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3



FULL METAL PANIC!

TREMBLING INTO THE BLUE

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TREMBLING INTO THE BLUE




He thinks guarding me is a burden—
She looked up into Sousuke's empty eyes.
His words were like an icy hand clenching her heart.


The red poison—Venom.
Was the lambda driver useless against that nightmarish slaughter machine?!
Sousuke felt a dangerous panic rising inside him!

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Prologue

Summer vacation was ending. One week from now, the summer vacation of her second year of high school would come to a close; just thinking about it brought a sigh to Chidori Kaname's lips.

She was a girl with a slender face and well-sculpted features... but right now, she was listless. She was in that time of year after you'd had all the usual summer fun, and your wallet lay empty and bare; these were the dog days of summer.

Kaname wasn't spending much time with friends, either. One was busy with a part-time job at a toy store, one had a schedule packed with summer courses at prep school, one was going on a trip with her boyfriend... And here she was at school, melting in the heat.

She was preparing for the culture festival, which was still over a month away from now. Dressed in her gym clothes, she was sprawled like a vagrant on a plastic tarp in an empty hallway. It was shady here, and well ventilated, and the floor was cool; the student council room was a steam bath, thanks to a broken air conditioner.

Kaname was lying on her front, flipping through budget documents. *Ahh... what's the point?* she wondered. Her eyes skimmed over various items: imitation vellum, packing tape, lumber; each one was attached to some barely-meaningful value. *What the heck am I doing here? Right now, Kyoko's working part-time and learning about the world. Mizuki is at prep school. Shiori is with her boyfriend in the Izu Highlands... ugh, that tramp.*

I want some memories, too, she lamented. *Something fiery and passionate. Something so impactful that I'll remember this summer for as long as I live!* And yet, summer was reaching its end, and nothing seemed to matter. Those were the thoughts that ran through her mind as she pored over page after page.

Then suddenly, she stopped. "What the heck?"

What had caught her attention was the construction invoice for the "Venue Entry Gate." This exhibit, which was to be attached to the school's front gate,

was given a new design every year and was one of their festival's most defining features. Last year, the art club had designed it with a "peace" motif, creating a 3D collage of doves taking flight. Typically, the construction costs ran about 70,000 or 80,000 yen, but this year's gate seemed excessive: Entry gate construction cost: 1,476,000 yen.

It was written, nonchalantly, in a handwriting she recognized. *His* handwriting.

"What the hell are they building down there?!" Kaname felt her body animate with motivation born from rage. She jumped to her feet, flew like an arrow down the hall, and headed for the dojo in the courtyard.

This area behind the dojo had become the de facto place to store materials for upcoming events—and indeed, when she arrived, she found several sweaty male students there, hard at work on building the gate. It would take a long time to finish, so the festival's executive committee had started on it over summer break.

"Wh-What in the..." Seeing the entry gate in progress for the first time, her eyes widened in shock. It was less of a gate and more of a fortress—a watchtower, even. It had a massive metal frame that stood about two stories tall. It was covered here and there with lead-colored plates, heavy rivets, and long, narrow gunports. It seemed designed for one sole purpose: to intimidate all who stood before it.

The air reeked of burnt iron. All around her sat rows of metal plates, steel bars, electronics, and generators. Her ears were assaulted by the roars of electric drills and blowtorches.

"Okay, who's in charge? Get out here!" Kaname commanded.

The foreman peeked his head out from behind the steel gate. He was wearing dingy work gloves and a safety helmet with a face shield. Beneath it, she could see disheveled black hair and a sullen face marked by a tight frown; she recognized him immediately as Sagara Sousuke. "Chidori?" he blinked. "What's the matter?"

"Sousuke!" she said. "What the hell are you doing?!"

Sousuke looked confused. “I’m building the culture festival gate. Just what it looks like.”

“It so does *not* look like that! Explain this!”

He folded his arms calmly as he looked up at the “entry gate” in progress. “I’d heard that the gate’s motif last year was ‘peace.’ I thought this year’s might be ‘security.’ This gate will protect the public, serving a dual function in both observation and defense. You see similar structures in cities in Northern Ireland and Palestine.”

“This isn’t Northern Ireland or Palestine!” Kaname wailed. “It’s Tokyo!”

“Not an issue,” he responded. “We plan to add emplacements, searchlights, and loudspeakers by the time we’re finished. It should hold out for quite some time against the kind of armed terrorist attack that might target a crowded festival.” Sousuke had grown up on battlefields overseas, and he still didn’t grasp how things worked here in a place as peaceful and safe as Japan. He couldn’t get it through his head that the chance of terrorists attacking a school’s culture festival were almost nil.

“We’ll be more likely to see the police than terrorists!” she howled.

“That’s fine. Not even police equipment will be able to destroy this gate.”

“That’s not what I—”

“Of course, its presence will disincline terrorists to interfere at all. Its greatest strength is as a deterrent,” Sousuke put in thoughtfully. “Festival visitors will rest easy when they see this gate.”

“Rest easy?” Kaname asked incredulously. The looming “entry gate” projected an aura of menace; no one was going to “rest easy” in its presence. “And so you requested 1.5 million yen for this monstrosity?”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “I believe I can get an excellent price on Israeli-made composite armor. A French arms dealer acquaintance of mine told me that typically you’d have to spend over 5 million—”

Whap! Kaname slammed the wad of documents she was holding onto Sousuke’s head.

Sousuke stared in silence. “Where did that come from?”

“You *suck*!” Kaname yelled. “Don’t you know what our budget is? It’s 1.5 million yen! You know what happens if we follow your crazy plan? We get the most surreal school festival ever! A festival with some looming fortress at the gate and no exhibits past it!”

“Hmm...” he frowned.

“No armor plating! Use plywood! Yeesh...” Kaname muttered, walking around the metal gate. She had to admit that the framework looked solid. They’d obviously been working hard on it, but...

Why does he have to spend all his energy in the most pointless directions? After letting out her umpteenth sigh that day, she was just about to stroll through the gate itself, when...

“No! Chidori, don’t—”

“Huh?” Her right foot stepped on some kind of button. The bare nozzle just above her head began to tremble, and she was hit with a cloud of red particles. It was some kind of paint, spraying her from all sides. Soon, she could see nothing but the crimson fog all around her.

“Too late...” Sousuke whispered, dispersing the mist with the blueprints in his hand. As it cleared, they could see Kaname standing there, pitifully, as red as pollack roe.

She coughed. “Wh-What did you...”

“You accidentally triggered the marking system,” Sousuke explained calmly.

“What... is that?”

“It reacts to outsiders trying to bring weapons into the festival,” Sousuke explained. “Even if they try to escape, the red paint will let them be identified at a glance. I see it still has room for improvement, but—”

“You... you...” Her entire body began to tremble, and her now-crimson hair stood on end.

“Calm down, Chidori,” Sousuke said soothingly.

“Don’t... you... *dare* say that to me!” She thought about charging at him and kicking him over. But before she could, Kaname felt a wave of something else sweep over her; she sniffled. It was a feeling of sorrow. A sorrow... not quite deeper than the sea, but deeper than the school pool, at least. Her current pathetic state must have sparked a resurgence of the emptiness that had overtaken her earlier.

“Chidori...?” Sousuke peered, puzzled, into the face of the slumped-over, weeping Kaname.

“It’s just... too much...” she bawled.

“There’s no need to fear,” he told her, “The paint is non-toxic.”

“That’s not what I mean!” *Smack!* Kaname ended up socking Sousuke one after all. He spun around like a top, slammed the frame of the fortress gate, and then slumped to the ground.

“I’m feeling sad, okay?” she lamented, ignoring the sight of Sousuke lying limp on the ground. “I just realized that my summer is going to end like *this*... That this is all there’s going to be to my youth... to my second summer of high school. Run ragged by an insensitive war-obsessed freak, painted red like a Char custom, crying my eyes out under this metal monstrosity...”

Sousuke hummed to himself.

“You can’t understand, can you?” she sighed dolefully. “Summer vacation is a special time for girls.”

Sousuke stood up abruptly. “Is it?”

“Yes! At least, it is in manga and dramas and stuff... But it’s fine; never mind,” she sniffed. “I’ll stop getting my hopes up for anything special to happen. I’ll spend my last week until school starts just hanging around my house. At least then I won’t have to look at your stupid face...”

Sousuke watched cautiously as Kaname wailed and moaned. At last, he asked, “You’re saying you’re free for a week, then?”

“Yeah, I am. You got a problem with that?”

“Hmm...” Sousuke put a hand to his chin and fell into silent thought. He

looked around at the other working students, and whispered low enough that they couldn't hear. "In that case... would you like to go on a trip with me for a few days?"

It took her a few solid seconds just to say, "Huh?"

"Accompany me to a verdurous tropical island," he coaxed. "Away from the others."

"Are... Are you being serious?" she asked. Kaname couldn't believe her ears; Sousuke had never invited her anywhere before. And the two of them... all alone, on a tropical island?!

"Yes," he told her. "Don't worry about the travel costs; I've been waiting for a chance to ask you for some time."

A few days... In other words, they'd be staying overnight. Two young people, alone, on an overnight trip... The suddenness of the invitation had shaken her badly.

"Hey. Are you... um... well..."

"You don't like the idea?"

"I-It's not that, but..."

"I believe you will find it very satisfying."

"Um... ummm..." Kaname hemmed and hawed and flapped her mouth. *What do I do? What* can *I do? Sousuke's never been this aggressive before. I figured he'd never just ask me right out; I'm not emotionally prepared! But if I say no, I might not get another chance... Still, isn't there an order you're supposed to follow with this stuff? I mean, it's not like we've even... you know. But still...* Her thoughts chased each other, around and around, and she could feel her face going pink.

"What do you think?" he asked anxiously. "Should I call it off?"

Kaname glanced at him sidelong for a minute. Then she whispered, "You won't do anything weird?"

"I won't do anything weird," he promised.

“It won’t be dangerous?”

“It won’t be dangerous.”

“There will be proper places to sleep?”

“Correct.”

“Hmm...” That was right. Now that she thought about it, they could sleep in different rooms. And if she stayed home, she’d just be lazing around the apartment all day... Maybe it wasn’t a bad thing to seek a little stimulation, here at the end of her vacation. She hadn’t done her summer homework, but who cared about that? *That’s right...* she told herself. *I did want to have a little adventure, at least...*

Kaname shrugged before answering him. “F-Fine, then,” she stammered. “If you insist, I guess I’ll go along.”

“All right. It’s decided, then,” Sousuke agreed. “I’ll come fetch you in the morning two days from now.” And with that, Sousuke went back to work.

Unfortunately, the trip he proposed would turn out to contain more than “a little” adventure.

1: Toy Box

25 August, 2345 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time) USS Pasadena, Sea Near the Mariana Islands “Con, sonar. New contact on bearing 2-0-6. Designate contact number Sierra-15.”

When the sonar technician’s report came in, the submarine’s captain, Commander Killy B. Sailor, was just about to announce his first rest break in six hours. He’d wanted to go to the bathroom. He’d planned to give command to the officer of the deck, withdraw to his quarters, let fly at the urinal, then relax with a fine Cuban cigar. But a member of his crew had just announced contact with a new target, and that meant he was stuck there until they worked out what it was.

Sailor’s first order of business, then, was to declare loud enough for the whole control room to hear: “Shit!” His strong features drew into a scowl, and his broad shoulders tensed. The fierce-looking, quick-to-anger man was often described in whispers among his subordinates as looking “like Schwarzenegger in a comedy.”

It was their tenth day out from Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The boat he commanded, the SSN USS Pasadena, was currently moving on a course west at 20 knots—36 kilometers per hour—at a depth of 200 meters.

“Captain... you may want to watch your language in this particular location,” cautioned Lieutenant Marcy Takenaka, the slender, attractive young man of Japanese descent who served as his executive officer.

“Huh?! Takenaka, are you stupid?” Sailor demanded sourly. “I said ‘shit’ because I need to take a shit! Are you gonna nitpick everything your captain says now? Huh?”

“That *is* part of my job,” Takenaka pointed out. “The military gives me that right.”

Captain Sailor glared angrily into his XO’s unflappable face. “Listen to you, all high and mighty... You Japanese are all the same. Always sniggering and arguing

with everything I say... This is why I can't stand you."

"Ah... You've said at least two erroneous things just now," Takenaka said tactfully. "First, I am a born-and-bred American. Second, I am not 'sniggering.'"

"Shut up, you nuclear-powered idiot!" The captain finally lost his temper and grabbed his XO by the collar; Takenaka made a noise of distress. "After two years stuck with you, I've finally figured it out," he bellowed. "Takenaka, you're a spy. A spy from our mortal enemy, trying to rob my beloved Navy of its funding—a spy from the US Air Force! Your constant nagging is the proof!"

"You know that's not true!" he protested. "Let me go, Captain!"

The control room crew all shook their heads as if to say "here we go again." The captain and XO were constantly butting heads, on everything from the dinner menu to the main reactor's output.

"Um... con, sonar. Requesting orders on Sierra-15."

His subordinate's reminder about the new contact snapped Captain Sailor back to reality. "Oh... right. No time for this now..."

XO Takenaka gasped for breath as Captain Sailor tossed him aside, cut across the control room, and peered into the sonar shack. "Where is it? Is it far?"

"Yes, here's the signal. It's sporadic and weak, so we're not sure yet..." The ST gazed at the display with a scowl, messing with dials and switches around the green, waterfall-like display of sources of sounds in the area.

A submarine had no windows; as they moved through the water, the only way to know what was around them was by sound. Another vessel could be dancing a jig inches in front of their nose, and as long as it was silent, they wouldn't even know it was there.

"It's a twin screw, so it must be big," Captain Sailor predicted. "Could be a Russian boomer... but the data doesn't match up. The DEMON is way off for that, too..." A boomer, or SSBN, referred to a large, nuclear missile-equipped submarine, designed to serve as the vanguard in an all-out nuclear war.

"Could it be a new Typhoon-class?" the ST asked.

"Not possible," XO Takenaka chimed in. He had managed to catch his breath

at some point and was poking his head into the sonar shack. “The only shipyard with the facilities to make a Typhoon-class is in Severodvinsk. A new ship like that in the water would have been sighted by the Atlantic Fleet in the Barents Sea. SOSUS would have picked it up, as well. But COMSUBPAC hasn’t issued any warnings—”

“I know all that, you vertical launch system dunderhead!” Sailor interrupted with an insult that would make no sense to a layman.

Takenaka closed his eyes. “Why do you always have to...” He stopped and cleared his throat. “Anyway. It might be better to assume it’s an entirely new model.”

“Hmm...” Sailor put a hand to his chin. In other words, a massive submarine of unknown nationality and model was sailing along on the Pasadena’s course. It didn’t seem to be Russian, but that didn’t mean it was friendly; to a submariner, all targets were hostile until proven otherwise.

“Let’s follow it a while,” he decided. “We’ll get permission from Command first—Take us up to periscope depth.”

“Sir. Should I compose the message myself?”

“If you want,” Sailor grouched.

But just then—“Wait, Captain. I just determined our distance,” the crewman working the close-range HF sonar whispered. His face was pale with fear. “It’s close. It’s big. Less than 600 yards and closing.”

Six hundred yards—their distance was only about five times the length of their own vessel, which was close enough to make an impact likely. When the hell had it gotten that close?!

The captain goggled. “What’s its depth?”

“Five hundred feet! We’re going to hit it!”

Before the report was even finished, Captain Sailor began to shout, “Right full rudder to 3-3-0! Make your depth 800! Maximum dive angle, hurry!”

“Aye, sir! Make your course 3-3-0, depth 800, maximum dive angle!” The XO sprang back to the control room and gave detailed instructions to the dive

station. The helmsman and planesman tensed up but did as they were told, both swiftly and carefully.

Immediately the boat tilted, moving on a desperate course to avoid collision with the unknown vessel. The turbulence caused by the sudden change in direction banged loudly along the hull, and the bulkheads groaned from the stress.

“Dammit, even the surfers in Honolulu can hear us!” Captain Sailor exploded. “Sonar! Any sign of attack?!”

“No, sir! We’re too close to tell!” The sudden, violent movement had unleashed pandemonium in the Pasadena. “Th-The other vessel is moving, too! It’s closing! Range 400! No, 300?! 250, 200...” the ST screamed, gripping his headset. The approaching Sierra-15—the mysterious large submarine—was heading straight for them on an impact course.

“Shit! Shit, shit, shit! Why won’t it avoid us?” Sailor screamed. “They have to know we’re here!”

“Captain, we can’t dodge it!”

A cold chill went up Sailor’s spine. An underwater collision was the one nightmare every submariner shared. It wasn’t like a car crash at an intersection; the crushing pressure that encased them at all times would exploit the slightest crack in their hull. If the hull ruptured, and water came rushing in? There would be no way to stop it. Every scrap of the metal, all the oil, the nuclear fuel—and all 133 souls on board—would be pulverized by the force and left scattered along the ocean floor!

“Range... 100... 50! It’s gonna hit!”

“All stations, brace for impact!” Sailor shouted into the microphone.

Every man on the ship grabbed whatever was handy. Sturdy railings, console panels, backs of chairs—some even grabbed pens or frying pans. One odd crewman, for whatever reason, grabbed his own balls through his pants.

One second later—

A powerful, destruction-sowing crash— The hideous shriek of twisting metal

— —did not come.

The Pasadena continued its ear-grinding turn, but no more. They'd passed the expected point of collision, yet their world remained whole. The XO was the first to come to his senses; he ordered dive control to steady their course and depth.

Immediately, the ship went quiet. Looking sick to their stomachs, the crew timidly looked around them. The attack they'd expected had simply not come, and the 133 crew aboard all shared a common feeling—that unsteady calm that followed the end of a bout of hiccups.

"Sonar, con. Where's the Sierra-15?" Sailor asked in a whisper.

"Sonar," the crewman reported. "It... well, it disappeared."

"What did you say?"

"It disappeared. Even our shortwave array... it doesn't pick up a trace," the ST insisted, with a tremendous lack of confidence.

A target as big as a Soviet Typhoon-class... just gone, in an instant? Half-disbelieving, Sailor ordered an all stop. The ship continued to turn on its soundless inertia as they investigated the area carefully. But even then...

"Nothing," the ST said helplessly. "There's nothing here."

"Not possible! Check the BQQ-5. I want a thorough test!" Sailor ordered, expecting an instrument malfunction.

"Captain. I won't argue with your request... but I don't think it's a glitch," Takenaka said hesitantly.

"Huh? What makes you say that?" Sailor demanded. "Can you back it up?"

"Well, no, but... I think what we just witnessed was... the Toy Box."

"The what?"

"There are rumors of a ghost submarine, unfathomably huge," Takenaka told him. "It appears without a sound and disappears the same way, traveling at incredible speeds. Several of our allies have seen it, but none have successfully managed to track it."

The US Navy's "Improved Los Angeles-class" of submarines, which included the Pasadena, were some of the world's most advanced. It was no exaggeration to say there was nothing they couldn't detect. For so many high-tech vessels to fail at tracking it...

"That's stupid," Sailor scoffed. "So you think what we just saw was this 'Toy Box' thing?"

"Well, it just seems very likely," Takenaka said defensively.

Sailor fell into a sullen silence and tapped his temple with his index finger. "I don't like it. A ship of unknown nationality that not even we can track, just wandering around the ocean, answering to God-knows-who... What if it's got nukes on it?"

"Well..." Takenaka hesitated for a moment. "If it wanted, it could wipe any city or base off the map in a second."

"That's right," Sailor retorted. "Before anyone even knew it was there." It could trigger a hot war between the US and the USSR. Just who had made the thing? No, the more immediate question was: could they afford to simply leave it at large?

Sailor stood up, as if coming to a decision. "Let's report it to Command. Take us to periscope depth. In the meantime, there's something I need to do."

"Where are you going?"

"The head!" he declared, passed command to Takenaka, and strode purposefully out of the control room.

Still, Commander Sailor thought to himself as he walked down the narrow hallway. *If that thing we met really was this "Toy Box"... I'd love to get my hands on the captain. Messing with me like this... I bet he's a real twisted psycho asshole.*

"Just you wait, Toy Box captain... Next chance I get, I'll make you wipe my ass," he growled. "You'll see. And you'll do it with your tongue!"

Same Timeframe, Amphibious Assault Submarine Tuatha de Danaan "What's the matter, Captain?" asked the XO of the

Tuatha de Danaan, Lieutenant Colonel Mardukas, as Tessa let out a sudden shiver.

"Oh, I just felt a sudden chill... I wonder if the air conditioning is malfunctioning."

"Do you think?" he questioned. "I feel fine."

"Maybe it's just my imagination... I'm sorry. Don't worry; I promise I'm not catching cold." She pasted on a smile then looked back at the nautical chart projected on the nearby screen.

The occupant of the captain's chair, Tessa—Colonel Teletha Testarossa—was a girl of just 16 years. She had large gray eyes, skin like fine china, and ash blonde hair, which was tied into a neat braid.

The control room of her amphibious assault submarine, the Tuatha de Danaan, was far larger than that of the Pasadena. It was more like the "mission control" you see in shuttle launch images, if smaller and with a lower ceiling. The lighting was dim enough that the blue and green display screens provided much of the room's illumination.

Before her were three large screens and fifteen seats; each member of the crew there had one job which they specialized in. The helmsman and the planesman, the navigator and the fire control officer, the engineer and special engineer, the officer of the deck, and so on. There were also seats for crew who oversaw ground operations when they were surfaced, but these were only filled when necessary.

The next rooms over were the sonar shack—the ears of the sub—and the communications and electronic warfare room. They'd just gotten a report from the sonar shack: "Con, sonar. Con, sonar. Our friend the Pasadena is heading for the surface. It's... yeah, rising, it's over the thermal layer. It doesn't seem to realize we were hanging on its tail. Hah." The sonar technician, Sergeant Dejirani, spoke the words with a strange rhythm.

Mardukas furrowed his brow but said nothing. He held back the urge to rebuke him, and nudged his glasses back up on his nose. *That's right... this isn't the same military that I came out of,* he reminded himself. *Steady on, steady*

on...

Tessa, for her part, showed no signs of displeasure with the ST's attitude and made a flick with her stylus. The display of detailed information about the Pasadena was minimized and banished to a corner of the large front screen. "Yes, well done," she said absently. "I feel we played a rather mean prank on our friend, the Pasadena. I hope they aren't too upset with us..."

"That's a rather tall order. If it were me, I'd take it as a bad blow to my pride," Mardukas responded. Lieutenant Colonel Richard Mardukas was a skinny man in his mid-40s with thinning hair that he kept hidden beneath a baseball-style cap he'd kept from his British Navy days. Stitched onto the indigo cap were the words "S-87 HMS TURBULENT."

The Turbulent was the last submarine he'd commanded, but he couldn't have been a less likely fit for that name; his pale skin and dowdy, silver-rimmed glasses put him as far from the archetypical Navy man as you could get. He'd look more at home packed into a commuter train at rush hour than standing on a submarine's bridge.

"Pride... Do you really think so?" Tessa asked.

"Yes."

"But there's nothing to be done about it," she lamented. "We don't have anyone else to practice on..."

"Also true," Mardukas admitted. The military organization to which this vessel belonged, Mithril, had four battle groups across the world. Hers, the Tuatha de Danaan, oversaw operations in the West Pacific, but they only had the one submarine under their command.

Given no one else to practice with day in and day out, the de Danaan had to test approaches, attacks, tracking, and evasion on the submarines of various militaries' navies. Generally, they stuck to clandestine approaches that left their subjects' captains none the wiser, but now and then—as in this case—it was necessary to get a little rough. Of course, she knew this couldn't be any fun for their unwitting and unwilling practice partners.

"But it wasn't for naught," Mardukas pointed out. "We now know to adjust

our expectations of silence during normal propulsion."

"True. I thought they wouldn't hear us for another ten seconds..." Tessa whispered, looking up at the ceiling. Her boat hadn't seen many days at sea. It had been through live combat, but there were still countless things about it to be tested and fine-tuned. They had no choice but to impose on others if they wanted to get the de Danaan working its very best.

Incidentally, "Tuatha de Danaan" was both the name of the vessel and the name of their battle group. Since they were an extremely small-scale operation, it was appropriate to treat them as equivalent. That made Tessa both captain and commander-in-chief; this concentration of power was convenient in operations where precision and speed were required.

At any rate, the test had concluded successfully, and the Pasadena had departed. Their brief three-day voyage was over, and it was time to return to their base on Merida Island.

"Well... perhaps we should head home as well," she sighed. "EMFC to passive; resume normal propulsion. All ahead standard."

It was an awfully gentle voice for someone commanding the world's largest high-tech submarine, but that was unavoidable. Mardukas repeated the officer's order. "Aye, Captain. EMFC, passive."

"EMFC station. Passive mode, aye. Engaging turbulence control. Fifteen seconds. Ten. Five. All devices, phase adjustment complete."

"Normal propulsion, contact," Mardukas continued.

"Maneuvering. Normal propulsion, aye. Engine one, ready. Engine two, ready. Normal propulsion, contact."

"All ahead standard," he finished.

"All ahead standard, aye."

As the head of each station reported, the de Danaan's twin variable pitch screws began to spin. These propellers, made of dozens of layers of shape-memory alloy, changed shape like living things and were the most quiet and efficient propulsion there was. The over-30,000-ton vessel smoothly began to

move forward. The floor vibrated just a little, but made almost no sound.

“Captain. Current speed, 30 knots.”

“Right. This should do it. Sonar, keep an ear on bearing 0-5-0. There are Japanese fishing boats in that area.”

“Right. Why?” the ST asked.

“You sometimes see accidents with snagged fishing nets... It wouldn’t harm us, but we’d capsize them.” It was true. It was the kind of accident even a veteran captain could cause, though officially, such incidents were not acknowledged by any countries’ militaries.

“Ah... I see. Roger,” the ST responded easily enough.

Mardukas felt deeply touched as he listened to the exchange and noted how smoothly things were running. When the de Danaan had first set out, most of the crew had behaved with hostility to Teletha Testarossa. It was understandable; what kind of military organization would accept a girl who couldn’t even legally drink as their captain?

Moreover, the crew had been chosen from all over the world to staff the de Danaan and were leading professionals in their fields (if also eccentric enough to have been kicked out of proper armed forces). Their pride in their work was not inconsiderable.

Mardukas remembered the first time he’d brought her out in front of the crew: “I am your executive officer,” he’d said. “This girl here is the captain.” It was as if he’d told them, “The Pope has expatriated to China.” But then, after various twists and turns, the crew’s opinions about her did a complete 180.

The Sunan Incident four months ago had been particularly decisive; her leadership then had been nothing short of breathtaking. While depth charges rained down from the North Korean patrol boats, she’d gotten that massive sub moving like a jet fighter to break through their blockade. As its designer, Teletha Testarossa had an intimate knowledge of the vessel as well as a unique ability to unleash its full potential. Even Mardukas, a submariner with 25 years of experience, was impressed by her skill and daring.

Now that she had proven herself, a unique atmosphere had come over the de

Danaan. Normal submarines, crewed by nothing but men, naturally formed into a patriarchal society: The captain was the father and the absolute authority. The de Danaan was more like a matriarchy with Tessa as chief; the men found fulfillment in serving and protecting her, and the fact that their “princess” possessed seemingly divine wisdom and beauty just made it better. It was a vessel truly worthy of the name Tuatha de Danaan, “tribe of the Goddess Danu,” the name of the pantheon in Celtic mythology.

“The EMFC is working well. At this rate, we should return to base by noon,” Mardukas said after checking the data on his personal display.

“Yes, I’m glad. Then we can hold the birthday party... Also, I expect a guest on the island tomorrow.” Tessa looked very pleased by the idea.

“What do you mean?” Mardukas asked.

“Chidori Kaname-san,” Tessa clarified. “I told Sergeant Sagara to bring her to Merida Island when it was convenient; I’ve hardly talked to her since the Behemoth incident.”

“I see.” Mardukas didn’t miss the note of glee in her tone when mentioning Sergeant Sagara. Since the battle with the giant arm slave two months ago, Captain Testarossa had been frequently mentioning the young sergeant’s name, though she likely didn’t realize it herself.

Mardukas didn’t know much about Sagara Sousuke, but he’d heard that he was a sober and skilled NCO. He knew that he was an elite member of their ground forces’ special response team and that he was currently assigned to a mission in Tokyo. He was also the only one who could pilot the de Danaan’s unique AS, the Arbalest.

It occurred to Mardukas that he should probably talk to this Sagara personally and get a read on him soon; depending on what he saw, he might need to get him away from her, perhaps via reassignment. It wasn’t that he was trying to play her father, but it was his job as XO to keep an eye out for unsavory activities. He’d already confiscated a small mountain of pictures of Captain Testarossa from various members of the crew and ground forces. He was hesitant to burn them, so he’d left them with Captain Goldberry, the on-board doctor.

They'd been traveling at normal propulsion for about an hour when the de Danaan's mother AI let out a small alarm calling for the captain's attention. 《Captain. Tasking message on channel E2. Now receiving,》the AI's feminine voice said.

"Understood," Tessa answered. "When you're finished, send it to me."

"Aye, ma'am." ELF communications were the only way to communicate with a sub on a dive, and these "telegrams" took time to receive. Therefore, it was five minutes before the message could finally be displayed on the captain's screen.

Tessa read it and let out a small sigh. "Mardukas-san," she said.

"Yes, Captain?"

"We can't return to the base just yet. The party is likely canceled as well... We need to turn south instead," she said, and then handed the telegram she'd just received to Mardukas. The message, already decrypted, contained a brief order issued by the head of Mithril's operations division: Priority order 98H088-0031

260115Z

From: United Operations Division Headquarters; Operations Department Head Admiral Jerome Borda To: TDD-1 Tuatha de Danaan A: Situation B26C in progress at Sector L6-CW

B: Tuatha de Danaan to cancel current mission, board ground force, arrive at 09-30N 134-00E and stand by.

C: Rendezvous with ground forces permitted at sea north of 17-00N.

D: Ground force scale and type should be determined by necessities of situation B26C.

E: ROE are as in peacetime until instructed otherwise.

Message ends.

"Really... The admiral is such a slavedriver..."

"The sector in question is... the Perio Archipelago, I believe," Mardukas said without needing to open a nautical chart.

Perio was a nation of beautiful coral reef islands far to the south of their

current location. It had gained independence just a few years ago, and while it styled itself a republic, in practice it was a protectorate of the United States. It was a minor nation with a population just under 20,000, which received most of its economy from tourism.

Mardukas couldn't recall what kind of situation B26C referred to off the top of his head; Mithril had at least 100 hypothetical "military crisis" scenarios, and while he knew most of the common ones, he couldn't possibly memorize them all.

Apparently the same did not apply to Tessa, though. Before Mardukas could open the data file to check, she whispered, "It means that chemical weapons are involved. That a storage facility has been attacked and occupied by an armed force of some kind."

Chemical weapons... sarin, tabun, VX gas, and other weapons of mass killing. Even after achieving independence, the Republic of Perio still played host to a few American bases. Mardukas remembered reading somewhere that this included a facility for disassembling and disposal of "special warheads." A poison gas storehouse in the middle of a tropical paradise in tourist season, occupied by terrorists...

"It's a terrifying thought," he concluded. "If that facility goes up..."

"Yes," she agreed. "All 20,000 people living in Perio... and tens of thousands of tourists, would suffer. The entire nation could even be wiped off the map."

"But the United States military will surely attempt a counterinsurgency," Mardukas predicted. "They have people always ready for this kind of thing, and if they send their AS-equipped special forces, they should take it back easily enough."

"I hope you're right. But if something goes wrong..." Tessa trailed off and glared at the screen ahead of her. "Then we'll need to act. Back into the fray..."

26 August, 1330 Hours (Japan Standard Time) Over Pacific Ocean, 200 Kilometers Southwest of Iwojima Sagara Sousuke was feeling uneasy.

He was en route to Merida Island, Mithril's base in the West Pacific, which lay 1500 kilometers south of Tokyo. The twin-engine turboprop aircraft vibrated in flight about 1000 meters over the ocean, and powerful sunlight streamed through the windows into the cabin where he was sitting.

Chidori Kaname was seated across from him, and the backlighting made it impossible for him to read her expression. She seemed to be upset, but he couldn't begin to guess why. *It's a total mystery...* he thought.

When he'd gone to her apartment that morning, she'd been in high spirits, greeting him with a beaming smile and a travel bag full of clothes.

"Okay, let's get rolling!" she'd said cheerfully.

When he'd led her to Chofu Airport and explained that they'd be taking a chartered Cessna, she'd begun to marvel, saying things like, "Sousuke, are you super rich?!" in open astonishment.

Then, as the Cessna took off for Hachijojima, she'd seemed beside herself with joy. He continued to receive comments like "I underestimated you" and "I didn't know you were so resourceful" as she gazed out, enraptured, at the scenery below.

It was after arriving in Hachijojima, when they'd changed to the twin-engine plane to Mithril, that the problems had started. Kaname had apparently thought they would be staying, and she'd been stunned when he'd told her they were just changing planes. At last, deciding it would be all right to tell her their destination, he'd said, "We're going to Mithril's West Pacific base. Colonel Testarossa wants to see you."

For some reason, she'd fallen silent after that. After a clipped response ("fine, then"), she hadn't said another word for four hours.

Strange. Have I overlooked something very important? Sousuke had been working the problem over in his mind all this time, and he still couldn't figure it out. Once they passed 20 degrees north latitude, he cleared his throat and addressed her. "Chidori..."

"Yes? Can I help you, Sergeant Sagara?" There it was, all of a sudden. An inscrutable malice came through in her words.

“If I’ve upset you somehow, please tell me. I’ll do anything I can to make it right.”

“Oh. Well, actually—” Kaname gave him the most sarcastic smile she could manage. “My problems are things you can’t possibly solve, so I should probably keep them to myself.” She left no room for discussion.

He’d been thinking of taking Kaname somewhere, after her business with Colonel Teletha Testarossa was finished... But at this rate, it seemed he’d have to give up on that plan.

As if to punctuate the fact that they had nothing further to talk about, Kaname turned and looked out the window. Her earring caught the light. *Wait... does she usually wear earrings?* he realized.

Just then, the copilot poked his head into the cabin. “Sergeant Sagara. Message from Merida Island. It’s for you.”

“I’m on my way... Chidori, I’ll be stepping away for a minute.”

Kaname didn’t respond. With a grimace, Sousuke lowered his head and entered the cockpit, and took the headset from the copilot. “Sagara here.”

“Hey, it’s me.” It was a fine baritone voice with a slight note of jocularity: Sousuke’s comrade, Sergeant Kurz Weber.

“Kurz,” Sousuke acknowledged him. “What is it?”

“We got a standby B order. It includes you. We need to board the de Danaan en route ASAP; we’ll be taking a helicopter there in a few minutes.”

Sousuke wanted to let out a groan. A standby order, now of all times? Ground soldiers like him and Kurz weren’t required to be on the amphibious assault submarine, the Tuatha de Danaan, at all times. They remained on land for daily training and other missions, and they were only called to board and stand by when absolutely needed. There were a multitude of things that could happen after they came aboard: sometimes they ended up seeing combat; sometimes they waited for days and nothing happened.

Since they’d gotten the order to board the de Danaan on maneuvers, Kurz and the others on Merida Island would be taking helicopters to the rendezvous.

But Sousuke was still en route from Tokyo; there was no way he'd be able to join them on their flight.

"They can only wait twenty minutes, tops," Kurz told him. "Can you make it?"

"Not a chance," Sousuke told him grimly. "We're at least two hours from Merida."

"Then you'll have to take *that* way. Don't catch cold. Of course, people like you never do..." Kurz laughed with a trace of mockery, referring to the old Japanese adage that "idiots don't catch colds."

