *is* our objective, Testarossa-san."

She held her tongue.

"Personally, I'm not trying to get anything material out of this... It's an act of expression," Takuma explained. "Very minor self-expression. Within a year, most people will forget about it."

"Like Takechi Seiji?" Kalinin said, and Takuma and the other men looked slightly surprised.

"That's right," Takuma replied after a moment's silence. "That man was like a father to us, and the world needs to pay for rejecting him. That's part of it. But that's not the only reason... You don't understand how we feel at all, do you?"

"Of course I don't," Kalinin retorted. "Besides, I would never even try to use something like that thing. It isn't remotely practical."

"That's where you're wrong. It's invincible, when piloted by a chosen warrior like me. I'll spread destruction and death and make Big Sister happy. And then I'll be happy, too." Takuma leaned over the railing with a bright smile. There was no particular malice in his expression, which just made it more unsettling. "Anyway, I'd better hurry up and get things ready. I've heard the police are on the way, with a squad of JSDF ASes. We can be sure now that they've taken no measures to fight our Behemoth, so we have no further need to question you."

"Stop this, Takuma," Tessa begged. "It's not too late."

"But it is too late, Testarossa-san. I really did like you. But it's time to say goodbye." Takuma didn't give an order, exactly, but the men used that moment to take aim with their guns.

They're going to shoot us, Kaname realized. The moment that thought entered Kaname's mind, a roar filled the cargo hold.

It was the shockwave from an explosion. The entire ship shook. It had come from somewhere on the ship—perhaps beneath it. It felt like a hit from a

torpedo.

The floor tilted hard to the left. Various things inside the room slid, rolled, and toppled toward the port side. The enemies on the catwalk lost their balance and had to cling to the handrail.

Kaname cried out as she fell and slammed her back against a mini-crane.

“Hide!” Kalinin shouted as he sprang into action, running at full tilt while practically carrying Tessa.

Kaname could see human figures on the catwalk readying their guns again. *If I stay here, I’ll be shot,* she realized, and in that instant, her body began to move on its own. Half-crawling, half-tumbling, she began to get her distance.

Bullets rained down, and sparks flew from every direction. She let out a series of panicked cries as she moved, then hid behind the closest thing she could find: a small compressor.

The sound of gunshots continued on the other side of the hold; Kalinin was probably trading fire with them. He and Tessa seemed to have retreated in the opposite direction, so there was no way for her to join back up with them.

She was isolated. The ship was rocking. Bullets were flying all around her. It was hell.

Kaname felt seized by terror, a sense of powerless, like an astronaut on a spacewalk whose lifeline had just been cut. She had no weapons, nowhere to run. What could she do all by herself? *What can I do? Wh-Wh-What... do, dododo...*

“Huh?” she breathed. She’d heard a strange voice in her ears. Her heart was pounding so hard she could feel the pulse in her neck. Beyond it, she could hear someone whispering to her. *Fif-fine... fineineine, it’ll be fine. Inein. Coming.*

“What?” she said. “Again?” The sound of a loud ricochet close to her caused the voice to vanish. Kaname let out a yelp. She couldn’t stay here.

Desperate and confused, she ran along the wall of the cargo hold. She tripped over a cable, banged into a steel pillar, and nearly fell. The rocking was awful. After managing not to get hit by any bullets, she hid behind a toolbox as large

as a desk, took in a breath, and cried, “Why does everything happen to me?!” No answer came.

Instead, one of the enemies vaulted a piece of machinery and began heading in Kaname’s direction. He wore a combat uniform and a mask. He must have known that she was unarmed; maybe he thought it would be easier to finish her at close range than to keep shooting at her while she was on the run.

Kalinin and Tessa were on the other end of the cargo hold; there was no way they’d be able to help her. If she tried to run, she’d be shot in the back. Realizing that, Kaname reached into the toolbox beside her, pulled out a large wrench, and threw it as hard as she could, in desperation. The soldier was hit in the shoulder and cried out, reeling back in surprise from her unexpected reaction.

“Okay, you asked for it!” She picked up a crowbar as long as her arm and, while teetering under the weight, charged at him with it. For some reason, the man didn’t shoot her, but just waved a hand in panic. It was like he was saying “stop,” but...

“Take this!” She swung the crowbar at him. The masked man just barely managed to block the strike with his rifle, but the momentum carried and struck him in the neck. The man staggered, but kept his balance, tenaciously.

“Why, you...!” She hit him again. This time, the rifle warped. The man dropped it, fell backward, and slammed into an iron pillar behind him.

“W-Well? You want another whack?!” Kaname shouted, readying the crowbar for another strike. Her legs were trembling, and she was about to weep out of fear, but she ignored all of it.

The man shook his head and held up both hands in surrender. “You really are full of mysteries,” he said at last.

Kaname started. “What are you—”

“It’s me, Chidori.” The man took off his mask and slowly picked himself up.

As Kaname caught the face in the dim light, she let the crowbar clatter to the floor. “Sousuke?”

On the other side of the cargo hold, the firefight was still raging. The ship's rocking wasn't as violent as before, but now there was an eerie creaking sound moving through the hull. Her head was pounding from the sound of gunshots and ricochets echoing all around. She could be shot from any direction at any time, and it was much too soon to relax.

Nevertheless, she threw herself into his arms.



She wasn't even thinking; it just happened. She had been so afraid, and she was so happy that he was okay. She couldn't possibly be self-conscious in this moment; she'd just wanted something to cling to so badly.

"Chidori?" Sousuke said.

She could sense his confusion. Holding back sobs, Kaname explained herself, "I was so scared."

"I'm sorry," he apologized.

"I was worried, okay?"

"I'm sorry about that, too."

"Idiot..." Kaname grumbled. "I almost died like a million times..."

Just then, Sousuke pulled out his pistol and fired two shots overhead. Two enemies, standing on the catwalk and aiming for them, screamed and fell; their bodies landed behind a distant compressor. Then, still holding Kaname, Sousuke said, "Please continue."

Kaname's jaw dropped. She released her hold on Sousuke, suddenly feeling vaguely silly. "I guess it's really not the time for this, huh?"

"Hmm. I suppose not," he answered. Amid the clamor and vibrations, the two quickly took shelter again.

"So," Kaname asked, "how did you get here?"

"We located you right away," Sousuke told her casually. "We infiltrated from the sea."

"Oh. So what's causing the rocking?" she asked. "And what was that big explosion earlier?"

"Ah," he nodded simply. "That was the bomb we set. You seemed to be in trouble, so we detonated it immediately. The ship will likely sink soon."

"Sheesh... you don't do subtle, do you?"

"It was merely efficient," Sousuke answered. "It will provide a distraction and take out the enemy equipment at the same time."

Sensible indeed—assuming they could get off the ship themselves. “But... you said ‘we,’ right?” Kaname asked. “Who else is with you?”

“Mao and Kurz.”

“Aha.” Kaname knew them. They were Sousuke’s comrades, and quite capable.

“The enemy won’t be able to focus on us right now. Let’s get out of here.” Sousuke took Kaname’s hand and began to run.

The floor pitched abruptly, and Takuma went shoulder-first into the wall. He moaned as he banged his head, then stumbled, and clutched at the railing. Sporadic firefights were breaking out on the other end of the hold; his heart sank as he realized that the ship was going down.

I won’t be able to activate the Behemoth, he realized. *I’ve lost my chance to climb inside, to move it, to show my power. What was the point of all of this, then? Big Sister...* There was a pain in his temple. The impact before must have broken the skin. There was a little blood. Red blood. *My blood. It hurts...*

“Takuma.” Seina and one of their comrades came running toward him across the catwalk.

“Big Sister?” Takuma asked, bewildered.

“What are you doing?” she demanded. “Get in the cockpit! We’re going to activate the Behemoth.”

“But... it’s too late,” he protested. “And I just got hurt...”

“Don’t whine about a little bump on the head. It won’t stop you from piloting.”

“But it hurts...” Takuma whimpered.

Seina grabbed him by the collar and pulled him in close.

“Ah...”

“Get inside,” she ordered. “We’re going to activate it. Protect the Behemoth.”

“Big Sister. But I...”

I'm injured, Takuma thought. *Aren't you worried about me? Is the Behemoth more important to you than I am? I became its operator to make you happy... I endured all those awful things... I never really cared about old man Takechi, I just felt bad for you, because you were the person closest to him. Big Sister...*

"Do you realize how many people have died to get you here?" Seina asked.

I don't care.

"Don't you realize you're worth nothing unless you pilot it?"

Stop it. If you don't—

"If you run away now," she told him coldly, "I won't need you anymore."

The world around Takuma went black. *I thought I was loved. I thought we didn't need the Behemoth. And yet... I'm the one who's not needed. Not needed. I...*

I'm just the operator, he realized. *I'm another of the Behemoth's working parts. That's all I am to her...*

"Understand?" Seina demanded. "Then get in there. He'll help you. I'll get it powered up and ready to go. Hurry." Ignoring the gaping hole she had just opened up inside Takuma, Seina slid down the ladder and ran over to the Behemoth's far side.

The comrade who remained with him slapped Takuma on the shoulder. "Get it together, okay? And hurry! The ship's going down!" At the man's prodding, Takuma listlessly began to walk.

Sousuke and Kaname dashed to the cargo hold's entrance, where they ran into Kalinin and Tessa. They must have just given the enemy the slip, as well.

"Sagara-san?" Tessa breathed in open surprise.

"I'm sorry our assistance came so late," Sousuke apologized.

"Ah..." Tessa held her breath for a moment, then gave him a pretty smile—which she quickly restrained. She looked like she wanted to throw herself into his arms—but she seemed to hold herself back from that, too. She just straightened up, averted her eyes, and said, "I'm pleased that you're safe. I'm

no longer angry about the schoolyard incident.” Her tone was light and breezy.

Sousuke was dumbstruck for a moment. Then he said, “I... I’m grateful.”

“What did you do to her, Sergeant Sagara?” Kalinin asked. Each man had reason to think that the other was dead, but neither showed any sign of joy at the reunion; this was standard fare for them, after all.

“Er. I...” As Sousuke struggled over what to say, Kalinin just shook his head.

“You can explain later,” he told the younger man. “For now, take those two and escape.”

“Yes, sir. What about you, Major?”

Kalinin turned back to the hold’s cargo, his face pale and haggard. His wounds were serious, and they seemed to have taken a toll on his stamina. “There’s... something I need to do,” he replied. “Go on without me.”

“I’m happy to go instead, if you so order,” Sousuke offered.

“No... that’s all right.”

Showing no further concern, Sousuke did as he was told.

Kalinin turned back to Tessa. “Colonel, you should escape if you can. I intend to stop the Behemoth from activating.”

“It’s too dangerous,” Tessa protested. “Besides, the ship’s sinking should take care of it. You should—”

“It’s just a precaution,” Kalinin said, cutting her off. “Don’t worry about me. And if it does activate... you need to be as far away as possible.”

Tessa said nothing.

“I’ll catch up with you later.” Kalinin checked the remaining bullets in his gun, then turned back to the cargo hold.

“Let’s go, Colonel.” Sousuke readied his gun and broke into a run, leading Kaname and Tessa down the corridor.

The ship’s tilt was getting worse. The hold itself was beginning to take on water.

“I told you to hurry! What’s the matter with you?” Half dragged by the other man, Takuma climbed up the armor of the colossal Behemoth. When he reached the summit of the mountain-like machine, he swiveled the lever at his feet to open the cockpit. The complex hatch meshes slid open with a pressurized hiss: first the secondary armor, then the primary.

“Get to it, Takuma!” his comrade shouted, over the sound of mercury lamps and metal pipes raining down from above. “Moving this thing is all you’re good for, so make it count, okay?!”