"That isn't the problem," Sousuke said. "It's Kaname. What should I do with her?"

"Ah, that's right. Since Tessa's underwater..."

"Should I have Kaname wait on Merida Island, or send her back?" Just saying the words out loud brought a cold sweat to Sousuke's forehead. Kaname was already in a bad mood, and now he'd have to say either, "something came up, please kill time at the base" or, "sorry, but please go back to Tokyo"... How was he going to do it? He was the one who'd invited her here.

"Are you absolutely certain you need me on the board?" he asked anxiously. "I'm sure there are others who can take my place. If you just let me talk to the Colonel—"

"Ah, hang on a second... Huh? Oh, it's Big Sis." He could hear Kurz holding a muttered conversation on the other end of the radio. Sousuke waited patiently, and soon Kurz returned. "Right. Got word about that at just the right time. Apparently Tessa says, 'If Kaname-san wants to come, bring her on board.' Nice, eh? The civilian gets to join us. Just bring her along."

"You expect me to put Kaname through that?" The method for boarding the de Danaan underwater was slightly... unusual.

"She's tough," Kurz told him. "She can handle it."

"Hmm..." Of course, there would be a lot to worry about, with bringing her onto a warship on maneuvers. Then again, the cutting-edge de Danaan was also one of the safest places in the world. Maybe it wasn't worth worrying about.

“I’ll bring her, then,” Sousuke responded, and after a few more formalities, he ended the call.

Back in the cabin, Kaname was stewing. Two days ago, when Sousuke had invited her, she’d started out hesitant. “Maybe we shouldn’t be alone together,” she’d thought. Not that she thought he’d try anything, but going on a trip together still felt like some kind of invisible line was being crossed.

It wasn’t just a trip. For a normal 16-year-old girl, an overnight stay with a boy was a life-changing experience. It wasn’t like going to an amusement park on a Sunday. And when that boy was Sousuke... that brought up other important, unresolved issues.

The relationship they had—the way she scolded him every day at school, acted like his big sister, looked after him because “no one else would”—she couldn’t help but feel this trip would change that. Getting closer to him might throw them out of the comfortable rhythm they’d established. Those thoughts jumbled together inside of her and made her heart pound in her chest. *Maybe I should call it off,* she’d thought again and again.

But when the night before arrived, she’d had a change of heart. She shoved a few changes of clothes and her bath set in her bag, and as she went about the work, she even realized she was humming. *Well, it’ll go how it goes...* she’d told herself. *What’s the worst that could happen?*

And so, she’d found herself looking forward to the trip. *Don’t worry so much; just enjoy your time with him. Eat all kinds of delicious things. Go with the flow. And if he asks for more... ah, what would I do then? No, I’m not that easy! Oh, but if the mood was right... No, I couldn’t! Oh, but could I? Hee hee hee...* Such were the thoughts that consumed her. The feeling had carried over to that morning, too, and continued as they were heading out.

Then, after so much wrestling with complicated, unfamiliar feelings, after so many emotional ups and downs... they’d arrived on Hachijojima, and he’d told her “We’re going to meet Colonel Testarossa,” and she’d been hit by an extreme feeling of deflation. *Oh, so that’s what it was,* she realized. *It’s just another Mithril mission. We’re going to some weird island, because your dearest darling asked you to pack me up and take me there. I can’t believe I spent two*

days worrying and wondering and letting my emotions go crazy. I'm so stupid... She'd felt about two inches tall.

In the cockpit, Sousuke was talking to someone on the radio. The plane was noisy, and they were speaking rapidly in English, so she couldn't tell what they were saying. When he finally returned to the cabin and sat down, his face was ashen.

"What is it?" she asked brusquely.

With a timid glance at her, he said, "There's been a change of plans."

"I see," Kaname replied stonily.

"The colonel has urgent business," he told her, "and she's not on Merida Island."

"And?"

"If it's all right with you, I'd like to take you along to our vessel."

"Hmm..." Kaname pondered briefly. Tessa had a ship, right? She felt like she'd heard about this at some point. The super-secret high-tech mercenary squad, Mithril, that Sousuke was involved with, had some kind of amphib... some kind of boat thing, and Tessa was the captain of it or something. It was true that she'd felt she needed to talk to Tessa for a while—the girl seemed to know something about the whole mystery surrounding Kaname—yet they'd only spoken together a few times over the phone since the chaos in Ariake.

"Okay, fine... whatever," Kaname responded indifferently.

"I appreciate it. Please stand by," Sousuke said, then returned to the cockpit.

For a little while after that, Sousuke came and went occasionally between the cockpit and the cabin. He would retrieve a large bag from the cabin shelf, fiddle with the radio in the cockpit, discuss something with the pilot...

About two hours after the decision to change destination, Sousuke asked her, "Did you bring a bathing suit?"

"Huh?" *Where did that come from?* Kaname wondered. *Are we going to the island after all?* "Well... I brought one, sure."

“Put it on,” he told her. “You can use the back of the cabin.”

“Where is this coming from?” she asked. “Hey...”

“Hurry. There’s not much time.” Sousuke headed back for the cockpit, seeming strangely flustered about something.

With no choice but to do as she was told, Kaname went to the bathroom in the back of the cabin and swiftly changed into her swimsuit. It was a one-piece with orange print; she’d also brought a white bikini, but she’d lost any desire to wear it in front of Sousuke.

She came back to the cabin with a towel over her shoulders, and found Sousuke there in a wetsuit; it looked like he was wearing it over his clothes. She stared for a second. “What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry,” he apologized. “We didn’t have a wetsuit in your size.”

“Uh, that’s not what I—”

“Put your luggage in this bag, please. All of it.” He quickly shoved an olive-colored bag at Kaname. “Once you’ve packed it in, zip it up. It’s double-layered, so make sure you get both. You should put that towel inside as well, and tie back your hair, if you can.”

Kaname remained annoyed. “Hey, would you just tell me—”

“Sarge!” The pilot called, and Sousuke ended up having to return to the cockpit. Confused, Kaname packed her things into the olive-colored bag.

“Finished?” Sousuke returned right away.

“Yeah,” she said. “But why did you make me do that?”

“The bag is waterproof and impact-resistant.” With that non-answer given, Sousuke opened another bag and swiftly put on its contents; this was a strangely-shaped rucksack, attached to a rigging of sturdy-looking belts and metal buckles.

“Um... hey, is that...”

“Put this on,” he ordered. “Hurry... no, I’ll put it on. We don’t have time.”

“Hey—” Kaname broke off, and suddenly let out a yelp. “What are you

doing?!” She could only stand there in shock as Sousuke began fastening the belts and buckles around her body; his rubber-gloved hands ran all over her arms and shoulders, legs and backside. Turning scarlet, Kaname tried to object, but...

“Sarge!” the pilot called. “One minute left!”

“Got it!”

“We’re running low on fuel, so we won’t get a second—”

“I know!” Sousuke shouted back. “Don’t worry!”

Intimidated by the strange tension in their interaction, Kaname found her objections dying in her throat. She winced in pain as Sousuke pulled at the buckles and belts he’d secured around her, testing their strength. “Hey, what are we—”

“Thirty seconds!” the pilot cried.

“Thanks a lot!” Sousuke responded. “See you another time!”

“Huh?” Kaname said. “What do you mean ‘another time’? Hey, wait—” Sousuke got around behind her and attached his buckles to hers with a clink. They were latched together now, with him standing right behind her, arms linked under hers.

“What? Hey...” she tried again, “what’s going on?” Sousuke, who was bearing all the equipment on his shoulders—including the bag with her luggage inside—strode quickly to the right side of the cabin, as if carrying her.

“Huh? Huh?”

The copilot, standing next to the hatch, cranked a lever in the wall. The sliding-style door flew open, and they were abruptly buffeted by the wind from outside.

Kaname shrieked.

Suddenly, the roar of the engine was much louder, and a cold gale was roaring around her. She could see where the sky met the sea, all in blue. It spanned out in its vastness, far below: ocean, as far as the eye could see. Tokyo Tower felt like nothing compared to the height they were at now.

Sousuke tossed a smoking marker out the hatch and watched the direction of the wind outside. Then he gave the copilot a thumbs up, and he patted Kaname on the shoulder. “Right! Let’s go, Chidori!”

“‘Let’s go,’ my butt!” she yelled back. “We’re still flying!”

“We are,” he agreed.

Kaname began to flail, struggling to get back into the plane, but because she was latched to Sousuke, it was hard for her to get traction. “What are you doing?! Hey, don’t tell me we’re going to jump—”

“Affirmative.” With a shout, Sousuke propelled himself out of the plane, taking Kaname along with him.

The floor vanished from below her feet, and a feeling surged over her, like her guts floating up inside her body. She could tell that she was screaming, but the rushing wind around her drowned her voice out, so that she could barely even hear it. In the corner of her eye she could see the turboprop plane receding.

Everything was blue. The crystal clear sky, the sparkling ocean... that, and the sun, were all that was left in existence.

“Ah...” Kaname said tremulously. She and he, alone in that cerulean world. Just the two of them, together... How wonderful it would be, if not for the force dragging them down. In a corner of her mind, she began to think she could excuse almost everything he’d put her through up until now. Yes, even the fact that he’d dragged her out on his suicide plunge. But just as that realization occurred, she felt a hard impact, and her body was jerked upward. No—in fact, their parachute had opened.

The world of pure blue vanished as an olive-green parachute came to comprise most of the view above her. The wind rushing past her near-naked body died to a gentle breeze that rustled her hair. Dangling from the parachute, they continued their downward drift.

“We’re going to die...” Kaname whispered, as she gazed down at the ocean below. There was no sign of the ship Sousuke had talked about. They were approaching the surface of the water now.

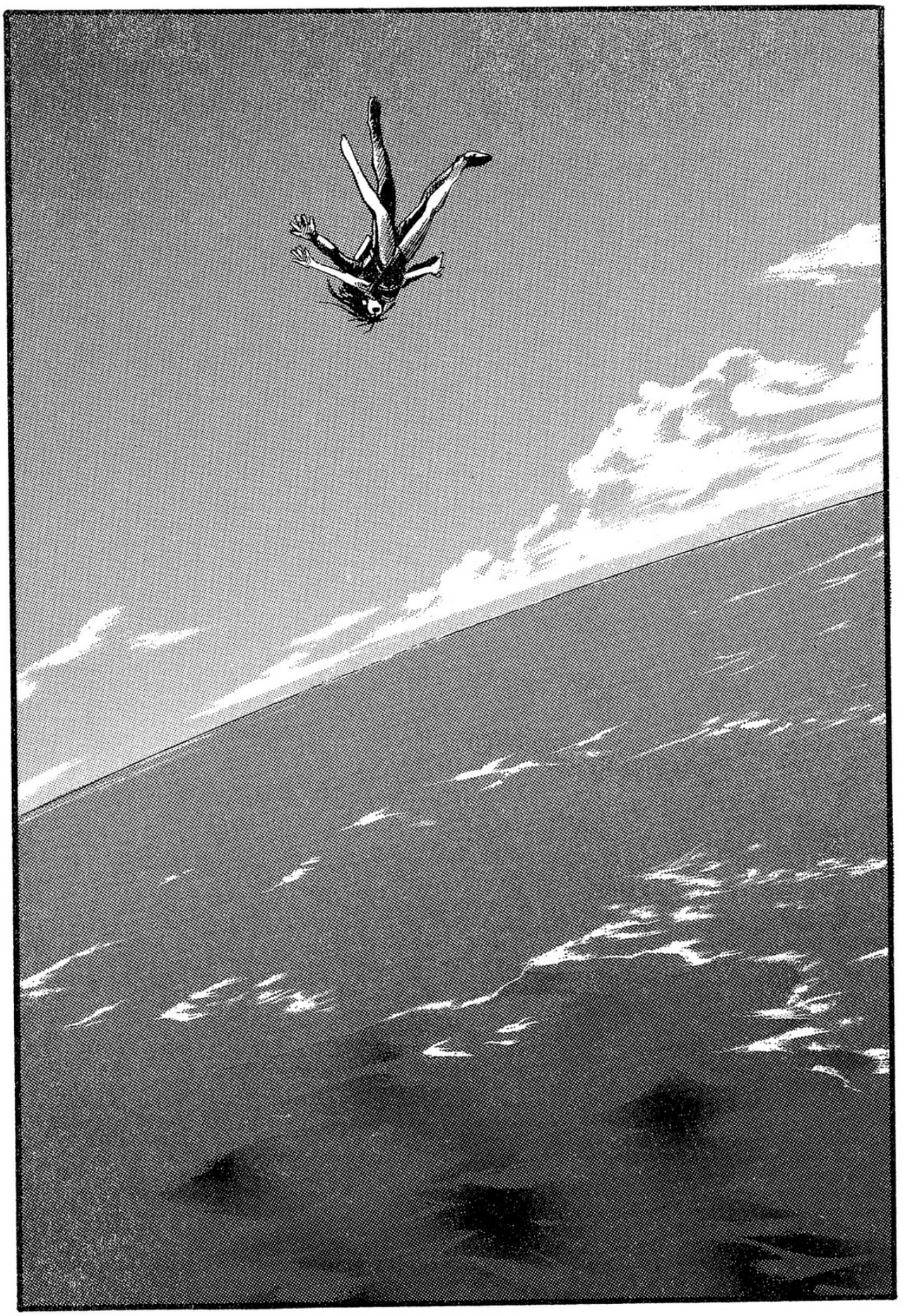
“Okay, Chidori,” Sousuke told her. “I’ll be cutting the parachute just before we

hit the water. Take a deep breath.”

“Why?” she found it in herself to ask.

“So that we don’t drown,” he said. “Three... two...” They had already fallen the height of a skyscraper. She could make out the waves in detail now. “Cutting now.”

Holding back the urge to cry, Kaname filled her lungs with air. The parachute flew free; they stiffened and plunged toward the ocean.



She felt a final impact, and her body was engulfed in seawater and foam.

The water wasn't as cold as she'd prepared herself for.

26 August, 0628 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time) Tuatha de Danaan, 30 Meter Depth, West Pacific Ocean "Con, sonar. Human-sized objects hitting the water on bearing 3-1-7. Distance... about 500 yards," the sonar technician told Tessa.

"Right," Tessa responded. "Just about as planned, then. Maintain course, decrease speed to three knots."

"Speed, three knots. Aye, ma'am." The slow-moving submarine slowed down even further. They were preparing to pick up Sousuke and Kaname, who had just fallen into the sea.

"Send the turtle for them," Tessa ordered. "Goddard-san, you have control."

"Aye, ma'am. Launching Turtle-1, starboard." The officer of the deck grabbed the stick and pressed a button.

The "turtle" was a kind of wire-controlled mini-USV they kept on board: it was about the size and shape of a sea turtle (hence the name) and moved through the water with fins based on AS technology while wielding a transceiver and optical sensors. It was, in effect, a swimming periscope, and it allowed the de Danaan to safely search the ocean's surface.

The OOD swam the turtle toward Sousuke and Kaname's location. Once it reached them, they'd put on diving gear and grab hold of it, and it would reel them down to where the submarine was. It would then bring them alongside one of the hatches, through which they'd enter an airlock and finally come aboard.

It was a process that not only Sousuke but other members of the ground forces had undergone countless times, as surfacing the whole boat to pick up one or two people was both inefficient and risky. The sub had already surfaced once an hour earlier to take the rest of the ground team (with their helicopters) on board.

The ST spoke again, suddenly nervous, “Sonar. I’m getting hard splashing on the surface of the water.”

“What do you mean?”

“They might be drowning. I’m hearing repeated impacts and screaming... I don’t like the sound of it.”

Abruptly, everyone in the control room grew tense. It wasn’t uncommon, during a water landing, to see someone to get tangled in a wet parachute and drown. Could Sousuke and Kaname have...?

“We need to take action. Get a diver on standby at Hatch 12. Have them ready to go at—”

“Ah, wait a minute. I’m getting shouting. It’s really loud. It’s... Japanese, I think? I’ll put it through. You tell me.” The ST switched the channel input to play the sound over the control room’s speakers.

Indeed, Tessa could indeed hear the kicking and struggling in the water, as well as screaming voices. She gulped and listened carefully to what was being said.

The statements captured by the de Danaan’s high-performance sonar were as follows: 《Stop it, Chidori! Glub...》

《Shut up! You deserve to drown, you jerk!》

《Hrk... you’re... strangling me...》

《I sure am! Have you ever thought about how I feel?! You callous jerk! You monster! I hate you!》

《Hrgh... gblurgh...》

Mardukas, standing very still beside her, looked over at Tessa as if requesting her judgment. He didn’t know Japanese, so the conversation was beyond him; the same went for the rest of the crew. They were all turned in their seats, gazing at Tessa, who was listening carefully. They all had the same question written on their faces: *Why isn’t the captain helping them?*

“Captain?” someone ventured.

At last, Tessa spoke sullenly. “They’re fine,” she said, then slouched back into her chair.

After much Sturm und Drang, Kaname finally put on the unfamiliar diving gear, grabbed onto the strange robot turtle, and dove into the water with Sousuke. Below the water, a massive submarine—the Tuatha de Danaan—was waiting.

Kaname had never seen anything like it. It had smooth, aerodynamic lines; what she could make out in the diffused light from the water’s surface suggested a silhouette not unlike a throwing knife. Then again, its size made it hard to say just what its shape really was...

The closer they got, the more overawed she became by its scale. It looked as big as a Shinjuku skyscraper; or perhaps, more pointedly, like a black mountain lying on its side.

Guided by Sousuke, Kaname entered a small hatch at about the middle of the boat. They waited in a narrow, cylindrical airlock while the water pumped out, and when it was finally done, she could at last tear herself free from the vile rubber mouthpiece of her breathing apparatus.

“Ugh... You never said... it was a submarine,” Kaname said with a cough, flexing her fingers open and shut. She didn’t know why, but her fingertips were tingling.

“You’ve been told that several times,” Sousuke protested. “You’ve been on board it once before, as well.”

“Huh?”

“It’s true,” he insisted. “The conditions then were more chaotic, of course; you were unconscious at the time.”

Kaname responded to that with a silent glare. They opened a hatch in the floor and climbed down a ladder to the deck below. Waiting for them in the passageway was a girl with ash blonde hair, dressed in a khaki-colored uniform.

“Tessa?” Kaname said cautiously.

“Yes. It has been a while, hasn’t it?” Tessa smiled gently and inclined her

head. “Welcome, Chidori Kaname-san. You have my permission to board.”

And so, for the second time, Kaname boarded the amphibious assault submarine, the Tuatha de Danaan.

26 August, 1625 Hours (Perio Standard Time) Berildaob Island, Republic of Perio, Western Pacific Ocean United States Armed Forces Chemical Munitions Disposal Facility The explosion of an attack helicopter bathed the coral reefs in a red glow. Wreathed in flame against the night sky, it wobbled like a slowing top, plunged, then broke into pieces against the ocean’s surface.

Machine guns roared. Bullets flew back and forth. Patrol boats burned, and black smoke rose. On the beach of this battle-stricken island sat a lone indigo arm slave, the M6A3 Dark Bushnell. It was a top-of-the-line machine that belonged to the US Navy’s special operations force, the SEALs. Or rather... it had been.

The eight-meter-tall humanoid weapon had been reduced to a smoking husk, its arms and legs bent at grotesque angles. Strewn around it were clumps of metal guts and sprays of high macromolecular gel fluid. Beyond the violent sounds of explosion and shelling came the roars and shouts of the soldiers of the counterinsurgency. These had quickly changed into screams of despair.

“Echo-84. We’re hit! Mayday! Mayday!”

“My leg’s out! Need assistance!”

“That red bastard... He killed Bob!”

“—stroyed. Repeat, November-1 destroyed! The lieutenant is dead! Command transferring to November-3—”

“Evacuate! We gotta get out of here!”

“Help me! Someone! Help! Help...!”

Staff Sergeant Ed Olmos could hear his allies’ cries through the transceiver, but had no time to listen to them. The AS he was piloting—also an M6A3—was running across the concrete-hardened shoreline. He had no allies nearby; he

was the last of his three-machine team. The operators of the other two had been elites who had undergone strict training and boasted skills at the top of their class. And yet, they had been killed—effortlessly, by a single AS. By that unidentified red AS...

“No way... this can’t be happening,” he muttered. “Shit...” Inside the cockpit, Olmos had gone pale. He couldn’t stop sweating; his hands were shaking uncontrollably. His dark eyes frantically scanned for the enemy. Where is he? *Where is he?*

The sensors of the M6A3 Dark Bushnell had completely lost track of the enemy machine. All it could pick up was the thick black smoke, the remains of his allies, and the collapsing buildings around him. *Where is he? Where is that red—* Olmos’s racing thoughts stopped as the smoke in front of him swirled.

Driven by long-honed instinct, Olmos dove his machine to the side. A rocket grazed his left flank and exploded behind him. Unfazed by the shockwave, he immediately opened fire at the faintly visible shadow before him. His machine’s carbine spat out 40mm shells, which trailed streams of light as they disappeared into the smoke.

Three three-burst shots; they had to have hit. Yet... there was no sign of impact. The enemy machine showed itself; cutting through the smoke, it rushed him at high speed.

It was a dark red AS with a slender yet strong silhouette, a V-shaped upper torso, and a diamond-like head. It looked like a Western-style AS, but Olmos had never seen a model like it in any catalog. Its elegant exterior belied the ominous power that seemed to lurk beneath. He waited to see what the machine would do—and bizarrely, what it did was laugh. The mocking sound of the pilot’s voice rang out from the machine’s external speakers.

“You son of a bitch!” Olmos roared and charged forward, suddenly enraged. He let fly from his grenade launcher straight at the enemy machine, close enough that he, too, could be caught up in the blast. Then he unloaded the rest of his rifle clip at the enemy’s last known location. *That should show the bastard,* he thought.

But a single moment later, out of the raging storm of flame and fragments, it

emerged. Slowly... and completely unharmed. *Even after all that...* “Oh, no...” he moaned.

The red machine turned to the stunned Olmos and said, “Out of ammo? I feel a chill... It’s not good to be so wasteful.”

Olmos groaned in despair.

“Incidentally, you’re the last of the lot. I had a few who spent their last moments weeping and pleading... so I applaud your gumption, soldier boy.”

“Shut the hell up!” Olmos yelled. His Dark Bushnell tossed its spent rifle aside and pulled a small handgun from the hardpoint on its back. He took swift aim at the enemy machine’s head and fired, but the bullets seemed to bounce off of the air itself, as if they had hit some invisible shield. Beyond the flying red sparks, he could see the red machine standing there, entirely nonplussed. “Hey...” Olmos whispered, panicking.

The red AS raised an index finger and wagged it side to side. “Tsk, tsk, tsk... None of that, now. Let me show you how it’s done. Ready...?” The machine pointed its finger at Olmos, mimicking a gun. Then came a word: “Bang.”

In that instant, the air around it warped. An invisible force burst from the red AS’s fingertip and raced through the air. It wasn’t a projectile; it was something unknown, a blast of some strange kind of energy. The whatever-it-was passed right through the Dark Bushnell’s armor, causing the machine’s cockpit to explode with the operator inside.

Olmos died without even knowing what happened. The last Dark Bushnell of the counterinsurgency, having lost its operator and control system, collapsed on the spot, never to move again. There wasn’t a single scratch on its armor.

●

When the last of the enemies had fled and the battle was officially over, he took a roll count. Of the ten ASes he had serving under him, one was destroyed, and one had lost its left arm. Losses from infantry and others totaled six dead and ten wounded. Not insignificant, but considering that they’d gone up against one of the strongest military entities in the world, it had to be considered an excellent showing.

After all, in turn, they had taken out twelve of the enemy's ASes, destroyed half of their helicopters and attack craft, and forced them to leave at least two dozen bodies on the beach. Those men would never make it home again, the poor things. Ah, stars and stripes forever!

"Let's see, now..." He walked his own AS to the base's chemical weapons repository. Chunks of wall here and there had been taken out by stray shots; it was a sight that would cause anyone who knew the site's function to turn pale with fright.

Not him, though. He simply squatted his machine down into its disembarking pose, then descended from the cockpit to the ground. He was getting the hang of the artificial leg these last couple of weeks. He looked up at the red AS, which seemed to be resting after a satisfying day of slaughter.

It was called the Codarl-i and known among his organization as "Plan 1058." It was an upgrade to the far more flawed Plan 1056, which he had lost four months ago, along with his right leg, in the mountains of North Korea.

"But if I'd had this one then..." A dark smile appeared on his face as he thought back on that battle—on his fight with Mithril's white AS.

"Gauron." Someone called his name. A man was walking toward him. He was around thirty years old, large and burly, with a boxer's frame. He had one of those ambiguous ethnicities; a face that could just as easily be Latino as it could East Asian. There was a sleepy cast to his eyes, but at the same time, his carriage suggested a man who wasn't fazed by anything. His most distinguishing characteristic, though, were the small round glasses that sat perched atop his round nose.

"Kurama," Gauron said. "I finished without you. Where have you been?"

"I was on the radio with Mr. Zinc," the man named Kurama answered bluntly. He seemed completely indifferent to the battle that had just gone down around him.

Gauron just hummed speculatively.

"You were right," Kurama said. "They seem to be coming."

"Oh?" Gauron inquired.

“Reports are that the submarine boarded the strike team en route,” Kurama confirmed. “This isn’t just recon. Apparently, they want to take us on.”

At this, Gauron grinned and let out a chuckle. “How kind of them. They latched right on to the bait.”

“Fairly extreme bait...” Kurama said, surveying the carnage. The still-burning ASes, the combat helicopters, the American soldiers’ bodies littering the ground here and there... The news of the operation’s failure would surely cause heads at the Pentagon to roll.

“Of course it is,” Gauron chuckled. “You know I love to make a scene.”

“I do know that.” Kurama produced a cigarette case, withdrew a cigarette-sized carrot stick, and crunched down on it. “There’s one more thing,” he said. “It’s possible your favorite couple is on board.”

“What did you say?” Gauron’s attention sharpened.

“We can’t be sure ourselves,” Kurama said, “but apparently they’re no longer in Tokyo.”

“Oh-ho... Well, well. Isn’t that nice. Fantastic.”

“I’m not sure why you’re so happy,” Kurama pointed out. “If she dies with Mithril, we lose our whole objective.”

Gauron chuckled again. “I know. Don’t worry. I’ll try hard not to let her die.” He shook his head gleefully. There was a joy in his haggard features that couldn’t possibly be healthy. He really was happy, though. This plan had called for him to do several things he disliked, and one was having to treat the boy and the girl as separate entities. But to think that circumstances would change to this degree...

“Yes, yes. I’ll be careful. I won’t let her die. Then again...” Gauron whispered.

“Then again what?” Kurama asked.

“Accidents do happen, don’t they?”

2: Deep Sea Party

26 August, 0807 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time) Sick Bay, Tuatha de Danaan, 200 Meter Depth, West Pacific Ocean Tessa seemed far more put-together now than when they'd met months before. Her khaki uniform, with knee-length skirt and indigo tie, lent her an air of distinction. The last time Kaname had seen her, Tessa had been in a baggy T-shirt and cargo pants, and it had been hard to buy her as any kind of top-ranked officer.

Wow. She really is military... Kaname felt a strange sense of wonder as she peered closely at the girl.

"Wh-What is it?" Tessa took a half-step back, unsettled by the scrutiny.

"Oh... nothing," Kaname said. "How have you been?"

"Just fine, thank you," Tessa replied politely. "Kaname-san... you look rather tired."

Kaname was on a bed in the sick bay, bundled up in a blanket and sipping hot cocoa. The ship's doctor had just finished running basic tests on her body temperature, heart rate, and blood pressure; she was a middle-aged black woman named Goldberry who held the military rank of captain. She had rattled off phrases like "you're looking better already" and "you've got quite a constitution," as she examined her, before giving the diagnosis, "you're in perfect health."

Sousuke was standing in front of the sick bay door, chest out in "at ease" posture. Kaname cast a sidelong glance at him as she replied, "I mean, I *only* got pushed out of a plane, thrown into the ocean, and dragged underwater... you'd have to be an idiot not to find that exhausting. A major idiot..."

A single bead of sweat appeared on Sousuke's temple as he listened.

"I'm sorry..." Tessa apologized. "We're not equipped to land conventional

aircraft here. It must have been such an ordeal...”

“Hey, it’s okay... I’d been wanting to see you again, too,” Kaname reassured her. “And we’ve got a lot to talk about, right?”

“Yes, of course there’s that. But first... Sergeant Sagara?”

“Yes, Colonel, ma’am?” he answered with ridiculous formality.

“Go to the main hangar,” Tessa ordered. “Find someone there and tell them that we’re heading their way.”

After a long moment of confusion, Sousuke replied, “Yes, ma’am.” He saluted and left the sick bay behind.

Kaname couldn’t quite explain what, but she felt something was off about their exchange. It was entirely businesslike, lacking any sexual tension or double entendre. Earlier, Tessa had told Kaname that she’d fallen for Sousuke; she’d told her, “let’s both do our best.” Of course, the “both” was a huge misunderstanding on Tessa’s part; Kaname didn’t even like Sousuke that way... From her point of view, it was more of an, “Uh, sure, good luck with that” kind of thing. She’d even almost said that... But still, it did concern her.

Ever since that day, any time Sousuke had left Tokyo for Mithril work, Kaname would find herself feeling vaguely uneasy. What were Sousuke and Tessa talking about when she wasn’t around? Were they spending all their time together? Were they sneaking into the sub’s gymnasium storehouse to get all hot and heavy and...

“Kaname-san?” Tessa interrupted.

“Huh?” Kaname snapped out of her daydream.

“Do you think you could get dressed? I was hoping to give you a tour of the boat; there are a few things you’ll need to know.”

“S-Sure. Hang on a minute...” Kaname withdrew into the back of the sick bay and started getting changed. As she took off her swimsuit, she caught a glimpse of herself in the wall mirror. The alluring figure of a naked girl—smooth, dewy skin; long, black hair that tangled, half-dried, around slender shoulders and voluptuous breasts. She hugged herself to cover her chest, turned around and

glanced back... *Hey, not a bad view, huh? Pretty good, even...* She wouldn't call herself irresistible, exactly, but she'd say she had it where it counted. *Easily a match for her, anyway,* Kaname assured herself, then immediately felt extremely stupid about it. Privately mortified, she reddened and sped through putting her clothes on. She slid on a rich blue dress, tied her hair with its usual red ribbon, slipped on her sandals and came out.

Doctor Goldberry handed her something. "Keep this on you, if you would." It was a plastic stick the size of a piece of chewing gum.

"What is this?" Kaname asked.

"It's a bit like litmus paper; it changes colors in the presence of high concentrations of neutrons."

"N-Neutrons?"

"If it turns orange, that's a danger sign," Doctor Goldberry explained. "You'll want to get away from the engine room as quickly as possible."

"And make sure to give it back to me before you disembark," Tessa came in to explain. "My submarine runs on a P/S-type Palladium Reactor. That device is a safety measure in the event of a disaster, but you shouldn't need to worry about it."

Kaname just tilted her head in confusion.

"Now, come with me. We wouldn't want to get separated," Tessa said, and then left the sick bay.

The halls of the Tuatha de Danaan were just wide enough to accommodate Kaname and Tessa walking side by side, and the ceiling was very low; they were far more cramped than the corridors at school. Kaname's first thought about these halls when she'd initially come on board were that they were surprisingly chaotic: the walls and ceiling were crammed with thick pipes and cables; valves, levers, switches and fire hoses... The sturdy, watertight doors they passed at regular intervals were fixed with enormous handles. In other words, it was just like any submarine. This was a bit of a letdown for Kaname, who had been led by the boat's outer appearance to expect the flat walls and ceilings of a space battleship from a sci-fi anime.

“You think it’s stuffy in here, don’t you?” Tessa said to Kaname, turning back even as she walked. “The corridors are quite wide as submarines go, though. We did it to ensure the safety of the crew when they need to run during an emergency. It means that foolish people are inclined to trip and fall—eek!” She really should have watched where she was going. Tessa banged her shoulder against a protruding pipe; the force caused her to spin before she fell, back-first, onto the floor.

“Hey, you okay?” Kaname asked, with concern.

“I’m... I’m fine. It’s nothing, really...” Tessa said with tears in her eyes, as Kaname helped her up.

“That was a close call... Are you sure you’re the captain of this thing?”

“It hurts to hear you say that, but this boat... it’s like my home,” Tessa explained. “There’s nothing I don’t know about it, outside of things related to my crew’s personal lives. For instance, that pipe I just hit was a number 28 B8 service pipe. During the design phase, I was forced to leave it protruding from the wall, to accommodate the placement of other modules,” she said, deftly switching the subject at hand as she resumed leading her down the hall. They passed through several doors and then descended a staircase.

Kaname’s second main impression of the Tuatha de Danaan was that it was quiet. She was pretty sure that the boat was moving, but there was no sound of machinery, and the floor wasn’t vibrating, either. It was as quiet as a shinkansen car.

“I made it to be that way,” Tessa responded when Kaname asked about it. “Stealth is vital for a submarine, so noise is our greatest enemy. A loud ship can be easily detected, even at distances where it couldn’t be made out with the naked eye, and modern-day warfare frequently begins at such distances. Of course... the spread of ECS means that is becoming less and less true in ground and aerial combat.”

“Ah-hah...” Kaname only understood about half of that, but she decided to nod along anyway. What she couldn’t understand was why she had seen so few of the submarine’s crew so far; the corridors were silent, and there was almost no sign of human life. She’d once caught sight of a scowling young crewman,

but he disappeared down the hallway without so much as a nod, as if he was avoiding her.

I don't think they like having me here, Kaname thought uneasily. She had reason to be here, but she was still just a civilian. It was understandable that they wouldn't be happy to see an outsider like her on their boat. "How many people are on board?" she asked out loud.

"A little over 240, at the moment," Tessa answered. "And we can accommodate more as needed."

"So why haven't I seen many of them?"

"Well, because..." Standing at a dead end in front of a closed watertight door, Tessa stopped and cleared her throat. "Kaname-san, you speak English, don't you?"

"Yeah, pretty well," Kaname answered. She'd lived in New York until three years ago, after all. She was a little rusty, but she could handle day-to-day conversation, at least.

"Let's switch over to that now," Tessa suggested.

"Um, sure."

"All right, then follow me. Kaname-san, I'm not sure if you like this kind of thing, but..." Tessa prefaced, then pushed open the thick door and stepped into the room beyond.

Kaname narrowed her eyes suspiciously but walked through. The stagnant air of the passageway gave way to a gentle breeze; the smell of oil stung her nose, and strong light greeted her eyes. "Ah..."

She was standing in an enormous room, which was lit up as bright as day. The ceiling was a little lower than her school gym, but it was deep. Cranes dangled from the ceiling, large screens lined the upper walls, and fuel tanks for helicopters and AS-sized rocket launchers were secured to metal frameworks. They were in a hangar, and along that hangar's port side stood about 200 crewmen in three neat lines. They spanned from about where Kaname was standing to the back wall: all different ages and races, dressed in a variety of uniform styles. There were khaki suits like Tessa's, olive green fatigues, orange

and blue work jumpsuits, helicopter pilot uniforms, lab coats, cook's whites, and so on.

There were also six arm slaves—those eight-meter-tall humanoid weapons—lined up behind them, just as neatly as the people. Their heads were inches from the ceiling. Kaname knew them; five were the model known as the M9, while the furthest one back was the white one Sousuke had piloted before. It wasn't just ASes, either; she could see helicopters and fighter craft lined up neatly beyond them, as well. The sight of the soldiers and weapons of the de Danaan all assembled in the hangar proved a truly impressive view.

What are they doing? Kaname wondered.

The middle-aged man standing next to them caught Tessa's gaze and nodded. He was a skinny man with glasses and a dour way about him. But despite his appearance, he managed such volume when he called out that Kaname found herself cringing in shock. "Atten-SHUN!!" All present went from rest to attention—two hundred people and six machines, all moving in unison.

"Huh? Huh?" *Should I go to "attention" too?* Kaname found herself stepping back, flustered.

The man spoke again. "Chidori Kaname, for repeated displays of exceptional courage, decisiveness, and kindness in the face of dangers to Colonel Testarossa and our squad mates, we extend our most heartfelt gratitude." The man took a deep breath and cried, "Salute!" At his command, all assembled raised their right hand in a salute in the style of the military of their origin.

All of their eyes were on her. Some were utterly serious, some were smiling, some looked appraising; some even seemed to be holding back tears... At the end of the line, Kaname could see Major Kalinin in his olive fatigues. His injuries seemed to have healed, and he held his large body straight and tall as he saluted Kaname respectfully. The six ASes were also saluting, looking down at her. The earnest arch of the white one's back suggested to her that the pilot was Sousuke; even reflected by a mechanical marionette, she could still recognize his mannerisms.

The M9 second from the end brushed its robotic temple with two fingers, then waved to her with its right hand; that humanoid weapon was hitting on

her, which meant its operator was probably Kurz. That meant the next M9 over, nudging it in its mechanical ribs, must be piloted by Mao.

“I realize it’s a bit much, but...” Tessa said with a smile as Kaname stood there, gaping silently. “When they heard you were coming, they all said they wanted to honor you, somehow.”

“Huh... what? M-Me? Um...” she stuttered. The realization that she was the center of attention sent Kaname into an even worse panic.



The hijacking incident four months ago; the giant AS incident two months ago... Kaname had played an important role in both. She'd been thrown into these situations against her will and thus had simply been doing what was necessary to survive. But the end result was still that she had saved many lives —including those of Sousuke and Tessa. This welcome was the best way for the people of the de Danaan to pay respect to the bravery of this ordinary citizen.

"Um, I... I'm honored. But I... I didn't do anything all that great..." Kaname mumbled, her ears going red. When Tessa conveyed her sentiments to the group, the soldiers burst out in laughter, applause, and cheers.

"Hey, look! She's blushing!"

"Oh man, she's cute!"

"Show some respect, guys..."

"Hey, hey! She's just like I said, right?"

"Kaname! Can I hook you up with my son?"

"Damn that Sagara, I'm gonna shoot him in the back..."

The crew's discipline was gone in a flash, replaced by noise and rowdiness. It felt strange to Kaname to have so many complete strangers making such a fuss over her.

"Quiet down, you lot!" the old man giving the orders scolded, a vein rising on his forehead.

Tessa watched with a slightly pained smile. "I'm afraid this version is closer to how they really are... But they really are all grateful to you. I hope you'll recognize that."

"B-But... I really didn't do anything, you know? It's not like I saved everyone here..." Kaname genuinely didn't know how to react to this. She hadn't saved the submarine itself, she'd just helped out a few people present from the sidelines. The "hero's welcome" felt a little misdirected.

"Untrue, Miss Chidori," said the gentleman who'd given the orders, turning to face her. "It is not the end result that matters most, but your conduct when danger stares you in the face; the difficulty of the actions you took. We all know

that very well.”

“Ah,” Kaname said meekly.

“The things you did wouldn’t be easy even for trained soldiers. You deserve to be proud.” His voice was easy and nonchalant, completely different from when he was giving commands. Kaname remained hesitant to accept the compliment.

“Colonel Mardukas is correct, Kaname-san. Anyway, the ritual is over... We were planning to hold a little party,” Tessa suggested, “if you’d like to join us.”

“A party?” Kaname blushed. “Um, that might be crossing a line, as welcomes go...” Besides, wasn’t this a military vessel? Even a layman like her had to wonder if it was all right for them to drop everything and have a party.

“Don’t worry. It will be a full day before we arrive at our destination,” Tessa said reassuringly. “And the party was planned from the start, for a different reason.”

“Huh,” Kaname said. “What reason is that?”

“Well, the truth is...” Tessa looked up at the hangar’s ceiling with a small, happy smile. “Today is her first birthday.”

26 August, 1335 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time) Main Hangar, Tuatha de Danaan It had been a year to the day since the Tuatha de Danaan first left port. The original plan had been to celebrate in grand fashion at Merida Island Base, but the sudden mission order had forced them to shift gears; they would be holding a small on-board party, instead. A corner of the hangar served as an impromptu party venue. Tablecloths were spread over empty ammo cases, and food was brought out from the galley. An M9 decorated with ribbons and tarps sat on one knee, holding out a banner in its hands: “Happy Birthday, Dear Tuatha de Danaan!” The menu was the usual stuff, and there was no alcohol allowed, but it was still more festive than a standard meal in the boring old mess.

The party started in a natural way. Crew came and went from the venue as they went on and off duty, enjoying food and conversation at their leisure. The ground forces were currently unoccupied, so there were relatively more of them present.

After a short but memorable speech from Tessa, Sergeant Kurz Weber played host to a bingo tournament. Kurz was a member of the ground forces' elite special response team; a blond-haired, blue-eyed, attractive young man, he seemed like the kind of person who was always up for a party. "Okay, let's get this rolling," Kurz said to the crowd, holding a magic marker like a microphone. "We've got three prizes today. Third prize: the tip of the radar mast that broke off the first time the Tuatha de Danaan left port. It was our first accident; an event worthy of commemoration. It bears the signature of both the captain and the supervising officer, and makes a fine souvenir to decorate your cabin."

The crowd booed. "We don't want that hunk of junk!"

Kurz ignored their complaints, and continued. "Next! In the Merida Island Base officers' residences, there's a cushy set of accommodations that's currently unoccupied. Second prize is, you get to live in those quarters, even if you're rank-and-file!"

The NCOs and rank-and-file soldiers clearly loved the idea and affirmed their excitement amongst themselves, but the officers already living in that area seemed unimpressed.

A second lieutenant who served in the engine room raised his hand. "Sarge, I live next to those quarters. What happens if I win it?"

"What do I care?" Kurz scoffed. "Cry and deal with it."

The lieutenant sank into annoyed silence.

"Last but not least," Kurz continued, "our marvelous first prize! This one's really something. It's a truly rare item, not easy to come by—I admit, I kinda wanted it too. The first prize is..." Kurz tossed away his notes and declared, "...a kiss from Captain Teletha Testarossa!"

"Whoooooa!" Most of the male soldiers present erupted. Some pumped fists in the air, others began to hyperventilate, while still others did backflips in

excitement.

Tessa, who was standing next to Kurz, just stared into space for a while. Then she snapped back to reality. “W-Weber-san?! I never agreed to this!”

“Huh?” Kurz blinked. “But you said you’d help in any way you could...”

“W-Well... I did say that, true...”

“If you don’t like it, you could donate some well-used underwear,” he suggested.

“That’s worse!”

“All right, then it’s a kiss!” Kurz insisted, and the tournament proceeded.

Kurz spun the cage and read the number from the first ball that came out. Participants mumbled among themselves and punched holes in the cards they’d been given in advance. The rule was that whoever got five in a row first won the grand prize. While things proceeded, Tessa sat, shoulders slumped and distressed, in a corner of the stage.

When it was about time to read the fifth number, Kurz addressed the audience: “Anybody close? Not yet?” A sullen-faced participant raised his hand. It was Sousuke.

“What...” Tessa felt a thump in her chest, and put a hand to her now-racing heart. Kaname, who was standing next to Sousuke, tensed up and looked nervous. The other men participating clicked their tongues in frustration.

Sousuke just looked around blankly (if with a trace of suspicion) at the reactions of those around him. He seemed to be the only one present who didn’t comprehend the meaning of the prize. “Did I do something wrong?” he asked in confusion.

“Lucky bastard...” Kurz groaned, then continued the game.

Tessa suddenly found it hard to sit still. *What if Sousuke wins?* she wondered. *That would be an excellent result, wouldn’t it? It would be a rare chance to get closer to him, given my position. I could just...! Oh, but the idea of kissing him in front of a hundred of my crew... It would be too embarrassing. What to do? What to do?* her thoughts continued to race.

“Almost there!” one of the ground force officers shouted. It was Captain Gail McAllen, of the SRT. His callsign was Uruz-1, and he was Major Kalinin’s aide; he was a little man in his mid-30s, with a black mustache.

“I’ve almost got it too,” said First Lieutenant Eva Santos, of the transport helicopter team, raising her hand. Though she was a woman, she seemed rather amused by the idea.

“Ah, Sagara-san... Please...” Tessa whispered to herself. *Please get it. I’m begging you. I’m waiting for you...* She knew that it wouldn’t change the result, but she just couldn’t help wishing. Apparently ignorant of her feelings, Sousuke remained scowling down at his bingo card, deep in thought.

“This is getting exciting!” Kurz crowed. “Will it be Sagara, McAllen, or Santos? Let’s keep things going!” The cage spun; the ball came out. Everyone gulped. Tessa was on tenterhooks as Kurz read the number. “B... 29.”

“Sorry, fellas! That’s bingo!” McAllen declared with a smile. Groans and sighs echoed throughout the hangar. Some slumped to their knees and gripped their heads; others threw their cards on the floor.

“There we have it! First prize goes to Captain McAllen! Condolences to everyone who missed out.” Kurz turned. “Tessa?”

Slumping in disappointment, Tessa turned her eyes limply to Kurz. “Yes?” she said at length.

“You heard the man. Up and at ’em!” Kurz replied while the group, recovering their fire, egged him on.

McAllen walked up to the podium, grinning. He was usually seen scolding and berating the ground forces, but right now he seemed quite relaxed. “Captain,” he said. “Lay one on me, if you please!”

“Don’t do it, Colonel!” someone called out from the audience. “He’s probably a carrier!”

“Just do it!” another person yelled. “Nothing to lose!”

She didn’t have a choice. If she refused now, she’d hurt his feelings, and disappoint the crowd. *Darn it...* Tessa thought. She had to be impartial. *That’s*

right. Back when I was a little girl getting my sea legs, I often greeted the old sailors who taught me with a kiss. It's not that big a deal, is it?

Tessa cast a glance at Sousuke. He was still scowling, as if trying to comprehend the situation. Standing beside him, Kaname's expression was inscrutable.

Tessa shook the tension out of her shoulders and addressed McAllen. "All right... Captain. Are you ready?"

"Heh... you bet I am, ma'am. It's my honor." The middle-aged man was grinning like a child. She smiled a little and gave him a peck on the cheek. The act was met immediately by whistles, applause, and cheers. "This is the greatest day of my life," he cheered. "I'm so lucky!" She saw Sousuke, at the other end of the crowd, glancing about as he at last grasped the meaning of the prize.

After bingo was over, some of the crew brought out instruments. SRT Master Sergeant Melissa Mao played on keyboards, accompanied by some crew from the maintenance and torpedo divisions. As the crowd began to grow rowdy, those around Kaname encouraged her to sing. She started off meek, but a positive reception to her rendition of Sakamoto Kyu's *Sukiyaki* improved her mood, and she satisfied them by singing a few more songs in passionate karaoke mode. She pulled Tessa on stage and gave a soulful rendition of James Brown's *Sex Machine*.

"Get up-pah!"

"G-Get up-pah..."

"Get on up-pah!"

"G-Get on up... pah?"

"I can't hear you!" Kaname yelled. "You couldn't order a pizza like that, let alone a squad! Right, everyone?"

"Yeah!" the crowd cheered.

"Can I take you to the bridge?!" Kaname bellowed.

"Yeah!" The listeners stamped their feet and joined in with her rapid call-and-response. It went on, with Kaname shouting and Tessa feverishly echoing her

each time.

As the song wound down, a communications officer approached Tessa and whispered something to her. Her face, showing a genuine sense of enjoyment, locked up for just a second, but it quickly relaxed back into a smile. She begged off from Kaname and the others, and left. They were disappointed at first, but the party mood quickly revived, and the festivities continued.

Sousuke was alone in a corner of the hangar, some distance away from the crowd. He was sitting on a small container, silently chewing on a fruit-flavored Calorie Mate as he gazed idly at Kaname and the others. *She really is good at this kind of thing,* Sousuke was thinking.

In just a few hours since her boarding, Kaname had already made herself at home among the crew. In fact, “made herself at home” was putting it mildly—she was incredibly popular with them. Her unpretentious demeanor, her outspoken attitude, her almost shocking lack of guardedness... those things all set the others at ease. It wasn’t just the crew, either; in school or out of it, she developed a rapport with everyone she met. Wasn’t that a far more valuable skill than firing a gun or piloting an AS? Any time he looked at her or Tessa, Sousuke began to see himself as hopelessly flawed.

The song changed to a lively jazz tune, and Kaname added some simple dance moves to her singing on the stage. With a downcast smile, she elegantly twirled her upper body, which caused her black hair to flutter. Sousuke found a sigh escaping his lips. He didn’t know why, but she suddenly felt far away—like the most distant person from him in the world.

“She sure is pretty, huh?” For the first time, Sousuke realized Kurz was standing right next to him. He was holding a non-alcoholic beer in one hand. “Sexy, stylish... No wonder guys fall all over her.”

“Do they? I wouldn’t know,” he responded brusquely.

“Good singer. Great sense of rhythm,” Kurz noted. “I bet they follow her around at school, too.”

“She does have leadership skills,” Sousuke agreed solemnly.

Kurz gave him a sidelong look that turned into a teasing smile. “You’re telling

me that seeing her like this doesn't spark anything for you at all?"

"No."

"Then what's with all the sighing?"

Sousuke fell silent; Kurz must have been watching him for a while. With a scowl, he said, "I'm just... concerned about all the noise. The submarine is on maneuvers currently. Light socializing is one thing, but musical performances—"

"Don't give me that crap," Kurz snorted. "Tessa said it was fine. Since when does a grunt like you get to second-guess her decisions?"

"Well... true enough." Sousuke didn't argue. Noise was the de Danaan's greatest enemy, but there were currently no major ships or submarines around them for 50 kilometers. Once they were in their area of operations, a commotion like this would be suicide, but that wasn't the case just yet. Someone could fire a gun on board, and the only ones that would hear it would be the migrating schools of fish.

Of course, even during downtime, there would be members of the crew openly fearful of the fate that might await them at their destination. But worrying wouldn't change what was going to happen; they still had nothing to do but wait until they arrived. Allotting that waiting time to recreational activities like these wasn't a bad idea at all.

"Everyone's afraid," Kurz said. "Even the veterans."

Sousuke said nothing. They'd be on strict silent running tomorrow regardless. The strained air that always precedes a mission would take over, and the fearful crew would find their nerves frayed to the breaking point. And then... the battle would begin.

Kaname and the crew were enjoying the party as if none of that even existed. "Huh? One more song? But... aw, okay," Kaname said, easily giving in. "You guys... Then, let's do that Stevie Wonder one I mentioned before. Ready, Mao-san?"

"Okay, okay. Bring it on."

"Then let's go!" Kaname snapped her fingers, and the intro began to play.

26 August, 1517 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time) Central Control Room, Tuatha de Danaan In stark contrast to the party in the hangar, the atmosphere of the control room was one of inorganic tranquility. There was only the blue of the front screens and green of the status boards; neat rows of digits and code conveyed every facet of reality that the submarine could perceive.

Tessa returned here after slipping out of the party, and found Mardukas and Kalinin waiting by the captain's chair. "What's the situation?" she wanted to know.

"Not good," Major Andrey Kalinin responded. The Russian, who commanded their ground forces in the field, rarely joined them to share good news. "The US Special Forces' raid failed. We're still lacking all the details, but... there's a lot that doesn't add up."

Information on the armed group occupying the chemical munitions disposal facility was on display in a corner of the main screen. Confirmed units included eight French-made ASes and five Soviet-made SPAAGs, plus around 20 foot soldiers or more. The camouflaged mid-size transport that brought them in had been left in the ocean on the south side of the base.

"This *is* strange," Tessa said, brow furrowed. "Their armaments are impressive for terrorists, but they shouldn't be enough to drive off the SEALs. What about the chemical weapons in storage?"

"There's been no sign of the fighting having caused a leak," Kalinin told her. "No intentional detonation, either—though the terrorists did release a statement that they *would* set it off the next time we try anything."

"I'm surprised the Americans opted for such a brute force approach..." Tessa trailed off. The media hadn't yet learned of the occupation. The American government was trying to deal with the problem covertly, in order to avoid the base's existence being made public.

According to the report made by Mithril's intelligence division, the terrorist

group was demanding the destruction of all of Perio's tourist facilities and an expulsion of all tourists there. They called themselves the Green Salvation Army and their stated goal was the protection of Perio's priceless coral reefs. They refused to entertain any negotiation with US forces for alternate conditions, but tourism was the Republic of Perio's only real industry, and the Western countries' fundamental policy was "never concede to terrorists"—so the result was a total impasse. The terrorists must have been fully aware of this, too, of course. And yet...

"I don't like it," she said, and gripped her braid tightly. "The skill it required to take over that base, the way they dealt with the special forces, the method they used to secure their equipment... it's all much too technical and professional. Yet their demands make them sound like amateur bank robbers. Could it be a diversion of some kind?"

"I couldn't say. But regardless of their motives, the danger remains," Mardukas put in. "And from what I can intuit, operations headquarters wants us to handle the counterinsurgency ourselves."

"We don't have a choice, then?" Tessa frowned. "For heaven's sake..."

Even as they spoke, the US top brass were probably in contact with Mithril's own upper echelons. Ever since the Sunan Incident, the number of top secret commissions Mithril had received from various countries' governments had been skyrocketing. They could expect to get the call the minute the details were worked out.

Just then, the boat's mother AI let out an electronic chime.《Captain. Intelligence message on channel G1. Source: intelligence division. Decrypting and saving as file N98H03811a. Process complete. Display?》

"Yes," Tessa said shortly, "please do."

《Aye, ma'am.》

The new information appeared on her personal screen. The intelligence division had sent an electronic file containing additional information about the fight at the chemical weapons facility. The special forces had suffered a complete rout, and at the time they fled, the status of the battle was still labeled unresolved.

Tessa and the others silently read the message text and the attached file, which made it clear that things were even worse than they feared: the destruction of the American ASes had been orchestrated entirely by a single enemy machine. Its model and maker were both unknown, but a soldier that made it back had managed to get it on video.

Tessa called up the video in question; the silent footage showed the blurry image of a red AS, running around the outskirts of the base, arms spread as if at play. It had a massive top-half, a diamond-shaped head, long limbs, and incredible explosive power.

“This... It’s the same make, isn’t it?” Tessa asked.

“It does appear so,” Kalinin said, confirming her suspicions. “It’s almost identical to the machine that Sagara and Weber fought in Sunan.”

The unknown silver AS, piloted by the vile terrorist Gauron... Tessa and the others knew it from mission recorder footage taken by the ARX-7 Arbalest during the fight. “I wonder if it has a lambda driver,” she speculated.

“Almost certainly.”

“No wonder the US forces lost...” Tessa thought a moment, troubled. “I’m liking this less and less.” She pressed the tip of her braid to her lips, anxiously.



The inside of her mouth felt sticky, as it always did when something bad was going to happen. Something in her head seemed to be screaming at her, *Do not approach that island.*

If she could, Tessa would have turned them right around immediately and taken them back to Merida Island. But instead, she regained her cool and said, “Kalinin-san. How’s the Arbalest?”

“Ready any time,” he answered. “Though formatting it proved to be impossible.”

“Then I assume Sergeant Sagara has not yet received a full briefing?” she checked.

“Those were your instructions, after all.”

“Good; consider them changed,” Tessa ordered. “Have Lieutenant Lemming brief him at once regarding the Arbalest and the lambda driver.”

“How much should she tell him?” Kalinin asked.

“Everything we know so far... little though that may be.”

“Understood.”

26 August, 1702 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time) Main Hangar, Tuatha de Danaan Kaname was cleaning up after the party, and Melissa Mao was helping her.

“Hey, sorry about putting you on the spot with the vocals,” the latter was saying.

“Oh, no prob. I had fun.” Kaname smiled as she swiftly folded up a tarp. “You guys are honestly a blast. I figured Mithril people would all be more like Sousuke...”

“Nah, he’s... more the exception, let’s say,” the other woman laughed. Melissa Mao was Sousuke’s comrade; Kaname had met her several times before, but this felt like their first time getting to talk to each other for real. Kaname had heard she was Asian-American, but appearance-wise, Mao could easily have been Japanese. She even spoke the language fluently, if with a bit

more of an accent than Kurz. She had short black hair and strikingly large, slightly almond-shaped eyes.

What a cool lady, Kaname thought. She had a kind of mature, sexy air about her, too.

"How'd things go with Tessa?" Mao asked abruptly, while she helped Kaname go about the work.

"Oh, well... she's sweet, you know?"

"Yeah?" Mao said. "I know things are complicated with Sousuke and all, but I hope you guys can get along."

"Ah..." Kaname felt her heart skip a beat.

But Mao continued, with the tone of the class gossip. "She told you, right? That she likes Sousuke *that way*."

"Y-Yeah, she did, but... but it's not like I—"

"—feel the same way?" Mao grinned.

Kaname stammered back, "R-Right..."

"Well, if you say so," Mao shrugged. "Oh... by the way, no one else knows except me, so no worries. She and I are just good friends in private." She dumped a set of cutlery into a plastic bag as she spoke.

Kaname stood very still and watched her at work and only eventually decided to ask, "But is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"Um... does Tessa really... you know?" she asked awkwardly. "From what I saw at the party, it didn't seem that way..."

It was then that a complicated smile appeared on Mao's face. It was a rather sad expression, almost like one of pity. "Ah, well... How to put it... while we're out of port, she can't really do the whole 'maiden in love' thing."

"How come?"

"Well... because the de Danaan is a warship," Mao explained. "It's a lethal weapon, under her command. If it comes to it, she might have to order one of

us to die in order to protect the rest of the crew."

Kaname said nothing.

"So she tries to keep her subordinates at a respectful distance. At least, when the rest of the crew are around."

"I see..." It made sense, now that Kaname thought about it. It was the same way anywhere, be it a submarine, a company, or a school club. Leaders had to be impartial. To start showing obvious favorites would demoralize the rest of the team, and compromise their loyalty. "That sounds tough..." she sighed.

"It is," Mao agreed. "It's tough, and it's lonely."

For the first time, it was sinking in for Kaname just how impressive Tessa was. Even after seeing the massive submarine and receiving the giant welcome, it still hadn't felt real. But why? Why did a girl her own age have to bear such an immense responsibility? Why did she have to fight alongside adults like Mao and Kalinin? Wasn't that simple cruelty?

But before she could ask Mao about that, Tessa herself entered the hangar. She looked in their direction and walked briskly up to them. "Kaname-san," she said.

"Wh-What?"

"I need to talk to you," Tessa told her. "Please, come with me." Kaname followed Tessa to the captain's quarters.

The Tuatha de Danaan was a special kind of submarine loaded with ASes, helicopters, and other machines. The fore side housed the hangar, the ammunition stores, the torpedo room, and other "combat" functions, while the facilities necessary for the running of the vessel itself—the control room, the crew quarters, the galley, the mess, and the reactor—ran from the midship to the aft.

"Structurally, it's similar to the Soviet Typhoon-class nuclear ballistic missile submarine," Tessa explained as they walked. "In fact, it came from the Russians initially—built in a shipyard in Severodvinsk. But there was an insurrection, and it was sent adrift in the Arctic Ocean, still incomplete. So we slipped in and took it for ourselves."

“You mean you swiped their half-built scrap?” Kaname raised an eyebrow.

“I suppose you could say that,” Tessa said after a pause. She looked a bit upset, but continued. “A comrade and I used it as the foundation for a completely revamped design. We spent several years on it, integrating all kinds of supertechnology unknown to any country or corporation... and this was the final product.”

“Hmm...” Kaname, lacking any frame of reference for how amazing that was, responded neutrally.

“Its functions are almost entirely automated,” Tessa said modestly. “If I wanted to, I could control it all by myself.”

“By yourself?” Even Kaname knew to be surprised by this.

“Yes. But the fully autonomous mode has a number of imperfections, including sacrificing its greatest strength, the superconductive drive. At the end of the day, a vessel this complicated can’t utilize its full potential without a well-trained crew looking after it.”

Soon, they arrived at the captain’s quarters. Tessa unlocked the door and went inside. Even though this was apparently Tessa’s room, the bag Kaname had left in the infirmary seemed to have been brought here at some point.

“What’s going on?” Kaname asked, feeling bewildered.

“Oh, you’ll be sleeping here, Kaname,” Tessa told her. “Please, make yourself at home.”

The captain’s quarters weren’t especially large; they looked rather like the facilities at a modest business hotel. Just pulling the bed out of the wall would probably make it feel stuffy, and she didn’t see any particular luxuries outside of a private bathroom in the back. The only thing that caught her eye was the sturdy-looking safe in the wall.

On the desk sat a pot of devil’s ivy, a colorful candle, and a wicker basket. Next to the basket was a plastic picture frame, which was set face down. Curiously, Kaname found herself reaching for it, but...

“Ah, please...” Tessa dashed out and covered the frame with both hands.

Kaname looked at her in confusion. “P-Please, don’t look at it. It’s... classified. Just some notes I jotted down... the week’s command codes and ID codes and such,” she explained, blushing and fidgeting. But even Kaname knew that nobody put notes in a picture frame. It was probably a picture of someone. Most likely... of him.

She remembered what Mao had just told her and felt a complicated swirl of feelings; a little amused, a little hurt, a little nervous, and yet relieved. The emotions all mixed together to inspire the slightest twinge in the back of her chest. But Kaname feigned total indifference and said, “If it’s that important, shouldn’t you lock it up somewhere?”

“You... You’re right. I’ll do that.” Tessa shut the picture frame up in the safe and cleared her throat. “Well... please, feel free to sit anywhere. Can I offer you tea?”

“Sure. Thanks,” Kaname answered, then sat down on the room’s only sofa. Tessa turned away to pull a tea set from the cabinet.

Kaname was starting to feel a little sleepy. The clock on the wall read 5:29 PM, but that was Greenwich Standard Time—in Japan, as in their current location, it would be the middle of the night—almost 1:30 in the morning. Perhaps noticing her state of mind, Tessa said, “I’m sure you must be tired, but try to stay up a little bit longer. Things will be very busy tomorrow, so I want to talk things over now, while we have the chance.”

Kaname yawned a little and said, “Sure. So, what did you want to talk about?”

“Us,” Tessa said simply.

“You mean Mithril?”

“No. You and me... and a few others,” Tessa hedged. “I don’t know how many, exactly...”

Kaname tilted her head, not grasping her meaning. “What are you talking about?”

“The Whispered...” She breathed the word as gently as could be, yet Kaname’s body locked up instinctively. “—You’ve heard the word before, haven’t you?”

After a long hesitation, Kaname admitted it. “Yes,” she said. In the tense silence that hung over the room, she could feel her heart beating a little faster. The Whispered. Of course that’s what it was about; the word that had been lurking in the back of her mind all this time. The word she’d worked hard to avoid thinking about, because of how frightened it made her... Her dark, hidden secret—a secret that had almost gotten her killed several times before. She’d had a sense, for a while, that the next time she saw Tessa, she’d be forced to confront it head-on. It was a baseless feeling, but one that was always there.

That’s why she hadn’t asked Sousuke to bring her to Tessa earlier. Kaname did want to see her—but at the same time, her mind had rebelled from the thought. She was afraid that the closer she came to the secret, the further she would end up pulled away from her family, from her school, from everyone who lived in that world. And though that thought had never left her head, it seemed her days of passive avoidance were over.

“You may have already realized it, but...” Tessa said. “I’m one of them as well. I’m a Whispered, like you. We know things nobody should know, and we can sometimes draw that information to the surface. There are only a handful of us scattered across the entire world. Perhaps a few dozen more with the latent potential—but no more.”

Kaname felt like time had slowed. There was the pleasant clink of porcelain against metal, and she nearly forgot that they were 200 meters underwater.

“Whispered are often referred to as ‘storehouses of black technology,’” Tessa went on. “Under the right conditions, we can access theories and technologies that far outstrip anything modern science can produce.”

“Me too?” Kaname asked faintly.

“Yes,” Tessa confirmed. “Most children born as Whispered seem to grow up unaware of their power. But as they age, their minds mature; knowledge and vocabulary increases, and they slowly begin to hear them... the whispers.”

Kaname said nothing.

“Once this begins, the intelligence of the Whispered rises dramatically. They find themselves easily solving problems they once found inscrutable, producing original creative ideas... They rapidly become geniuses.”

“A-Am I going to...”

“You haven’t already seen the signs?” Tessa asked.

“Um... I’m not sure. Well...” Kaname thought back to her scores from the first term final. Pretty well in English and social studies; pretty lousy in grammar—that much was typical. It was her grades in math and science that were unusual.

When she’d started the science test, Kaname had thought, *What’s with these easy questions? Everyone’s gonna get a perfect score,* but she’d been dead wrong. On a test where the average score in her year was 52, Kaname had scored a 95—even though physics and calculus were usually her worst subjects. Kyoko and her other friends had been surprised; even Sousuke had been stunned. What if that wasn’t just a fluke?

“The idea kind of creeps me out...” she admitted. It felt like she was turning into a different person. Even if being a Whispered let her conquer difficult subjects with ease, it didn’t feel like something to celebrate.

“I suppose it would... but the truth is unavoidable,” Tessa monotoned dully.

Is this how doctors sound when they tell someone they have cancer? Kaname wondered.

“On top of this fundamental intelligence increase, Whispered sometimes find themselves knowing more advanced things—things they couldn’t possibly know. Things told to them by a whisper.”

A“whisper”—was that what that voice was? “Just out of the blue, you mean?” Kaname asked.

“Yes,” Tessa said. “As far as I know, you’ve used this power twice: the first time was in the mountains of North Korea; the second was during the battle with Behemoth. It let you know things you couldn’t possibly know. Of course, the second one... you did with my help.”

“Your help?”

“You don’t remember?” Tessa questioned.

“Oh... I guess I do. I gotta say, I still don’t get exactly what happened then...” Kaname thought back. She remembered the voices that came to her through

the hazy veil of consciousness. The first one was unsettling, but the second... she'd felt sure it was Tessa's voice.

"What happened then is known as 'resonance,'" Tessa informed her.

"Resonance?"

"Yes. Under certain, specific circumstances, Whispered 'resonate' with each other. In the deepest parts of our minds, in a place beyond sight... we're able to use the 'sphere' to share our thoughts. It happens when the both of us, together, believe it necessary."

"What... like telepathy or something?" Kaname's question wasn't meant as a joke. She had been through too many strange experiences to simply dismiss the idea as unbelievable.

"Telepathy... Perhaps," Tessa mused, approaching with a tray; she must have finished the tea. "It's difficult to say." She placed a teacup on the small table in front of Kaname then poured black tea from the plunger in the piston-style pot. An elegant fragrance tickled Kaname's nose. "The resonance... it's not quite like having a conversation via telephone or transceiver," she went on. "It's closer to a LAN on a computer."

"Or like the Internet?" Kaname guessed.

"On a much smaller scale, and involving fewer people, yes," Tessa agreed. "But resonance is a very dangerous act—You want to avoid it as much as possible."

"How come?" Kaname frowned. "It sounds like a really convenient power—"

"Convenience always comes at a cost, Kaname-san," Tessa said, with a hint of admonishment. "I've told you before, but the resonance between Whispered is a sharing of thoughts. It's not a conversation or a transmission, it's a melding. Even if it's kept brief... one wrong move, and you may end up forgetting who you are. Think of it like this." She picked up the milk dispenser and poured it into her tea, where the cup became a swirl of red and white. Stirring caused the tea and milk to mix, until it was all the same color, an opaque agate. "Once blended together like this, the tea and the milk can never be separated again."

Kaname said nothing.

Tessa took a casual sip of her milk tea. “This is fine for tea, it just makes the taste more pleasant. But it must not be done with human minds. It will shatter your very identity and bring your life as you know it to an end.”

“Um... I think I understand,” Kaname said uneasily, “but I’m not sure.”

“I’m sorry to speak in such abstract terms, but I don’t entirely understand it all myself,” Tessa apologized. “I can’t do any research on it, now that I’m essentially the only Whispered in Mithril.”

Kaname blinked in surprise when she heard that. “There are others like you?”

At her question, a look of pain entered Tessa’s face. She appeared to be trying to suppress some rising, intense emotion that she hadn’t fully processed yet. “Yes... One that we took in a few months ago is currently in rehabilitation... but setting her aside, there was one other Whispered capable of using his knowledge like me.”

Kaname noticed the word “was,” but didn’t touch on it. “What was he like?”

“His name was Bani Morauta,” Tessa told her. “He was quiet, but kind. And absolutely extraordinary. He’s the one who created that work of art, the Arbalest.”

“Arbalest?” Kaname asked.

“The white AS,” Tessa explained. “Sagara-san’s.”

“Ahh...” It was Kaname’s first time hearing that the machine had a name.

“The Arbalest was based on the M9 prototype, with a lambda driver added in. It’s full of black technology, with no thought given to replicability. We cannot build another, because Bani is no longer with us.”

“You can’t make one, Tessa?” Kaname questioned.

“No. Whispered are not omniscient; I only have limited knowledge of the principle and technology of the lambda driver,” Tessa admitted. “It would be possible to consciously summon a whisper and learn more... but I would prefer not to attempt it.”

“Why not?”

“It’s far more dangerous even than resonance. Each dive into the mysteries of the mind, each attempt to access that forbidden knowledge, causes the whispers to take us over more and more. Once you yield control to them, you can never get it back again,” Tessa warned her urgently. “I know this, because I saw it happen... to Bani.”

“They took him over?” Kaname gasped.

“Yes,” Tessa said shortly. “He went mad and killed himself.” Silence fell over the captain’s quarters.

The Tuatha de Danaan was a truly quiet vessel. There was no hum of machinery, no sound of the waves, no creaking of water pressure on the hull. It was a maddening kind of quiet.

“Now, Kaname-san...” Tessa said at length, setting down her unfinished tea. “The reason I am telling you about the Whispered... is because you are no exception. The danger may not be imminent, but it exists all the same. And not only from the whispers—There are those out there who are desperate to acquire people like you and me.”

“You mean like that Gauron guy?”

“Yes. He appears to be dead now, but he was part of an organization—likely the same one that supplied Takuma and the others with the Behemoth,” said Tessa. “What’s more, they’re capable of building lambda driver-mounted ASes... Which means that they must have one or more Whispered.”

Kaname had nothing to say.

“They want you,” Tessa concluded. “And if they know about me, I’m sure they want me, too. They’ll resort to anything to get us.”

“But... but that’s...” Kaname tugged at the hem of her dress with her fingertips, feeling restless. It wasn’t her first time hearing that people were after her, but she’d never felt the threat so keenly before. There was too much peace in the world she lived in, the bustling town and school, for the idea to feel real.

“I understand that you’re afraid,” Tessa said calmly. “But you aren’t completely alone. We do not wish to see you to fall into enemy hands. The

higher echelons of Mithril agree, and that is why they sent a bodyguard from the intelligence division to watch over you."

"Sousuke, right?" Kaname said.

Tessa shook her head. "No, Sagara-san and I belong to operations, not intelligence."

Kaname tilted her head.

"You may not have realized it, but you have a second bodyguard watching over you."

"A s-second?" she said shakily. "Who is it?" It was a bolt out of the blue. This was the first Kaname had heard of it.

"I do not know. And it's probably better that I don't," Tessa admitted. "Their agents are at their strongest when invisible to both friend and foe. If you knew the agent's identity, then he—or perhaps she—would lose that powerful asset."