Takuma said nothing.

“Well? I can’t hear you!” He gave him a light cuff on the head, and Takuma gave him a small nod in response. “Eesh. What a freak...” the man spat, then quickly moved to descend the machine. Takuma pulled a pistol from his belt, pointed it at the man’s back and fired.

The man started. As he turned around to look at him in shock, Takuma fired three more shots into him. The man lost his balance and plummeted down the machine, its dark red armor seeming to drink in the fresh blood.

“Don’t act like we’re friends, you incompetent,” Takuma spat, before taking out a disposable syringe. He knew very well where his veins were. Unceremoniously, he plunged the needle into his arm, and injected the liquid inside. The ritual was over.

I’m going to pilot it. I have no other choice, Takuma told himself. *I’m a part of the Behemoth. This is the only place I belong. That cockpit is all there is in the world. I don’t care what happens after this. I’ll move that greedy devil however it wants me to... spreading destruction and flames...*

“Hold it,” a voice behind him said. He turned to see a Caucasian man, done up in bandages, pointing a pistol at him. This was the man they had been holding on the ship, Testarossa’s comrade.

“I can’t let you get inside that thing. Step over to me, slowly.” The man held out a hand. His gun was still pointed right at Takuma. But... he could sense a deep exhaustion on the man’s bearded face. The strain of coming this far seemed to have reopened his wounds; he might die soon, just on his own.

“And if I say no?” Takuma asked.

“I’ll shoot you,” Kalinin told him flatly.

“But I don’t have a choice,” Takuma protested. “I have nowhere else to go.”

“I don’t show mercy,” Kalinin answered, “even to children.”

If that were the case, you wouldn’t have given a warning, Takuma thought. *Is he being sentimental? No, that attitude suggests—*

“Throw the gun away.” Seina was standing on the catwalk just ten meters from the Behemoth. She had a submachine gun aimed at the man’s head.

But you’re not trying to save me, are you, Big Sister? You just want me to pilot the Behemoth. That’s all it is, isn’t it?

“You, eh?” the man said, without lowering his gun.

“I won’t let you stop him,” Seina answered.

“Activating this thing won’t change anything,” Kalinin said.

“We’ve been through this before,” she countered. “I’m not out to change things.”

“Then you sound like a spoiled child,” he accused.

“I don’t want to shoot you, either, you know.”

This exchange... Takuma felt that he’d heard something like it a long time ago. When was it?

“Then don’t,” Kalinin said simply. Perhaps the man’s exhaustion was reaching its limit. His right hand moved. Two gunshots rang out.

Takuma felt a dull impact in his side. It felt, at first, like a strike from a fist, but the sensation was followed a moment later by a sharper, burning pain. It occurred to him that he’d been shot. From a corner of his eye, he could see the man toppling over. A spray of blood had burst from his back. Big Sister had shot him.

Whimpering, Takuma crawled across the Behemoth’s armor, heading for the cockpit hatch. The fallen man was trying to use the last of his strength to shoot him again.

Just then, the ship rocked. The man bounced down the slope of armor, and fell onto the platform below. The ship creaked, and the catwalk broke in two. Seina lost her balance and gripped the railing, but she was struck by a falling ventilation duct. Crushed under the large pipe, she vanished from sight.

“Big Sister...?” *I should go help her...* Takuma thought, then realized how foolish he was being. She wouldn’t want that. Besides, he was injured. Even if he abandoned the Behemoth now, he couldn’t save her. The nihilism that had been gnawing away at his heart for years told him that she must be dead.

“Goodbye...” he said. *I have only one path left to me.* Enduring the pain in his side, he let himself slide into the open cockpit hatch.

The ship rocked, the corridor tilted, and an eerie roaring echoed around them.

“This way.” Sousuke kept his gun straight in front of him as he continued down the passage. Tessa lost her balance countless times, but Kaname reluctantly supported her.

Despite what had happened in the schoolyard earlier, they weren’t acting very hostile to him—even though he’d been sure they resented his decision. *I just don’t understand... Perhaps I made the right choice after all? I’ll have to consult with Kurz later.* Those were the thoughts that consumed his mind as he ran toward the stairs.

Just as he reached them, he ran into a man with a rifle on the way up from a lower deck. Both shouted in shock, and pointed their guns at each other simultaneously.

“Oh, hey.” It was a tall, slender man with long blond hair.

“Kurz-kun?” Kaname asked incredulously.

“Weber-san,” Tessa acknowledged.

Kurz grinned. “Hey, Kaname-chan, Tessa-chan. You’re looking well. I’m happy to see you. You both deserve a treat.”

“What are you talking about?” Kaname asked.

“Nothing, really,” Kurz said innocently. “Just changing up my greeting.”

“Is that all?” she asked suspiciously.

“That’s all. Anyway, it’s taking on water faster than I thought... We’d better hurry.”

“Right,” she answered.

Kurz began climbing the stairs. Lending credence to his words, the ship had entered a steady tilt, very different from the earlier rocking. The sound of water, like violent currents, began to echo up from the floors below.

“You think we used too much powder?” Sousuke asked.

“Hmm,” Kurz pondered. “Well, explosives aren’t really my specialty.”

“You never mentioned that before,” Sousuke said dryly.

“I seek beauty in destruction; a single point of focus,” Kurz defended himself. “That’s why I’m so good at sniping.”

Listening to their conversation from behind, Kaname whispered, “What a weird double act...”

At last, the group came out on the deck. They were close to the prow, and they could see the ocean rising as the tail continued to sink. Containers on the deck began to snap their restraints and fall into the sea. As the deck warped further, a container crane came loose and collapsed, falling just beside them. Kaname shrieked.

“Yeah, yeah,” Kurz commented. “Dangerous up here...”

“Hurry,” Sousuke said.

As the George Clinton continued to sink in earnest, its prow began to tilt upward. They managed, with difficulty, to make it to the port side; the deck was at a severe angle now, and they were no longer really walking, so to speak. The broadside was just close enough to the pier for them to jump.

“I’ll go first!” With a lithe leap, Kurz landed on the pier. He shouldered his rifle and held out both hands. “C’mon. You first, Tessa.”

It was about two meters from the deck to the pier. Tessa hesitated a moment,

but with Sousuke's help, she jumped with all her might. Kurz caught her firmly, and Tessa's escape was complete.

"Okay, now Kaname!" Kurz shouted encouragingly. Kaname jumped without any hesitation, and Sousuke brought up the rear. The four of them quickly got their distance, ran to a large pile of neatly stacked containers, then turned back to watch the cargo ship sink.

"Hmm, feels like the end of a great evil," Kurz mused. "Needs more explosions, though. The final boss's castle really should go down in flames. It's kinda anticlimactic without it, y'know?"

"What are you talking about?" Sousuke grumbled.

"But..." Despite having made it to safety, Tessa's expression remained grim. "Kalinin-san hasn't made it out yet. I'm worried. With the way it's sinking..."

"What?" Kurz asked. "The old man's alive?"

"Yes. Why would you assume he's dead?" Tessa glared at Kurz.

He put a hand to his chin, not even seeming to notice her look. "Ah, this might be pretty bad. That's a tricky spot to get out of, even for someone like him..."

"I have an idea. Uruz-7 to Uruz-2," Sousuke spoke into his radio, calling to Mao, who was on standby.

"Uruz-2 here. How'd it turn out?"

"The major is inside the sinking ship. He's probably in the hold," Sousuke told her. "Can you rescue him?"

"Oh, hell! Why didn't you say that earlier?!" Suddenly, the air behind them distorted wildly.

"Wh-What?!" Kaname was the only one shocked.

Blue lightning shot through the empty air. A thin membrane of light expanded, and then a massive figure showed itself, pouring into existence like ink spilled on a canvas. Sparks of light went flying, and suddenly, there was a gray AS kneeling beside them. It was Mao's M9 Gernsback, previously rendered invisible via ECS. She'd been on standby here in case of an attack from the Savage from before.

The M9 shot a V-sign to the flabbergasted Kaname. Then it stood up, waved to them, and took off in a run toward the sinking cargo ship.

“Melissa, be careful. There might still be a hostile inside that ship,” Tessa said, leaning over to use Sousuke’s transmitter.

“No worries,” Mao answered. “I’m not about to get beaten by a Savage.”

“It’s not that. The thing in there is—”

Sirens could be heard in the distance. Whirling red lights reflected off the nearby containers. It seemed the police had arrived.

“Ugh, they made it.” Kurz clicked his tongue distastefully. They’d probably make it to this pier while Mao was out searching for Kalinin; if the police saw the M9—an AS of unknown affiliation—they might open fire. Of course, small arms wouldn’t even scratch an M9’s armor, but...

From a corner of the cargo ship came the sound of ripping metal. Startled, the four turned to look.

Mao’s M9 was standing on the deck of the now mostly submerged ship. Something wasn’t right. Its posture was upright, but its back was arched over, and its arms were flailing.

“What’s wrong, Mao?” Sousuke asked.

“Wha... What is...?!” Her voice, coming in over the radio, sounded utterly bewildered. There was another sound of creaking metal. Its back still arched, the M9 slowly began to rise into the air. No—it was being lifted, by something that had grabbed its lower half.

It was a giant hand. The hand itself was about the same size as the M9... no, it was even longer, thicker, and stronger. One of its fingers was the same size as the AS’s arm. The deck bulged upward, creaked, and let out a scream. The arm’s master was about to break loose from the hold.

“What...” Tessa breathed.

At last, scattering shards of metal everywhere, the assailant revealed itself, towering proudly against the night sky.

5: Behemoth

27 June, 0236 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Akami Pier, Koto Ward, Tokyo

Sousuke was sure it was an optical illusion. Though he was at a distance now, it still took him some time to process it as “humanoid.” It was so big, his mind just wouldn’t accept the idea.

But the truth remained, no matter how his instincts might protest: The seawater-soaked red armor, the broad upper arms and thighs... Its head couldn’t be seen from below; the protrusion of the chest blocked it from view. The four of them, Sousuke included, could only stare up at the huge arm slave and gape.

“What in the hell...” Kurz whispered.

Sousuke furrowed his brow, his expression intense. “It’s absurd...” he breathed. He’d seen the thing in the hold before, but from up close, he’d been unable to really grasp the shape of it. He’d simply parsed it as “some giant machine.” It was hard to fault him for doing so; who could imagine an arm slave that was five times the height of a normal one? Even as someone who knew ASes inside and out—rather, perhaps *because* he knew them so well—Sousuke had never even considered that one this size could exist.

There were reasons why most ASes were about eight meters and ten tons: Skeletal endurance; the EM muscle actuators’ optimal output; size of generators; covertness; ease of maintenance; efficiency of production; mission objectives; size needed for corresponding firearms; et cetera, et cetera... Careful calculations had been done taking all of these elements into account, and that was the size settled on as most effective.

The massive AS had a simple outward appearance, with none of the intricate armor plating of the M9. There was something ancient about its presence, like a

mythical giant armored with piecemeal iron sheets. It felt less like a product of technology, and more like a clockwork figurine, given life by magic.

Gripping the M9 tightly below the waist, the giant AS began to squeeze. Its armor creaked, on the verge of splitting.

“I c-can’t move!” Mao screamed.

Tessa snapped out of her daze and shouted into the radio, “Melissa! Use your monomolecular cutter on the thumb!”

“Thumb? What thumb?!” Mao didn’t seem to realize she was in the grip of a colossal AS. She was too close to catch the scope of what she was dealing with, and her AI’s likely inability to identify the enemy must be adding to her panic.