"I guess you're right..." For some reason, Kaname found herself thinking of their student council president. Smart, calm, and cool-headed... She wouldn't be surprised if it was him. No, that was way too crazy. But who else could it be?

"After the Sunan Incident, it was Kalinin-san who proposed that Sagara-san remain with you. I'm sure you're acutely aware of this by now, but in the peaceful society you inhabit, Sagara-san is... conspicuous," Tessa said. "If the enemy were to get serious about abducting you, they would likely seek to eliminate him first."

Kaname vaguely got her meaning. "Hey, wait, you mean... Sousuke is a decoy?"

"Effectively," Tessa said with surprising calm.

Kaname felt a sudden surge of temper. "What? That's awful! Sousuke's... he's doing the best he can! Sure he's kind of a pain in the butt, but he's always working really hard to protect me! Using him as bait for bad guys is..."

"I know that!" Tessa raised her voice and glared at Kaname, not even bothering to hide her irritation. It was an extremely sudden change.

As Kaname was stunned into silence, Tessa recovered her composure and

lowered her eyes. “I am sorry. But... I want you to consider for whom it is he must do this.”

“Huh?” Kaname fell silent again as the other girl’s words caught her off guard.

“Sagara-san is aware of the other bodyguard,” Tessa continued at length. “He likely knows that he’s a decoy, and... he knows of the danger his position puts him in. He accepted this mission with full knowledge of all of it. And he did it entirely...” *For your sake.* Those were the words she surely would have said, if she could only bring herself to say them.

The existence of the bodyguard surprised Kaname less than the fact that Sousuke knew about it. He had never breathed a word of it to her. He’d always insisted that he would protect her, but in fact... he was the one most in danger. Something that important, and he’d never even told her...

Sousuke... She felt a slight heat in her chest, accompanied by a surge of mortification. Embarrassment for her past foolishness, acute sympathy for the pain Tessa was in, and self-loathing... all in all, Kaname wanted to crawl into a hole and disappear. “T-Tessa... um...”

Tessa remained silent.

“I’m sorry. I... I didn’t know,” Kaname stammered. “And... I really...” She didn’t know how to express how she felt.

While she hesitated, Tessa suddenly smiled. “It’s all right. It isn’t your fault. It’s the fault of the ones targeting you.”

“You’re not mad?” Kaname said timidly.

“No, it’s all right. I just... envy you and Sagara-san so much that it sometimes upsets me.” Tessa let out a big sigh. Then she shook her head, as if to drive out the bad feelings. “But! I’m not ready to throw in the towel just yet.”

“Huh?” Kaname blinked.

“I’m refraining while we’re on maneuvers, of course,” Tessa teased. “But you should know that in peacetime, on the base, he and I meet up frequently.”

“R-Really?”

“Yes. Not long ago, the two of us slipped out of the base, and went to a

deserted beach...”

“A b-beach?”

Tessa giggled. “The rest is a secret.”

“H-Hey!” Kaname found herself leaning forward, but Tessa just shrugged.

“Now we’re even, Kaname-san. I love Sagara-san. And until you admit that you do as well, the score will remain tied.”

“Come on! I’m telling you, I don’t—” Kaname got that far, then suddenly wondered why she was getting so upset. She stared into Tessa’s teasing eyes for just a second, then began to laugh, as if all the tension was leaving her body. “Well, whatever.”

“Indeed.” Tessa giggled. They shared their laughter for quite a while, completely at ease. Just a few minutes ago, things had felt as grave as if the end of the world was coming... and now it was all forgotten.

To think that talking about that war-obsessed fool Sousuke could bring this kind of relief... Kaname whispered a thank-you to him in her heart. (Though she’d be keeping that “deserted beach” talk tucked away in her mental arsenal.) “That’s about all I needed to talk with you about. But there’s one last thing,” Tessa said after their laughter died down. “The things that I’ve told you, particularly regarding the Whispered, are only known to a select few at Mithril. Not even Sagara-san, Weber-san, and Melissa know about it.”

“You mean... it’s top secret, right?” Kaname checked.

“Correct. In fact, it has an even higher classification rating—it is a ‘black fact.’” Tessa’s voice wasn’t especially grim; there was nothing hushed or threatening in her tone, but that just gave it all the more weight of reality. “So... I want you to make me a promise. Promise that you will not tell anyone else about this. Not Sagara-san, not your friends at school, not your family... especially not your father, who likely does not look kindly on organizations such as Mithril.”

“Yeah... I’ll bet,” Kaname agreed glumly. *He probably does know about them,* she realized. Her father worked for the United Nations as High Commissioner for the Environment: it was a newly created department that handled mediation and regulations on environmental issues. They didn’t have the

budget or clout of older departments like the High Commission for Refugees, but his power was still considerable.

“Because of your father’s influence, the higher-ups in Mithril forbade me from telling you about the situation,” Tessa continued. “That order is still in place.”

“Huh? But then...”

“Yes. What I’ve just done is a grave violation of duty,” Tessa admitted. “I’ve been considering the matter for a long time now... and in the end, I decided to tell you. I could not leave you exposed to such severe danger because of a political decision made by my superiors.” The risk that she was taking on exceeded anything Kaname could even imagine. She didn’t know if Mithril did executions by firing squad, but what she’d done had to be enough to get her stripped of her post, at least. She was taking that risk on, all for Kaname’s sake.

“But why would you?” she asked with upturned eyes, and Tessa showed a slight hesitance. An uncertainty. Or was that... bashfulness?

“Please... do not read so deeply into it. My reasons aren’t anything of any great significance. But... anyway, will you promise not to talk to anyone else about it?” Tessa asked, looking straight at Kaname.

Kaname met her gaze head-on and said, “Yes,” without any hesitation. “I won’t tell anyone. I promise.”

“As a friend,” Tessa suggested.

“Yes,” Kaname agreed. “As a friend.” The two found themselves shaking hands.

The next morning, Kaname went with Sousuke and Kurz on a tour of the boat. They visited the mess, the duty room, the torpedo room, and the control room and had fun conversations with the crew at each station. The sonar shack was especially interesting; the technician let Kaname listen to his treasured tape of the sounds around the boat. The sad cries of the whales, the pig-like shouts of the dolphins, the roar of underwater volcanoes erupting—the ocean was a livelier place than she’d ever imagined.

They let her view the weapons in the hangar, too. She was shown the cockpit of a combat helicopter, and they even let her touch the controls. She was

allowed into an AS cockpit, but they only let her move the head—She wanted to try the arms and legs, but Sousuke seemed to bristle at the suggestion, saying things like, “No, it’s dangerous. Extremely... dangerous.”

She didn’t breathe a word about what Tessa had told her; she just interacted with the others, as she’d always done.

It turned out that touring a submarine was a lot more fun than walking around some resort. It was full of surprises, big and small; everything she saw, everyone she met was a completely new experience. But... around noon, she felt the atmosphere on board undergo an almost imperceptible shift. The expressions of the crew became a little more guarded, and the hangar, which had been noisy earlier with maintenance work, fell quiet. The people she saw coming and going in the corridors, and the people she saw killing time in the berthing, all drastically reduced. A subtle tension hung in the air.

When Kaname asked Sousuke about it, he told her, “The boat is nearing the area of operations.”

“Area of operations?” she questioned.

“Yes,” he said. “The fighting will start soon.”

3: Water Pressure, Gravitational Pressure, Political Pressure

27 August, 1857 Hours (Local Time) Sea near Republic of Perio The Tuatha de Danaan had arrived a few dozen kilometers northeast of the Republic of Perio. The waves were peaceful, and the tropical coral reefs sparkled in the setting sun.

Below the water, a massive vessel moved, hugging the line between the burning red and the dusky darkness. It was like an image from a painting—one that symbolized looming misfortune. It had a black silhouette, like a knife, or like a shark. Its elegant curves belied the potential for slaughter and destruction. If any fish could take in the entirety of its form, it would have fled without a second's thought.

Inside the de Danaan, preparations for battle were proceeding swiftly.

27 August, 1436 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time) 1st Briefing Room, Tuatha de Danaan "Briefing commence!" Captain Gail McAllen declared to the chatting soldiers as he entered the room. There were 32 combatants in the briefing room in all. They were all wearing casual battledress; just before the operation itself, they would all change into their "going out clothes"—fatigues, flight suits, and AS operator uniforms.

Sousuke looked up from the book he was reading, and the other soldiers stopped their chatter. Kurz, sitting behind Sousuke, showed no such respect. He continued to talk in hushed tones to his nearby comrade, Corporal Yang Jun-kyu.

"Could you stop talking, please?" Captain McAllen asked pointedly.

"Yeah, sure."

From the corner of the large LCD screen, Captain McAllen glared at his

subordinate. An Australian, he was Major Kalinin's aide, and he also held the SRT's top call sign, Uruz-1. His expression, relaxed during the bingo tournament, was now drawn taut. "Everyone here?" he called out again. "The major will now go over the plan! Listen up!"

Major Kalinin walked past him to stand in front of the group. He looked down at the clipboard he was holding then began speaking, without any preface, "As you already know, a United States military facility has been occupied by an armed group." His tone was completely neutral, as if he was reporting next week's cleaning duties.

"A US Navy strike team has already tried and failed to take it back," he went on. "As this is a special case, we'll be using our more advanced technology to hold a rematch on their behalf. Our primary mission is suppression of enemy ASes and hostage rescue, as well as preventing the destruction of that crucial facility. Here's the party venue," he said, turning on the large screen. He put a disk into the slot in the side which brought up a 3D map of the island: It was a small, elliptical plot of land, with cliffs on the west side that sloped gradually to a sandy beach on the east. The US base took up the majority of its area.

"The chemical munitions disposal facility on Berildaob Island in the Republic of Perio... Its purpose is to neutralize aging chemical warheads and incinerate them. This means they hold stockpiles of sarin, tabun, soman, and other nerve gases—several hundred tons of them."

Nearly everyone in the room looked distressed. They knew that even words like "toxic" didn't begin to cover the threat those chemical weapons posed.

"The armed group in question call themselves the Green Salvation Army. Their stated objective is to drive the tourism industry out of Perio to save the coral reefs—on threat of unleashing the poison gas."

"That's crazy..."

"If they can't protect it, put it out of its misery, huh?"

"There's a bad joke, if I ever heard one..."

The various team members threw in their comments. Some even let out a low chuckle, reflecting a black sense of humor.

“What’s a dangerous facility like that doing in a tourist site like Perio, anyway?”

“The hazardous nature of such facilities make them a challenge to build on American soil,” Kalinin responded. “Public opinion, state elections, lobbyists, et cetera... it’s all politics. Not that I expect that to reassure you.”

“Typical...” The soldier who asked shrugged.

“At the same time, Perio was an American territory until recently,” he went on. “Even though it’s officially independent now, it’s still under US protection and economically and militarily at their mercy. They were essentially forced to accept the facility.”

Sousuke, quietly listening to his words, found it to be a familiar story. Poor countries and regions always drew the short straw on hosting military bases, landfills, nuclear plants—facilities that were often magnets for armed conflict by themselves.

Kalinin continued his speech. “Regardless, the site is dangerous, and we need to get the Green Salvation Army out of there. Let’s zoom in on the base itself.” He manipulated the screen to magnify the 3D image. There were several low buildings, residential facilities, and offices; a short runway and a heliport, but no harbor. In the middle of the CG model was one large facility built halfway into the hillside; this was the warehouse and disposal site for the chemical warheads. “The live chemical warheads are stored in an underground warehouse here. From the information we’ve received, the terrorists have a large number of bombs hooked up to that warehouse.”

“Then if they go off—” a soldier interjected.

“The force of the blast will carry catastrophic amounts of nerve gas into the upper atmosphere, from which it will travel downwind to the islands. It takes only one milligram of this gas to kill an adult human being; it could end all life in the Perio Archipelago in a day,” Kalinin said plainly.

A gloomy silence fell. Every soldier there seemed to have the same expression—their faces read: “I want to go back to Merida Island.”

“Therefore, we first need to disable the bombs,” Kalinin said, pressing

onward. “Then we need to dispatch the enemy forces, while securing the American soldiers they’ve taken hostage.”

“He makes it sound so easy...”

“Talk about your crazy schemes...”

“Why is it always like this?” The soldiers grumbled to themselves.

Captain McAllen yelled over them. “Shut up! This is what you’re being paid for!” They fell back into a reluctant silence.

Kalinin continued his explanation as though nothing had happened. “The enemy forces include nine ASes and five autonomous triple-As.” The LCD screen switched to an image of one of the enemy arm slaves. Its armor was rounded; its silhouette resembled a person wearing a down vest. It was similar to an American-made M6, but it had a small periscope in place of a head. “These are the enemy ASes: Mistral IIs, made by France’s Giteau Co. They’re common throughout the Islamosphere and parts of South America, and despite their simple electronics, they’re tough little machines.”

Just then, a helicopter pilot raised a hand.

“Yes?”

“I have a question. These Mistral IIs... they’re still in use by proper militaries, aren’t they? How did these terrorists get their hands on so many?”

Kalinin paused. “In mid-July, a transport ship set to deliver them to the Indonesian Army went missing in the ocean near Sri Lanka. It was found sunk three days later, with the cargo and most of the crew missing.”

“Ah-ha...” said the pilot. Either the crew had been bought off, or they’d been in league with the terrorists from the start.

“Back to the subject at hand. We can fight these French ASes with the standard equipment and tactics, same for the anti-air cannons. But there’s one enemy AS that will demand the strictest caution.” Kalinin swapped out the image on the screen.

It was now a picture of the “one enemy AS,” and Sousuke gulped slightly when he saw it. Kurz, behind him, let out a small groan. As if noticing their

reactions, Mao glanced back from a seat some distance away. The other members of the squad frowned at the unfamiliar machine.

That was it—the same machine he'd fought four months ago. It was red instead of silver, and the shape of the head was slightly different. But there was no doubt about it—it was back. Of course, its operator at the time—Gauron—was dead now, but Sousuke had remained haunted by visions of the dangerous man's specter roaming about the base.

"This one machine took out an entire US special forces squadron," Kalinin was saying. "It's unclear what country it belongs to, but it's third-generation, like the M9. It's powered by a palladium reactor, so it's amazingly quiet—and while rudimentary, we believe it also has an ECS capable of invisibility mode. That's probably why it's painted red."

An ECS was a stealth device capable of hiding a machine from various parts of the electromagnetic spectrum, such as radar and infrared. Mithril's cutting-edge ECSes could even cloak the visible light spectrum, but technologically speaking, it was harder to mask the shorter-wavelength side of it—violet, for example. Longer-wavelength colors like red were comparatively easier to hide.

"In other words," said one of the soldiers, "it's like our machines—good for sneaking around and surprise attacks?"

"That's right. Use your ECCSes." The ECCS was the ECS counter-sensor.

"This machine is also mounted with a special device that renders normal attacks ineffective. If you run into this AS," Kalinin looked around at those assembled, "try to avoid a direct engagement. In other words, run."

The group was baffled by this.

"Run? No way!"

"It's a counterinsurgency mission."

"Why bother even having the raid at all?"

A chorus halfway between genuine and sarcastic complaints rose up, and the room was soon plunged into chaos. Captain McAllen shouted "Be quiet!" again, but it was less effective this time.

Just then, Kurz looked up at the ceiling and raised his voice irritably. “Do you guys wanna die or something?” His voice wasn’t as loud as McAllen’s, but for some reason, his words seemed to carry. All present turned questioning gazes to Kurz. “The major’s right. That thing’s dangerous. You’ve never seen anything like it. Not even 57mm shells will work on it. It basically cheats.”

“Oh? Does it use the Force, like Darth Vader?” one incorrigible member of the squad asked.

Kurz glared at him. “Yeah, that’s right. It uses the Force.”

“Sounds rough. We’d better see Yoda about some training.” The team member laughed. Kurz didn’t.

“You all seem to be laboring under a misunderstanding,” Kalinin said after waiting patiently for things to quiet down. “When I tell you to run, that is neither advice, nor a request. It’s an order. Anyone who ignores it will be severely punished. That is, assuming you survive.”

The room fell silent again.

“We’re assigning this AS the name ‘Venom,’” he continued. “It’s extremely dangerous, and we must dispose of it to finish our mission. Thus, the task of engaging and destroying the Venom will be left to Sergeant Sagara.” The other soldiers looked over at Sousuke for the first time.

Sousuke wasn’t particularly surprised; he was expecting to be pitted against it. “With the Arbalest, you mean?” he asked, as if in confirmation.

“Yes,” Kalinin confirmed. “If you encounter the Venom, you’re to assist the others in withdrawing. Keep it locked down with coordinated attacks and melee, and keep it completely occupied. That’s our only path to victory.”

“And if I fail?”

Meeting Sousuke’s gaze head on, Kalinin responded evenly, “Then the mission fails. The Venom will destroy all of your allies.”

Sousuke fell silent, as if the weight of everyone else in this room had been placed on his shoulders. He’d faced the possibility of death in countless missions before now, but it had always meant his death alone, as a single

combatant. If he'd made a mistake, he'd have been the only one to die. Of course, that was no laughing matter—but the point was, he bore no more responsibility than any other member of the team. He was a mere mercenary, a supporting character; just one more notch on the death tally.

At least, he had been. That had all seemed to have changed that day—the day he met the Arbalest and Chidori Kaname. The existence of that AS, and of that girl, meant that failure was no longer an option for him.

I can't afford to lose, he realized. *I can't afford to make any mistakes. I'm not even allowed to die...* The pressure was horrifying. Yet Sousuke simply gazed at the floor with his usual sullen expression, and responded, quietly, "Understood."

"Good. Do your duty as an NCO." Their operations commander turned back to the group. "Deployment will be aquatic, retrieval by helicopter. We'll be sending six ASes divided into three teams: strike team, sniper team, and bomb disposal team. And I have good news for the bomb disposal team, regarding your infiltration route. This concludes the mission outline; the captain will explain the details. McAllen?"

"Sir." Kalinin stepped back and McAllen stepped forward.

"First, the makeup of the AS teams! Strike team will be me and Sagara. Sniper team will be Weber and Nguyen. Bomb squad will be Mao and Dunnigan. The rest of the SRT will stand by in the helicopter as commanders for infantry squads! In addition, radio frequencies will be—"

27 August, 1621 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time) Main Hangar, Tuatha de Danaan After the briefing, Sousuke headed for the main hangar for a discussion with the head engineer.

The ARX-7 Arbalest had been painted dark gray overnight. It was a pure stopgap measure; its white armor stood out too much for a stealth mission, so they were covering it up with the same dark gray paint used for the M9s.

Like the M9s, the Arbalest had a human-like silhouette. It had flexible joints and long, slender limbs. At the same time, it had power—it brought to mind the image of an agile, yet strong, warrior. The shape of the head was also strange;

below the keen eyes of its dual sensors sat a hardpoint for holding a weapon. It gave the Arbalest a distinctive face, like a ninja with a scroll in its mouth from some old period piece. There were two feather-like attachments on each of its shoulders—heat sinks that helped with cooling. You could also affix subcapacitors of a similar shape, or even weapons to them.

These distinctive parts and sharp-looking form gave the machine an air of the divine; it was as if just touching it would be blasphemy. That was the first impression that most people got... and it wasn't actually wrong. The equipment of that inscrutable device known as the "lambda driver" really did make the Arbalest a kind of mystical presence.

According to the engineer who looked after it, the lambda driver was comprised of three major components: The first was a device called the TAROS, which connected to the cockpit. This was short for "transfer and response omni-sphere," but no one knew what it meant, including the engineer herself. What she did understand, if vaguely, was that it picked up pulses from the pilot's nervous system and converted them into special kinds of electric signals, which in turn activated certain functions in the machine.

The second was a small module, about the size of a mini-fridge, that formed the lambda driver's core. Inside it was apparently a cylinder of laser-like rainbow light, but she had no idea what function it served. Activating it seemed to consume a massive amount of power in an instant, which was why the machine carried spare capacitors. This module was directly connected to the machine's AI, Al, but no matter how many times she analyzed the software, she couldn't figure out the nature of their connection.

The last was the skeleton that served as the machine's framework. It was fundamentally identical to the M9's, made of a titanium alloy and ceramic composite, but its core had been infused with a strange material. Delicate crystals wove together in complex patterns like nerves, changing their arrangements when hit with an electrical current. But once again, what function that served was a mystery to her.

In other words, it was a cascade of things she didn't understand.

Whenever the AI Al was booted up, the display insisted, "Sergeant Sagara's

presence required to activate lambda driver.” It didn’t reject other operators, exactly; the lambda driver simply wouldn’t activate for them. All attempts to delete the requirement had failed; formatting Al didn’t work, either. Any other methods they’d tried to strong-arm it simply caused Al to display an error message and lock up.

“And that’s basically it. I give up,” the young chief engineer, Lieutenant Nora Lemming, said as she threw up her hands lightly. “All I can say is that this machine ‘amplifies mental energy’ or something like that... not that I’m a fan of that woo-woo sort of thing.”

“What happened to the person who made it?” Sousuke’s tight frown became tighter as he looked up at the Arbalest.

“I was told that he died,” the lieutenant said carefully. “The only one who knows more about the lambda driver than me is the captain. But even she mainly seems to know about the TAROS...”

“I see...”

“So we can’t actually build another of this thing. Thankfully, we had some spares, so we managed to fix the arm you shot off... but if you lose your left arm again, we’ll have to start subbing in M9 parts.”

“I’ll be careful,” Sousuke promised.

“But don’t worry. You’ve successfully managed to activate it twice in a real fight. I think you have a gift.”

“A... gift?”

“Yes. A wonderful gift, given by God. So have faith in yourself, Sergeant Sagara.” the lieutenant said with a smile.

27 August, 1655 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time) Galley, Tuatha de Danaan Despite how interesting the place was, after a day, Kaname inevitably ran out of new things to see; the boat’s scenery became monotonous, and she had nothing to occupy herself with. Sousuke and the others had vanished off to some

meeting or another, and she had barely seen Tessa since that morning. She stopped by the control room, but the other girl was talking with the guy who'd led Kaname's welcome yesterday, and she didn't do more than glance at her and wave.

Kaname was bored and wanted to go home. Apparently the boat would finish its job and be back in base in about two days. Kaname was told that if she wanted, a helicopter could take her and Sousuke back to base earlier, and they could head back to Tokyo from there... but that, too, would have to wait until their "job"—the mission—was finished. Thus, she'd have to find some way to kill time here until tomorrow.

Left with no other option, she'd chosen to head to the galley and help the cook. She chopped furiously through a mountain of onions, followed by carrots then potatoes. The work seemed endless, which made it a perfect distraction.

"You're good at that, you know?" the young cook (one of the few Japanese people on the ship) said, seeming genuinely impressed with her knife skills.

"Why, thank you," Kaname agreed.

"You know how to use an oven, too," the cook observed. "Why not quit school and join our crew? I'll teach you the secrets of deep-sea cooking."

"Not my bag, thanks," she laughed.

Just then, an announcement came over the speakers. "This is your captain." It was Tessa's voice. "We will soon be entering the area of operations. There will be no hostile vessels on or in the water during this mission, and this vessel is not expected to engage in active combat. We will, as usual, remain in the shadows—which should not be difficult given the power of this vessel and the skill of all aboard. Be precise and cautious and do your jobs, as you always do. May God watch over us all." She could be heard clearing her throat, and then, "Now, proceed to secondary battle stations. That is all." The message ended. A bell telling them to take battle stations—likely electronic, though it sounded just like a real one—rang out. From the galley, Kaname could see a handful of crewmembers, who had been relaxing in the mess, quickly spring to life and run out to take their posts.

“Ahh, here we go,” the cook muttered.

With faint trepidation, Kaname asked, “Are they going to fight?”

“Yeah, but don’t worry,” the cook reassured her. “The boat itself won’t engage; just the members of the SRT.”

“SRT?” she questioned.

“The special response team. You know, like Sergeant Sagara.”

Sousuke is going to go fight, then. The thought sent a new wave of anxiety flooding over her. She’d seen him fight in the past, and they’d certainly been through a lot together... but she’d never been in quite this situation before. *Going* to fight—something about the future tense made it all feel more real. “Hey... I gotta go, okay?”

“Huh?”

Kaname ran out of the galley, leaving the startled cook staring after her. She fought her way past crewmen rushing to their battle stations, down the hall to the duty room where Sousuke and the others slept. It was already empty. Her next few guesses also turned up nothing, so she ran to the hangar and... “Ah...”

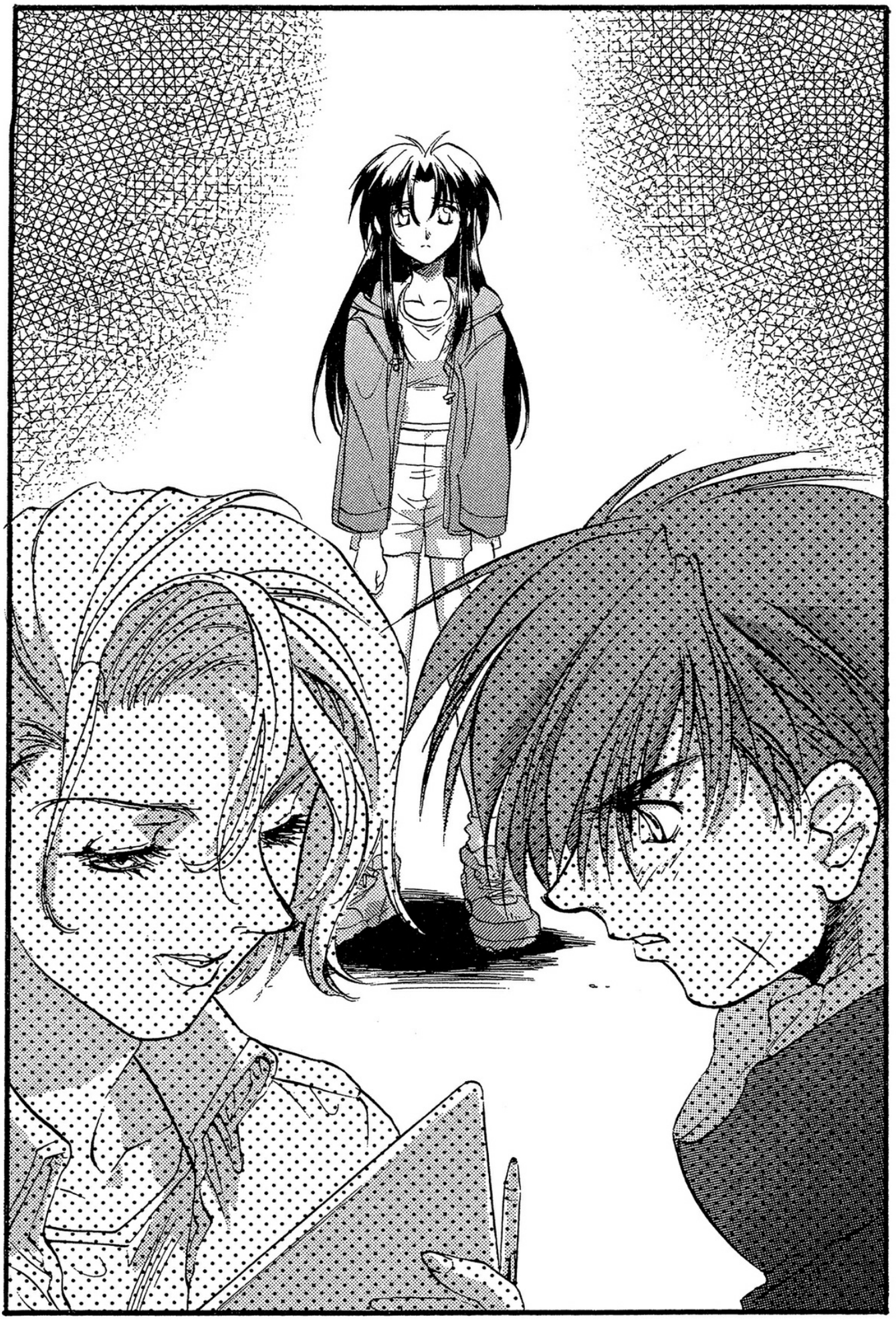
Sousuke was standing in front of his AS—it was already armed for bear—conversing with a jumpsuit-clad woman. He was dressed in his black AS operator’s outfit, holding a clipboard-like tablet. A little ways away, Kurz and Mao were hanging out with an East Asian combatant whose name she didn’t know.

“Kaname?” Kurz was the first to notice her. “Where’s the fire, huh? Oh... I get it, you ran all this way to bring me a good luck charm. It never fails! A locket with a girl’s pubic—glugh!” Kurz doubled over abruptly from an elbow to the solar plexus.

Mao, the guilty party, was rubbing her temples. “If only I knew why you were like this...” She redirected her attention. “So, how can we help you, Kaname?”

“Um, ah... I’m not really... I just...” Kaname dissembled. She wasn’t sure what she had come here for, either. She glanced in Sousuke’s direction and saw him still talking shop with the engineer; he hadn’t noticed Kaname’s presence at all.

He looked extremely focused and probably wasn’t about to come over for a chat.



“I get it. It’s not safe for you to be here, though. The ASes will be walking around just before we deploy.”

“R-Right...”

“We’re getting ready for battle right now,” Mao finished gently. “So, sorry to ask, but... you know?” Kaname caught her meaning; she was politely telling her to leave.

Swallowing a faint feeling of alienation, she nodded. “Right... sorry to be in the way.” Kaname didn’t have any choice but to turn around and go. She got as far as the hangar door, then looked back one more time.

Mao was pressing her hands together in apology, while Kurz waved to her casually. Sousuke still hadn’t noticed her. So far away, his back to her... He seemed like the most distant person in the world.

I mean... it’s not like it’s the last time I’m ever going to see him... Kaname thought, and then let out a sigh.

27 August, 1750 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time) Tuatha de Danaan, 15 Miles Northeast of Berildaob Island, Perio Archipelago Her subordinates’ voices chorused through the control room as the deployment drew near: “Current depth, 80. Speed, three knots. EMFC, all green.”

“Turtle-1, depth ten... five... hold.”

“Sonar, no vessels detected above.”

“Contact on ESM, US Navy cruisers. Analyzing now...”

“Current, four knots from northwest. There’s a faint breeze on the surface.”

“Uruz-1, I’ve entered the first airtight chamber.”

“Uruz-7, AS entry to second airtight chamber complete.”

“ESM analysis complete. Bearing 0-8-0, Arleigh Burke-class. Bearing 0-7-9, Ticonderoga-class. Estimate range at least 30 miles each.”

“Starboard, first ATC technician. Closure of interior hatches complete.

Pressure secured."

"Port, second ATC technician. Closure of interior hatches complete. Pressure secured. Ready to flood any time."

The reports poured in to Tessa, who paid each of them the necessary amount of attention while swiftly dishing out orders of her own. "Good," she said. "Flood ATCs one through six."

"Aye, ma'am. Flood ATCs one through six," Mardukas responded.

This time, the ASes would deploy from the water. They'd swim unnoticed to the destination island then launch a surprise attack. The submarine had three AS-sized airlocks on either side of the hangar from which the M9s and the ARX-7 could exit; they were currently housing Captain McAllen and his AS team. All she had to do now was open the hatches.

"All right..." Tessa ran her final checks then scanned the ocean surface. She took control of a turtle with a small joystick and manipulated its optical sensors. For a very brief time, she had the floating robot deploy a small periscope; as she swiveled it 360 degrees, the things it saw came through, crystal clear, on her captain's screen.

She could see the sea at night. This far from any light pollution, the sky was clear and beautiful. All around the horizon, stars glittered in bountiful color. It was a breathtaking sight.

A foolish notion flitted through her mind. What if she canceled the operation and surfaced the boat? Then, what if they all went topside and breathed in the fresh air, while she and he gazed up at those stars together, for real? It was a wonderful thought.

"Captain?" Mardukas asked.

Then, as if nothing had happened, Tessa switched her screen to night vision mode, and checked for local ships and aircraft. All clear; now for the dispatch. She glanced at the status board on the front screen. It gave the current state of the airlocks, with corresponding diagrams and labels.

2nd ATC—■/ARX-7 (Uruz-7) *Don't worry. He's good at what he does. And... Mao and Kurz and the others are with him, aren't they?* Teletha Testarossa set

aside her thoughts, took in a deep breath, and gave the order. “All AS hatches, open.”

“Aye, ma’am. All AS hatches, open!”

Sousuke felt a jolt and heard a muffled gurgle as the second hatch opened. Water began to pour in all around his machine; his night vision sensors showed green ocean filling in all around him.

The Arbalest was currently equipped with an underwater pack: a unit clasped around its torso which carried an oxygen tank, ballast, and high-powered pump-jets. In an emergency, it could also unfold into a hydrofoil to let the machine skate across the water’s surface at high speeds. The Arbalest and the M9s weren’t designed to be fully watertight, so their dive depth was limited to about 40 meters; for most operations, though, that was more than enough.

Okay... he thought before cranking up the output of his pump-jets to sail his machine out of the airlock. The hatch closed immediately behind him. The M9s deploying from the other hatches trailed streams of tiny bubbles as they overtook the Arbalest.

A laugh came over the radio. “Okay, bring on the resort-hopping!” It was Kurz’s voice, and Sousuke could see one of the M9s spinning around in the water.

“Don’t mess around, idiot!”

“Aw, but—”

“Don’t ‘but’ me! Darn it... Let’s go!” the call came from Captain McAllen’s M9 just before it started on the move. The Arbalest and four M9s followed after, holding watertight containers carrying their weapons in both hands. They formed a neat column—a kind of formation—and swam forward at a depth of 30 meters, picking up speed as they went. Behind them, the de Danaan’s bow began to tilt downward as it left to dive to even greater depths.

That’s right, Sousuke realized in that moment, *I never said anything to Chidori...*

They spent about twenty minutes swimming. The ocean was pitch black, but the sea floor below was just visible to their night vision sensors. That hadn’t

been the case just a few minutes ago—the increasing shallowness signified that they were getting closer to land. They could see tropical fish swimming in and out among some scraggly rocks nearby; their colors would probably be dazzling in the light of day.

"Sousuke?" Mao asked over the radio. She wasn't using the mission channel.

"Yes?"

"You seem a little worked up... Are you?"

The sudden question caught Sousuke off guard. It took him a moment to respond. "What do you mean?"

"You don't have to hide it," she said reassuringly. "Nobody else uses this channel."

"I'm not hiding anything," he protested. "I—"

"Oh, come on," she scoffed. "You didn't even *notice* Kaname before, did you?"

"Before? When?"

Mao made a noise of bemusement. "See? You're not even looking at the world around you. You're worried about what the major said, right? About that Venom thing."

"Well... of course I am," he said stiffly. "If I make one mistake, everyone on the team will die. It's natural that I should keep in mind the importance of—"

"Don't do that," Mao said, cutting him off. "You need to not sweat that stuff."

"What?" Sousuke was confused. "I would think you, of all people..." McAllen was heading up this particular operation, but Mao often assumed the leadership role for their smaller three-man team. She was a very responsible person, so it was strange to hear her say something like that.

"Oh, come on," she sighed. "If I ran myself ragged over everything like you're doing now, I'd be screwing up constantly. You can't let yourself focus on what's riding on your performance. You need to tell yourself 'it'll all work out,' or else the pressure's going to break you."

“But...”

“So it’s not enough to protect Kaname; you want to protect us, too?”

Sousuke gulped and struggled for an answer.

Mao let out a small laugh in response. “The concern is appreciated, but I’ll pass. Kurz and McAllen and the others would say the same thing.”

Sousuke probably would too, in their position. They weren’t just any soldiers; they were hand-picked elites, capable of protecting themselves. He knew that. They wouldn’t take unnecessary risks, and if they were in danger, they knew how to get clear. In other words, she was right.