“Right now, there’s an enormous—” Tessa’s attempt was interrupted by a new shriek from Mao. The giant’s other hand had grabbed the M9’s top half; it had turned her machine on its side and begun to twist.

Tessa gasped.

The giant yanked its hands apart, tearing the M9 in two.

Milky white liquid—the drive system’s shock absorbent—sprayed like blood from its severed torso, as its upper half jerked around in a series of eerie convulsions.

“Melissa!” Tessa screamed. Even Kurz went pale at the sight. Kaname averted her eyes and grabbed tight to Sousuke’s arm.

The giant AS—if you could even call it that—held the severed M9 halves up high, as though offering tribute to the Goddess of Night.

Hoh... A low, muffled sound echoed through the harbor. *Hoh... hoh hoh hoh hoh...*

It was a voice. It was coming from the giant. Woofers, installed somewhere on the machine’s body, were conveying the operator’s laughter to the outside world. It seemed to well up from the ground below; a foreboding sound that sent a chill up the spine despite the hot and humid summer night.

The giant tossed the M9’s remains aside; each half hit a separate part of the ocean, raising up a splash in turn.

“Mao...”

Sousuke was about to rush out, but Kurz held him back. “You’re gonna jump into the ocean with that thing right there? It’ll crush you like a bug!”

“But—”

“I’m worried about Big Sis, too, but we’ve got bigger things to worry about... Look.”

The giant had bent slightly at the waist to examine Sousuke and the others. The head, previously hidden behind the chest, could now be seen in the dim light. It looked like it was wearing a cylindrical helmet, but the place where its mouth should be was instead home to a line of four machine cannons.

“I think he likes us,” Kurz said.

The giant gazed at them with hollow eyes. It looked ready to attack at any time, but... instead it turned away, slowly rotating its upper half to face the arriving police and JSDF battalions.

The officers and soldiers, piling out of their patrol cars and transport trucks, stared up at the giant in disbelief. Three JSDF ASes (the Type-96, a 2nd generation machine) brought by trailer were already activated and on the ground—but they, like the people at their feet, simply looked blankly up at the giant.

“Sagara-san, do you have a satellite communicator?” Tessa asked.

“My radio can transmit,” Sousuke told her.

“Let me use it,” she demanded.

“Yes, ma’am. For now, we should get our distance... Head for the car.” Sousuke took off, running for the car they had taken to the pier. The other three followed after; gawking at the thing wouldn’t get them anywhere.

“What’s she going to do?!” Kaname asked.

“Call for reinforcements?” Sousuke guessed. “Or we may need a cruise missile...”

“Reinforcements? Where the heck would you get—”

Behind them, the police were standing their ground, issuing a warning through a megaphone. “D-Deactivate your machine and come down from there! If you don’t, we... we’ll open fire! Do you hear me?! Deactivate your machine and—” There was a dull splashing sound.

They looked up, and saw that the towering giant had set a foot onto the pier. It didn’t do more than crack the asphalt below. This in itself seemed impossible; the ground should have collapsed beneath its weight.

“F-Fire!!” Like a dam bursting, the guns roared out. Shots deluged the giant with a sound like a raging waterfall.

Unfortunately, not even the ASes’ 40mm rifles could pierce the giant’s armor, to say nothing of the infantry’s small arms; they just sparked trivially against the right side of its frame.

“They’re not going to beat it that way,” Sousuke whispered as he hurried toward the car.

To Takuma, the bullet swarm was like a mild drizzle. The pain in his wound was gone now; he felt elated. It was like he was flying. He could break a standard AS in half like a toy; the slightest flick of his hand could reduce a building to rubble. He *was* the giant—his consciousness filled it, head to toe.

The pathetic assault continued.

“Annoying flies...” Takuma whispered, regripping his master suit lever and pressing a round button with his thumb.

《Lambda driver function B, ready,》 the Behemoth’s AI informed him.

Let’s have a test, he decided.

One of the JSDF ASes had readied a large rocket launcher. It wasn’t the latest model, but it was powerful enough to punch a hole in a tank—mighty though it was, not even the Behemoth could endure a blow like that.

Takuma concentrated. His will, amplified—altered, some might say—through training and drugs, crafted an image. The image he was sculpting was something like “shield”—Not just the thickness, feel, and weight of a shield, but

something much more specific.

He imagined every molecule falling into place. No, “molecule” wasn’t the right word either—what he wanted wasn’t comprised of physical matter, but of a power that existed beyond substance. A power that took reason to draw together and manipulate—that was the best way to express it. The proper words to describe it hadn’t been invented yet.

A JSDF machine unleashed a large rocket. It was heading right for Takuma’s—for the Behemoth’s—chest.

An image that no one had ever seen, had ever heard of; an image that no one could even conceive of—no one except for him—his mind could conjure in an instant.

The lambda driver gave that image form.

The rocket streaking toward the Behemoth exploded just before impact. Its scalding hot, highly pressurized metal jet burst emptily against an unseen wall. There was no damage done to the Behemoth’s armor. It was a gratifying feeling.

“That won’t work.” Takuma smiled cruelly, then pulled a trigger. All four of the Behemoth’s head-mounted 30mm machine cannons began to spit fire in a move the machine’s designer had dubbed “Dragon’s Breath.”

Destruction rained down on the enemy army. One after another, police cars and SPVs were shredded and exploded. Tires went bouncing to thirty meter heights; trails of burning gasoline spread; black smoke covered the pier. Men ran this way and that—crying, screaming, crawling.

Takuma laughed. *And all I did was blow on them!* He’d taken out nearly all of the police vehicles, but the JSDF ASes—the Type-96s—were still around. One was drawing back, panicking, reflecting the movements of the operator inside. The leading machine still seemed to want to fight, but the knees of the one to its right were knocking.

Takuma reached behind him and drew the “tachi” mounted on his back. This was a Japanese-style sword three times the length of a standard AS, made of layered ceramic and titanium alloy. Though a tachi was traditionally a cutting

sword, this one seemed more like a bludgeon.

Holding the tachi aloft, the Behemoth charged at the three ASes. This required no particular effort on his part; he just had to walk and crush.

His first swing of the tachi smashed the leader machine to pieces. Another horizontal sweep, and the second was bisected. The final machine fell onto its backside, both hands raised. He just casually kicked it away, causing it to crumple like a soda can as it flew off.

Takuma laughed louder. *What a marvelous feeling! No one can stop me. No one can escape me. I'm so glad I came here. I never should have hesitated. Now there's no question that I'm the king of the world...*

Beyond the mountain of containers, she could see an AS's severed arm fly through the air; the giant must have already taken out the JSDF machines. Flames from explosions streaked the night sky, and shouts and screams echoed across the pier.

Ahh... why didn't they just run away? Tessa wondered. She couldn't help but feel responsible for the tragedy unfolding around her. If only she had killed Takuma in Sousuke's apartment, or anywhere else along the way... If she had, this never would have happened. They might have lost Kalinin, but the enemy would have given up on activating the Behemoth, and... and...

Infinite choices. Infinite forks in the road.

Would that have been a reason to kill him, though? Could I really have made that decision?

"No, I couldn't," she told herself.

For the first time, I've been forced to face my imperfections: how I dealt with Sousuke, how I dealt with Kaname... I've been made acutely aware of my inconsistencies, my hypocrisies. To think that yesterday, I aspired to omnipotence... and now, how powerless I am!

Sousuke's voice broke Tessa out of her anguished reverie. "Colonel. The reinforcements?"

“What?” she asked.

“We need to do something about that giant,” he insisted. “What are your instructions?”

Instructions? He’s still treating me as his commanding officer... Tessa realized.

“I... I’m sorry,” she told him. *That’s right,* she thought. *I still have more to do. I can kick myself another day...* Tessa turned the radio on and opened a satellite channel.

“Yes?” came the response.

“Testarossa here,” she said crisply. “Put me through to Commander Mardukas on the de Danaan. On the double, top priority.”

“Roger that. Give me five seconds.”

Exactly five seconds later, she was transferred over and her XO, Commander Mardukas, responded. “Captain. It’s good to hear you’re safe.”

“Mardukas-san,” Tessa said, “where are you right now?”

“120 kilometers south of the Kii Peninsula.”

Impossible, then. The submarine was over 500 kilometers from Tokyo; it would take two hours to bring new ASes via helicopter, and they were too far away to shoot them here with emergency deployment boosters. Even loading one into a modified ballistic missile, as they’d done during the Sunan Incident, would take at least one hour’s preparation. How much damage could that giant, the Behemoth, render in that time? Just the thought of it sent a chill up her spine.

There’s nothing we can do, Tessa realized. *We’re helpless. I’m—*

“Captain. Do you require the Arbalest?” Mardukas inquired, his monotone itself reminiscent of an AS’s AI.

“Yes,” she replied hesitantly.

“Immediately?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll send it, then.”

She was stunned. “What did you say?”

“You’ll forgive me for acting in absence of orders, but... we have everything in place to fire a ballistic missile containing the Arbalest in three minutes’ time,” Mardukas clarified. “It should reach you approximately six minutes after firing—In other words, nine minutes from now.”

The process of firing a ballistic missile required the de Danaan to surface briefly to open up the flight deck, leaving it temporarily defenseless. The world’s largest and greatest amphibious assault submarine, the Tuatha de Danaan, was an object of interest for navies around the world. It was a risky move that could lead to their capture.

“Mardukas-san...”

“Forgive me. I’m prepared to receive any punishment you deem appropriate.”

Tessa smiled as she pictured Commander Mardukas’s skinny, nervous face. *That’s right. I’m surrounded by the best. To give up now would be disrespectful to them...* “No, you did very well,” she told him. “Fire it at once.”

“Yes, Captain. And the drop point?”

“Let me see...” It couldn’t be here; the giant might attack it the moment it landed. They needed a place with more complex terrain, to buy the operator a minute or two to board after it dropped. Somewhere with limited sight lines, if possible. Not downtown, to avoid involving innocents. Somewhere dark. Somewhere restricted, preferably with lots of highs and lows... and...

The best location possible. A place where the Arbalest could use its abilities to the fullest. Where could that be? Tessa was navigating a complex labyrinth of thought, reviewing all possibilities in the blink of an eye. Every location she considered contained elements of uncertainty. Nothing stuck out as a singular “ideal.” But...

It’s not going to be perfect. I need to accept that, and deal with it.

“I’ve made up my mind,” Tessa whispered, then tapped Kaname on the shoulder. “What do you call that building?” she asked.

Towering in the distance, across the water, stood an illuminated building that

resembled an inverted pyramid.

“Huh? That’s the International Exhibition Center... the Tokyo Big Sight, I think?”

Takuma activated the Behemoth’s sensors. The cameras and infrared detectors, mounted in a dozen locations, searched tirelessly for his targets. He was tens of meters tall; nothing could escape his sight.

He immediately caught the heat signatures of four people hiding behind a warehouse one block away. Running figures—two men, two women.

“There you are,” he whispered. *Teletha Testarossa and her companions... I’m surprised to see Sagara Sousuke still alive, but I’ll kill him now. He pointed a gun at me and threatened to kill me. It scared me. That humiliation... I haven’t forgotten it.*

Yes... It’ll feel even better when I step on him. And I’ll teach that impudent and vulgar female, Chidori Kaname, a lesson, too...

If Testarossa dies with them, Takuma told himself, *it’s an acceptable loss. No, in fact, it’s better that way—She’s only ever looked down on me; she never noticed my affection. Better to destroy her, if I can’t have her.*

“That’s right...” he muttered out loud.

Plain, unadorned legs, like those of a tin toy, pushed forward through thick black smoke. The Behemoth had begun its slow march through the flames.

Sousuke and Kurz had parked their truck behind a warehouse, a block from the giant’s stalking grounds. It was a secondhand kei truck, with “Takasawa Fish” written on the side of the bed.

“You sure this is our only option? It kinda reeks...” Kaname said, sniffing the air.

“Now’s not really the time to complain,” Sousuke observed.

“Hey, guys. I think Colosso’s on his way,” Kurz warned.

The giant’s footsteps had grown louder. The containers and streetlights

around them shook each time it took a step. They couldn't see it through the stacks of crates in their way, but they could tell it was coming closer. Did it know where they were?

"Perfect," Tessa whispered, as if she had something in mind.

"Huh?" Kaname said. "What do you mean, perfe—"

"Get in! We need to go!" Sousuke shouted, leaping into the driver's seat. Kaname scrambled into the passenger's side, and Kurz and Tessa jumped into the bed.

The giant's head appeared, peering over the mountain of containers; simple, bucket-like armor with two round eyes and a mouth. Its face, reminiscent of an old wind-up toy, slowly turned toward them, then tilted.

"Get going already!" Kaname screamed. Chilled by the giant's gaze, she drummed her fists urgently on Sousuke's shoulder.

"I know..." he said, and the second the engine turned over, the kei truck sped off. As it turned the corner of the warehouse, the weight of its four riders caused it to veer wide to the left.

"Listen, Sagara-san." Tessa leaned forward from the truck bed to address Sousuke in the driver's seat. "You need to keep that giant's—the Behemoth's—attention."

Sousuke couldn't believe his ears. She wanted him to lure the Behemoth? To where? And how? Wasn't that suicide? "But Colonel—" he protested.

"Do it," Tessa replied in the harsh, cool tone of command. "It's what Mithril pays you for. You don't have to make my safety a priority. I've decided to put my faith in your skill."

With that one statement, Sousuke felt a strange change come over him. It was the unique confidence and daring of one who had been given another's trust. "If you insist, I'll make it happen"—was the feeling it inspired.

"Very well," he replied. "Where do we go, then?"

"Keep straight for now," Tessa instructed. "Turn right at the intersection, then head to the International Exhibition Center—that building, there. The monorail

track will help to shield us on the way."

Of course. An excellent escape plan, Sousuke decided.

"The Arbalest will drop on the Center's western side," she continued. "We'll buy you time until you can board it."

"You want *me* to pilot it?" Sousuke asked, with a glance back to Kurz.

"Yes," she affirmed. "You're the only operator whose settings it recognizes at the moment. In the incident two months ago—"

"It's coming!" shouted Kaname, who was keeping watch behind them.

The giant was striding toward them, kicking over streetlamps and roadside trees. Though it wasn't running, it was still moving fast enough that it could catch up at any minute. It was just so big; its stride was unreal. They could see the giant's head turning to face them. Was it going to unleash its machine cannons?



“It’s about to fire. When I give the signal, turn!” Kurz screamed.

“Understood,” Sousuke replied tersely.

“Not yet, not yet, not yet... Turn!”

Sousuke jerked the wheel with all his might. In that same moment, the giant’s fire rained down. Dozens of 30mm machine cannon shells, each the size of a milk bottle, fell on them at the speed of sound. The force that hit the kei truck felt less like a strafing and more like an explosion.

Kaname screamed. Chunks of asphalt went flying, and the guardrail, just inches away, was cast into the air like an old rag.

The truck lurched. They were headed for a streetlamp. With technique that was nothing short of miraculous, Sousuke got their vehicle back on course. Tessa was nearly thrown from the truck bed, but Kurz grabbed her and reeled her back in.

“Too close...” Sousuke breathed. *I won’t have time to lure this thing anywhere! The next time it fires, this lousy kei truck—*

“Sousuke, drive straight!!” Kurz hollered.

“What’s the plan?”

“I’m gonna give him a sock in the mouth. Look, just keep straight no matter what. Keep your speed steady, too!”

“Roger.” Sousuke did as he was told, driving straight at a constant speed. Kurz knelt down in the truck bed and aimed his rifle at the still-pursuing giant.

“Wh-What are you doing?”

“Hush, Kaname-chan. You’ll see soon enough...” Kurz’s smile was bone-chilling. His eyes took on the focus of a bird of prey as he licked his upper lip and readied his rifle with a lover’s touch. The barrel swayed up and down from the vibration of the road, but it seemed he’d adjusted for that. The course of the wind. The movement of the light. Taking that and everything else into account...

“Now... aim right at me, you son of a bitch...” Kurz said softly.

The giant turned its head toward them, preparing to fire another machine cannon barrage. Sousuke felt the urge to yank the wheel again, but he put his trust in his friend and maintained course.

Here it comes, Kurz thought, and in that moment, he fired. It was a single shot; a rifle round that wouldn't even dent an LAV.

Nevertheless, something strange happened to the giant's head. There was a blast like a firework from one of the machine cannons, followed by a pop of metal shards. Then the right half of the head began to spew flame and black smoke—a minor explosion had occurred. The giant stumbled. It let out a low moan, and pressed a hand to its injured head.

"Bullseye." Kurz's shot had flown up the machine cannon's barrel and ignited the powder inside. To hit an opening three centimeters wide, from two hundred meters away in a moving car...!

"Kurz-kun... you're amazing!" Kaname said with admiration.

"Easy-peasy," Kurz snorted triumphantly.

"This whole time, I just thought you were a loser with a big mouth!" she went on.

Kurz scowled.

"It's not over yet," Sousuke cautioned. Kurz had taken out half of the enemy's machine cannons, but they couldn't expect the same trick to work twice. In addition, the giant immediately recovered from its confusion, let out a roar and raced back into pursuit. It was running now, arms raised. The road buckled beneath its feet.

It was like a tsunami of iron heading right for them; Kaname's jaw dropped. Its massive body seemed to block out the sky.

"Dammit," Sousuke cursed, and slammed his foot on the gas.

27 June, 0241 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Akami Pier, Koto Ward, Tokyo

Near the outskirts of the wharf, onto a ramp lapped by the waves of the harbor, Andrey Kalinin had been dragged ashore. He'd been shot from behind in the sinking ship, but the bullet had only grazed his shoulder. Still, the ocean water had robbed him of blood and body heat; he was so exhausted, it was difficult even to move. This time might really be...

He stopped himself. Who was it who had pulled him from the water, and swam him all the way to this ramp? He decided to sit up and see.

Seina was there, lying face-up on the slope. Her lower half was soaked with seawater, her pale face turned toward the sky.

She was the one who had saved him. That by itself didn't surprise Kalinin that much; after all, if she'd wanted him dead, she could have hit a major organ. A shot to the head would have been easy at that distance.

"Do you think I'm a fool?" Seina asked him.

"No..." Kalinin responded, then he realized: her back was hemorrhaging blood. She had her back to the ground, so he couldn't make out the extent of it... but its severity was easy to imagine. She was beyond treatment now.

"The Behemoth... activated?" she asked.

"Yes," he told her succinctly. "You won."

"Too bad... I don't really care anymore..." the voice drifted from her lips, weakly and with great effort. "It was originally... planned... as an anti-AS gunboat... It was supposed to be loaded... with even more firepower... to hunt ASes..."

"But it was too slow," Kalinin said.

"Hence... the lambda driver... and Takuma..." Seina trailed off. Not even a machine of that size could withstand a direct hit from a tank gun or a supersonic missile—In a competition between shield and spear, the spear typically had the advantage. They'd mounted it with that unstable system, the lambda driver, to compensate; and thus, the Behemoth was born. "It's impossible... to destroy it," she predicted. "Forty minutes... of fuel. Can't be stopped until it runs out..."

“Depending on Takuma,” Kalinin observed.

“I don’t think... I’ve been very good to him,” she confessed. “His memory is so jumbled... At some point... he decided I was the sister he’d killed. And I... exploited that...”

Kalinin said nothing.

“I don’t have any... blood relatives,” Seina went on. “I’ve been alone... for so long.”

Silence. Explosions rang out in the distance, like thunder from a looming downpour.

“You’re not going to ask?” she finally said.

“Ask what?”

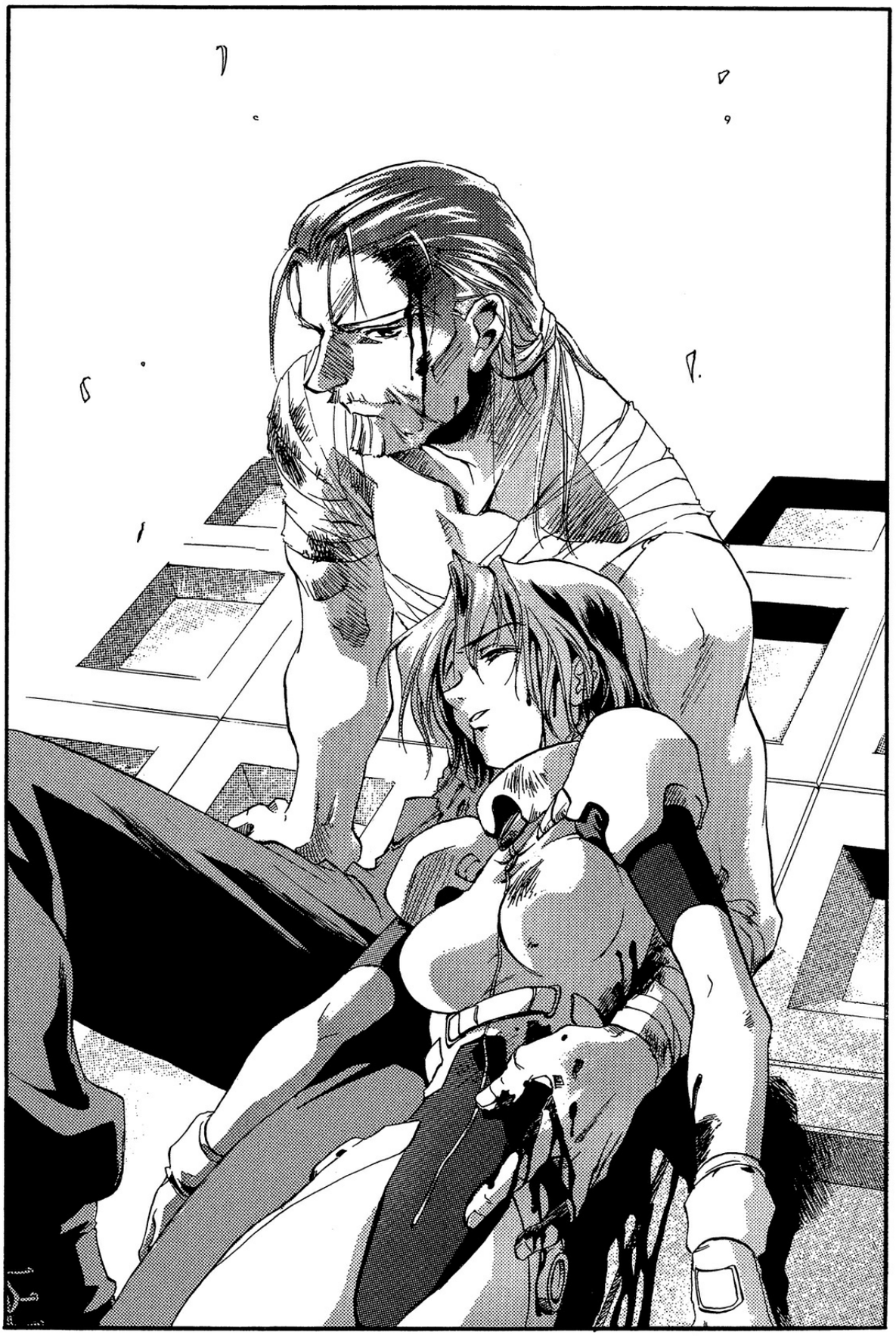
“Why I saved you...”