“You’re right,” he said eventually. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Attaboy. Talk to you later.” Mao closed her channel.

But... Sousuke found himself thinking less than a minute later. *But normal ASes don’t stand a chance against that thing. It took out twelve American machines all by itself.* It was an unshakable fact. *If I lose, it’s all over.* No matter how he tried, he just couldn’t get that thought out of his mind.

Soon after, orders came through on the mission channel: “Uruz-1 to squad. We’ve just passed the third waypoint; this is where we split into our three teams. Got it?”

After passing the waypoint, the six machines would move to their respective stations: the infiltration team would disable the bombs on the chemical weapons, the suppression team would make landfall and attack the base directly, and the sniper team would back up the land team and keep an eye on the island as a whole. Thus, the counterinsurgency would kick off with attacks from three directions—from underground, from the beach, and from outside enemy shooting range.

“Uruz-2, roger.”

“Uruz-6, roger.”

“Uruz-7, roger.”

“Uruz-10, roger.”

“Uruz-12, roger.”

After each unit gave its response, they dispersed, in teams of two, to their designated areas.

The infiltration team consisted of Mao and Sergeant Dunnigan. Dunnigan was born in the American South—Louisiana—and he’d started out as a paratrooper with the US Army. There were signs of premature aging in his appearance, even though he couldn’t be much older than Mao, but he was in amazing shape, with a musculature that let him lift a 100-kilogram barbell effortlessly. Not only was he an AS operator, but he was also an expert with explosives, which was probably why he’d been chosen for this team. The first stage of their job would be to go on ahead of the other four, infiltrate the place where the chemical weapons were being held, and disable the bombs reportedly planted there.

They’d be infiltrating from underground. The western side of the island terminated in a low cliff, and there was an old tunnel under the waterline. It had been dug out over fifty years ago to serve as a secret dock and submarine port for the old Japanese Imperial Navy. The passage of time and countless earthquakes since had collapsed and submerged it, and it had proceeded to fall out of memory for everyone, including the current US Armed Forces.

The deepest part of the tunnel was separated from the storage facility by a rock wall about two meters thick. Their plan was to open a hole with a drill, use a fiberscope to look around inside the storehouse, then blow through. After that, they would bust in and take out the detonators.

“Approaching land now,” Dunnigan said. “Time to cut the jets.”

“Yeah, I hear you...” Mao replied. The pump-jets on their backpacks died down, and the flow of tiny bubbles ceased. Instead, they used the AS-sized flippers attached to the M9s’ feet to proceed onward at a depth of five meters.

Dunnigan’s swimming technique was so perfect, it was hard to believe he’d come out of a land fighting force. She’d heard he had plenty of live combat experience; that he’d been through several dangerous missions during his time in the Army; that he’d earned multiple Purple Hearts and Bronze Stars. He was the polar opposite of Mao, who’d been dishonorably discharged from the Marines without a single notable accomplishment to her name.

That wasn't the reason, but she and Dunnigan weren't especially close. He'd come to them from Mithril's South Atlantic Battle Group, the Neimheadh, only two months prior, and while she knew he was a skilled combatant, she still didn't know much about him as a person.

As they got to within a mile of the island, Dunnigan began grumbling. "Such a crock of shit..."

"What is?" she asked.

"This dumbass mission. Sending us out into the back end of nowhere... Couldn't they get someone else?"

Mao groaned. "Stop complaining. No one can handle this stuff but us."

"Who even gives a rat's ass? What are the bombs gonna do if they go off? I mean, other than wiping out the piss-poor locals..."

Mao couldn't believe her ears. "Dunnigan?"

"Hey, I'm just joking around. Don't take it so personal, Chinese," he said with a chuckle.

Mao responded, voice firm, unwilling to just let it go. "That's not something to joke about while we're on a mission. And my name isn't 'Chinese.' It's Melissa Mao."

"Yeah, yeah," he chuckled. "Well, unclench already. I'll do my job. You can count on it."

"I certainly hope so..." she muttered.

Once they were in the vicinity of the island, the two machines let the current carry them to the western shore. Thanks to HF sonar and GPS data, they immediately found their destination: the sunken tunnel.

Its entrance was blocked by crumbled concrete and rocks; there wasn't even enough space for a person to slip through. Fortunately, such an obstacle was no match for an M9, and at night, with the waves high, there was no risk of the enemy catching them at work. The greater risk, in fact, was the possibility of an enemy trap.

If it was clear the enemy already knew about this route, they'd have to call off

the operation. They'd back off and withdraw, and warn their other allies to return in secret. They'd have to scrap their existing plan and figure out another way to go about it.

An outside observer might find this idea agonizing, but it was better than trying to ram an unworkable plan though—A typical special operation was a much more mundane, patient endeavor than what was typically depicted in the movies. Fortunately, it didn't seem that would be necessary this time.

Mao used the full range of her M9's sensors to scan for danger, slowly and carefully, but found no sign of traps or surveillance in the tunnel.

"We're good to go?" Dunnigan asked.

"Affirmative," Mao responded. "I'm positive we're safe."

"In we go, then. C'mon."

The two machines pushed the rocks aside and entered the tunnel. They couldn't keep up radio contact while underground, so they left a wired relay device at the tunnel entrance.

The sniper team consisted of Kurz and Corporal Nguyen. Nguyen came out of the Vietnamese Army; he had long experience in jungle warfare and considerable skills in knife combat. He also knew a lot about AS firearms, both Eastern and Western. He had a lean frame and olive skin, and despite his hollow cheeks and somewhat sickly appearance, he wasn't someone you wanted to cross; his affinity for knives had made him as sharp-eyed as a hawk.

Nguyen, like Dunnigan, had transferred to the squad two months ago. They hadn't run too many operations together, but he seemed like a reliable workhorse type; he also had a sense of humor.

"Uruz-6 here," Kurz said. "We're almost to the sniper point. Time to set depth to zero."

"Yeah, I see it. Just make sure your ass doesn't stick out of the water," Nguyen responded, and adjusted his M9's position.

The sniper team had arrived in the sea four kilometers west of Berildaob Island. It was shallow there, with a water depth of only four meters—enough

that an M9 could stand with its upper torso out of the water. It was from here that they'd pick off the enemy ASes and anti-aircraft artillery around the occupied base. The American M6s couldn't be effective at this range, but the M9s had the equipment and fire control systems to make it possible.

"Got any PFZs in mind?" Nguyen asked, inquiring about their attack targets.

"Nah, why bother?" Kurz shrugged. "I'll shoot the guys on the right, you shoot the guys on the left. Simple, right?"

"You sure about that?" Nguyen checked again.

"Sure, I'm sure."

The two began their preparations. Kurz's machine staked out a position 100 meters away from Nguyen's then opened the weapons container it had been carrying. Kurz would be using a 76mm sniper cannon; it was about as powerful as you could get, as far as stand-alone AS artillery went. It was also tops for accuracy and came with independent optical and self-diagnostic sensors, as well as a trajectory calculation computer.

Nguyen's machine came armed with an eight-round surface-to-surface missile launcher. It fired a modified version of the Hellfire air-to-surface missiles that were frequently used by combat helicopters. They were precise, powerful, and used smokeless rocket motors that made them harder for the enemy to spot.

"Here's hoping the infiltration team can handle this..." Kurz whispered.

Nguyen snorted on the other end of the line. "If they screw up, I'm out of here. They're not paying me enough to have a shootout in a gas cloud."

"No kidding," Kurz laughed.

Nguyen continued his grumbling. "Mithril's got great equipment and they pay well, but I hate all the niggling crap that comes with their missions. Guarding hostages, watching for chemical weapons... the whole thing gives me an ulcer. You get what I'm saying?"

"Eh, if running out guns blazing was all the job took, they wouldn't pay us the big bucks." The delicate demands of their missions was what justified their equipment and salaries. Even Kurz, with all his constant complaints, knew that

much.

“But Kurz, we’re mercenaries. Killers for hire. Fighting our client’s enemies is one thing, but risking our lives for all this other stuff... it’s kind of a violation of contract, isn’t it?”

“Is it? I never read the contract.”

Nguyen groaned. “Are you kidding me? We might be in a rotten business, but it’s still a *business*, y’know?”

“I just don’t see how it’s that big a deal.”

“Fine, forget it. If I decide it’s not worth it, I’ll just find a new job.”

“Find a new job, huh?” Kurz responded absently. He was too worried about Sousuke to pay much mind to Nguyen’s idle talk. That AS... the Arbalest. He’d been wondering for a while why the operator had to be Sousuke, when both McAllen and Mao seemed like a better fit. Protecting Kaname, operating prototypes... wasn’t it a little cruel, putting all that responsibility onto one kid’s shoulders?

He’s wound up tight enough as it is... Kurz was well aware of Sousuke’s innate earnestness, and his sense of responsibility. He honestly liked that about him (though he’d never, ever admit it). But was it possible those traits could play against him in this case?

Well, no big... Kurz reassured himself. If that “Venom” thing showed its face, his sniper cannon would have some things to say about it. Even if the 76mm rounds didn’t land a decisive blow, he could at least make it easier for Sousuke to do his thing. Under the water, Kurz waited for the battle to start.

Sousuke and Captain McAllen were serving as the strike team. The second Mao and Dunnigan disabled the bombs, Kurz and Nguyen would kick off their long-range attacks. Sousuke and McAllen would rush onto land at top speed and sweep through what was left, while Mao’s team came up from the storehouse to assist. Once the AS battle began in earnest, the de Danaan would surface; helicopters full of infantry would take off, then fly in to occupy the base. That was the plan in a nutshell.

Sousuke’s Arbalest and McAllen’s M9 were already within 600 meters of the

beach. This was far closer than a gas turbine-powered M6 could get unnoticed, but even their highly advanced machines would be spotted by the enemy if the water got any shallower. While the de Danaan could use its ECS even when surfaced, the M9s and the Arbalest had to be fully out of the water to use theirs.

The Arbalest poked its head above water to get a read on the current state of the island; the night vision mode employed by its dual sensors showed Sousuke a base surrounded by a fence. Illuminated by bright lights, it was a squat structure that openly bore the scars of the battle it had just been through.

Sousuke remained silent. He could see one of the enemy's anti-aircraft artillery: a turret with two machine cannons mounted on tank treads. The Arbalest's AI ran an automatic analysis and displayed detailed information on the weapon.

It was a 2S6M Tunguska, a self-propelled surface-to-air cannon made in the USSR. Despite the "surface-to-air" label, it was also a tremendous threat to ASes—it would shower them with 30mm shells the minute it realized they were there.

There was also an enemy AS walking toward the beach in front of the base on patrol. It cast a searchlight over the ocean, coming and going repeatedly over certain places. The AS was one of the French-made Mistral IIs described in the briefing: a squat humanoid form with no head, and its main sensors mounted in the crotch. The Mistral IIs had superior armor to the Soviet Rk-92 Savages and greater firing precision. Mithril's machines might be more advanced, but Mistrals were nothing to sneeze at if you encountered them in large numbers.

Sousuke knew that there had to be more than those two machines, but the buildings and terrain produced natural blind spots that prevented him from tracking their locations. He saw no sign of that AS—the Venom—either.

On the beach, he could see the abandoned husk of a burnt-out AS; it was one of the American Dark Bushnells. It stretched one arm up toward the night sky, while its body was twisted, as if in agony. It was tragic to think of those men in their second-generation M6s coming ashore, unaware that within minutes, they'd be up against an opponent that could outfight even cutting-edge M9s.

An hour passed. Dawn came. The underground infiltration team should have disabled the bombs by now, but there was no visible change in the base.

The Venom was still nowhere to be seen. Was it undergoing maintenance in the hangar? Was it hiding somewhere, cloaked with its ECS? Or... was it under the ocean, creeping toward them right now? What if it had ambushed Mao's team? What if it was attacking Kurz's? These unfounded questions flitted in and out of Sousuke's mind. He felt like a nervous wreck.

"Sergeant Sagara," came a call from the M9 beside him; McAllen's.

"Sir?"

"I've been taking part in AS operations for nine years now."

Sousuke waited curiously.

"So... you know. I've seen good machines and bad ones. And from what I've seen, that's a pretty good machine you're in right now. Just put in your usual effort, and you'll be fine. This is business as usual. Got it?" Maybe McAllen was trying to show concern. He always seemed like such a nagging, stuffy man, but that, too, came from a strong sense of responsibility as a commander in the field.

"Yes, Captain, sir." But despite his acknowledgment, Sousuke couldn't fully purge from his mind the image of that mauled M6, lapped by the waves.

Not long after, he heard a muffled explosion from the direction of the base; it sounded like it had come from under the storehouse. For a second, he thought that the bombs attached to the chemical weapons had gone off... but that wasn't it; it was smaller in scale. Black smoke began to rise from the building's entrance, and the enemy soldiers on patrol began shouting to each other.

It's begun... Sousuke flipped the voice command switch on his stick. "Al. Power level to military."

《Roger. GPL, military. Output increasing. 20... 30...》The machine's AI, Al, spoke to him in a deep male voice. The generator's output, which he'd been keeping at minimum, began to slowly rise.

"Uruz-2 here! We've taken out the detonators! I repeat, we've taken out the

detonators! Proceeding above ground now!” Mao’s report put an end to their communications blackout. They must have successfully disarmed the bombs.

“Uruz-6, ready to roll any time.”

“Uruz-10, what he said.” These reports came from Kurz and Nguyen of the sniper team.

《60... 70... 80...》The generator’s power surged through the body of the Arbalest. Sparks of electricity crackled from the joints with a pale blue glow. Its electromagnetic muscles creaked and its body trembled.《90... 95... 100!》

Time to go. Sousuke took in a deep breath, and then— “Uruz-1 to all units. Hunting season is open. Attack!”

“Roger.” Sousuke pulled the throttle trigger on his left stick as hard as he could. The aquatic pack’s pump-jets burst to maximum output. A geyser erupted behind him, as if from an explosion. The force of it jolted his body. His machine burst to the surface, kicking up plumes of water as it streaked toward land.

Accelerate. Accelerate. The knots reading on his speedometer continued to rise, and the machine vibrated wildly. The Arbalest skated closer to the beach, tearing through the waves. 150 meters. 100 meters...

The patrolling Mistral II noticed and took aim with its rifle. *Object on course. Straight ahead. Unable to dodge,* he thought. Silently, he set the Arbalest’s head-mounted machine guns to full automatic; he poured on 12.7mm rounds at a rate of a hundred per second. They sparked off the enemy machine’s durable armor, but it still hunched over, reflexively, to shield its sensors. The act bought him a few seconds; it was more than enough.

The Arbalest hit the beach at full speed and leaped low across the ground. Sand went flying as it rolled, carried by momentum to slam straight into the opposing machine. There was a powerful crash, and the Arbalest and the Mistral II collapsed in a tangle of mechanical limbs.

The enemy machine quickly sat up and thrust its monomolecular cutter bayonet at the Arbalest, but the Arbalest had already pressed a shot cannon into its side; it fired. The point-blank 57mm shell sent the Mistral II flying back,

nearly bisected at the waist. Oil sprayed from the wound for just a second before it hit the ground, spitting fire.

That's one... That first kill reawakened Sousuke's soldier's instincts.

There were more explosions coming from the base—Kurz's sniping and Nguyen's missiles. McAllen had also successfully made landfall; he used an anti-tank dagger to take out the artillery then pulled a carbine from his back and went on the hunt.

Sousuke righted his machine immediately and ejected the aquatic pack clasped over his machine's torso. The explosive bolts activated and broke it in two. He leaped the Arbalest at a newly-arrived Mistral II.

Aim. Fire. Dodge. Search. Aim again.

That's right. This is my body. It's just like always. Nothing has changed.

Fight. Defeat. Destroy.

Cut. Strike. Slice. Burn. Crush.

It's so easy... Sousuke realized. The Venom was nothing; just another mission objective, no matter what name they gave it. His job was to destroy it by any means necessary. *Forget about protecting others,* he reminded himself. *That's all that matters.*

He would lodge his teeth into the Venom's windpipe until the breathing stopped. *Come out and face me...*

Same Timeframe, 30 Meter Depth, Central Control Room, Tuatha de Danaan "It's started. M9 ADMs are signaling that hostilities have begun!" the combat intelligence officer said, with a hint of nerves.

"All of them?" Tessa asked from the captain's chair.

"Affirmative, ma'am."

"Then it's time to surface," she decided. "Raise all ECS masts; MBT to standard blow."

Mardukas balked at that order. It wasn't the mention of ECS masts that gave him pause; those were the devices used to cloak the de Danaan from enemy radar while it was surfaced, so their use was entirely expected. It was the mention of "standard blow" that shocked him.

When a submarine surfaced, to gain buoyancy, it had to set the MBT—the main ballast tanks—to blow. There were several ways to do that; the de Danaan had a special method called "silent blow" that took more time, but let them maintain a lower profile to ships around them. Conversely, standard blow let them surface quickly, but the rapid expulsion of water generated noise, which made them easier to detect.

"What's the matter, Mardukas-san?" Tessa inquired.

"Standard... blow? You're certain, ma'am?"

"We have little time to lose."

"Ma'am," he said after a pause. "Forgive me. Prepare to surface!" Mardukas pressed the switch for the diving alarm, and a synthetic siren sound blared out all over the ship.

At the same time, the mother AI's voice rang out.《Surface! Surface! Surface!》

"Standard low pressure blow!"

"Standard low pressure blow, aye. Initiate low pressure blow, all MBT!"

"Raise all ECS masts! Activate electromagnetic camouflage!"

"ECS masts, aye! First, rising! Second, rising! Third..."

《Surface! Surface! Surface!》

"Flight control room, helicopter squads. Start engines!"

"Gebo 3, 4, 5, 6! Start engines!" All at once, the transport helicopters in the hangar began to rev up their multi-thousand horsepower turboshaft engines.

Wreathed in foam, the giant boat began to raise its bow. The floor trembled with a low rumble. The submarine had had enough of holding its breath; it was now letting out a roar.

"Wh-What's going on?" Shocked by the sudden vibration and noise, Kaname

clamped down the boiling pot of curry.

“The boat is rising to the surface,” the cook responded. Likewise, he was holding a stack of dishes to keep them from falling.

“Why? Is there some kind of problem?”

“I’m not sure. We don’t usually surface with all this noise... Something could have happened to the SRT.”

“To... Sousuke?” she asked hesitantly.

“Sergeant Sagara?” The cook shrugged. “I couldn’t say. It also might not mean anything.”

“I see...” Kaname looked up at the kitchen’s ceiling, nervously. *Sousuke... Will he be okay?*

28 August, 0405 Hours (Local Time) Berildaob Island, Perio Archipelago Bathed in the glow of the rising sun, two Mistral IIs appeared beyond the flames. They broke away from each other at high speeds, then closed in on him while laying down alternating shots of cover fire.

A run-of-the-mill operator would try to dodge the shots and get some distance, but not Sousuke; his Arbalest stopped running and knelt down in place. The enemy was trying to lock down his attacks, he knew; all their rapid movement and wild fire was just a buildup to their next move, to stop and take careful aim. *That’s right,* he thought. *Come after me...*

The enemies’ fire hit the ground around the Arbalest, sending up bits of asphalt and puffs of white smoke. A trilling alarm from the AI warned him that it was dangerous to stand still.

“Shut up,” he muttered. He readied his machine’s shot cannon in both hands, took careful aim, and fired. The shot sent one of the enemies reeling back. Shards of metal went flying, and the Mistral II slammed into the ground. Its severed right leg spun through the air and landed on an abandoned jeep, crushing it.

Sousuke fired again. The second machine fell, bounced into a somersault, and exploded. His shotcannon was out of ammo. He wanted to change clips, but there was already another enemy machine bearing down on him.

Sousuke rolled the Arbalest forward to skillfully dodge its shots. As it sprang back to its feet, the enemy machine cast its rifle aside and drew a melee weapon that resembled a long-handled hammer. It came in range in a second. The hammer swung down. As Sousuke's machine just managed to dodge, the hammer hit the ground and exploded.

A HEAT hammer? Sousuke instantly identified the weapon, even as the blast poured over him and he drew his machine back. A HEAT hammer—it resembled a long-handled hammer, but the head was filled with a powerful shaped charge. Their disposability made them cheap and easy to produce, while still packing enough power to destroy a tank in one hit.

The Mistral II tossed the spent shaft aside, and pulled out another HEAT hammer. This one it swung sideways; the Arbalest dodged it by a hair. Sousuke grabbed the enemy's shoulder with his machine's left hand; he fixed the shotcannon to the hardpoint on the Arbalest's head—sticking it "in its mouth"—and used its free right hand to draw a monomolecular cutter.

Impact. The two machines slammed into each other; the knife-like cutter plunged into the Mistral II's chest. There was an ear-piercing scream as the enemy machine trembled from the force. Sousuke ignored it as he moved the monomolecular cutter, smoothly tearing the enemy's control system to shreds. That made four.

He pulled out the knife. The Mistral II fell to its knees, and then collapsed forward, its wound sparking and smoking. Sousuke replaced his shotcannon's clip, then propelled his machine forward with leopard-like agility, searching for more enemies.

Where? Where is it? Where is the Venom? The Arbalest's head moved back and forth. The ECCS on its forehead was on full blast, emitting radar waves to catch any trace of nearby enemies. Over the radio, he heard reports from various allied machines: "Uruz-6. We've taken out all targets visible from here. Bring on some more!"

“Uruz-12. We’re topside. Barracks B secured and locked down; one enemy infantry dead, two injured. Hostages all safe.”

“Uruz-10. All confirmed surface-to-air artillery destroyed.”

“Uruz-2. Barracks A secured and locked down. Twenty-three hostages located, all safe. Four enemy infantry subdued with tasers.”

It was going pretty smoothly. Most of the enemy ASes were destroyed, the enemy soldiers were captured, and the base personnel had been rescued, safe under the protection of Mao and Dunnigan. But that most crucial element—the red machine—was still missing.

“Uruz-1 to squad. I’ve had no sign of the Venom yet. Anyone seen it? Even the slightest trace. Report.”

“Negative” was the universal reply to the commander’s call. But just then—
“No, affirmative. It’s... is this supposed to be a joke?” Mao said.

“What is it, Uruz-2—” McAllen’s response cut off in a gasp.

“What the...?” Dunnigan also let out a groan of disbelief.

The reason for their confusion was immediately clear. The red AS—the Venom—was in plain sight, standing atop of the tallest building of the facility, to the northeast. Its ECS wasn’t even engaged.

What’s its game? Sousuke wondered.

The diamond-shaped head. The oversized frame. The jagged silhouette. And... the red monoeye. Like a poison dart frog in humanoid form—that was the kind of sharp, dangerous aura that wreathed this new AS.

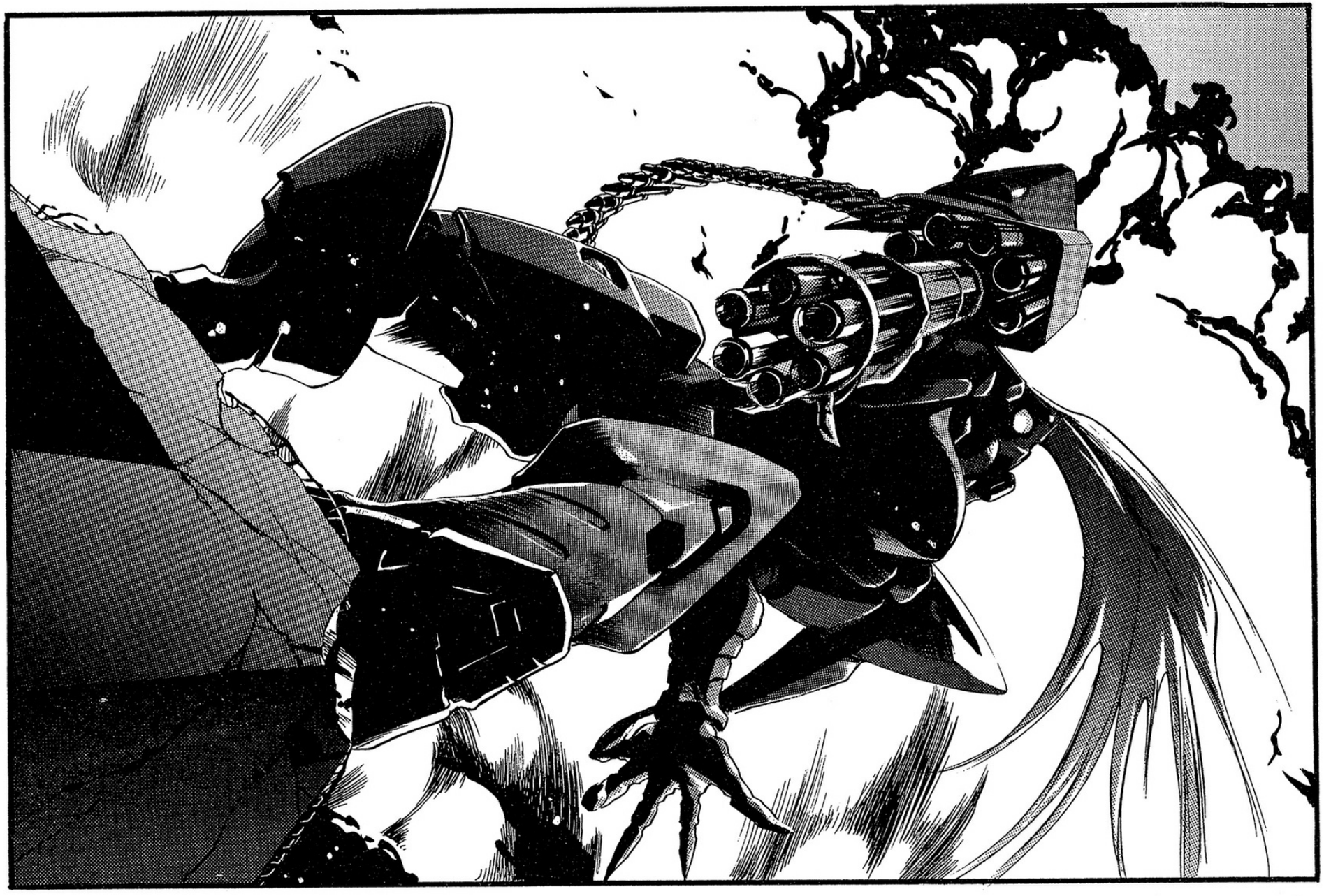
The Venom turned its head languidly, lording over the flame-wreathed base. There was a large Gatling gun in its hand; a hard-to-wield but insanely powerful weapon.

“Greetings, Mithril friends...” came a voice from its external speakers. Sousuke recognized it, and his heart sank in his chest.

“It’s been so very long. How I’ve missed you... Particularly you, Kashim. Or is it *Sagara-kun* these days?”

“Ga...” *Gauron.* Even before he could say the full name, the enemy cut him off, mockingly.

“Right-o! It’s me.” With great effort, the red AS readied its heavy weapon.



4: The Venom Spreads

28 August, 0411 (Local Time) Berildaob Island, Perio Archipelago “Time to get this party started... Dance for me!” Gauron laughed in a voice that crackled with madness. From the roof of the building, his AS fired its Gatling gun wildly. A Gatling gun was like a wheel of six connected gun barrels; it rotated at high speed to fire each in rapid succession, letting it rain shells down on them faster than any rifle.

“Uruz-1 to Uruz-6!” McAllen called. “Can you snipe him?”

“Negative,” Kurz responded. “I can’t get a shot from my current position. I’m on the move now.”

“How about a Hellfire, Uruz-10?!”

“Out of ammo, sir,” Nguyen replied tersely.

“Piece of shit!”

The 35mm shells shredded buildings and asphalt like confetti and sent the ground-locked machines scattering. Blinded by fragments and white smoke, the M9s continued to run at full speed.

“Uruz-7, advance! The rest of you, fall back! Give him cover!” McAllen called over the radio.

“7, roger,” Sousuke responded shortly, running the Arbalest forward in a crouch. *Gauron...* He didn’t even bother telling himself he was supposed to be dead. All he could feel was bitterness and exhaustion.

He was so sure he’d finished him back then, in the mountains of North Korea. But he’d been wrong. He didn’t know what kind of devil’s luck had kept the man alive—but regardless, here he was. He was inside that machine—the Venom—that stood between Sousuke and his goal.

In a situation where every second counted, he’d had no time to check if the

enemy was dead. Perhaps his assumption had been mere wishful thinking?

Gauron. What are you doing here? he wondered. Was this a trap after all? The man was talking like he'd expected them. But if so, why would he show himself so readily? None of it made any sense.

Sousuke's feeling before the charge began—that fear—began to well up again from deep inside him. He felt an itchy sensation at the top of his head. His breathing became labored, and he felt panic rising. He urged his nerves to return to their finely honed state, but they wouldn't budge.

This wasn't good. He couldn't stay like this. He remembered that destroyed Dark Bushnell he'd seen, and imagined it as one of his allies' M9s. If he messed up... If he failed... If he lost...

There would be no going back.

It's Gauron I'm facing. I made it out of Sunan, but he... he's come here to kill my allies again. Just like the last time. Three years ago, in Afghanistan...

"Uruz-7!"

McAllen's voice snapped him back to reality. He realized with a gasp that he must have slowed down.

"Look alive over there!" McAllen ordered.

Gauron was firing grenades from a launcher attached to the Gatling gun. Small bombs rained down on them, bringing calamity in their wake. Explosions burst and popped like bubbles. Sousuke propelled his machine in a zig-zag motion, managing to weave it through the grenades.

"Uruz-7! What are you doing?!" The M9s of McAllen, Mao, and Dunnigan, which had pulled back, all fired their rifles at Gauron. Their indiscriminate barrage rained down on the Venom; 40mm armor-piercing rounds peppered its head, its chest, its shoulders, its legs... no, it only looked like they did. In fact, each round sparked and exploded inches away from the machine. There would be a warp in the air around it, and then a radial fracture would run through the building's wall nearby—but the Venom itself remained uninjured.

"Is that the magic trick you mentioned?" Dunnigan growled.

“Affirmative. Keep away from it,” Sousuke responded, diving to the side to dodge a Gatling strafe. The immense enemy firepower made it impossible for him to close in. The data they had suggested that the effective range of the Arbalest’s lambda driver was a few dozen meters. He had to get into that range, then use that technique—“pour your will into the shot, then fire.”

“Not that we could get close like this anyway... Dammit!” McAllen cursed, hiding behind the wall of a warehouse, which was looking like a tattered old rag. It was only the M9s’ remarkable maneuverability that had kept them safe from the curtain of fire so far. If this went on much longer, none of their machines would be safe.

“Uruz-2 to all units. Don’t aim at the machine, aim at the weapon! The ammo belt for the Gatling—ah!”

“What is it?”

“I’m okay. Minor damage. Hurry!”

Without even a “roger,” McAllen and the others opened fire. Some leaped, others crouched. They were aiming at the Venom’s right side. Most of the shots were blocked by the usual forcefields, but— Gauron cackled. “You know it’s pointless... hmm?”

A flash. An explosion. A shot had managed to hit the Gatling gun’s ammo reserves, igniting the gunpowder. This started a chain reaction through several hundred 35mm rounds, sending shrapnel bursting all around.

The force of it pulverized the building, and wreathed the area in swelling flames and black smoke. Gauron’s AS was nowhere to be seen. Had he been blown to bits, or had it simply flown clear?

“Did we do it?”

“Well...”

“Be careful!”

Just then—

The Venom seemed clothed in flame as it tore through the smoke from above. It appeared completely undamaged from the point-blank blast.

“Well, well!” Gauron remarked casually. “Not bad at all!” He landed with a crunch, then bolted into a charge, kicking up concrete like sand. The Venom’s spontaneous power was equal to—no, greater than the M9’s.

“The hell is that thing?!” Dunnigan shouted.

“12, fall back!” Sousuke ordered as he faced down the machine’s charge. Now was the time to use the lambda driver; he fixed the shotcannon at his mechanical hip and took aim. He could see the Venom in his targeting box, holding a large monomolecular cutter in each hand.

“Kaaashiiim!” Gauron laughed, prolonging every syllable. It was exactly like that moment four months ago.

“It’s time...” Sousuke whispered. *I can do this,* he reminded himself. *I’ve done it before. I will make it work. If I don’t... if I fail...* he swallowed hard.

Calm your mind—You have to stay calm. Focus your will—You have to focus. Imagine the shot—Imagine it. The image is important. It’s absolutely crucial.

Sousuke pulled the trigger. The shotcannon blasted out a 57mm shell. His aim was perfect. The winged armor-piercing shot flew right into Gauron’s AS—No. It exploded into sparks just in front of the Venom, as every previous shot had done.

Sousuke’s jaw dropped. Nothing had happened. He’d just fired a normal shot; the lambda driver hadn’t activated. He gritted his teeth. The Venom was already flying at him. Its knife-wielding hands were spread wide, as if to take the Arbalest in an embrace— “Sousuke!”

Before Gauron’s knives could tear into the Arbalest’s cockpit, another M9 came flying from the side and tackled Sousuke out of the way. The two machines fell together in a tangle; the knife’s point sliced through the air where he’d been a second earlier.

Sousuke sat his machine up. “Mao?” he questioned.

“Get it together! Are you even paying—” That was as far as Mao got.

Gauron had stopped on a dime and turned to face them. He thrust out his right hand, and with his index finger pointed at Mao’s M9, he whispered,

“Bang.” There was a sudden warping along a line of empty space between the Venom and her machine. Something ran along that line, an invisible power that slammed into the M9 and— The noise that followed was unsettling: a low, dull thunk; cracking and screaming of the machine’s metal frame; fluid bursting out of something elastic...

An internal explosion of some kind caused the M9’s head to fly out of its socket—it dangled limply against its back like a rokurokubi, trailing various broken cables and pipes. Shock absorbent bled from the pipes and pooled on the ground below.

“Mao?” Sousuke called out nervously. There was no response. The M9 lay limp and motionless in the Arbalest’s arms, with no sign of movement at all. He didn’t even have time to check on the pilot’s safety; Gauron had already turned his “finger gun” to the Arbalest. Instinctively sensing the danger he was in, Sousuke had his machine pick up the M9 and beat a swift retreat.

Gauron released a low chuckle. “Come on, why so scared? I just pointed at you, that’s all.”

Sousuke bared his teeth, and glared ahead of him as he laid Mao’s machine on the ground.

“Uruz-7, what happened?!” McAllen’s and Dunnigan’s M9s took up his flanks and fired their rifles at Gauron from several hundred meters away.

Gauron, who appeared to regard their attack as no more than a light drizzle, hunched over, as if gathering power. “All right,” he said, “let’s try this again.” Gauron brandished his monomolecular cutters and went back on the offensive.

Sousuke flew back again, releasing a blast from his shotcannon. “Uruz-7 here. 2 is... down. I don’t know her status. Check on her while I draw the Venom’s fire.”

“What? Say that a—”

“I said Mao’s down! Check in on her already!” He fired and fired, but Gauron was relentless. Each shell from the shotcannon was deflected; he didn’t even leave a dent.

This isn’t... like before! Sousuke realized. The last time they’d fought, his

opponent's use of the lambda driver had also appeared limited. But now it was different; there was nothing holding Gauron back. Even total surprise shots weren't fazing him.

On top of that, Sousuke couldn't use the device he needed to fight back. No matter how he focused, he couldn't get the lambda driver to work. He was panicking too much to use it, and his inability to use it increased his panic. It was a terrible spiral.

Just then, he received a communication: "Sousuke. It's me."

"Kurz?" Sousuke asked with surprise.

"Lure the Venom to the east side of the island," Kurz told him. "Get it back to building D1." Building D1 was the one Gauron had appeared on earlier.

"What's the plan?"

"Don't ask; just keep cool and get going. Leave this to me."

"All right," he eventually agreed. As instructed, Sousuke raced his machine to the northeast building. Kurz's voice seemed awfully composed for someone who must have heard what happened to Mao—but Sousuke knew that was no reason to take him lightly. The mask he usually wore—of the perpetually laid-back, shallow man who irritated his comrades—there in the cockpit, hidden from the eyes of others, he had let it fall away.

Gauron pursued the Arbalest. They were a match in agility and explosive power, so it was hard to completely shake him.

"Are you just going to run away forever?" Gauron jeered. "Why won't you play along?"

Sousuke had managed to get close to the building. It was 10 stories tall, five or six times an AS's height—but the floors from the sixth up had been ravaged by the Gatling gun's explosion.

"All right. Get in front of it and hold there," Kurz told him.

The Arbalest stopped near the entrance on the building's east side, which was littered with the remains of cars and concrete, and turned to face his pursuer. That's when Sousuke realized: the place he'd arrived at was in the direct line of

sight from Kurz and Nguyen's sniper point. He increased his sensors' magnification and saw an M9 readying a large rifle far off in the ocean. Right ahead of him, Gauron's AS was drawing close. Sousuke turned his shotcannon toward the red machine and fired off a few shots. Each one was deflected.

"I'm disappointed, Kashim," Gauron commented lightly. "I was hoping you'd have grown a little more skilled..." His knife flashed through the air. Sousuke blocked it with the shotcannon, which Gauron sliced in two. There was another flash, and part of his machine's shoulder armor fell away.

A sharp thrust came at him from either side. Sousuke launched his machine forward hard, and managed to grab his opponent's wrists. A normal operator would be dead before he'd reached this stage.

"Fighting hard, I see. But...!" The hands holding the knives continued to push forward. The Arbalest's electromagnetic muscles creaked from the force as they tried to push back, pitting mechanical strength against strength. But the power of the enemy machine was incredible, and it had gravity on its side.

The Arbalest was forced back one step, two steps—until its back hit the wall of the building. Its frame creaked. The tip of the swiftly rotating, vibrating monomolecular cutter inched its way toward the Arbalest's chest. "Ngh..." Sousuke groaned.

"Well, what now?! You're about to die!" Gauron screamed. "And that girl you love so very much—"

"Uruz-7," Kurz said calmly, "stay put." The next instant, Gauron's machine took a hit from the side. Shards of shredded metal went flying, and the enemy machine's head snapped back. Even from four kilometers away, Kurz's shot had flown true.

But—could it even guard against surprise attacks from that distance?—the 76mm shell still wasn't enough to pierce the enemy's force field. Fortunately, the sheer force of the hit did set the red AS off-balance, and that was enough to create a crucial opening. Immediately, Kurz poured on more shots: a second, a third, a fourth, a fifth. These shots were not aimed at Gauron; they were aimed at the half-demolished building behind him—each precisely-aimed blast took out one pillar or support. With the building's upper half already holding on by a

thread, the removal of these braces caused the whole structure to snap.

No, “snap” failed to capture the gravity of the situation—it was a cacophony of steel supports being wrenched apart, of concrete imploding, of every piece of glass in the building shattering immediately to powder. Hundreds of tons of building material were collapsing down from above in an earth-shaking, ear-splitting tumult... all headed straight for the Arbalest and its enemy.

“Get out of the way!” came Kurz’s warning, but it wasn’t needed. Sousuke dropped his machine down to sweep Gauron’s legs out from under him. Its balance lost, the red AS fell to its knees. Without even a glance back at the enemy, the Arbalest then leapt away, low and fast, like a bat out of hell.

An instant later, the collapsing building hit the ground, crushing the red AS beneath. The ground shook and roared. Pulverized building material, walls, floor, pipes, and furniture were scattered everywhere. There was so much dust in the air that the whole world seemed to go white.

“Sousuke,” Kurz asked, “are you alive?”

“I think so...” he replied. The Arbalest, which had thrown itself to the ground in its escape, slowly picked itself up. *That was a reckless move on Kurz’s part,* Sousuke thought. One wrong move and Sousuke would have died with Gauron. But he also had to admire his marksmanship—from a distance of four kilometers away, the pillars of the building must have looked like needles, yet he’d gone four for four, taking them all out in seconds. “Your skill is impressive,” Sousuke said in tones of great admiration.

“Bet your ass it is,” Kurz grumbled.

Just then, Dunnigan’s M9 came running. “You get him?”

“I’m not sure... Give me your gun,” Sousuke ordered, “and then stand back.” The Arbalest took the 40mm rifle from Dunnigan’s M9. He checked the remaining rounds, then kept the rifle carefully pointed forward, held in both hands, as he approached the mountain of rubble. He had no confirmation yet if Gauron was dead or alive. Surely, not even the lambda driver could hold up against a destructive force like that... right? But what if he was lying under the rubble, waiting for an opportunity to burst out and fly at them? Then he’d have to use the lambda driver to finish the enemy off once and for all.

But... can I do it? Sousuke wondered. His hands were soaked with sweat. Just then, there was movement in the rubble. Sousuke was startled; it wasn't a sudden movement, just chunks of reinforced concrete slowly swelling upward and falling away.

The red machine appeared. It wasn't holding a weapon. Its hands were both raised, and it spewed steam from its joints as it straightened up awkwardly.

Uncertain of his opponent's intentions, Sousuke's finger hesitated on the trigger. He hadn't let his guard down, but he also wasn't certain that shooting him would work.

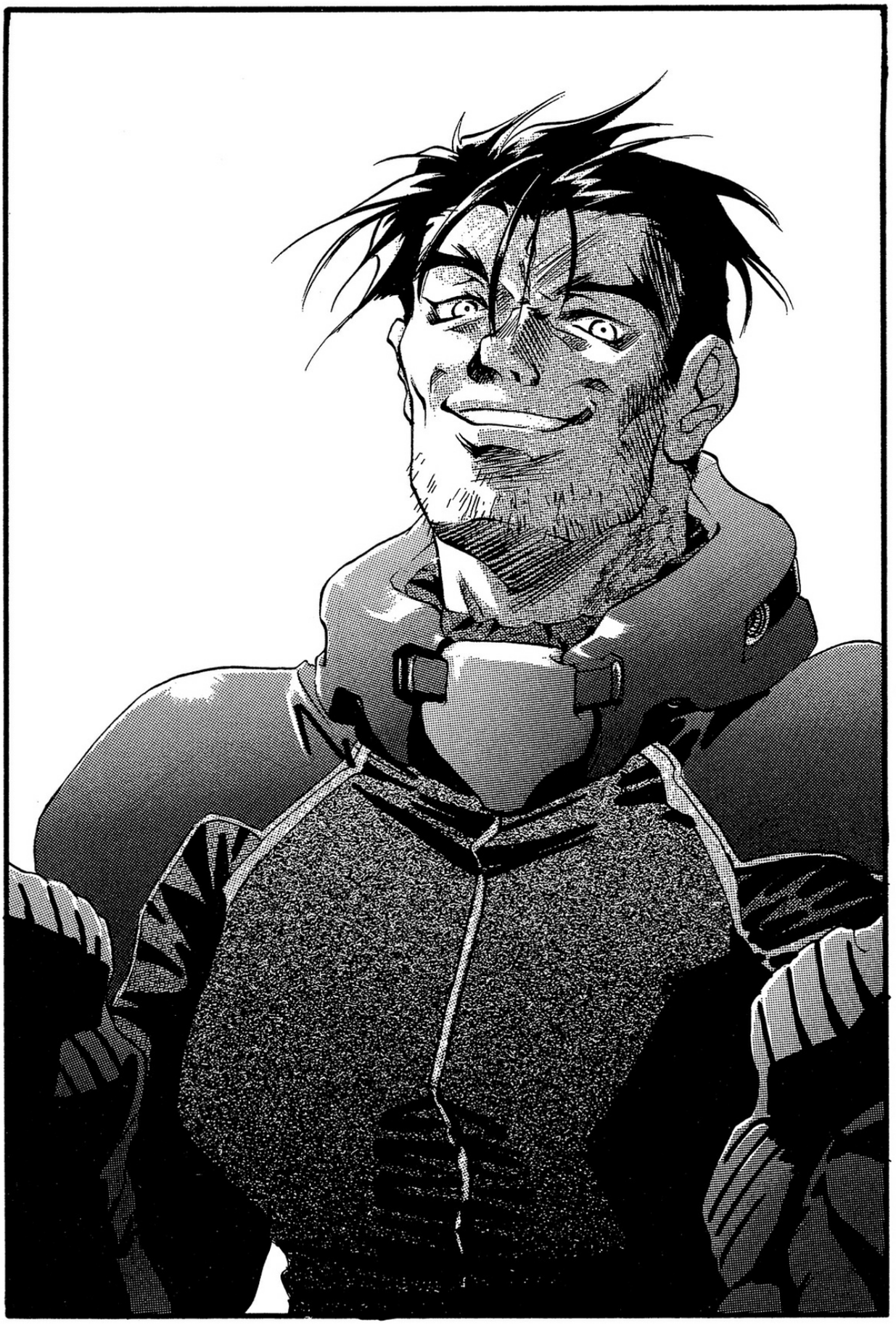
"I guess you win this one... I overheated again," Gauron said at last. There was a sound of depressurization. The red machine's chest trembled then slowly split in half. He'd opened the hatch. For any AS operator, opening a hatch in front of the enemy was a sign of surrender. ASes were modeled after the human body, and given their skeletal structure, it was nearly impossible to move with the torso split like that. As far as Sousuke could tell, the Venom was no exception.

"It seems our positions are reversed from the last time," Gauron chuckled. "I surrender; do with me as you will."

Sousuke quietly seethed. "Get down from there." He was struggling to keep his voice soft and calm.

"You're not going to shoot me? You may find yourself regretting that..." That was the last word from the external speakers. A few seconds later, a man's figure emerged. He was wearing a dark red operator's uniform. There was a vertical scar on his forehead and a burn scar along his neck. He looked thinner than he had four months earlier, but it was Gauron, no question.

"So? What will you do with me?" asked the terrorist with a rueful smile.



28 August, 0440 Hours (Local Time) Berildaob Island, Perio Archipelago Within a mere thirty seconds after the battle with Gauron ended, the transport helicopters from the Tuatha de Danaan arrived. The members of the PRT—primary response team—disembarked and scattered throughout the base, while the M9s hung behind them for support. There were a few sporadic shootouts with the remaining enemy infantry, but they managed to secure the base without any serious injuries.

They took seventeen hostages from the terrorist group. Most of them were struggling mercenaries, who had been crowded out of various worldwide conflict zones. The American base personnel, 48 in total, were also liberated from the barracks where they'd been held. Normally, there would have been more men on base, but since it was summer vacation season, over half had been away.

As for Mithril's own losses... Melissa Mao had survived. Gauron's "finger gun" shot had passed just above the cockpit block, so it hadn't actually hurt its operator. She'd just been knocked out by a concussion caused by the force of the impact.

The best news of all was that they had recovered Gauron and the Venom virtually unharmed; investigating man and machine would let them learn some things about the organization backing them. On paper, the mission was a roaring success...

But only on paper. To Sousuke, what happened back there felt like the furthest thing from success there could be. His failure to use the Arbalest's lambda driver had almost gotten Mao killed, and they'd only survived thanks to Kurz's quick thinking and Gauron's stall-out. In other words, he himself had contributed nothing. He'd gotten lucky, no more.

McAllen had said, "Don't sweat it. You did well."

Kurz had said, "Hey, sometimes shit happens."

Dunnigan and Nguyen had nothing to say at all.

The base was in a clamor with the counterinsurgency complete. Sousuke was in his Arbalest, standing in a pockmarked heliport on the base's west side, protecting the landed helicopters. Nearby lay Mao's damaged M9 and the red machine, the Venom.

Sousuke turned his eyes to a small transport helicopter. Next to it stood Major Kalinin, who had come with the PRT, as well as Captain McAllen and the tightly-restrained Gauron.

"Hey there, Ivan. How many years has it been, now?" Gauron seemed perfectly at ease, even in the presence of the large, burly Russian with eyes like ice.

Kalinin stared closely at the terrorist, his gaze one of murderous intent. It was a look that would cause a normal person's heart to leap from their chest in terror. "What are you planning?" the Russian asked at length.

"Planning? Whatever do you mean?" Gauron chuckled.

Kalinin watched him a moment longer. "If you insist," he allowed. "Just a warning—don't expect the smallest hint of mercy. There won't be any deals made, here. I'll make you confess everything, and then I'll erase you from this earth. Remember that."

"I'm trembling already," Gauron mocked.

Kalinin turned and addressed to the soldier next to him. "Take him away." With a shove from the PRT member, Gauron boarded the helicopter. Kalinin and Captain McAllen took their distance as the machine began to lift off. "Get your men out of here within five minutes. I'm going to stay on the base, as planned."

"Sir," Captain McAllen acknowledged.

Kalinin still had some petty politicking to deal with: contacting the incoming US military forces and negotiating with them about the aftermath. Except for a few of his subordinates, all other staff and equipment—AS and transport helicopters—would be withdrawing at once. Gauron and the Venom would be moved to the de Danaan, while the other hostages would be remanded to United States custody. Kalinin really did believe he should have shot the man

dead on the spot, but headquarters had ordered that Gauron be taken in. This "stealing" of the terrorists' leader would surely earn blowback from the Americans.

While walking with McAllen, he sank into dark thoughts. *That man clearly has something up his sleeve. A lifeline, at the very least...* The Gauron that Kalinin knew would never engage in such reckless terrorism. He might act self-destructive and hedonistic, but he was still a professional; he'd construct his plans carefully, with achievable goals and a guarantee of his own safety in mind.

Gauron wasn't suicidal. He'd put his own life over that of the whole planet; Kalinin knew that for sure. By contrast, the seizure of that base, the absurd demands, the easy surrender... none of it fit his usual modus operandi. It was no wonder Tessa was concerned; the base attack could well have been a diversion for Gauron's allies to attack some other critical facility elsewhere.

Mithril's top brass, having already acknowledged that possibility, were keeping an ear to the ground, and issuing warnings to the security forces of various nations. There was no sign of any such activity at the moment, but... if the enemy had made the right preparations, they'd effectively have no way to guard against it.

It was just like what had happened here; they were always stuck reacting. It was a fundamental problem with Mithril. Deterrence was their goal, and they called themselves invincible, but everyone in the organization knew that that was a lie. It wasn't a problem limited to Mithril, of course; all anti-terror entities faced a similar dilemma. The initiative in a battle always lay with the attackers.

Mithril's lone advantage was their advanced equipment and elite personnel—but that, in turn, meant their expansion was limited. A power to crush evil that was extremely potent, but rare—this was the reason the anti-terrorist mercenary organization had named itself after "mithril," after the fictional metal from the works of J.R.R. Tolkien.

Kalinin broke out of his musings. "Ask Colonel Testarossa for instructions regarding the Venom," he said. "I'll leave the treatment of that man... Gauron, to you."

"Sir," McAllen responded.

“Keep at least two men on him at all times,” Kalinin cautioned. “Who they are is up to you. Following his physical examination, keep him under strict lock and key, and do not remove his restraints under any circumstances. Keep him completely isolated until quarantine is over. Once he’s received his bill of health, ignore any further requests for medical aid.”

“You mean, any sudden turns for the worse?” McAllen grinned. He was talking about feigned illness.

“Yes. I don’t care if he dies as a result; there’s no need to afford him any respect,” Kalinin said. “Treat him like an extremely intelligent, exceedingly savage animal.”

“Understood. Sir.” McAllen saluted, then ran back to his own M9.

The Mithril transport helicopters receded into the distance. Some were large with ASes dangling beneath; others were small, for personnel transport. They must have engaged their ECSes in flight, because they all suddenly disappeared in the morning sun. Plumes of smoke were still rising here and there around the base, and the barracks, communications center, administration building, and hangar were all riddled with holes.

Kurama crawled out from under the remains of the Dark Bushnell left on the shore. He’d determined there was no more need to stay in hiding. “Hmm...” He gazed at the last vestiges of the helicopters, a pale purple band hanging in the air, and his round nose let out a snort. *There goes Gauron,* he thought.

Luck would determine what happened to him next—and that man’s devil’s luck was not to be underestimated. No... perhaps the pancreatic cancer was a balancing of the books for all of the undeserved good fortune in his past. He was a dead man walking now; a man with nothing left to fear.

Kurama put the chance of the plan’s success at about 50-50. Bad odds; they both must be mad.

He pulled out a satellite communicator module, extended the antenna and swiftly manipulated the panel. Soon, he’d opened an encrypted channel.

“Yes?” came the voice on the other end. It was the languid voice of a young man; he sounded sleepy.

“It’s me.”

“Oh... Kurama? How’d it go?” There was a sound of hair being brushed back, and a faint sound of rustling cloth. He could hear a woman’s nasal moaning in the background.

“Gauron’s been taken to the Toy Box,” Kuruma said.

“Hmm... Sounds like I won the bet. Mr. Gold owes me three Leviathans and five dollars. Next time I see Gauron, I’ll have to treat him to dinner...”

This gave Kurama pause. “You think we’ll see him again?” he asked doubtfully.

“I certainly hope so,” the boy said, and then yawned. “It took me three days to create that special program, after all. And Mr. Zinc laid all that groundwork... Well, I want that rotten little sister of mine to learn a lesson.”

“Really, sir?”

“Yes. At the very least, it should get her attention,” the boy reasoned. “I’ll wait for good news, but I won’t get my hopes up... So, are you heading back now?”

“Yes.”

“Be careful, then.”

“Thank you.” The transmission concluded, Kurama closed up the transceiver and threw it into the ocean. He checked his clothing; it was your basic American military uniform. His rank was corporal, and his dogtag read J. Rock. He had an ID card, too.

A dozen or so US military helicopters were approaching from the northern skies. “Let’s see...” *Which should I ride back?* Kurama wondered.

27 August, 2015 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time) Main Hangar, Tuatha de Danaan Once all the helicopters had landed in the hangar, the ship’s hull—a.k.a., the flight hatch—slowly closed with a muffled roar.

The ASes detached from the helicopters. Then, each walked to their

designated spots and knelt down. The helicopters stopped their engines, folded up their rotors, and were locked down. Deck crew and maintenance personnel ran busily around the hangar, securing machinery and disarming weapons.

Kaname stood at the hangar's entrance, fidgeting. Combatants from the earlier battle kept passing by. They mostly looked tired, but at the same time, relieved. A few even winked to Kaname. *It looks like everyone's okay, then...* she was thinking, when just then, Mao was carried past on a stretcher. She looked like she'd been wounded.

Kaname tried to call out to her in concern, but the middle-aged ship's doctor, Peggy, who was standing next to her, said, "Don't worry. She just took a tumble, is all." Mao was taken to the sick bay. Kaname watched the stretcher go, turned around, and found Sousuke standing there. He must have been seeing Mao off, too.

He was safe. Relief flooded over her, but as she opened her mouth to speak, she realized it. "Sousuke?" It was clear that he was depressed about something. His face was its usual sullen one with its usual tight frown... but his eyes were scanning the floor listlessly. He had none of his usual vigor. "Um... Welcome back," she said hesitantly.

Sousuke didn't respond. He just sat down on a small electric tractor parked nearby and didn't even seem to notice that Kaname was there. She had come all this way to make sure Sousuke was all right... but of course, he didn't seem to realize that.

An alarm rang out from the submarine's speakers, and a synthetic voice called "Dive! Dive!" The floor tilted a bit, vibrating. At some point, the hangar had come to be nearly deserted, and a hush had fallen over it.

"Y-You don't have to get back to the duty room?" she asked.

"No," he muttered.

"Why not?"

"I made a mistake. I can't face my comrades," he said coldly, before starting to remove his operator's uniform. He took off the cast-like neck brace designed to prevent whiplash, then the thin body armor, and then unzipped the chest,

which acted a bit like a biker's coveralls. He tied the sleeves around the hips of his still-covered lower half, but on top, he was just wearing a tank top.

"Did... someone die?" Kaname asked cautiously.

"No."

"It's all good then, right? Mao-san didn't seem that bad off, either..."

"Don't trivialize it." Sousuke raised his voice.

"I'm not... trying to trivialize it..." Kaname stammered.

"She could just as easily have died... because of me and that AS."

"Huh?"

Eyes still averted, Sousuke began to speak, the words flowing from his lips as if a dam had burst. "I couldn't use that device—the lambda driver—properly. 'Pour your will into it,' 'imagine the shot'... none of it makes any sense to me. I'm sick of it. It's too vague and random to serve as a weapon. It's just like magic; they should get a shaman to pilot it, not a soldier. I..." He looked at the Arbalest parked on the other side of the hangar. "I don't like that machine," he went on bitterly. "I hate it. It lets its operator down at the most crucial times. It's not a tool for a professional. Whoever made it is the worst engineer ever."

Kaname had never seen Sousuke complain about anything like this. Fighting back her numb surprise, she clutched the hem of her apron and said, quietly, "Hey, why don't you get some rest? You must be tired..."

"I'm not," he said shortly.

"But, like... this isn't like you." Kaname genuinely believed that. This wasn't like him. This wasn't Sousuke at all. She didn't know what had happened, but to say all these vicious things... Usually he was much more forward-driven; he never stooped to criticizing the people or things around him.

"What would you know about me?" he said in a harsh whisper, restraining a shout.

"Huh?" she blinked.

"You talk about what's 'like me,' as if you knew. Do you realize what they've

pushed on me? I'm a mercenary," he went on. "I was doing fine on normal missions with normal equipment. But ever since that mission four months ago, all I get is criticism. Gauron, that AS, being your bodyguard... none of it's what I'm cut out for. It's all a nuisance."

"You..." Kaname felt like she'd been smacked in the back of her head. A nuisance. Being her bodyguard was... She'd never realized that was how he felt about her. "You... You know..." she managed to squeeze out. "It's not like I asked you to do that. You're the one who forced his way into my life, so... so quit, if that's what you want..."

"I can't," he said tiredly. "I'm the only one who can execute this mission."

"Oh, please... Mission? You can't..."

Sousuke looked up at Kaname. His eyes were exhausted, indifferent, hollow. "It sounds like you're the one who's tired."

"I'm not tired," she told him. "I'm worried about you, okay? But you just..."

"I know," Sousuke said, cutting her off. "I get it, so go back to your room."

Kaname didn't say anything else; she just turned around and left. She passed Kurz and an East Asian soldier at the door, and without even a word of greeting, dragged herself listlessly into the hall.

Even after Kaname had left, Sousuke remained, blackly glaring at the floor. The fact that Gauron was alive. The fact that he was on board with them. The Arbalest, Mao, the lambda driver... His mind was seething with fear and regret, and he couldn't see a way forward. He'd hit a wall. His head felt heavy.

"Sousuke." He heard a voice. Kurz had come up to him at some point, with Corporal Yang trailing behind him.

Sousuke looked up curiously. "Kur—" Kurz's fist slammed into his left cheek. With no way to stop a sucker punch, Sousuke tumbled off the electric trailer and crashed into the floor. It must have cut his cheek open, because he could taste blood. He grunted, and after some stirring, looked up. Kurz was clearly trying to hit Sousuke again, while Yang was doing everything he could to restrain him.

“Don’t do it, Kurz!” Yang pleaded.

“Shut up!” Kurz snarled back as they struggled against each other.

Sousuke wiped some blood from a corner of his mouth. “What do you think you’re doing?” he asked curiously.

“Sorry for eavesdropping, but I couldn’t stand another minute of your damned hero act,” Kurz told him sarcastically. “That’s all!”

“Hero act? I—”

“Shut up,” Kurz said coldly. “You couldn’t be the big man out there, so you wanna sulk like a child and take it out on a girl. You’re like a wife-beating bastard who gets his neighbors calling the cops on him every night. You get it?!”

“I’m not taking it out on anyone!” Sousuke cried, confused.

“Yeah right, asshole! You made a nice girl cry!” Kurz yelled back. “You’re a piece of shit, and the only way you’ll learn is if I beat your face in!”

“What...” Kaname was crying? When? Why? Sousuke had been so focused on his own problems that he hadn’t given any thought to her at all. *I... made her cry?*

Yang managed to talk Kurz down into some semblance of calm. His shoulders heaving, Kurz turned his eyes away from Sousuke. “I get why you’re on edge, okay?” he said brusquely. “Look... I’m not mad about what happened on the mission. That Arbalest is a weird AS. We all knew it might crap out on you; that’s why me and Mao and McAllen were there. But we captured the Venom and we took back the base. That means the job went well! Am I wrong?”

“But Mao—” Sousuke started.

“Are you kidding me? She goes through that shit all the time,” Kurz objected scornfully. “You’re not some damned rookie! You *know* that!”

Sousuke said nothing.

“You think you’re the only one fighting out there? Get your head out of your ass...” Kurz spat, then strode out of the hangar.

Yang remained behind, hands on his hips, and let out a long sigh. “Sousuke.

Are you okay?”

“Yeah...” he mumbled.

“Earlier, Kurz said he wanted to tease you because you looked so depressed. I think it was his way of trying to cheer you up. But when he heard what you said to her, he just lost it...”

“I see,” Sousuke responded, and then stood up. He wiped the corner of his mouth again. The taste of blood. The pain. He knew the sensations well, yet there was something unfamiliar about them. He thought it over, and realized he’d never actually been hit like that before.

Of course, that wasn’t about to cheer him up.

28 August, 0115 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time) Central Control Room, Tuatha de Danaan After diving to 300 meters, they set a course north-northeast at a speed of 30 knots. There was a US Navy submarine hiding beneath the thermal layer, the veil of ocean water that cut off sound waves. Of course, they knew the de Danaan—which they called the “Toy Box”—would be in the vicinity of Berildaob Island right now. On top of that, it seemed that they’d acquired data on the de Danaan’s acoustic signature. Anti-submarine patrol planes, anti-submarine helicopters, and frigates were all on the move.

Tessa used their SCD and EMFC to skillfully slip through their blockades. It was the usual game, and they won in the usual way.

She looked at the nautical chart on her screen. According to the weather team’s report, there was a low pressure system approaching from the west, and they’d have storms up above for about a day. This was a good thing for them; it would keep the American anti-submarine helicopters at bay, and they might have to give up on tracking them entirely. If everything went well, they could be back at Merida Island Base by tomorrow night.

Tessa wanted to check in on Mao and talk things over with Sousuke, but she

didn't have time for that yet. She had to stay in the control room and be on the lookout for the smallest abnormality. She was worried about their prisoner, Gauron... Not only was he alive, but he'd appeared with a new lambda driver-mounted machine in tow.

Kalinin, who had remained behind on Berildaob Island, had radioed to tell her to watch out for him. "He's probably planning something," he'd added. Tessa had had a bad feeling about things ever since she had first heard the island was occupied, but this had proven even worse than she'd thought. A smell of danger seemed to waft from the first briefing room, the place where the man was being held.

Still, Sousuke and the others had done well; the fact that they had taken the Venom in without a scratch was nothing short of a miracle. *Or perhaps I should say, it's everything I expect from Sagara-san...* she thought. Despite her occupation with the command of the vessel, and having not yet heard the details of the Venom's capture, she allowed herself a private moment of heart-fluttering indulgence.

"Colonel." Second Lieutenant Lemming, an engineering officer, entered the control room. She had been ordered to do a quick examination of the Venom, which now sat in the hold.

"What is it?" Tessa responded.

"Well, I still haven't done a full analysis yet, but its LD seems fundamentally identical to the one in the ARX-7. Though there are a few minor differences... One thing that's for sure is that it's from the same line as the one in the Behemoth."

"I see..."

"But there's something else that concerns me," Lieutenant Lemming went on. "That AS... they said it overheated and surrendered, but..."

"What?" Tessa asked with some alarm.

"It still seems perfectly functional. It had some armor snapped off here and there, and the ECS lenses in the shoulders took damage, but..."

Images of the AS snapping to life and running rampant in their hangar raced

suddenly through Tessa's mind. "There's no danger of it starting up on its own, is there?" she asked.

Lemming gave her a quiet smile. "No, ma'am. We've unhooked its generator. No matter what its AI has been programmed to do, it can't move without a power source. It also has a self-destruct device, but that won't go off unless someone sets it off."

"I'm glad to hear that, but..." In that case, why wasn't the AS nonfunctional? More to the point... why had Gauron given up when he could have kept fighting? *Did he get himself taken hostage on purpose?* she wondered.

Impossible. Out of the question. The man had undergone a full body search, had been put under the strictest restraints, and was under round-the-clock surveillance from SRT staff. He'd cleared quarantine as well, so there was no chance he'd brought some virus on board. That terrorist would have no opportunities to escape or to try anything on them. And yet...

"Well, thank you for all your hard work," Tessa finally said. "We'll give the Venom a more thorough analysis back at base."

"Yes, Colonel." Lieutenant Lemming saluted her, then left the control room.

"Mardukas-san." Tessa addressed her XO once she was gone.

"Yes, Captain?"

"I want to talk to you about something..."

28 August, 0110 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time) US Navy Submarine Pasadena, West Pacific Ocean It had been a while since they'd received orders from fleet command, but they came in as follows: *Some time in the next twelve hours, the Toy Box might pass through your area. Run quiet; if you find it, tail it, and take in as much data as you can.*

Commander Killy B. Sailor, captain of the USS Pasadena, crushed the paper they were printed on into a ball, and groaned in displeasure. "And how the hell are we supposed to find it? Dammit..." They had to search for a machine they'd

lost sight of at point blank range in an area with a radius of 100 kilometers. It would be like finding a needle in a haystack.

“I’m sure command isn’t expecting that much from us,” offered his XO, Lieutenant Takenaka. Other ships of the Pacific Fleet were apparently further south, hunting for the Toy Box. The Pasadena was somewhat isolated by comparison.

“Probably not,” Commander Sailor agreed. “You know, missions like these always make me think of Nobby.”

“Who?” Lieutenant Takenaka blinked.

“Ah, when I was a kid, I led this peewee baseball team, see?”

“Oh?”

“We called ourselves the Oklahoma Sailors,” the commander reminisced. “One of the kids was this loser named Nobby. I put him in right field, batting eighth, and otherwise hung him out to dry. Any time he made an error, I pulled his pants down in front of Kathy.”

“Who’s Kathy?” Lieutenant Takenaka asked.

Sailor didn’t answer, but his gaze turned distant. “Times like these, I think about how Nobby must have felt, stuck out there in the cold of right field...”

“Did the story need to be that long?”

“What? Are you mocking my beautiful boyhood memories?”

“You mean that blathering on about your days as a bumpkinville bully?” Takenaka retorted.

“Why, you...!”

For the next three minutes, Sailor and Takenaka laid into each other. The officer of the deck finally said “that’s enough” and separated them, and the two panted for breath. After a minute of rest and five minutes of arguing, they decided to lay the sub low just under the thermal layer and wait for the Toy Box —the untrackable Toy Box—to pass.

In other words, they had a dull twelve hours of picking their noses and waiting

ahead. Or so he thought...

28 August, 0431 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time) Galley, Tuatha de Danaan Tucked in between the new microwave and the oven, there was a space. It was dark, no more than shoulder-width wide; the perfect place for someone to crawl into her shell when she was feeling low.

Kaname was curled up in that space, wallowing in her depression. She hugged her knees, gazed gloomily at the floor, and radiated isolation. All she could think about was Sousuke. She'd feel angry, then disappointed, then sad, and then pitiful. Whenever her thoughts reached a standstill, her eyes would fill with tears. Then she'd realize how pathetic she was being and go back to anger.

Tomorrow, she thought, *I'll ask Tessa to take him off my bodyguard duty.* Maybe they could get someone else to take over, or remove the requirement altogether. Whichever; it didn't matter. He hated being around her and thought of her as a nuisance. She didn't want to be a burden anymore; that's all it was.

The cook, Private First Class Kasuya Hiroshi, let her have her space. Sousuke had come to the mess a few hours before to ask Kasuya if he'd seen Chidori Kaname, but he'd covered for her and said no. There was something strange about watching two Japanese men speak to each other in English.

When Kaname got tired, she dozed off. Then she woke up from her shallow dream and went back to her circling thoughts. Eventually, she got tired and fell asleep again. The cycle repeated over and over.

Finally, as if unable to watch her self-torment any longer, Kasuya spoke up. He bookmarked the book about oceanography that he'd been reading and walked up to her. "Um, hey... Kaname-chan," he tried cautiously. "You can stay here if you want, but you should probably eat something."

After a long pause, she croaked out, "No thanks."

"And if you're going to sleep, you should probably go back to the captain's quarters," he advised.

"Don't want to," she managed again. She couldn't stand to see or talk to

anyone right now.

“Don’t be like that,” Kasuya said soothingly. “A shower and a nice rest might help you feel better.”

Kaname looked up at him, emptily. “Am I a nuisance to you?”

“What? No, I wouldn’t say that...” he said with a strained smile.

She’d become a burden here, too, it seemed. With a sense of resignation, Kaname stood up and dragged herself out of the galley.

Same Timeframe, 1st Briefing Room, Tuatha de Danaan Guard over the terrorist was being handled in snappy one-hour shifts. The de Danaan had no brig facilities, as they were rarely needed, and space was at a premium on a submarine. Therefore, on the rare occasion they ended up with a prisoner on board, they just used a currently unoccupied room. In this case, it was the first briefing room.

Private Liang of the PRT was taking his second turn on watch. He and the SRT’s Sergeant Dunnigan sat near the room’s entrance, watching over the terrorist. Watching was all the job consisted of; the terrorist in question—Liang didn’t know his name—had been placed in a straitjacket, gagged, handcuffed and chained to the chair. His prosthetic leg had been removed and was being stored in another room with his other equipment. There was no way he could possibly free himself from restraints like that.

Liang was bored, even though he was only ten minutes into a shift. His attempt at smothering a yawn earned him a glare from Sergeant Dunnigan. “Sorry.”

“You’d never make it as a sniper,” Dunnigan told him acerbically. A sniper needed discipline to hold a single position for hours at a time... Basically, he was telling Liang he lacked that discipline. Dunnigan was a big, burly man, with a round, shaved head and a thick scar over his right eye. His eyes were a pale blue. They hadn’t talked much before, but as far as Liang had seen, the man was always in a bad mood.

Liang sniffed. “Maybe not, but not even a Shanghai acrobat could slip out of those restraints. So...”

“Part of our job is to be prepared for any danger that might come,” Dunnigan told him. “Don’t forget that.”

“Danger?” Liang scoffed. “What kind of danger could there be?”

Dunnigan’s brow furrowed, and he assumed a posture of careful deliberation. He checked his watch, then responded, gazing at the terrorist. “Let’s see... How about this?” Dunnigan took a silencer out of his pocket and screwed it into the muzzle of his pistol.

Liang watched him in confusion.

“Let’s say, just for an example... What if I did this?” Dunnigan turned the gun toward Liang.

The man’s jaw dropped. “Wh-What are you doing? That’s not fair...”

“Sure, it’s fair. This is one possible danger. That’s why you can’t let your guard down.” His blue eyes stared right into Liang’s. They were serious, like a teacher offering a grave life lesson.

The gun remained trained on him. The private gulped, and nodded. “I... I’m very... sorry. Sergeant, sir.”

“Glad you get the point.” Dunnigan smiled broadly. As Liang relaxed, the sergeant, still grinning, added this. “But you learned it too late.” He pulled the trigger. Private Liang died instantly from a bullet to the brain. The shot was extremely quiet.

The chains, handcuffs, straitjacket and gag were removed, and Gauron could finally find a measure of comfort. He rubbed at his joints, stiff from their long confinement, and rolled out his neck. As his prosthetic leg was still missing, he remained seated in the chair.