“I think I can guess,” Kalinin said mildly.

Perhaps she had seen the shadow of another in him. Perhaps she hadn’t been able to completely abandon her bonds with others. Perhaps she had wanted to leave behind someone who would remember her. Any reason he could think of was a sad one.

“Always acting... like you know everything... I hate it. Makes me want to vomit...”

“I’m sorry,” he said, and meant it. Seina smiled. It was *that* smile, the one he’d only seen from her once before.



“My most hated darling... would you tell me your name?”

“Andrey Sergeevich Kalinin,” he answered.

“A strange name...” Those were Seina’s last words.

Kalinin watched her in silence. Then, as anyone would, he closed her eyes for her. Her hollow death mask became a visage of sleep. No one would believe she had been a terrorist bent on destruction. *A member of the clergy... perhaps you were right,* he thought. *I’ve guided so many through their final moments...*

Just then, he heard a splashing sound; someone had swum up to the ramp. It was Melissa Mao, grunting and gasping her way through the water. She must have caught sight of Kalinin before, because she didn’t seem surprised to see him alive.

“Dammit. Thought I was a goner,” Mao groaned, then looked over at the corpse next to him. “Friend of yours?” she asked.

“Something like that,” he acknowledged.

27 June, 0241 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Ariake, Koto Ward, Tokyo

Kaname couldn’t believe how calm she’d managed to remain. She’d been so scared before. It seemed like just moments ago that she’d felt her temples pounding, and heard the sound of blood pulsing through her veins. Now, those sounds were gone.

Ah, is this it? Kaname thought, with a strange sense of understanding. *Is this where Sousuke lives all the time?* Now that she thought about it, it wasn’t her first time reaching this state.

Anyone could end up the same way, even in their daily lives—you met an “enemy,” and you felt afraid, but you decided to face it nevertheless. Because you knew that if you spent all your time cowering in fear, you couldn’t do what needed to be done. *The human mind is really something, isn’t it?* she mused.

There was an explosion, and a crunch, and a lump of concrete came loose

above them. The giant's machine cannons had destroyed the track for monorail—technically not a monorail, as its cars ran on rubber tires—running over their heads.

They were on a collision course. They couldn't dodge it. They'd hit it. No—

As they braced for impact, the kei truck skated under the tons of falling concrete by a hair's breadth. The remains that broke up after hitting the road below were kicked away trivially by the pursuing Behemoth. It was like having an angry tornado on their tail, spreading destruction as it pursued.

"Gun it! Gun it!" Kurz cackled, high on adrenaline.

From the driver's seat, Sousuke scolded him, "Stop laughing and shoot out the other one!"

"Yeah, fat chance. Just keep dodging like you've been doing!"

Kurz's shot had taken out half of the enemy's machine cannons, and the remaining two must have lost much of their accuracy; time and again, its shots grazed the kei truck, but no more. Still, the damage around them was considerable: the occasional passing taxi or passenger car was hit by an explosion or a stray shot and skidded and flipped, or crashed into the guard rail; street lights and roadside trees were toppled like bowling pins; asphalt was plowed up; and glass was shattered in buildings along the way.

Their vehicle, too, was far from pristine; there was a strange rattling in the suspension, and from time to time, the engine let out a high-pitched whine. The outer frame was in tatters, and the windows had been completely blown out.

The International Exhibition Center was in sight. But just as Kaname was wondering why they'd come here...

"Is that it?" Sousuke whispered.

She turned her eyes forward, following his gaze. Just ahead of them and slightly to the right—what he might call 2 o'clock—a cylindrical capsule hung in the air, dangling from three parachutes. It was descending from the sky, heading for the cluster of giant silver buildings that made up the Exhibition Center.

“I’ve seen that before...” Kaname remembered it from North Korea. The capsule was designed to burst in midair and release the AS inside.

“Not good,” Sousuke muttered. “It’s completely exposed.”

Hoh... hoh hoh hoh... The Behemoth had seen the capsule, too. Letting out its muffled laughter, it changed the aim of its machine cannons. White streaks tore through the air...

A direct hit. The parachutes were shredded, and the wires holding it were cut. The capsule, now riddled with holes, crashed into the Center with a shower of metal fragments. There had been no explosion, but...

“They got it!” Kaname cried out.

“No, not yet,” Tessa said, her tone confident. “It would take more than that to destroy that machine. Sagara-san?”

“Roger,” he replied. “Chidori, I need a favor.”

“Huh?” Kaname asked, startled by the request. “What favor?”

“Drive.” Sousuke released the wheel and opened the driver’s side door.

“What?! I’m just in high school! I don’t know how to drive!” Kaname argued, grabbing the abandoned wheel in panic. They were nearing an overpass that would temporarily hide the truck from view. “Can’t you have Kurz-kun do it?!”

“There’s no time. It’s up to you,” he said, then jumped out of the truck. He threw himself clear and rolled along the ground, getting further away as Kaname watched. The Behemoth, not noticing Sousuke’s move, simply vaulted the overpass in pursuit of the truck.

“What the hell is he doing?!” Kaname shrieked.

“Turn, Kaname!” Kurz called.

Kaname, now in the driver’s seat, instinctively yanked the wheel to the right. The truck plowed into the intersection in front of the Center and veered, tires squealing, despite the red light. Fortunately, it was late enough at night that there was nobody there to hit them.

But I can’t drive a car! Kaname thought. She was just about to slam the brakes

when Tessa shouted at her from behind, “Keep driving! If we stop, we’re dead!”

Kaname groaned. Tessa was right, of course—That impossibly huge, reckless AS was still after them. If they stopped, they’d be crushed underfoot, and it would all be over. *This is too crazy,* she thought. *Should I jump out and run? No, I can’t do that now. Besides—*

“Whatever! Just don’t blame me later!” Kaname slammed her foot on the gas.

What a complicated building, Sousuke thought. The International Exhibition Center was made up of several layers of intricately laid out floors, which opened out onto vast interior spaces. He ended up having to take bizarre detours just to get from one floor to another, and many of the routes ended up in shuttered dead ends. In the end he decided to shoot his way through glass, grenade his way through shutters, and all-in-all force his way to the capsule’s landing site. He passed in front of a “West Hall” sign, and at the bottom of a frozen escalator, he found the capsule he was after.

There it is! he thought. The hall was enormous, large enough to fit an entire other building inside. The capsule lay on its side at the center, riddled with smoking holes. It was about the size of a fuel truck’s tank and surrounded by fragments of metal framework and glass—a result of its breaking through the roof on its way down. Sousuke took the escalator three steps at a time and ran to the capsule. The AS should be inside it. White smoke wafted from the bullet holes.

The lever to trigger its explosive bolts should be here somewhere... he thought frantically. But it wasn’t. Sousuke spent ten seconds circling the capsule, desperately searching, but he couldn’t find the panel for the manual release.

Is it... underneath? The capsule might have fallen with the release panel down. That meant there was no way to break it open—Which meant the AS was locked inside!

Even after taking a flurry of 30-millimeter shots, the capsule remained tightly shut. There was no way he’d be able to pry it open himself. His gun wouldn’t do him any good; he had no explosives and only one grenade.

Could he use the grenade to turn the capsule over? There was no way to be

sure, but Sousuke couldn't afford to hesitate. Every moment he wasted here was a moment the giant would spend chasing Kaname and the others. It could tear them apart any second.

I'll just have to try it. Sousuke made up his mind, took the pin out of the grenade, and shoved it between the capsule and the floor. He released the lever and ran away. A few seconds later, it exploded.

The large capsule rocked. Sousuke held his breath. The metal tube tilted just a bit... then returned to its original position.

Just pretend you're in a go-kart, Kaname told herself. *You can handle some silly car. Though it's a good thing kei trucks are automatics...*

"Yeah... that's right..." she realized. The path ahead was a straightaway with good visibility. If she kept driving that way, that thing would hit them with its machine gun barrage. She had to get them somewhere with more cover!

"Turning now!" Kaname yelled to her passengers. She jerked the wheel as hard as she could. There was a sturdy gate blocking the entrance to the Center's parking lot, to keep cars from coming in overnight. She couldn't afford to hit it. She turned the wheel again; the truck plowed through the roadside bushes and smashed through the fence.

It was a miracle that they didn't end up tumbling. The car rocked up and down and back and forth, and the wheel jerked back at her in protest. Kaname felt a dull pain in her right hand; the rebellious wheel had jammed her thumb.

She swallowed the pain; she didn't have time to think about it now. Breaking through all those obstacles had slowed the truck down, and the Behemoth's feet were coming closer and closer. It blacked out the sky—

"Go faster!" Kurz urged her.

"I'm trying!" Kaname screamed back. The tip of the giant's toe grazed the back of the truck, shaving off the license plate. The kei truck wheezed in protest, but valiantly picked up speed. The wall of the Center, like a warehouse scaled up a few dozen times, grew larger in her vision. She just managed to avoid a collision with the outer wall. The truck's left side scraped it, but Kaname

managed to regain control, continuing to rocket around the building's lengthy perimeter. "If we stay here... it'll shoot us!" she insisted.

"Get us inside! Break through a shutter!" Kurz shouted, pounding on the partition between the bed and the cabin.

The Behemoth fired. The shots pulverized the wall next to them; razor-sharp shards embedded themselves in the passenger seat—uninhabited now, but the place Kaname had been sitting just minutes ago. Rather than chilling, she found it funny.

A hesitant laughter leaked from her throat. Her awareness expanded. She felt alive. The flying shards of glass and asphalt seemed to slow, and even though Kurz and Tessa were behind her, she felt like she could see them.

The pain in Kaname's thumb was gone now. She skillfully turned the wheel, yanked the parking brake for an instant, and forced the car into a sideways slide. It felt like the most natural thing in the world.

Gas again. Keep moving. Giant coming. Still okay. The kei truck sped toward the Center's shutters. *I can do it. I can do it. I know I can do it.*

The shutters came closer, closer—Impact. Her vision went black. The shutter had proven tougher than expected. She hadn't had time to buckle her seatbelt before, so her head had slammed into the steering wheel with enough force to cause a depressed fracture.

And yet... the truck had broken through and come clear into the Center. The muffler must have fallen out, causing the space around them to echo with the rumble of the exhaust.

Despite her hazy consciousness, Kaname kept her foot on the gas, but the kei truck's endurance seemed to have hit its limit. The gears must have gotten fouled up, and she couldn't pick up any speed.

The hall itself was large enough to hold a cargo ship. She couldn't see any exhibits, just darkness—a vast, open ocean of nothing. Inertia carried them some way through the dark, and then at last, the car stopped.

"Tessa? Hey, Tessa?!" Kurz cried out.

Tessa was lying limp in the truck bed. Kaname couldn't tell if she was unconscious or dead, but there was blood trickling down her forehead.

Kaname's own head was feeling fuzzy. She felt like the world around her was pulling away. *What... is this? I've felt this way before...*

"Ah..." She heard a creaking from the wall and the ceiling behind her. Steel was ripped, concrete was broken, and moonlight came pouring in.

A bucket-shaped head and two hollow eyes—through a newly-made fissure in the outer wall, the Behemoth looked down at them, head tilted. *All done now?* it seemed to say.

"No more games..." Takuma whispered after a small, trembling breath. Inside the cockpit, his lower half was soaked with blood—blood from his wound. His eyes wouldn't quite focus; the letters on the screen were blurry.