“Hmm... I thought for a minute you were going to leave me out to dry,” Gauron said. He was all smiles, but Dunnigan was stone-faced.

“I can’t say I didn’t think about it, but that last mission made up my mind for me,” Dunnigan admitted. “I can’t stay here. They’re all a bunch of spoiled

babies.”

“Are they?” In fact, Gauron was meeting this man for the first time. It was only recently that Mr. Zinc, their spy in the upper echelons of Mithril, had begun to take action. The man who was freeing Gauron now was one who had been won over by Mr. Zinc. Most people at Mithril were extremely content with their lot there, so finding potential traitors was a job that apparently came with great difficulty and danger. Of course, that was none of Gauron’s concern. His job was to take their submarine in unharmed—or to destroy it. “Anyway, welcome to Amalgam. Mister, ah...”

“Dunnigan. John Dunnigan.”

“A pleasure, John.” Gauron held out his right hand.

Dunnigan ignored it and said, with cold fire, “Watch your mouth, Chinese. I don’t let just anyone call me John.”

“Ah-ha...” Gauron lifted an eyebrow.

“We’re just partners in a business arrangement,” Dunnigan reminded him. “Don’t forget that.”

Gauron withdrew his hand and scratched at his temple. Then, gauging the other man’s expression, he said, “So, just to be sure... I assume you ‘don’t take orders’ from me too?”

“Yeah. I’m glad you understand, Chi—” Without even standing up out of his chair, Gauron had grabbed Dunnigan’s wrist, and before the other man could react, he twisted it and threw him off-balance. Then he spun him by the arm, turned him, pushed him down, pulled—and like magic, Dunnigan’s massive body went flying, flipped, and ended up on the ground. Dunnigan gasped in shock.

Gauron dropped onto his fallen opponent. At some point, a knife that Dunnigan had smuggled in had ended up in Gauron’s hand. “Goodness me... Was that you letting your guard down, *Jooohn*?” He pressed the knife to his opponent’s neck. “Incidentally, that’s jiu-jitsu—from my home country, Japan. *Jooohn.*”

“Why... you...” Dunnigan struggled for words and breath.

“‘Watch your mouth’? ‘I don’t take orders from you’?” Gauron scoffed. “That’s not how this works, *Jooohn*...” The knife’s tip began to inch into Dunnigan’s flesh.

Dunnigan hissed and began to cry out.

“You see, *Jooohn*... even in business, one must pay respect to his predecessors. You know that, don’t you? *Jooohn?!*”

Dunnigan’s body trembled with agony; sweat rose on his brow. Then at last, as if unable to bear it any longer, “F-Fine... I’m... I’m sorry...” he hissed.

“Are you, really?” Gauron wanted to know.

“I am, really. I won’t make any more trouble for you.”

“Good. Then let’s shake and make up.” With the knife held to his neck, Gauron reached out with his right hand. Still forced to the ground, Dunnigan tremblingly took it. “Now... where might my leg have ended up? We can’t do anything without the disc I hid in there...”

“I brought it with me. It’s in there.” An olive-green bag was stowed beneath the chair Dunnigan had been sitting in.

Gauron put on the uniform previously worn by the dead Private Liang, stole his submachine gun, and left the briefing room with Dunnigan. It was already late at night; the lights were dim, and there was no one to be seen.

Dunnigan led him down the corridors to a stairway to the upper deck. “The control room is up here,” he said. “It’s where you’ll find the captain.”

“Excellent.” As Gauron put his foot on the step, he heard a voice behind him.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

They turned around and saw a man standing there, his pistol already drawn.

It was an officer: a short, Caucasian man who was leaning out from behind the corner with his gun pointed squarely at them.

“Oh, hey, Captain McAllen. Let me explain—”

“Shut up, Dunnigan.” McAllen interrupted sharply. “So this was the game, eh? Good thing the major warned me about the chance of a traitor in our midst. But

what I never thought it would come from our own SRT...”

With a rueful smile, Dunnigan dropped his attempt at smooth talk. He let out a chuckle and a shrug without the slightest sign of shame. “Never liked that little girl from the start,” he confessed. “Never, from the start.”

“You can explain yourself later,” Captain McAllen told him grimly. “Both of you, drop your guns.”

The corners of Gauron’s mouth curled upward. “And if we refuse?”

“You die.” McAllen was keeping his left side carefully hidden behind the corner, and he was probably a first-rate marksman. He’d kill them both in a split-second, before they could even raise their guns.

It was then that another member of the crew appeared, from around the opposite corner. It was a Southeast Asian man in a combat uniform.

“That you, Nguyen?” Captain McAllen asked cautiously.

“Captain,” Nguyen asked, “what’s going on here?”

“Just what it looks like. Dunnigan’s betrayed us; call Weber and the others,” McAllen said, his gun steady.

Nguyen took stock of everybody present, then drew a small pistol from his pocket: a 9mm with a silencer. With a silencer— “What’s wrong with you, Nguyen?! Hurry up and—”

“Sorry, Captain.” Nguyen pointed the gun at McAllen and pulled the trigger. There were three swift shots; each released a spray of fresh blood from his chest.

Like a marionette with its strings cut, Captain McAllen collapsed onto the floor. He didn’t even have time for a scream, a curse, or an insult.

“Nice shot!” Gauron breathed. “So, would this make you my other partner-in-crime?”

Nguyen nodded. “Looks that way. I’m Nguyen Bien Bo. Do I get a bonus for that?”

Gauron laughed with a wince. “I’ll see what we can negotiate.”

“Counting on it, Gauron-san.” Nguyen made an “OK” sign with his fingers. Just then, there was a faint sound. The three men, with their finely honed senses, turned their eyes toward it at the same time.

A girl was standing just beyond the fallen McAllen. She was dressed in a way that seemed out of place on a warship—a pale green parka and yellow shorts—and her long black hair swayed in the dim light.

The girl looked down at the blood at her feet, then slowly raised her eyes to Gauron and the others. Her delicate features were clenched up with uncertainty, and her lips were trembling. She seemed to lack any idea of what was going on and any comprehension of the situation she’d walked into.

She opened her mouth wordlessly, snapping out of her daze. But before she could turn to run away, Nguyen leaped at her. There was no way that an ordinary girl, already shaken, could compete with the speed of a trained soldier. He wrapped an arm around her from behind and held a black combat knife to her chest. She let out a cry of distress.

“Scream if you like, dearie. But here’s what it’ll get you...” Nguyen put his mouth close to her ear as he pressed the knife harder against her breast through her clothes. “Lots of painful memories and a body no guy’ll ever want.”

She just barely managed to stifle herself.

“That’s the civilian the captain invited on board. Let’s finish her off,” Dunnigan said.

But Gauron shook his head gravely. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Various reasons... We just need to try to avoid killing her,” Gauron told him. “Emphasis on *try*.” As Nguyen walked the girl up to them, he peered into her face. She was holding her breath, her eyes filled with tears... yet she was mustering up all the courage she had to glare back at Gauron. Fortunately, that seemed to be the limit of her resistance.

“It’s been a while, Kaname-chan,” Gauron said pleasantly. “How’s everyone at school?”

It's like a horror movie, Kaname thought. *Sousuke beat this guy... this terrorist, in the mountains of North Korea. He's supposed to be dead.* Yet he had survived, and now, he was here on this submarine. Out of nowhere he'd appeared, in this place where someone like him should never be...

What is going on here? she wondered. *What...* Kaname racked her brains—but of course, there was no way she could figure it out on her own. The only thing she could tell for sure was that she was in trouble again, and that this time, it was especially bad.

They're probably even better than Sousuke, something in her mind told her, vaguely and without basis. This man—Gauron, his name was—and his two highly skilled henchmen weren't like the terrorists working with Takuma two months ago. The way they walked, the way they carried themselves, the quiet aura of death that wreathed them—these were men who reeked of violence, professionals who could kill a man as effortlessly as they took a breath. That much was clear, even to an amateur like Kaname.

The group began to travel through the deserted passageways. The bald-headed giant led the way, followed by Gauron and Kaname, with the lean knife-wielder bringing up the rear. They climbed a stairway, passed through several doors, and came out into the heart of the Tuatha de Danaan, the control room.

Tessa was sitting in the captain's chair in the control room, reviewing the battle record from Berildaob Island. There were only nine crewmen on duty there with her; nearly half the seats of the lecture hall-like space were empty. Even her executive officer, Mardukas, was currently absent.

The crewman nearest to the door was the first one to notice the new arrivals. He was barely even on his feet before Dunnigan socked him in the nose, sending him toppling over his seat. The sound of his cry and fall drew all eyes to the entrance at once.

Tessa looked over a second later than the rest. She started in shock at what she saw: Sergeant Dunnigan of the SRT; Chidori Kaname, being dragged along by Corporal Nguyen; and... Gauron, with a submachine gun in hand. Tessa could feel all the hair on her body stand up. The sight of these four people together told her immediately what had happened, and who it was that had betrayed

her.

Most of her crew began to rise from their seats, preparing to fall on Gauron and his accomplices. But before they could begin, Tessa shouted, “No!” The crew froze. “Don’t do it. That’s an order!”

They probably thought they could neutralize the intruders, even if a few of them died in the process. But Tessa knew too well what a member of the SRT could do. Sousuke, Mao, Kurz, McAllen, Yang—all were good people, but they also possessed a nearly superhuman aptitude for killing, and Dunnigan and Nguyen were no exceptions. The two of them alone could probably kill everyone here with just their bare hands—and to make things worse, they were armed.

Tessa’s rule was for her crew not to carry weapons on board unless absolutely necessary; firearms and blades were especially forbidden in the control room. She had actually broken that rule herself and smuggled in a small automatic pistol... but one gun wouldn’t save them against these three.

“There’s the judgment I expect from a captain. Know when to avoid a fight,” Gauron said languidly. Then, he turned his gun to Tessa. “Did you hear that, everyone?” he went on. “No funny business, now—and that includes sounding the alarm. Any attempt at resistance I see will bring terrible consequences for your pretty little captain. How terrible, you ask? Let’s just say ‘X-rated’—things you shouldn’t show to minors. Understand?”

The crew slowly returned to their seats, expressions grim.

“Do your worst. You won’t leave this vessel alive,” Tessa said with a note of challenge.

But Gauron’s reaction was pure delight. “Oh, she’s adorable! You know, I feel like I’ve done you two wrong somehow, tearing you from this wonderful work environment...” He looked at Dunnigan and Nguyen, but they both smiled ruefully.

“Yeah, like we care,” Dunnigan said with a snort.

“It’s not like she’d let us do anything anyway,” Nguyen agreed.

“I see,” Gauron said neutrally. “Ah... by the way, you should go join her, Kana-

chan. You're both going to be my precious hostages." Gauron yanked Kaname by the arm to stand her next to Tessa.

"Kaname-san," Tessa whispered urgently, "were you hurt?"

"I'm okay... But one of your soldiers... um..." Kaname stammered, face pale.

She's probably trying to tell me that someone's dead, Tessa realized. *But who?* She felt a pang in her chest, but managed to drive it from her mind for the time being.

"Now, let's move on to the main event," Gauron was saying. "Captain, put us on a northwest course... 3-0-0 should do it."

"I will not," Tessa answered.

"Oh, won't you?" Gauron pointed his submachine gun at the closest member of the crew.

"No!" Kaname shouted.

The crew member being targeted—OOD Goddard, who held the army rank of captain—gulped, but braced himself for what was coming. "Don't do it, Captain," the man said to Tessa, looking straight at her.

Tessa said nothing.

"I won't hold it against you," the OOD went on. "Neither will anyone else. Just please—"

"Die, then," Gauron said. But just before he pulled the trigger— "Wait," Tessa interrupted. She couldn't take it; she just couldn't.

Gauron's finger paused. "Oh? Is that a crack in resolve I see?" The terrorist chuckled wickedly and nodded a few times, as if enjoying her capitulation.

"Turn to port," she whispered weakly, after a desperately long pause. "Course 3-3-0."

"Captain!" the OOD objected.

"It's all right! A simple change of course won't do any harm. Didn't you hear me? Port, course 3-0-0!"

The OOD nodded weakly and repeated her order. The pilots began to steer.

The de Danaan, which had been heading almost due north, slowly began to veer westward.

There's no harm done yet, Tessa told herself. If he asked to take them past a depth their hull could withstand, or to fire any of the weapons, or to tamper with the output of the palladium reactor—if he made any dangerous requests, in other words, that's when she'd turn him down... even if it meant he killed every person there.

Her only choice was to buy time. Soon enough—if they hadn't already—the crew outside the control room would realize something was wrong, and then the tables would turn. The enemy probably only consisted of Gauron, Nguyen, and Dunnigan—if Mardukas and McAllen put their heads together, they could work something out. Leaving Major Kalinin on the island had proved to be a crucial mistake. She'd be so much more confident if he were on board with them now...

"Let me guess... you're thinking you can work something out if you buy enough time?" Gauron said.

Tessa froze.

"I should probably let you know: that last little exchange was for my own personal amusement. I have a backup in place for your inevitable refusal." Gauron chuckled again, and pulled out a floppy disk. He took a few minutes to examine the captain's chair display and its connected computer module. This was one of the few terminals directly connected to the mother AI, Dana, which oversaw all the functions of the vessel.

It can't be... A shiver went up Tessa's spine as she considered the possibility.

After checking the throttle, Gauron slipped in the disk he'd brought. "Hmm... I think I need to do... this, and this... What a confusing interface," he grumbled. "Honestly..." He used the track ball to move the cursor around the screen, and then hit a few keystrokes. "There we go." He pressed enter and a window appeared; the terminal was reading the disk's data right before their eyes.

Preparing COC | Remaining time 00:00:05

This was followed by another display: Warning | Execution of COC requ dx ‰s

approval of T. TeA?t rossa or operati‰i?s division Input passwoA?a?Ord or voiR?I?乙D ‰i?d?µ?U?･? commaB ‰ e!!!!!!!

.....

Then her personal screen went black, as did the control room's front screen.

"No... no..." Tessa eked out the words, her face pale. Kaname and the crew just watched her nervously; they had no idea what was happening.

But everything became crystal clear when the screen recovered, and displayed the following message: Welcome, Captain Gauron | Orders, please | I will do anything you ask Gauron let out a whistle and placed a hand on Tessa's shoulder. "Well, would you look at that? Machines are fickle things, aren't they?"

Tessa was dumbstruck. "COC" was short for "change of command." Usually, only Tessa could change who was registered as captain. But Gauron had done it, using only a single virus-loaded disk. Only a few people in the world knew the de Danaan's programming language, BAda... and she could think of only one capable of doing something like this. "It was him, wasn't it?" she breathed at last. "Do you... know him?"

Gauron chuckled. "I do. He sends his regards, by the way... Although, if things go smoothly here, you'll see him yourself soon enough."

Suddenly, it all fell into place for Tessa. This was *his* twisted way of saying hello. He was working with Gauron, and Gauron was going to take her, and her submarine, and hand them both over to him.

"Now, AI-kun?" Gauron said languidly.

《Yes, Captain?》The response was delivered in a female voice with just a hint of sensuality—the voice of the mother AI, Dana. The immediate reaction suggested that she had already been implanted with Gauron's voice print data.

"I think we should run a little evacuation drill," Gauron decided. "Please sound the fire and reactor accident alarms. Get everyone into the main hangar!"

《Aye, sir.》

A chilling siren began to blare through the boat.

5: Into the Blue

28 August, 0500 Hours (Greenwich Mean Time) USS Pasadena, West Pacific Ocean "An alarm, you say?" Captain Sailor was dubious about his ST's report.

"Yes, sir. Bearing 1-5-8, below the thermal layer. No clear sounds of propulsion, but it's moving... probably southeast to northwest. And quickly, at that..."

"Let's hear it, then." He took the man's headset and put it to his ear. He could hear a siren blaring like a wild beast's howl; behind it was a calm, feminine voice. It was saying something in English, but it was too soft to make it out.

"Hmm..." Captain Sailor found himself pondering. Could someone have had an accident? The noise had to be coming from some kind of submarine. He could tell that it was moving quickly, and so quietly that the siren was the only thing giving them away; there was no detectable cavitation, even to the Pasadena's powerful sonar array. On top of that, the Pasadena was the only submarine he knew about in the area. Which meant the sound had to be coming from— "Captain, it must be the Toy Box!" XO Takenaka said, beating him to the punch.

Sailor grimaced, hackles up. "Why do you always... No, I think I know."

"Huh?"

"Forget it," Sailor grumbled. "So the damned thing's shown its ass, at last. All ahead one-third, increase depth to 180! We're setting a trap for the Toy Box!"

"Aye, sir. All ahead one-third! Make your depth 180!" The Pasadena rose slowly to a shallower depth in order to better hide itself behind the veil of seawater.

Main Hangar, Tuatha de Danaan An ear-splitting alarm sounded out accompanied by AI warnings. The crew, awakened by the commotion, flooded into the main hangar en masse.

There was no fear in their expressions; just confusion, and a sort of weariness. They moved briskly enough as they handed out oxygen masks and life preservers, and they'd get top marks in efficiency in the transfer of all weapons and ammunition closer to the bow for safety, but there was still a lot of grumbling and complaining all the while.

That Testarossa girl has a sick sense of humor, making us run fire drills at this hour—That was the feeling that pervaded the crew.

《All crew evacuate to fore, main hangar. Repeat. There is a fire in the second engine room. This is a drill. Move to first compartment—》The announcement described a fire in the engine room at the far back end of the submarine that was producing a great deal of smoke and toxic gas, and an additional loss of reactor control that was creating dangerous neutron leakage. It was the kind of catastrophic situation that could only happen if the AI or the captain lost their minds. Preparedness was all well and good, of course, but...

It's odd, Sousuke thought, and many of his fellow NCOs—and a handful of officers—seemed to share the sentiment. They had a crucial hostage on board, and US military ships might still be in the local waters. Who would hold a fire drill under conditions like these? Why would that brilliant girl play around with them like this?

Sousuke was running, weaving in and out among the 200 busy crew members who currently packed the main hangar. *Chidori... where's Chidori?* he wondered. He couldn't find her. He accosted various sailors to ask, but none of them had seen her. Not even Private Kasuya, the cook, could account for her whereabouts.

At last, he approached the door that would take him to the submarine's aft. The man standing there, a first lieutenant, stopped him. "Sorry! We're about to lock down here!" In the drill's scenario, there was currently poison gas on the way.

"Our guest—Chidori Kaname is missing," Sousuke told him. "You need to let me find her!"

“No! Anyone still beyond this door is dead!” The first lieutenant declared—referring to the scenario’s fiction, of course.

“But—”

“If you see her later, tell her she died,” the first lieutenant said, cutting him off. “Now stand down; that’s an order!”

“But—”

“I said, that’s an order!” The lieutenant initiated the closure of the heavy, watertight door. The power of an independent servo motor caused the 40cm slab of metal to turn, slowly. The closing of this door—which was practically unbreachable once locked—would completely seal off their half of the sub from the aft.

Sousuke had a bad feeling about this: the suspicious fire drill; the silence from Tessa; the presence of Gauron; the absence of Chidori Kaname... But his commanding officer had told him to stay put, and he couldn’t defy orders. Sousuke stood stock still, watching the door close. Kaname was on the other side.

“Chidori...” An inexplicable feeling overwhelmed him—*If I don’t go, I’ll never see her again.* Sousuke remembered her face, the last time they’d met. Her eyes, gray with despair and despondency.

Then, the words she had said... *I’m worried about you, okay? But you just...*

And yet, here I am again, with a decision to make. If I let “orders” stop me... Sousuke was through the door in an instant.

“Ah, hey!” the first lieutenant shouted. “You!”

The watertight hatch closed behind Sousuke a second later, followed by the sliding of thick cylinders within. There was a tinny buzzing and the sound of an electromagnetic lock snapping sharply into place. All at once, the noise of the hangar was gone, leaving only the alarm.

Before him stood nothing but empty passageway; red emergency lamps blinked in the dim light. Sousuke only got about ten steps before he noticed a man in battledress, standing in the doorway to one of the crew quarters. He

was leaning against the frame, his arms folded. It was Kurz Weber.

“Kurz?” Sousuke ventured cautiously.

“You sure you want to go against orders?” Kurz asked, his eyes on the ground.

“If you think it’s so bad, then why are you here?”

“I’m not exactly the follow-the-herd type. Especially when it comes to that evacuation drill crap.”

“Is that all?” Sousuke wanted to know.

“Yeah, that’s all.” Kurz snorted. “But... I didn’t think you’d be the one joining me.”

“Is it strange?”

“Heh... no, maybe not. Maybe it’s totally expected.”

The two finally made eye contact, and there was no awkwardness at all.

“I think something’s wrong,” said Sousuke, after a beat.

“Yeah. I can’t find McAllen,” Kurz agreed. “And it’s not just him... I asked Auntie Peggy, and she said Mao’d gone missing from the sick bay.”

Kurz must have noticed something off about the alarm, too. Something *was* wrong—Sousuke felt sure of that, now.

Kurz approached Sousuke and slapped him on the back. “Ready to roll?”

“Sure,” Sousuke said shortly, and the two of them took off running. They had no weapons, no information, and a lot of ground to cover, even if they were limited to the aft. Visibility was poor, and they were completely on their own.

But, at the very least, they were the best team on the boat.

The Tuatha de Danaan was an enormous, complex structure, but it had two clearly delineated halves: the fore and the aft. The fore contained the hangar, torpedo and missile tubes, munitions room, and other “weapon”-related functions. The aft contained the control room, engine room, reactor, crew quarters, mess, and other “boat”-related functions. The two were separated by a thick, sturdy partition, so that even if one half took catastrophic damage and got flooded, the other half would remain safe.

Gauron's evacuation order had moved everyone to the hangar in the fore, but the control room was in the aft; in other words, he'd cut them off from the crew.

Tessa's people weren't stupid, but they weren't about to ignore an emergency evacuation order, either. They would do what they were told without objection. Once the evacuation was complete, they would close the door, and the mother AI, Dana, would seal the two halves off from each other. It would then be impossible to open the door from the hangar side.

"In other words, no help is coming," Gauron concluded.

The crew in the control room—Tessa and Kaname excepted—had been handcuffed together in a chain in the corner. They couldn't charge them now, even if the wanted to.

"So it seems I'm fully in control," Gauron gloated. "Smart thinking, eh?"

"I don't agree," Tessa said, coldly. "There are ASes in the hangar, and a monomolecular cutter could tear through the partition. Then dozens of my subordinates could storm the control room, fully armed."

"Oh, of course," he agreed. "Which is why I was about to do this. AI-kun?"

《Yes, Captain?》

"Reverse life support to the fore, would you?"

《Aye, sir.》

Reverse life support—in other words, he was going to stop the flow of oxygen to that side of the submarine. Most of her crew—200 people—were on that side. If he did that, they would all eventually die of asphyxiation. "Don't!" she cried.

"But I have to," Gauron argued. "I need to put a check on those clever subordinates of yours, so they don't go concocting some little scheme on me."

"They'll all die first," Tessa pleaded. "You have to give them oxygen, at least a little bit!"

"I wouldn't give orders, if I were you," Gauron advised her coldly. "Try that again, and I might really overload the reactor... or I'll send the boat into

somersaults, that might be fun. Or maybe I could take it deeper and deeper until it's crushed by the pressure..." he cackled.

The boat was currently running on full autonomous mode, meaning that it was under the complete control of Dana. That made Gauron's threats more than just sick jokes; he had the power to make them reality. The sophisticated digitalization of the Tuatha de Danaan's systems meant that—within limits—it could function entirely under one person's command.

Of course, running it this way meant utilizing only the bare minimum of the vessel's potential. A crew of a few dozen specialists was required to correctly interpret prodigious amounts of data, analyze situations, and make smart calls. Even just for moving the rudder, an experienced helm officer was better than a computer; maintenance checks, too, had to be done by human hands.

The boat's greatest assets—the superconductive drive and electromagnetic fluid control system—also needed a proper crew to function. Full autonomous mode put all of that under the purview of one AI, which could introduce inefficiencies that specialists would avoid, cause fatal accidents, and make strategic blunders. The control mode was there for worst case scenarios, but it left them wide open to detection, even from standard battleships.

Even beyond the imminent danger to everyone in the hangar, sooner or later, the entire submarine would be at risk.

I need to do something... Tessa told herself. The weight of her crew had never felt so heavy on her shoulders before. Her people were going to die. The men and women with whom she had shared so many highs and lows. Every single one of them...

Even with all that dizzying pressure, Tessa continued to rack her brain. The vessel's AI, Dana, currently considered Gauron the captain. There was no way to change that through normal procedures, because doing so would require Gauron's approval. This meant she would have to take back control of Dana at the root.

Dana's core was located in the central computer room known as the Lady Chapel. It contained a special device that Tessa could use to merge her consciousness with the submarine; this would let her operate the submarine

directly and take control back from Dana and Gauron. Her actual control would be as limited as the autonomous mode's, of course, but if she could save the crew in the hangar, they could probably get things back to normal soon enough. Merging with the submarine was a dangerous task, and they'd never tried it on maneuvers before, but it was the only option available.

The question was, how to do it? The Lady Chapel was on deck three, one floor down from their current location. It was close, structurally speaking, but Tessa'd have to take detours to get there—She'd also need the universal key, located in her quarters, if she wanted to get inside. Could she really give Gauron and his men the slip, and then travel all that way?

She did have a gun they didn't know about yet: a German .22-caliber pistol, hidden underneath her chair. It was small, with only seven rounds, and it barely had enough power to put down a small dog. Would it really be enough to get her past three professional combatants?

It wouldn't. They'd catch her or kill her—one or the other—immediately. Tessa wasn't especially good with a gun, and worse, she was slow. Her lack of athleticism was critical, and couldn't be overcome with gumption alone.

Still, she was the only one on board who could fuse with the submarine in the Lady Chapel, take control of Dana, and temporarily act in her place. Only her, a Whispered. No one else in the crew could do it. No one else— *Wait,* she thought, and turned to the person sitting right next to her…

Kaname, who had been watching things quietly up until now, felt an internal jolt of surprise. Tessa was looking at her. There was something strange in her expression, as if she were holding her at gunpoint. Her usually beautiful eyes were wide open and desperate; signs of mental strain and indecision flitted in and out them. It was as if she was commanding her to die.

She's about to push something on me... something serious, Kaname realized, instinctively. She looked around in silence.

Gauron was sitting on a console a little ways away, eating some ham slices. The large man known as Dunnigan occasionally looked in Kaname's direction and grinned, while the one called Nguyen leaned against one of the control room's two entrances, smoking a cigarette.

After a moment, Tessa gently took Kaname's hand. Her delicate fingers were soaked in sweat. When she released her, Kaname felt two things enclosed in her palm—a strip of paper, and a small key.

Hey, what are you— she began to think, and then she heard the voice.

That's the key to my safe. It was Tessa's voice... wasn't it? No, nobody was speaking—not even whispering. Neither Gauron nor Dunnigan nor Nguyen nor any of the rest of the crew had said anything, nor did they notice anything being said.

There was only Tessa, her unfocused eyes gazing emptily in the direction of the front screen. *...cus. Focus... This is... resonance. Feel it...*

Huh? Kaname felt the sensation of something seeping deep into her mind, something soft and pliant. A set of thoughts, unknown to her, that echoed through her skull.

Take another key from the safe... the universal key, Tessa thought at her. *Find the Lady Chapel... on the third deck... and then do this... resonate... again...*

Wait, Kaname thought back at her. *What's the Lady Chapel?*

It's about to begin... Tessa replied. *We'll have to... gamble...*

What are you talking about? What's the key for? Hey! Hey! Hey?! Kaname gasped when she realized she had shouted that last "Hey!" out loud.

Gauron and the others looked at her suspiciously. "'Hey,' what?" he asked, while chewing on a bite of ham.

"Oh... w-well..." Kaname stammered, barely managing to palm the key and the paper. Beside her, Tessa let out a sigh; deep, but not quite hopeless.

"Now I'm curious. Why would you shout out 'hey'? Nothing happened to prompt it. I'd love for you to tell me. How about it?" Gauron came closer. His pace was relaxed. His gaze fell on Kaname's closed fist. "What do you have there? Show me."

Kaname said nothing.

"I said, show me," he told her flatly. "Didn't you hear?" Kaname just stood there, motionless, as he reached for her arm.

Then, Tessa took action. There was a small pistol in her trembling hand. She turned the gun to Gauron and, with her eyes almost closed, she pulled the trigger. A light, sharp gunshot echoed through the control room. Gauron lurched back, clutching his neck.

“Kaname-san, run!” Tessa cried, and fired repeatedly at Nguyen, who stood in the doorway. Her shots were wild and reckless, but the man instinctively threw himself to the floor—a less remarkable soldier might have stayed upright and taken a bullet for his trouble.



In a move that shocked even herself, Kaname didn't hesitate—she went right into a full sprint. Answering the question of why Tessa had a gun, processing the fact that she'd shot someone, wondering where to actually go—she could save all that for later. Even a moment's hesitation now would mean her death; that was one thing she knew clearly.

As she slipped past the staggering Gauron, Dunnigan flew at Kaname from behind. His hand lashed out and grabbed her parka. There was a sound of ripping cloth, and Dunnigan was left holding her sleeve, which had been torn off at the shoulder.

I can do this, she told herself. *I can escape.* This was the part where most people would stumble and fall, but Kaname, displaying a remarkable sense of balance, managed to right herself and continue straight for the exit. When she reached Nguyen, who was just getting up, she used a chair as a springboard, vaulted over him, and slipped out the door. On her way out, she saw a bullet spark on the wall right beside her.

"Stop!" roared Dunnigan, the one who had fired.

But Kaname refused. She left the control room behind to run low through the hallway, as fast as she could. Bullets ricocheted over her head, but she ignored them. She rounded the corner, then kept on with all her might. Heavy steps pursued from behind, followed by a ferocious roar.

"You little brat!" Dunnigan yelled. "I'll murder you!"

The world around her blurred. It didn't stop Kaname's running, but she realized she was crying. The fate of Tessa whom she'd left behind, the question of what would happen to her next, the loss of her brand new parka—all of these things were fueling her tears.

"Hey," Sousuke said, and Kurz stopped in his tracks.

Kurz, holding a sturdy metal pipe in one hand, looked up at the ceiling of the corridor with narrowed eyes. "That sounded... like a gun," he mused. "Probably a .22-caliber seven-shot... A Walther, I think?"

"It came from the control room," Sousuke agreed.

“Shit. I knew it.”

“Let’s hurry.”

“Yeah, got it,” Kurz grumbled. “But... it’s like a damned maze in here.”

They were on the fourth deck, where a seemingly endless series of locked watertight doors continued to confound their progress. They couldn’t just head straight to the control room; they had to continually search for routes that weren’t blocked off. Dead end after dead end steered them along an infuriatingly circuitous path.

“Most of the boat is currently under Dana’s control,” Sousuke said grimly.

“Yeah. I bet I know why, too,” Kurz agreed. “But... all this tech sure makes our lives easier, huh? Damn.”

“Anyway, we’ll just have to run.”

“You said it.”

The both of them hurried on.

Kaname’s spontaneity had surprised everyone in the control room. One minute she was just a girl trembling in Tessa’s shadow, and the next, she was sprinting for the door. Unfazed by the sound of gunshots, she’d gotten past two trained combatants, and dashed off like the wind. It seemed to have caught Gauron and his men flat-footed, as well. It was, in all honesty, a stunning display of agility.

Dunnigan had immediately gone after Kaname; only God knew whether she could give him the slip. Tessa would just have to hope for the best.

Kaname-san... please... Tessa thought to herself, as if in prayer. Her gun was out of bullets, but the .22-caliber peashooter had done its job beautifully. If guns had eyes, this one would probably be winking at her. Walther TPH—for the first time, Tessa felt true affection for the name of a firearm.

Of course, she knew these might be her final thoughts. Doubled over, with a hand clasped to his neck, Gauron slowly turned to face Tessa again. Blood was oozing out between his fingers. The bullet had just clipped his neck, and it didn’t look like the wound would be fatal. A pity.

The terrorist's lips curled into a smile. It was an inhuman smile; his eyes had turned a reddish-brown, as if seething with some violent emotion. In his mind, he had probably already killed her, dissected her, and cut her to pieces hundreds of times. This was who he really was; he had shown his true self at last.

"Impressive, girl," he said in a strict monotone.

Tessa put on the strongest front she could manage. "I could have killed you if I wanted, but I took pity on you. You could show me some gratitude."

"Is that so?" Gauron grabbed her braid and yanked her to him, hard.

"Mm!" Tessa found herself crying out from the pain.

Gauron was strong enough to break her neck if he wanted to. His blood-soaked hand seized Tessa by the jaw, and he drew so close that she could feel his breath. "You're not fooling anyone, pig," he snarled. The crew in the control room began to struggle as they watched, but the handcuffs and chains kept them helplessly tied.

"Ah... ah..." Tessa choked out.

"I was told not to kill you... but frankly, I don't care much for those orders," Gauron said. "Not when I could be yanking out your bowels and winding them around the room. What do you think of that?"

Tessa struggled and whimpered. Gauron dug his nails into her skin, hard, and then—as if winning a struggle for self-restraint—he cast her to the ground.

Wiping the blood from his neck, he said to Nguyen, "You pursue the girl, as well. It's not as if she can leave the aft. If you catch her, feel free to break one of her legs."

"What about you?" Nguyen asked.

"I can handle things here by myself," Gauron told him. "Besides... it's possible that other crew members might have ignored the evacuation order. Kill anyone you encounter on sight, understood?"

"Got it," Nguyen answered simply, and then left the control room.

"Now... *ex*-Captain. You've made me very angry, but I've decided not to kill

you yet. I'll punish you instead." Mopping at his neck with a napkin, Gauron walked up to the captain's seat, and hit the voice command button. "AI, take us to periscope depth. Speed, five knots. Use ESM to search for nearby surface ships."

《Aye, sir.》

The submarine began to rise. The swift ascent created turbulence around the usually-quiet boat. If there were any submarines in the area, this would quickly get their attention.

"Wh-What are you—"

"You'll see soon enough. Soon enough..." he chuckled.

Hiding behind a cabinet full of cleaning supplies, Kaname heard the footsteps of her pursuer down a distant corridor. It sounded like he'd gone past her. Was she safe now? She couldn't be sure... But she also couldn't just stay here, so she slid quietly out from behind the closet.

Kaname's ripped parka was barely clinging to her shoulders; it was just depressing at this point, so she threw it off. She took off her hiking boots to quiet her steps, too. She realized that if she'd been wearing sandals back in the control room, she might never have made it out—the boots that had saved her life had cost her 13,000 yen. She'd have to come back to retrieve them later.

Now down to a tank top and shorts, Kaname felt almost naked. She began to walk again; the floor was cold against her bare feet. Then, suddenly, the boat began to make a drastic move. The floor tilted a bit; she couldn't tell if it was to the front or the back.

The number of locked doors she encountered made it slow going to the captain's quarters, as did her fear of her pursuer, Dunnigan. She knew he could be hiding anywhere, waiting for her. Every corner, every half-open door she encountered... they were all sources of terror to Kaname.

She finally reached the captain's cabin, and used the duplicate key Tessa had lent her when she'd first come on board to get in. There was also the other key, the one she'd just been given—the key to the safe. That was even more important.

The safe in the wall was the size of a 14-inch TV. She put the key in and turned it, then one by one, pushed the buttons for the eight-digit code from the paper Tessa had given her. *3, 1, 1, 2, 8, 7, 6, 5... there.* The electronic lock released, and the safe door opened. She looked inside.

Kaname saw a thick file folder, some documents, and a rectangular case that resembled a jewelry box. She instinctively reached for the "jewelry box," opened it, and found a small but sturdy-looking key inside. The letters "UNV" were engraved on the shaft. This was the universal key; it had to be. If this had been an RPG, she'd have heard an "item acquired" sound effect. That was the one item in the safe that looked like a key. The only thing left was...