You've certainly prolonged the inevitable, he thought. *But now, it's over. I'm going to crush you, and the time I wasted will all be worth it. My wound will heal then, too; I'm sure of it.*

The AI offered a warning. 《Lambda driver Function A decreasing. Interference occurring in skeletal structure.》 The machine was beginning to make sounds of protest, groaning and trembling.

Not good. Need to focus. Takuma shook his head a little and redirected his consciousness back into his body, filling every inch of it. The machine couldn't work without that.

《Function A restored.》

Good. He worked his machine arms and legs to pry away more of the Center's outer wall. Then he took a step inside.

The kei truck containing Testarossa and the others showed no sign of taking off again; it seemed to have broken down entirely. She herself was lying in the bed of the truck, apparently unconscious, in the arms of another man, a Caucasian. It was the man who had defied him with the rifle before—He would have to die, as well.

The driver's side door opened and Chidori Kaname got out. With one hand

pressed to her head, she staggered, and grabbed the truck bed for support.

Injured, is she? Serves her right, Takuma thought. Then he realized something: Sagara Sousuke wasn't there.

Where is he? He should have been in the driver's seat... He has to be there! If I can't squash him, what's the point?!

"Where is Sagara Sousuke?" he boomed through the Behemoth's speakers.

Chidori Kaname didn't answer.

But I know she can hear me! Takuma thought furiously. "Speak!" he demanded. "Where has Sagara Sousuke gone?"

The ant-sized Chidori Kaname took a shaky step forward and looked up at Takuma. She was trying to say something. He turned his machine's high-sensitivity directional microphone toward her.

"—hell should I know, idiot? Why don't you ask your big sister?"

Takuma's complexion purpled. *Fine, then. You can die. I was a fool to even ask!*

He turned his head-mounted machine cannons toward her and the others. They tensed up, as if resigned to their fate. *Perhaps it's for the best that Testarossa is unconscious... I'll tear them to shreds and then step on them... Yes, there won't be a single glob of flesh remaining...*

"Die," Takuma said simply, and squeezed the trigger. He felt a powerful impact. His head snapped hard to the right. It wasn't recoil from the cannons; something else had—

Takuma was baffled. His head had taken fire from the side. And it wasn't simply machine gun fire; it was bigger. Yes, like an AS—

"You called?" said a voice.

Takuma turned his head.

On the roof of the Exhibition Center's north side, kneeling in the moonlight was a lone AS. It held a short-barreled shotcannon in one hand, which it had pointed at the Behemoth.

What? he wondered.

Its body was pure white, its silhouette powerful yet elegant. It looked less like a weapon and more like an object of worship. Where its mouth would be was a large hardpoint for holding a weapon, bringing to mind a ninja with a scroll in its mouth.

“Licking your chops in front of your prey... It’s a third-rate move,” came a voice from its external speakers—the voice of Sagara Sousuke.

“What did you say?” Takuma demanded.

“I’ll take you on. Come on and try me.” The white AS, its shotcannon still pointed, beckoned him with just the index finger of its other hand. Like it was mocking him...

Who does he think he is? He thinks he can beat me with that minuscule machine?! A dark fire began to burn in Takuma’s chest. “Very well, then,” he said coldly. The Behemoth turned and charged the white AS.

He’d just made it in time. Safe inside the cockpit of the ARX-7 Arbalest, Sousuke breathed a sigh of relief.

The grenade had failed to move the capsule containing the machine, but it must have nudged the explosive bolts just past the threshold; just as Sousuke was ready to sink into despair, they had activated, and the capsule’s outer plates had gone flying. He had been dumbstruck, naturally.

Inside, the Arbalest was safe and sound. It had taken hits in places, but nothing was compromised, thanks to its cutting-edge armor. The drive system had a few complaints about the damage from the fall, but that was it.

The enormous AS, the Behemoth, tore through the Center on its way toward him. It was surprisingly nimble for its size.

《Proximity alert!》 shouted Al, the Arbalest’s AI.

I know, Sousuke thought. The approaching enemy machine, rushing toward him with arms outstretched like a hostile tsunami, was taking up the entirety of his screen.

Silently, Sousuke braced the shotcannon with both of his machine's arms to reduce recoil, and pulled the trigger. The Arbalest's palms transmitted a high-voltage percussion signal to the shotcannon, causing it to fire on full automatic. The rat-at-at-at-at-at echoed through the air until he'd emptied its entire stock.

Any one of the depleted uranium APFSDSes could destroy an armored truck with one shot, and he'd fired six in all... but it was naïve of him to think that that would be enough.

The air in front of the Behemoth warped. An invisible wall repelled all of his shells, causing each of the six shots to burst into futile sparks. Sousuke was stunned.

A giant arm was swinging down. The Arbalest just managed to dodge it with a leap to the side. The hit tore through a part of the roof, sending more fragments and dust showering down.

Is this...?! Sousuke recognized it. Two months ago, he'd been in combat with an AS that had possessed the same powers; its so-called "lambda driver" let it create strange force fields just like that. He didn't know how it worked, exactly, but it was apparently capable of repelling any and all physical attacks.

Rolling down the roof of the Center, the Arbalest pulled from its underarm equipment rack an anti-tank dagger—a powerful throwing knife that came packed with a shaped charge. He threw it with a whip-like underhand, aiming right at the Behemoth's neck.

But the dagger, again, detonated without contact. *Another deflection. I'll need more,* he thought.

"Hoh hoh..."

The Behemoth laughed as it fired its head-mounted machine cannons. 30-millimeter shells rained down from the sky. The Arbalest weaved through the barrage—if the kei truck could do it, this machine certainly could—then stuck another clip into its spent shotcannon.

Projectiles won't work on it, Sousuke realized. *Just how am I supposed to beat it, then?*

It's back, Kaname thought. This sensation—this dark, heavy, strange feeling of floating. *How many times has it been, now?* She'd found herself here several times in these last two months. Sometimes it was just before she woke up in the morning, sometimes during class... while she was resting, in the bath, and a few other times.

She hadn't told anyone: not Kyoko, not Sousuke. If someone pointed it out, she'd just waved it off with, "I'm not feeling well." But that wasn't the real reason.

It's here. Is it because I decided he needed it? When did I think that?

It's back... baback, it's baback... Backackack... Somewhere inside of her, something was pushing its way to the fore; something with the power of words. If she let it run rampant, it would completely take her over... a whispering voice. *Cacalling callingling call Callingling youcalled?*

It sounds just like my voice, Kaname thought. And then, *a voice just like mine, mine, mimimine,* as her thoughts and the voice blended together.

Shut up, she thought frantically.

Shushut upup. Gegege tout, get out. Die. Hey, die, the voice went on.

Shut up, she thought at it again.

Shutshutup, shut up really? Eally really? Need me memeneed, didn't you? the voice responded.

Yes. I need you, Kaname admitted. *You taught me that, didn't you?*

Sosososuke Sousuke will die unless you dododo something he'll diedie didie. Poor baby!

Why can't you just talk normally? Kaname demanded.

Let me tatalk talk then. Open upupup. Surrender. Go on and die, the voice coaxed. *Little, justa lilittle.*

Kaname clutched at her head, clamped a hand to her mouth, tore at her shirt.

Don't get smart... just tell me, Kaname thought back. *What is it about that giant? What kills him? What should he do?*

Don’t you fefeel sick? the voice replied.

Yeah... I feel awful. Now answer me. I won’t lose. Wowon’t lose. Ah... Kaname winced.

Can’t cacan’t do it. Kaname, you cacan’t do it, dummy, the voice told her.

That’s enough! Summoning an animalistic rage, Kaname bore her fangs to the presence.

It retreated, cowed, and sulked to her, *N-No need... to gegeget so mad. No neneneed, no need. I won’t do anything. I’m not bad...*

Strange, she thought. *Is it scared?* She was about to scream like a wild beast, to hurt it more, when—

Stop it, Kaname-san! This, too, was a voice just like hers. But it was different; it was someone else’s. Whose?

Ah... yes. That bibitch is here. Come to interrinterrupt... the first voice sulked.

Try to tempt her again, and I won’t show you any mercy, warned the second.

Pfft. I’m here. I’m still hehehere. Hererere, the first voice said.

We won’t need you, the second voice told the first one, *because I’m here.*

Nonowrong. That’s wrong. You’re wrong.

Go away, the second voice commanded.

It went away—the first voice, at least. The second one, the newer one, proceeded to speak to her. *Kaname-san... Kaname-san?*

What is it? Kaname demanded suspiciously. *Who are you?*

Never mind who I am, the voice told her. *I have a favor to ask of you.*

A favor?

Tell him something.

Tell who? Kaname asked. *And what?*

Use the lambda driver to aim at the giant’s back... at one of the cooling devices... the voice advised.

Huh? She was confused.

One of... the enemy's lambda driver cooling... the voice trailed off.

A fragmented image appeared in her mind, and then vanished. Kaname just sat there in silence.

Then, all of a sudden, the world seemed to snap back into place: Streams of light in the dark; the caved in roof of the Center; the kei truck, whose engine had breathed its last. She could hear gunfire coming from somewhere; Sousuke was fighting, off in the distance.

Kurz Weber had seized her by the shoulders, his expression serious. He didn't have his usual playboy air. His eyes were so blue that they made even Kaname's heart skip a beat.

"Wh... What is it?" she stammered.

"Uh?" Kurz said, blinking. He was back to his usual idiocy immediately. His grip on her relaxed and he let out a sigh of relief. "You're back..."

"What is it? Did I... do it again?"

"Yeah. No matter what I did, you wouldn't respond," Kurz admitted. "You kept muttering... then out of nowhere, you shouted, 'Stop it, Kaname-san!' Scared the hell out of me..."

She wondered what he meant by "no matter what I did," but she forced herself not to think about it. It was likely the reason her cheeks stung, though.

Tessa was lying in the bed of the kei truck. She seemed to be alive. Kaname remembered what she'd seen—rather, what she'd heard. Had that been Tessa's voice, or something else?

She told Kurz what she'd learned. They had to use the lambda driver... somehow... against a cooling device on the giant's back. Its lambda... something. She didn't know what it meant. All she knew was that it was important—very important.

The giant's back. Maybe once she saw it, it would make more sense.

Hey... what the heck am I thinking? Kaname wondered. This was all way too dangerous. If that giant saw her, it would stomp on her like a bug. Plus they

didn’t have a car, so if it came after them now, there’d be no way to escape it. Did she want to get squashed underfoot? She could get hit by stray fire, too. And what if the building collapsed on her? She’d die. She’d be seriously dead.

This has nothing to do with me. Why should I put myself in danger? I’ve already been through so much. I’ve done enough, haven’t I? What I should be doing is hiding. That’s right. Just call it off... she told herself frantically. Even though she already had her conclusion.

Her conclusion...

I mean, he’s in danger. And he needs me. Then there’s how I feel... It’s not like his relationship with her changes that. I really don’t want him to die. I don’t. I really, really don’t. Which means I’d better go and do it.

“Ugh, I hate this. Darn it!” she moaned. Fear was a nasty thing. The minute you let your guard down, it reared its head again. She cleared away the cobwebs, then turned to Kurz and held out her right hand. She repeated the line she’d said once before: “Kurz-kun, give me your transmitter!”

The Behemoth drew the huge tachi from its back and swung it sideways at the Arbalest. The bludgeon, which was as long as a transmission tower, tore through the air.

Sousuke braced himself, then jumped. The sword swept past, just beneath his machine’s toes.

He turned the Arbalest over in midair, popping a shotcannon blast at the enemy’s head in the process; its movement and fire control systems made such acrobatic shots possible. But once again, the shell bounced off.

It’s like there’s nothing I can do! he fumed to himself. The barrier came from the lambda driver. Did it have any limits? Was there any way to nullify it? The tachi came streaking down from the sky. Sousuke dodged it, and called to his AI, “AI!”

《Yes, Sergeant?》

“We’ve got a lambda driver, too, right?!”

《Affirmative.》

Yes, his Arbalest was mounted with a similar device. Sousuke was vague on how it worked or what it could do, and he had never gotten a proper explanation on what it was, but... “Assuming the enemy has a lambda driver too,” he asked, “is there some way we could fight it?”

There was a brief silence.《Unknown.》

Not again. Some stupid classification settings were blocking the explanation.

“I’m requesting the information as an NCO in the field!” Sousuke yelled.

《Request noted. But answer unknown.》

It must really not know. Even the AI, Al, knew nothing about the Lambda Driver.

Try to remember what happened before, Sousuke told himself. *Your fight against Gauron’s AS two months ago, when we were escaping enemy territory...* He’d followed Kaname’s advice and imagined “pouring his will into the shot” as he fired the shotcannon. The lambda driver must have activated in that instant and canceled out the enemy’s force field.

It’s worth a try... he thought. He let out a long breath. He stood his machine stock still on the roof, aimed his gun, and concentrated. *Stay calm. Don’t tell yourself it’s stupid. Tell yourself that this shot will break through his shield. Believe it... Yes, just like the last time...*

Tearing through the Exhibition Center’s roof, the Behemoth approached.

Aim right at its head. Imagine it...

“Let’s go...” Sousuke whispered. He pulled the trigger. The muzzle spat flame. The shot fired. The air around the Arbalest rippled for a second. Some kind of alarm went off in the cockpit, and a small triangle symbol flashed in a corner of the screen.

Did I do it? he wondered. The shell he had fired stopped in front of the Behemoth. But it didn’t break apart like before; it held its shape.

It was a strange sight—the arrow-like AP round slowly but surely forcing its way forward, while a low, eerie throbbing rang out. It was like a pair of invisible

hands had grabbed the shell, and the two were now battling it out.

But soon enough... There was a pop, and the shell seemed to break through. It flew smack into the Behemoth's neck.

"Did I make it?" Sousuke wondered. Moving his machine back quickly, he surveyed the result of the exchange: smoke was rising from the giant's neck, but there was no change beyond that.

"Nothing?!" Sousuke asked in despair. The hit had landed, but the damage done was minor. The enemy was too big. It was like expecting to sink a battleship with a single shell.

The Behemoth reeled for just a moment, then immediately turned back to the Arbalest.

Just as they made it to the east end of the Center, a two-meter-long piece of metal frame flew at them. It grazed Kaname's nose and impaled itself in the ground, causing her to cry out in panic.

They were close to the parking lot side, where the Behemoth and Sousuke's machine were fighting beneath the night sky. Actually, to call it a fight wouldn't be quite accurate—Sousuke's machine seemed to be limited to running around, dodging the giant's attacks. He was weak; pitifully weak.

No, she decided a moment later, the problem was the enemy's size. For something so big to move that fast... *It just wasn't fair.* In fact, Sousuke must be pretty incredible to be able to dodge those attacks...

"Ahh..." She was terrifyingly close to the battle. Every movement of the machine generated a gust of wind that rustled her hair. The towering thing's every gesture sent rubble flying, storms raging, and earth shaking. Its every step kicked up a cloud of dust and dirt, obscuring her view of its back.

"I think we should go! It's too dangerous!" shouted Kurz, who had come with her.

"No! I need to get closer!" Kaname insisted, though what she really wanted to do was turn around and run.

“But—”

“You don’t need to come with me!” she shouted. “Run, if you want!”

“You think I’d ever do something that lame?!” Kurz said, looking like he wanted to cry.

“Then do what you want! Either way, I’m going!”

“Oh, come on!”

Choking on smoke, the two of them ran along the Center’s outer wall. The area around the staff entrance—where they’d been standing just a few seconds ago—was hit by a falling lump of concrete and smashed to smithereens.

The tachi roared through the air at the Arbalest. The Arbalest dodged, but it was pursued moments later by a sweep of machine gun fire.

Sousuke winced as his machine took shots in the leg and the chest. They were all at weak angles, and they didn’t penetrate far, but they knocked the Arbalest off balance.

Taking advantage of the moment, the Behemoth reached out with its free hand. *I can’t escape...* Sousuke thought, and it was in that very moment that his machine’s left arm was grabbed tight. Its armor began to creak and pop from the pressure. *It’s so powerful...*

“Hoh... hohhhh...”

the Behemoth laughed as it raised the Arbalest up over its head. The G-forces were dizzying.

Was it going to slam him against the ground? Not even this machine could withstand an impact like that—it would fly to pieces at the joints!

Sousuke pointed his shotcannon at the giant’s thumb and fired. Despite his proximity, that barrier manifested yet again, deflecting the shot. It was no use.

In that case...! Out of better options, Sousuke turned the shotcannon toward the Arbalest’s own upper arm and pulled the trigger. He felt a jolt of impact as the rest of the machine tore away from the captive limb; having earned its freedom by force, the Arbalest crashed into the Behemoth’s shoulder before

plummeting toward the ground below.

Desperately working the movement control system, Sousuke managed to right his machine and land it feet-first. Evaporated shock absorbent jetted like steam from the joints of its lower half. His AI rattled off a succession of damage warnings.

From behind an orange trash can, Kaname desperately tried to get a glimpse of the giant's back. *Look out!* she wanted to shout, but it's not as if that would help him. Worrying and panicking could wait until she found something he could use.

Where is it... where? The giant's back was high above, and shards of metal were raining down. It was hard for her to keep her eyes open.

The slanted armor on the Behemoth's back was made of a series of blocks. Where was the cooling device? *Cooling device... there's probably a hole or something for it,* she thought.

"Kurz-kun, do you see a cooling device?!" she yelled.

"There's a bunch of 'em!" he said. "Those long things... and the round ones!"

A bunch of them... that did seem to be the case. There were countless small holes in the giant's back: two rows of them on either side of its spine; two long slits and four round holes.

Which one... which one is it? she wondered. The cooling device for the lambda driver... What did that mean? If the lambda driver needed cooling... and there was a hole for that... was that its weak point? Was he supposed to attack it?

But which hole was it?!

There's no way to beat it, Sousuke realized. *No blind spots. There's nothing I can do to make my shots effective. My drive system is severely damaged. I'm reaching my limit. I'm going to die here.* Just as Sousuke thought that—

"Sousuke, can you hear me?!" came a short-range communication.

While keeping his attention focused on dodging, he said, "Chidori?"

“Okay, listen up! I don’t totally understand it, but there should be a cooling device for that lambda driver thing in its back!”

A cooling device—of course, any machine would have one. “And?!” he asked.

“And... I think you should attack it!” she told him.

“You *think*?!”

“That’s all I know! Also, it can’t be a normal attack! You need to use the lambda driver! You have one, right?”

“Did the colonel say that?” Sousuke asked suspiciously.

“What, Tessa? I don’t know, but... ah, I think so!” Kaname said. “Let’s say that’s what happened!”

“Do you really expect me to—”

Just then, Sousuke realized it. Kaname and Kurz were within arm’s reach of him, squatting in front of the wall of the Center. What were they doing in such a dangerous place?!

That moment’s distraction was his undoing. The giant’s kick came from the left side. The approaching leg consumed his vision. He couldn’t dodge. It hit him. The Arbalest traced a low arc in the direction of Kaname and Kurz, and he hit the wall back first.

He heard a scream; it had come from Kaname. *Good,* he thought. *I didn’t crush her.*

Sousuke’s body was starting to go numb. His head was swimming; alarms were ringing in the cockpit. In a corner of his vision, he could see Kurz on the ground, shielding Kaname with his body.

“Hoh... hoh hoh...”

The Behemoth was looking down at him. It had seen Kaname and Kurz, too. He had no other choice, now. If he withdrew, that monster would step on them. He’d just have to finish it.

“Chidori... which hole?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“The cooling device,” he tried again. “Which hole is it?”

“Ah... it’s...” He could hear her gulp on the other side of the radio. “The narrow slits. The right one or the left one... either one will do. Just remember to attack using the lambda driver.” This time, her voice was confident.

The narrow slits. He remembered them. They were on the lower half of the back, close to the hips. They were downward-facing, so it would be easy to take aim. The only question was whether he could invoke the lambda driver’s power on command.

“All right.” Sousuke picked his machine up and took a deep breath.

“Hoh... give up...”

the Behemoth—no, Takuma—said. There was something exhausted in the tone of his voice. Was he... getting weaker? *Time to die...* The towering giant readied its tachi in both hands and swung it down at him with all its might.

Sousuke dashed his machine forward, just barely dodging. A piece of his shoulder armor went flying; the Behemoth’s tachi hit the ground and snapped in half.

The Arbalest’s charge continued; it scrambled low between the enemy’s legs. It then threw itself down, face up, and slid along the ground on momentum alone. Sousuke turned the shotcannon upward and saw the monster’s back beyond the barrel. The long slits—there they were. He aimed for the right-side one, which was at an easier angle for him.

Focus—that part was easy. Imagine pouring his will into the shot—that part was hard. Believing the shot would land—he’d just have to. *Die!* That wish was the most important thing.

He fired. Just like the last time, the air around the Arbalest warped. The shot went flying. As before, the Behemoth’s invisible wall activated, stopping it halfway. But the shell continued to struggle, inching forward... Then, as if flicked by a rubber band, it smacked the Behemoth straight in the back. Shards of metal went flying.

ARX

His shot had hit the slit dead center, making it through. It had gone in.

Sousuke could hear something break down in the giant's body, but the damage looked minor from outside. It was hard to believe something so small could really harm the massive brute...

Sousuke remained silent. For a few seconds, nothing happened. The Arbalest and the Behemoth both remained exactly where they were. And then...

The asphalt beneath the Behemoth's feet cracked, and the giant began to sink. It was as if gravity had finally caught up with it. Its right knee bent; its ankles began to tremble, creak, and break. The arms it had moved so freely before suddenly dropped, as if yanked to the ground with chains. The skeleton and drive system screeched, and oil leaked from its joints. Armor plates began to break off here and there, dropping to the ground. The Behemoth was beginning to crumble.

It was the breaking of the hip joint that brought the house of cards tumbling; it crashed into the ground, blasting to pieces from the force. There was no explosion, but parts of the torso were on fire. Dust, flames, and thick black smoke billowed everywhere, while smaller parts continued to clatter to the ground.

That was that. An anticlimactic end.

"I can't believe it..." Kaname's voice came through in a whisper.

Sousuke said nothing, but glanced at the radio questioningly.

"I said 'the long slit'... but I was totally guessing. I can't believe it worked."

That was the last straw. Sousuke dropped his shotcannon in exhaustion.

Rubbing her aching head, Teletha Testarossa left the Exhibition Center to find the Behemoth already in pieces. She sighed in relief; she definitely hadn't counted on passing out there, but it looked as if Sousuke had made it through—thanks to Chidori Kaname, her fellow Whispered. She didn't like to admit it, but that girl was really something.

The reason the Behemoth had collapsed was quite simple: The lambda

driver’s pseudostring repulsor fields were all that was keeping it stable; without that device in place, it would break down under its own weight. It was the same logic that caused whales to die immediately when they came up on land.

Using the lambda driver to reduce a thing’s weight... she’d known such applications were possible, but Mithril lacked the exact knowhow to make it happen. But to have a lambda driver, which fed off of its operator’s mental strength, operating continuously like that—it would truly require a special pilot. A dedicated pilot, with a mind strengthened through training and drugs... that was Takuma.

But to use the system to support the machine’s weight, while also activating that barrier to keep enemy projectiles out... whatever entity had created the Behemoth must have access to black technology on a level far beyond Mithril’s.

The Arbalest was kneeling down before the giant’s still-flaming wreckage. A round capsule about the size of a kei car—the Behemoth’s cockpit shell—was lying in front of it. Sousuke must have pulled it from the remains.

Kaname and the others were nearby, as well.

“Tessa,” said Kurz, the first one to notice her. “You sure you should be out here? After what you went through—”

“Positive. I’m just fine.” Tessa waved a hand and walked up to the cockpit shell. “Can you open it?”

“Sure. Just stand back.” Kurz pulled the gun off his belt and activated the shell’s manual release lever. There was a popping sound a few seconds later, as the shell burst open. Takuma was inside. He was lying right-side down, dressed in the spacesuit-like master suit that helped convey an operator’s movements.

“He’s still alive. What do we do?” Kurz had a gun pointed at him, but Tessa, beside him, slowly pushed it down.

She came close to the cockpit and crouched down. “Takuma-san,” Tessa said quietly, and Takuma’s head moved a little.

“I lost. Big Sister... Why?” His voice seemed to be fading away.

“I told you,” Sousuke began. “Licking your chops in front of your prey is—”

“You shut up!” Kaname barked, interrupting his attempted lecture through the Arbalest’s external speakers. The white machine’s shoulders slumped, and it fell silent.

Tessa responded as if she hadn’t heard any of it. “You haven’t lost. Sometimes these things happen.”

“It’s... too awful...” the boy moaned.

“Yes, it is,” she agreed. “It’s quite terrible...”

“I don’t have anything. I don’t have anything now...”

Tessa knelt down and touched Takuma’s sweat-stained cheek. Then she looked down, and whispered into his ear. “It’s all right, Takuma. I’m here with you.”

“Big Sister...”

“I will always be with you.”

“You... mean it?” he choked out.

“Yes. Now calm down, and go to sleep.”

“Okay... I’m... sorry.” Takuma closed his eyes. He never moved again.

Tessa didn’t cry. She knew that she wasn’t a kind enough person for that. It had been an empty performance, meant purely to satisfy herself. And yet, she told herself, this was for the best.

“Let’s see...” She stood up, stretched, and looked all around. “Well done, Weber-san. Your aim is as true as ever.”

“Heh, no prob.” Kurz held up a hand.

Then Tessa looked up at the Arbalest. *I’ve really made a lot of trouble for him tonight,* she thought... but it was partly his own fault, for bringing out her softer side. “Well done, Sagara-san.”

“Not at all, Colonel,” Sousuke returned.

“That machine is yours now,” she told him. “Take care of it, would you?”

“Yes, ma’am... Er?” The white AS saluted at first, then looked confused.

Tessa offered no further explanation, but turned to face Kaname. “And... Kaname-san. I need to offer you special thanks.”

Kaname folded her arms and snorted. “If you wanna thank me, I could use some explanations. I’ve got tons of questions, okay?”

“I’m sure you do. I’ll attempt to explain as best I can... another day.”

“Huh?”

“Well, I’m tired, too...” Tessa spread her arms in another big stretch. “But... there is one thing I want to tell you.”

“Tell me?” While Kaname tilted her head, Tessa cast a glance at the Arbalest.

“Sergeant Sagara, please shut off your audio sensors. That’s an order.”

Sousuke stammered in confusion. “Yes, ma’am...” but he quickly did as he was told, and shut the machine’s sensors off.

Now that he couldn’t hear them, Tessa walked up to Kaname, and whispered... “It appears I’ve fallen in love with him.”

“Huh?”

“I wanted to tell you... ‘let’s both do our best,’ Kaname-san,” Tessa said, then smiled in amusement. It was a smile appropriate to a girl her age, lacking any trace of ill will.

“Ah... huh? Um, I...”

While Kaname stood there, flabbergasted, Tessa turned away and just started walking. “Now, let us withdraw. I’ve heard that Kalinin-san and the others are all right.”

◆

On the roof of a building a kilometer from the decimated International Exhibition Center stood two men, watching through binoculars.

“I feel a chill,” one of the men whispered, though it was an early summer night.

“I really thought he’d get a bit further,” the other man said. He had round glasses that sat snugly on his round nose.

“Well, we’d basically given a toy to a boy scout. We never should have gotten our hopes up.”

“Still, it’s such a waste. Two cruisers’ worth of budget down the drain in fifteen minutes... It’s absurd. What were the higher-ups thinking?”

“Don’t be so down. We got the data, as well as video. And it’s drastically increased public anxiety.”

“We also got to see all its drawbacks. Amalgam doesn’t need that machine.”

“True.” The man chuckled. “And there were other unexpected benefits...”

The man with the round glasses furrowed his brow. “Benefits?”

“Yes.” Another laugh. “I got to see my beloved darling and his girlfriend again.”

The other man was silent.

“I’ll have to say hello to them soon. Yes... I’ll give them quite the greeting.” With a bright smile, the man left the roof, trailing his artificial leg behind.

Epilogue

The battle in Ariake City. The mysterious giant AS that had run amok and self-destructed. The beyond-repair destruction of the Tokyo Big Sight. The involvement of the JSDF. Those topics were all over the morning news, so there was a fair share of discussion of them in class. Still, they also had a test coming up; they didn't have time to just gossip all day.

Classmates were busy showing each other printouts about test questions, lending each other notebooks, and fervently studying vocabulary lists. Tokiwa Kyoko could usually expect Kaname to be her study buddy at times like these, but things weren't quite going as planned today.

"Hey, Kana-chan. Hey!" Kaname was passed out on her desk, and Kyoko was shaking her as hard as she could. "Yesterday, you said you'd help me with my English. Come on, wake up!"

"Ugh... Please... Just a few more minutes..."

Noting Kaname's lack of cooperation, Kyoko sagged. "Darn it... Did you pull an all-nighter studying last night?"

"Well, I didn't get any sleep, that's for sure..." Kaname groaned. "But I also didn't... do any studying..."

"Then what *were* you doing?"

"Fighting."

"Oh, sure. Fine, then. Forget it. Don't help me." Kyoko switched gears immediately. "Hey, hey! Sagara-kun!"

She approached Sousuke, who had grown up abroad—meaning he was fluent in English—in the hopes that he would help her instead. He was sitting in a corner of the classroom, arms folded, stock still.

"Sagara-kun?"

He said nothing. His eyes were fixed ahead.

“Hey.” No reaction. Kyoko waved a hand in front of his face, but Sousuke didn’t even seem to see it. She leaned a little closer, and noticed that his breathing was quiet and regular.

“N-No way...” she whispered. He was sleeping with his eyes open. The reminder that such freakish abilities existed caused sweat to bead on Kyoko’s forehead.

“Okay, everyone, take your seats! Class is about to start!” The classroom door opened, and their teacher Kagurazaka Eri came in. The students hurried to take their seats. They stood, then bowed.

Kagurazaka Eri seemed in high spirits today. “Good morning, everyone,” she said cheerfully. “It’s a dangerous world out there, but at times like these, it’s best to focus on our studies. Now, it’s the last class before the test! Let’s all give it our best! Open your textbooks to page 61!”

They were going to review all of the material to be tested. The students all quickly opened their textbooks— even Kaname, with great difficulty, managed to execute the task. Only Sousuke remained silent, arms folded, desk empty, staring vacantly ahead of him.

Eri noticed immediately. “Oh. Sagara-kun, did you forget your textbook?”

Silence.

“What’s wrong?” she asked in concern. “Answer me.”

Silence.

“Sagara-kun?”

Silence.

“Wh-What... Don’t glare at me like that.” With a slight wince, Eri walked up to Sousuke’s desk. “Sagara-kun. Are... Are you refusing to participate in my class? If you have a problem with me, I’ll try hard to fix it. But this behavior...”

Silence.

“This behavior... it’s a little excessive, don’t you think?”

Silence.

“Please say something, Sagara-kun. Please.”

Silence.

Half in tears, Eri pounded the desk hard with her textbook. “Sagara-kun!”

Sousuke snapped awake, and then into action. He leaped out of his seat, pulled a pistol from his hip holster, grabbed the teacher by the neck, dragged her to the floor, pressed the gun to her head, and—

Kaname leaped in from the side with a flying kick, knocking him out cold.

If not for Kyoko’s quick reassurances, Eri would have probably run out of the room crying.

The End

Afterword

So sorry for the wait. Sousuke and Kaname are going about their usual peaceful(?) lives at Jindai High, when they're attacked again by a powerful enemy. Almost all of this volume took place in the city, and over the course of one day. I hope you enjoy *Rampaging One Night Stand*, the second story of the long-form adventure-style *Full Metal Panic!* series.

I think character is highlighted more in this story compared to the last one. The plot itself may be less complex because of that, but I still ended up with a tome that's far more than 300 pages. That's very thick. I was originally aiming for 260, but... strange how things happen.

Authors are timid creatures. We worry that our books won't sell if they're too thick. But *Fighting Boy Meets Girl* certainly sold (thanks to all of you, of course), so I can rest easy knowing I don't need to worry. Most booksellers ended up short on stock, and I kept hearing "I can't find your book," and getting scolded for that. Sorry to everyone who had to search around for *Fighting*.

As for other things to write... hmm. I can't think of anything. I have no other choice but to call in a guest. It's our protagonist, Sagara Sousuke. Let's give him a round of applause.

S: "You need me for something?"

—Yes. Say something interesting for me.

S: "Very well. I will compare the proposals by Lockheed and Boeing in the development of America's latest Joint Strike Fighter, currently undergoing trials."

—Please don't.

S: "In that case, I'll explain why the AS's head-mounted machine guns use depleted uranium rounds. Since they're also used to intercept ATMs—"

—Stop.

S: “..... Shall I tell you about the incredible Korean Marine torture techniques that I heard from an acquaintance returning from Vietnam?”

—You know what, never mind. Forget it. You can go.

S: “It’s true that I’ve received no training in the art of conversation. But I can listen. Tell me a story about yourself.”

—Hmm. About myself... Actually, two days ago was Valentine’s Day. I got chocolate from fans, and from some people in the Fujimi Editorial Department. It made me happy.

S: “I see.”

—But it was all brought to me by my supervisor S-san when we met up for idea discussions. S-san is a woman, and there was no chocolate from her.

S: “I see. (pop)”

—All I needed was some obligation chocolate. It felt a little lonely.

S: “..... I don’t understand why you want chocolate so much. But this editor of yours will probably be the first to read these lines. She’ll recognize that you’re calling her out.”

—Yeah, but yesterday, when I told her, “I can’t think of an idea for an epilogue,” she said, “Why not write about what’s going on in your life? Like about Valentine’s.” And she was grinning.

S: “She sounds like a splendid woman.”

—You don’t understand the sensitivities of a man’s heart. Darn it. I’m feeling sad.

S: “Not that it matters, but speaking to you reminds me of Kurz. (pop)”

—Don’t compare me to that idiot.

S: “I expect he’d say the same thing. (pop)”

—By the way, what is that ‘pop’ thing you keep doing?

S: “I’m eating chocolate.”

—Chocolate? Who gave it to you?! Tell me!

S: “I cannot. I was asked not to.”

—Hmph. I think I can guess. And I’m sure she insisted it was obligation chocolate, too.

S: “(sweating) How did you know?”

Ah, we’re out of pages (I don’t know why I looked at my watch there).

I’ll be asking for all of your support while I write my next manuscript. Thank you all again (bows).

See you next time for another round of Sousuke in hell.



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by Shouji Gatou

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