Kaname looked in silence. In the back of the safe sat a picture frame; it lay there face-down, inconspicuous in the dark. It was the one she'd seen the first time she'd visited the room, after the party. Tessa had locked it in here, claiming that it contained "classified codes." Kaname knew she shouldn't look. It was unfair to look without permission.

But... she thought weakly. *Still, even so...* She couldn't restrain her curiosity. Biting back her feelings of guilt, Kaname reached for the frame.

As she'd expected, it was a picture of Sousuke. He was standing with Tessa, next to a rock somewhere. Tessa was wearing a T-shirt and leggings; Sousuke was in his fatigues. Behind them, for some reason, stood an M9 covered in splattered blue paint.

Kaname immediately regretted looking at the picture. The sight of them standing there, looking like a perfect couple, made her feel like an outsider. *I don't belong here,* she thought. *I'm a tourist. I'm... just a burden.*

Then why am I here, doing all of this? she wondered. *Off on some errand I don't understand, playing hide-and-seek with some psycho... Why bother? Is there some reason I can't just lie down and die here? Who would care if I just let it all go and curled up in a corner?* Those questions raced around and around in a corner of her mind, causing her spirit to waver.

Kaname was tired of being frightened and exhausted. And yet, she kept moving. It almost happened automatically; not even she knew why she was doing it.

She returned the picture to the safe and closed the door, then tucked the new universal key into her shorts pocket. She booted up the PC on the desk to see if it contained some useful information, but accessing it required a password. In a long-shot move, she tried the passcode to the safe—of course, it didn't work, so she gave up and rummaged through Tessa's furniture and papers instead. None of it yielded anything useful.

There was nothing else for her here. She'd just have to take the key and go to some place called the "Lady Chapel." She wouldn't find out its significance, or what she should do there, until she arrived. But where was this "Lady Chapel" exactly? She dimly recalled the term's real-life meaning—a chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary. What would she find there? Kaname couldn't even begin to guess.

If only someone were left in the aft of the ship, she could ask them, but... Things being as they were, she'd just have to go looking for it herself. And that mountain of a man was somewhere out there, searching for her…

The mother AI, Dana, gave a report:《Contact with surface ship on bearing 3-2-3; designate contact number Echo-1. Knox-class frigate. Range is estimated at 20 miles.》

Gauron smiled in satisfaction. The de Danaan's sensors had picked up an old-style US Navy frigate; it was probably one of the ships searching for the de Danaan.

The submarine had begun to sway now that they were near the surface; there must be rough seas just above them. The waves caused oscillations through the de Danaan's massive form.

What is he planning to do? Tessa wondered as she watched. She would receive her answer immediately.

"All right," he ordered the AI, "ready Harpoon missiles one and two. Target, Echo-1. Firing mode, BOL. You handle the rest."

Tessa's jaw dropped.

《Aye, sir.》

So this was her "punishment"—Gauron was going to fire anti-ship missiles at

that frigate. She leaped to her feet and grabbed his arm. “No! There must be three hundred people on that ship! They’re not part of this! And they’ll also return fire!”

“Oh, will they?” he taunted.

“Take it out on me if you hate me so much!” Tessa pleaded. “Leave innocent people out of this!”

Tessa’s outward panic seemed to have mollified Gauron at last, because he smiled in delight, and said with a chuckle, “Sorry, but I can’t do that. You’re the kind of person who suffers more when the harm is done to others, aren’t you? I know about that. *All* about it.”

Just then, the AI spoke:《Target, Echo-1. BOL mode. Data input complete. One, ready. Two, ready.》

“Okay! Proceed to flood tubes one and two,” Gauron ordered.

“Stop it, Dana!” Tessa yelled.

《Aye, sir. Flooding.》

“Open tubes one and two,” he went on.

“Stop it!” she begged. “Please!”

《Aye, sir. Tubes are open.》

Tessa grabbed at his arm, but Gauron threw her to the floor. “I told you to watch.” He cleared his throat. “Now, one, two...”

“No—”

“Fire!” The Tuatha de Danaan fired its improved Harpoon anti-ship missiles.

The crew in the hangar could hear the launch, as well. Lieutenant Colonel Mardukas had felt that they were in trouble somehow, but this told him that the danger was even worse than he’d imagined.

The mother AI had determined that it should fire part of the de Danaan’s arsenal, the submerged-launch anti-ship missiles. *Impossible. Unthinkable. It couldn’t possibly...* he worried. *No, why would it be unthinkable? What’s wrong with me...*

“XO, the Harpoons...!” one of his subordinates shouted.

“I’m aware,” Marduka replied briefly. “Forget it for now; we need to break through the door... get to the control room...”

They’d tried contacting the control room several times and received no response. The AI’s voice had simply responded, “Please stand by.” They’d been too conservative. They’d been cut off for thirty minutes now, and they had no more time to lose. They needed to send people to the aft, find out what was going on, and— “Get... to the control room...” Mardukas’s head hurt. It was hard to breathe, and his thoughts were sluggish. At first he assumed that it was just him, but he quickly noticed that everyone around him seemed to be feeling the same way.

The oxygen... he realized. The oxygen distribution system had broken down— or it had been shut off. “Put on... your masks,” he choked out. “Your OBA masks...”

Some had already fallen and lay incapacitated on the floor. Some remained limp, even after their comrades put the masks on them. Some managed to stand up and work the unresponsive manual oxygen transmission panel...

“Use M9s... to breach the barrier...” Mardukas tried to shout as he clung to the wall, but he weakly fell to his knees. The floor was rising. No, he was falling...

“Cap... tain...” he gasped. *Your instructions were exactly right. You always... do... surprise me...*

Surface, West Pacific Ocean The two Harpoon anti-ship missiles engaged their turbojets as they burst out of the ocean, flying at low altitude and high speed. The all-weather missiles activated their active radar seekers within just twenty seconds of flight and found their target.

The sudden attack had the bridge of the old-style frigate in a panic. It only had a primitive ECS, so it couldn’t hide from a cutting-edge homing radar. They attempted an intercept, but they didn’t have much time. Nevertheless, the

ship's CIWS—20mm Vulcans—managed to shoot down one of the two incoming missiles.

But they couldn't avoid the other. The de Danaan's second anti-ship missile slammed into the frigate's port side, significantly above the water line. It tore through the hull, flew into the helicopter hangar, and blasted the tail off an unmanned anti-submarine helicopter. Inertia then carried it out the hull on the starboard side, where it broke apart and fell into the sea in burning chunks. It didn't explode as it should have; the missiles had had their warheads removed in advance.

Miraculously, there were no injuries among the crew, although the maintenance man (who had just finished up working on that helicopter) stamped his feet in rage. It never would have occurred to him that his life had been saved by the caution of a 16-year-old girl.

Deep below, eighteen kilometers away, another American vessel was in an uproar: the USS Pasadena had detected the Toy Box missile's attack on their ally. Their quick-to-temper captain flew into a rage and began shouting, ordering his crew to battle positions and demanding the preparation of live ADCAP torpedoes.

The Toy Box was an enemy, and a rabid one at that. They had to sink it as quickly as possible. The Pasadena became an angel of death, closing in on the nearly-helpless de Danaan.

Deck 4, Aft, Tuatha de Danaan No one was there. She was alone.

Kaname ran down the dim passageway, panting. She would slam into a closed door, struggle to open it... then give up, and began searching for another path. Dead end after dead end.

She didn't know anything about the Lady Chapel Tessa had "told" her about before. Where was it? What did it look like?

Kaname struggled for breath. The interweaving, door-lined corridors felt like a dungeon in a video game. Where was that huge man? He could be right on her heels, and yet here she was, wandering around, hopelessly lost in the dark.

“Ah...” She tripped over a bucket that had been left out. It made such a racket as it fell that she jumped in surprise.

She heard footsteps. Actually... they sounded like footsteps, but she wasn’t really sure. She couldn’t even tell if they were close by. The suspicious sound disappeared immediately.

What... what’s going on? Her fear grew even stronger. Her gaze turned behind her, she started to walk, but immediately bumped into something.

That huge man, Dunnigan, was standing in front of her. Kaname started in shock. “I found you,” he leered.

She tried to run away, but he had her arm in a vise-like grip. She kept struggling to turn around. Dunnigan yanked her toward him, then with just one arm, threw her roughly through the air.

Her 49-kilogram body flew like an aluminum can. She slammed back-first into a door, which opened as she hit it, letting her roll into the room beyond. She toppled over a chair and then fell into a heap on the floor; the force of the fall knocked the wind out of her. She gasped and struggled for breath.

Dunnigan strode toward her. Kaname crawled along the floor, trying to get away. He was holding something—not a gun, but a knife. A knife. Why did he have that? Why was this man not satisfied with just catching her?

Her mind went blank, except for one phrase: *He’ll kill me.* He was toying with her. If he’d just wanted to catch her, he wouldn’t have thrown her aside like this.

In the dim red lighting, she could make out Dunnigan’s expression. He was smiling like a child, like a boy about to play an especially naughty prank. A little boy about to pull the wings off a fly...

“That’s right. Try to run, Chinese,” Dunnigan said. “Try to run.”

They could hear the sound and the screams in the distance. Down the starboard corridor, below them, on the fourth deck.

Sousuke and Kurz had just discovered the body of Private Liang in the first briefing room. With it, they’d found the molted husk of a straitjacket,

handcuffs, and ropes. Gauron was gone, as was the submachine gun Liang should have been carrying.

“Son of a bitch...” Kurz snarled.

“It came from the galley,” Sousuke said.

The two dropped their search of the room and ran back into the passageway. The boat was tilting and rocking; the movements themselves weren’t anything too serious, but they had never felt the de Danaan move like this before. They ran through the empty corridor and passed through several doors; as they approached the stairway to deck four, they sensed someone behind them. It was Nguyen, standing at the corner they’d just come around.

“Nguyen?”

“Hey, you two. Good to see you’re safe. I just—” Nguyen came closer, waving to them with one hand. The other held a 9mm automatic pistol.

They weren’t about to stand there and wait to see what he was doing; Sousuke and Kurz dashed to opposite sides of the hall, on instinct. A bullet from Nguyen tore through the place where they’d been. A ricochet sparked against a nearby wall as the ear-splitting gunshot echoed through the confined space.

“Heh. Not bad!” Nguyen let out a whistle. “Sagara. I think that girlfriend of yours is one deck down. But...”

Sousuke tried to poke his head out, but another bullet hit nearby. A fragment of metal cut across his cheek, and he was forced to pull back.

“I can’t let you get to her,” Nguyen finished regretfully. “Nothing personal.”

They still couldn’t entirely believe it. How could Nguyen, a member of the SRT, betray them? Whoever was with her on the deck below was probably one of theirs, too—It probably wasn’t McAllen, a member of the old guard; it was more likely Dunnigan, the newcomer.

Kurz and Sousuke were pinned in place behind a pipe and a cabin door on either side of the corridor. The stairway was close, but they had to get rid of their opponent before they could get to it. Neither of them had a gun or a knife; their only weapon was the steel pipe Kurz had picked up on the way.

Nguyen was right; he wouldn't let them go. And Kaname was in danger...

"Sousuke, here's the plan," Kurz called. Nguyen would be able to hear them, so he was speaking in Japanese. "I'll draw this bastard's fire. Use that opening to book it down the stairs."

"By yourself?" Sousuke questioned. "But—"

"No arguing," Kurz said shortly. "Kaname needs help. Go."

Sousuke hesitated. "Got it," he conceded, at last.

"Tell her you're sorry, okay?" Kurz grinned. Sousuke nodded and got ready to run.

"What're you two whispering about?" Nguyen's footsteps came closer.

From the safety of the door, Kurz threw the pipe in their direction. "Go!"

The second he called out, Sousuke dashed into the passageway.

The large man approached, grinning, knife in hand. Kaname grabbed a folding chair and threw it at him, but Dunnigan batted it aside. She managed to climb to her feet and kept backing off, realizing for the first time that she was in the mess hall.

"Go on, keep running," Dunnigan instructed her, coming closer. There was no mercy in his eyes. Her terror just seemed to delight him.

She ran into the galley, banged her hip on a table, and stumbled. *No, it's okay. I'm not finished yet. There are knives in the galley... rolling pins... frying pans...*

Heavy footsteps followed. Behind her, the man entered the galley through the door. Kaname found a can of pepper on a shelf and threw it. It hit his chest, causing the powder within to spray everywhere, but Dunnigan just grinned and inhaled deeply through his nostrils.

Kaname was shocked. But she remembered hearing Sousuke talk about how, with enough training, a person could resist certain doses of tear gas... And of course, this man was a trained soldier.

"Sousuke..." she whispered. *Where is he now? There's no way he'll come to save me. The cold way he looked at me. He thinks I'm a burden...*

“Nowhere left to run, not anymore,” Dunnigan taunted her.

Kaname threw a bowl. It bounced off of him. She threw a spoon. It did nothing. She found a chef’s knife, and threw it with all her might. But despite what movies had taught her, it didn’t stick—it hit him handle-first and fell onto the floor.

“Stay back!” she yelled.

“No chance of that,” he chucked at her. “No chance.”

She looked into the mess through the galley window; no one was there. No help was coming.

Dunnigan charged, and it was like a tsunami bearing down on her. He drove her helplessly to the end of the long, narrow galley, then thrust her back and pinned her against the wall. She could feel the power of the man’s arm, the steel of his trained muscles, the stifling smell of his sweat.

She couldn’t breathe. She struggled. It hurt, and she fought to speak.

“You listen to me, now,” Dunnigan instructed. “I can’t stand Orientals. You Chinese, especially... you killed Nick. *My* Nick! You know how humiliating it was... having to salute someone like you?!”

The man was frothing with rage. *Nick... who’s that?* she wondered. *An old battle comrade?* Kaname didn’t have time to consider it any further. The man continued to grip her by the neck while he brandished his knife in his other hand. His eyes danced with madness and glee. How could an expression like that exist in this world?

“Chidori!” came a voice from the entrance to the mess. It was Sousuke.

Oh... he came, she realized. But he was so far away. Dunnigan’s knife was thirty centimeters from her face, while Sousuke was over ten meters away, with a wall separating them. It was too late. He wouldn’t make it in time.

Dunnigan seemed to share that sentiment. He showed a momentary reaction to Sousuke’s voice, but then returned his focus to her, pressing the knife to Kaname’s neck. He seemed to want to finish her off first. His arm tensed. He was about to pull. He was— She didn’t give up hope. Even in a nosedive, a pilot

would keep working the control stick and throttle to the end, and right now, Kaname was that pilot. Her hand scrambled desperately in the sink to her right —and caught hold of something. It wasn't a knife. It wasn't a rolling pin. It was a board—rectangular, slender, and made out of plastic. But she didn't care what it was; she needed something, anything.

"Mmm...!" She slammed the board against his head with all the strength she had. Most men would consider it a pathetic strike, but for some reason, it caused the man's face to freeze up in shock and surprise, and his hand to stop right on the verge of slicing her throat.

The left side of his face had completely caved in. The skin had peeled away from his temple to his jaw, exposing yellow fat and pink cheekbone. Blood began to ooze out, as if to hide the cruel wound from sight. The man's already contorted face began to warp further as the agony reached him. Dunnigan began to roar; he released Kaname and drew back, cradling his face with his left hand and howling like a beast.

Kaname coughed, leaned against the wall, and looked over questioningly at the board she had grabbed. It was an ABS resin vegetable grater, used for cooking; its surface was sticky with what it had just sliced. She let out a shriek and tossed it away.

Dunnigan fixed a glare on her again, his blue eyes burning with fury. "W... Woman!!" The rage in his voice could have split heaven and earth.

But, powered by adrenaline, Kaname shouted back at him. "The name's not 'woman'! Y-You want me to *fillet* you next? Bring it on!"

"Dunnigan!!" Just then, Sousuke leaped into the galley.

Dunnigan reacted quickly. He drew a pistol from the holster on his hip, turned around, and fired. Sousuke rolled along the floor, scooped up the knife she'd thrown earlier, and took cover behind the refrigerator. Kaname guessed that he didn't have a gun of his own. Past experience told her that if he did, he would have fired it into Dunnigan without hesitation.

"Dunnigan," Sousuke said. "So you're in on this, too?"

"You bet I am!" Dunnigan retorted.

“You killed Liang?”

“Yeah, and he deserved it!”

Sousuke made his move. He opened the refrigerator door, using it as a makeshift shield. Dunnigan fired regardless. There was a flash and a gunshot sound—at the same time, Sousuke threw the knife from the safety of the door. He’d been aiming for the enemy’s chest, but the man ducked, causing it to hit him in the shoulder instead.

Nevertheless, Dunnigan held his aim and kept shooting. “You can’t hide from me, not from me!” Catching on that Sousuke was unarmed, Dunnigan charged forward. He could finish him more easily from up close.

I have to stop him, Kaname thought, and dove out impulsively. She flew at the arm holding the gun. The wild-eyed man let out a roar and threw her against the oven, sending a crack through its heat-resistant glass.

But she’d created an opening. By the time Dunnigan had turned back around, Sousuke had abandoned his cover and begun his charge. Dunnigan cried in shock, and threw the knife in his left hand. Sousuke dodged it, but now a gun was in his face. Just before it fired, he jerked his head away from the muzzle. There was a ricochet sound; Dunnigan’s shot had missed its mark.

Sousuke grabbed his opponent’s arms and jumped; his powerful flying knee-strike caught the man in the jaw. This got a grunt out of Dunnigan as the large man reeled back and dropped his gun. But he continued to swing his knife wildly, and the blade caught Sousuke’s hair.

Sousuke rolled along the ground and picked up the dropped gun, then aimed it at the man’s head from a near impossible position. He fired—two, three, four times. He emptied the chamber.

“Gh... Chine...” Despite taking multiple .45-caliber shots to the torso, Dunnigan didn’t fall. Like the legendary Benkei, he remained standing, then took one step back, two...

“Go down.” Sousuke stood up, and unceremoniously kicked the man in the chest. The measuring cups rattled in the sink from the force with which the giant hit the ground, back-first. It was over. Eyes wide and glaring at the ceiling,

Dunnigan breathed his last.



Silently, Sousuke helped Kaname up from where she had fallen beside the oven. They were both covered in sweat. Kaname was particularly bad off; she was covered in bruises and scrapes, her hair was a mess, and her ripped tank top was covered in Dunnigan's blood.

"Chidori?" Sousuke asked, his shoulders heaving, but Kaname just gazed at him, glassy-eyed. "Were you injured?" he tried again. "Where does it hurt?"

"Everywhere," she answered at last, weakly. But her pride had taken a worse beating than her body. Once again, she'd been saved, and it filled her in equal measure with relief and shame. The two contradictory emotions merged together into one powerful feeling, and everything she'd been holding back all this time surged up inside her at once.

"I..." The questions she'd asked herself at that safe—Why was she still here, running around, hunting for clues instead of escaping? What was she trying to prove by putting herself in this much danger?—she finally knew the answer to.

"I'm just a burden, right?" she asked, voice trembling. "I'm just a burden on you, right? You'd be fine, just fine, on your own. Even now... even now... you weren't afraid... even a little... not at all..." She couldn't say anything more. She hung her head, trembling, as sobs squeezed up from her throat. Tears fell onto her thighs, thick and hot.

"Chidori..." Sousuke crouched down and touched her shoulder. After a silence that felt like forever, he spoke awkwardly, and with hesitance. "I... I'm sorry. You're not... a burden. Not at all."

She said nothing.

"Don't you remember?" he asked helplessly. "You've helped me countless times before. I would have been dead a long time ago, if it weren't for you. Just now, too... Dunnigan had a gun. I'm not sure if I could have beaten him by myself... I'm sure I couldn't have, in fact. It's because of you that I..." Sousuke hesitated a moment. "It's because of you that I'm here right now. So don't tell me I'd be fine on my own... please."

Kaname looked up at him, tearfully. Their eyes met for just a second, but Sousuke immediately turned away, scratching at his temple with a finger. His

expression was nervous and dejected.

“Okay,” she said at last, sniffling. “I got it. Anyway...” Just then, she realized that his leg and shoulder were stained with blood. “Sousuke, you’re hurt...”

“I’m okay,” he told her. “They’re minor injuries. I’ll tend to them later.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure; don’t worry. What about you? Can you stand?”

“Yeah...” Kaname took Sousuke’s proffered hand tightly. It was warm, and gentle, and very strong.

Just then, a high-pitched noise rang out through the submarine. It was a sound she’d never heard before, like something metal hitting the hull.

“That’s an active sonar sound...” Sousuke whispered, eyes turned to the ceiling.

“What’s going on?” Kaname asked anxiously.

“A submarine is trying to fire a torpedo at us.”

USS Pasadena The Pasadena picked up the sound of the Toy Box diving again. It was setting a northward course, accelerating to about 30 knots, at about four miles away.

The Toy Box didn’t usually run this loud. During their close call the other day, it had moved smoothly, almost elegantly. Now, it was making a racket like a drowning whale.

Captain Sailor directed their vessel through the water, setting up an ideal attack position. Their active sonar told them the exact location of the “enemy sub.” Their SSN’s torpedoes were the latest MK 48s, also known as ADCAPs, and they could easily reach speeds in excess of 60 knots. They each carried a 300-kilogram payload, and one hit could sink any vessel with ease. They were just waiting for the right moment to fire two of them off.

“Tubes three and four are open. We’re ready to fire at any time!” said XO Takenaka. His words were brisk, but his voice remained tense with nerves. He looked at Captain Sailor, whose eyes were gleaming dangerously, and sought

confirmation. “Um... are you serious about this?”

“Of course I am! If we let it get away now, it’ll be our heads on the block!” Sailor responded authoritatively, and then gave the order. “No mercy. Fire three!”

“Aye aye, sir! Fire three!” The ADCAP fired in a rush of pressured air. It sang through the water, trailing a line of tiny bubbles.

Sailor’s merciless plan was to fire just one ADCAP at first, then a second a few minutes later. The enemy sub would be forced to take evasive maneuvers to dodge the first one. Then, even if they succeeded, even if they avoided a fatal injury—the second, coming a few minutes later, would be there to finish them off.

To finish them off—that was all the Pasadena wanted. According to their calculations, the first torpedo would hit the Toy Box in six minutes.

Control Room, Tuatha de Danaan《Contact with high-speed screw on bearing 2-9-2. Assumed to be a torpedo of some kind. It is likely approaching this vessel,》reported the infuriatingly calm voice of Dana. An experienced sonar technician would be able to name the classification, number, speed, and depth of the torpedoes, but this was another one of Dana’s limitations.

The control room’s front screen displayed a magnified view of their local area, where the mark that represented the torpedo could be seen closing in on the de Danaan. Just five minutes left—without the use of their superconductive drive, there would be no way to shake it off. It was unavoidable, and one hit would sink even something as massive as the de Danaan. The catastrophic water pressure would crush them, demolish everything on board, and leave their twisted wreckage strewn across the ocean floor for kilometers.

“You monster,” Tessa whispered, glaring at Gauron. “Give me control back at once. And untie our pilots and the sonar technician. I promise, they won’t fight you!”

“No,” Gauron said carelessly.

“They’re about to sink us!” Tessa insisted. “I’m not sure if even *I* can dodge that thing... but I know for a fact that you can’t!”

“We won’t know that until I try, will we?” he retorted.

“You’ll die too!” she yelled. “Are you trying to kill yourself?”

“Kill myself?” A smile appeared on Gauron’s face. It was a darkly humorous smile, like he’d just heard a particularly wicked joke. “Kill myself, eh? That would be the world’s most extravagant suicide, wouldn’t it? Taking a hundred million dollar piece of hardware with me... Not the worst thought in the world, is it?” he chuckled.

A death wish... Tessa realized it in that moment: Gauron had no attachment to life at all. This explained everything. Why he’d engaged in such reckless terrorism just to lure them there, why he’d gotten himself taken hostage despite the danger it put him in, why he’d attacked a US Navy ship unprovoked... Nobody would ever act this way if they cared about going home alive. *We’ve been misreading him from the start,* Tessa thought. *What have I done?*

“Then how about a game of chicken?” Gauron mused. “Take us to a depth of 1500.”

《Warning. This order exceeds tested depth limit.》

“So? Let’s just try it out.”

《Aye, sir.》The boat tilted further, carrying the de Danaan toward the abyss.

While the vessel around him careened toward its doom, Kurz continued to face a more personal danger. Nguyen was just down the hallway with a gun, while Kurz had no weapons. He’d have loved to have bravely faced him down, but keeping out of the line of fire was taking everything he had.

The second he left the shelter of the door, he’d be hit with a bullet, no question. He was dealing with the marksmanship of a member of the SRT, after all—There was no way to move fast enough to dodge a hit from someone like him, in a hallway with an unimpeded sight line.

Plus, they’d just gotten a ping from an active sonar. It was probably a torpedo

from a US submarine; if they couldn't stop it, they'd all end up dead. It was the worst situation imaginable—simultaneous threats from within and without.

"It's gonna turn us all to sea scrap, you know. Are you okay with that?" Kurz shouted.

Nguyen just laughed. "We'll be fine. This thing can outrun a torpedo, can't it?"

"You idiot," Kurz screamed back. "Modern torpedoes are insanely fast. And this is the US Navy we're dealing with!"

"So what, we're supposed to join together for our common good? I'm not falling for that bluff," Nguyen said. He seemed assured of his dominance in the situation. "But, actually... that's an idea. Come out with your hands up and I'll spare you, Kurz. I don't have anything against you personally."

"Go to hell," Kurz spat back.

Nguyen laughed from across the hall. "I'm serious. Come with me to the control room. Talk to Gauron, maybe kill a member of the crew to prove you're with us... Then he'll cut you in, too. The pay's good, I promise."

"Ugh, lame." It was Kurz's turn to laugh now. He had just imagined getting out of this scrape by putting his hands up, walking out, and saying, "Okay, I'll join you." It was pathetic; so pathetic that he couldn't help but laugh, even in a dire situation like this. "Who could ever shoot his mouth off to his girl after that? Nguyen, you're an embarrassment."

"Shut up." The other man's voice turned dangerous as he recognized the mocking tone. "Do you know how much Gauron's organization is paying me? Five million dollars."

"Five..." Kurz trailed off. That was close to 600 million Japanese yen; enough money to keep a man in comfort to the end of his days.

"They put two million into my bank account up front," Nguyen said flatly. "Guess they figure it's a small price to pay to get their hands on a billion-dollar submarine. You're gonna laugh off five million because it's 'embarrassing' and 'lame'? Sounds like a spoiled rich-ass who's never lived hand-to-mouth..."

With a payout like that, Kurz would never have to worry about money again.

He'd be set for life. He could live in the lap of luxury on a tropical island somewhere. He could wash his hands of this whole bloody business... and transfer *her* to a better hospital, too.

"Listen to me, Kurz. Like I said before, Mithril is a squad of mercenaries," Nguyen insisted. "We're not superheroes. We're a gang of killers who get paid to do what we do. Why shouldn't we side with whoever's signing the bigger check?"

Kurz said nothing.

"What do you expect to get out of this whole 'loyal soldier' act, huh? Just come out already."

Kurz looked around the cabin he was in. It was just a standard sailor's berth; bunk beds and personal effects. There was a picture of Tessa in her uniform tacked to the wall, but nothing that could be used as a weapon. *No, wait...* His eyes fell on a fire extinguisher next to the door.

"You've convinced me, Nguyen," he admitted.

"Oh?"

"After I get rid of you, I'm gonna hit up Tessa for a bonus. I'll get her to let me take sexy swimsuit shots of her, and then I'll sell them to the ship's crew for twenty dollars a pop," Kurz went on. "If a hundred guys buy them, that's two thousand dollars. Sounds good, right?"

Nguyen fell silent for a moment. "I thought you were smarter than this." He sounded genuinely disappointed, but Kurz's nose could pick up the scent of rising hostility drifting down the hall.

"It's not about being smart," Kurz retorted. "I'm a realist, that's all." He picked up the fire extinguisher and steadied himself.

Sousuke had an idea of where the "Lady Chapel" Kaname was talking about might be found. There was one place on the maps used by the ground forces and crew that was always blacked out and unlabeled: a classified bay. He'd never given it much thought, but he'd always kept it tucked away in the back of his mind, near the rear of the third deck, and directly below the control room.

The crew of the de Danaan was diverse, ethnically and religiously—the captain's policy was that those who wished to pray could do so in their own way—so the vessel contained no particular places of worship. Could the "Lady Chapel," then, refer to this secret room?

"We're almost there," Sousuke told her. "Try to hang on." He sped to the location on the third deck, dragging along the unsteady Kaname. He was worried about Kurz, but right now, their priority was taking back control of the submarine from Gauron. The only way to do that was to follow the hints that Tessa had given her.

On top of the vibrations that had been running through the boat for a while, suddenly, the floor tilted. It was like a passenger plane going into a descent. They could hear a commotion all around them as small objects toppled from desks and shelves.

Half-tumbling, they turned a corner and saw a door at the end of a long, narrow hallway. They ran to it. The door was labeled "LC" and contained a warning label: "Entry forbidden without permission from Captain or Executive Officer."

"Do you have the key, Chidori?"

"Yes, here. Ah, it went in..." Kaname inserted the key she'd found in the captain's room, and the thick door opened with an electronic sound.

The Lady Chapel was a very small room. It was a dimly-lit, domed space, about four meters in diameter; Kaname felt like she was coming into one of those snow huts that northern Japan was famous for. The walls were embedded with lines of blocky modules, with labels like A01 and X16, and covered in switches and levers.

A large machine sat at the center of the dome. It looked a little like a bed and a little like a chair; it also vaguely resembled an open coffin. It was shaped to fit one person, in a seated posture, on their back—if the cover was slid shut, that person would be completely enveloped. It was similar to an AS's cockpit block.

On the part of the cover that would go right over the head, the following was engraved in elegant typeface: Transfer And Response "Omni-Sphere" *System103* Mod-1997c Ver1.01

Sousuke recognized the acronym—TAROS, the device inside the Arbalest that the engineer, Lieutenant Lemming, had mentioned. But what was one doing here, in the depths of the Tuatha de Danaan? He cast a glance at Kaname.

Gazing down at the TAROS, she said quietly, “This is an older model than the TAROS in the Arbalest. It’s not hooked up to a lambda driver... but to the submarine’s control system.”

“What?” he questioned.

“I think I understand. Yes, I... I see.” Kaname was like a different person, both in her voice and her expression. She muttered to herself, nodded, and then... she turned gentle eyes to Sousuke.

“Chidori?” He was taken aback, but she simply smiled at him.

“Thank you, Sagara-san. Your job here is done,” she told him. “Now... could you come and save me?”

Kurz sprayed the fire extinguisher out the door. It was a makeshift smokescreen; the cloud of white powder reduced visibility to near zero. He immediately flew out into the hall and ran at Nguyen, full tilt.

His enemy fired. The bullet grazed his arm, but the shot told him exactly where Nguyen was—he charged, and while the other man dodged, he managed to grab hold of the wrist of the hand with the gun.

Nguyen grunted, and there was a flash from his left hand. Kurz ducked instinctively, but the knife tore a shallow cut across his neck. It swept past him again in a backhand swipe; Kurz pulled at his opponent’s seized wrist, and the slight imbalance forced Nguyen’s strike just clear of a critical hit.

Dammit! Kurz mentally cursed. He’d thought that he would stand a better chance in close combat, but he’d been a fool—the man was a master with knives and had no blind spots to exploit. In a cramped space like this, a pistol and a knife in experienced hands was an ideal combination. Kurz might be a master with a rifle, but his close-combat instincts were basically average as specialists went. He could hold his own, but he wasn’t exactly a natural—which left him no match for Nguyen.

The knife’s tip thrust at him. He knocked the hand away, but too late; it

stabbed him in a shoulder. Kurz hissed and screamed as a burning pain shot through him.

Grabbing the arm with the knife, Kurz yanked his opponent toward him again, and this time, rolled back onto the ground. From there, he executed an odd sort of tomoe-nage—propelling Nguyen up with a kick and, with a grunt of effort, casting him back and away. This gave him some distance from the other man, which freed him from the knife's threat, only to put him back in danger from the gun. Kurz jumped to his feet and tried to flee around a corner, but the next second, he felt a dull impact in his right leg, followed by a shooting pain.

Kurz winced; the knife Nguyen had thrown was sticking into the back of his thigh. He tried to put weight on it, but the leg gave out beneath him, causing him to fall to his knees. Clinging to a pipe in the wall for support, he looked back. Nguyen was pointing his gun at him, only three meters away; there was no escaping now.

Nguyen's swarthy face stood out against the white mist, the expressionless mask of a master killer. Cold ruthlessness had eclipsed his last vestiges of reticence or friendship; his eyes were now those of a murderous machine.

I'm dead, Kurz thought. But the next second, something strange happened: Nguyen's head underwent a slight spasm, like he'd been hit with an electric shock. There was a medical scalpel sticking out of the man's neck.

"Ah..." Nguyen's eyes opened in surprise, and he turned his gaze toward the starboard corridor. *That must be where the scalpel came from,* Kurz reckoned, but from his current position, he couldn't make out the source.

Another silver flash pierced the corridor's darkness. Another scalpel stuck into Nguyen's chest. The man looked down at it, and as if remembering something, he turned his gun toward the unseen someone.

In that moment, Kurz summoned all the strength he had left and launched himself at Nguyen. He pulled the knife out of his leg, readied it at his hip, and ran. He felt like he was in a yakuza movie. In his heart, he was shouting, *Your ass is mine, punk!*

The charge—simple on the face of it, yet difficult to actually dodge—took Kurz straight into Nguyen, where with an unsettling crunch, he jammed the knife

into his opponent's stomach. Nguyen fired at the floor as a groan spilled from his lips. Kurz stabbed him again. Then, in the same movement, he knocked the gun out of his hand.

"You really suck, Nguyen," Kurz said, breathing heavily. "You ask me, that five million isn't worth the paper it was printed on. I wouldn't use it to wipe my ass... it'd give me hemorrhoids, not to mention clogging up the shitter!"

Nguyen's eyes rolled back in his head, and he fell still. He was dead. Kurz felt a little bad that the last words he had to hear included "wipe my ass," "hemorrhoids," and "shitter"... but, he decided, he had brought it on himself. As Kurz pulled away from the body, the former Uruz-10 slumped to the floor.

"Whew..." He crouched down, shoulder-to-shoulder with the corpse. The stab wounds in his shoulder and leg throbbed with pain. A silhouette was approaching, walking through the extinguisher's leftover mist. It was the person who had thrown the scalpels at Nguyen from his blind spot.

It was Mao. She was dressed in her underwear—an olive green sports bra and bikini panties—just how she'd been left in the sick bay. Her smooth skin had worked up a thin sheen of sweat. Her ample bosom, slender legs, taut waist, and toned rear were all on display, giving her the beauty of a leopardess.

While Kurz stared in awe, Mao ran a languid hand through her hair. "Kurz... You are the worst close-range combatant I've ever seen. Charging in, then pulling away... You looked like a small-time hood. I couldn't even watch it..." Her voice was listless. There was something strange about her manner; she seemed unsteady on her feet. "Who is that, anyway? Oh... Nguyen. What the hell, what was his beef with you? Huh?" She looked down at the corpse, muttering incomprehensibly.

Kurz tilted his head. "Big Sis, what are you doing here?"

"Huh? Me? I was in the sick bay, I think... when I woke up, they were sounding the evacuation drill alarm. I didn't want to go to the... to the hangar looking like this, so I hid," she said. "I think. That's when I heard shots..."

"Hey, now..." he began.

"Peggy... I think she drugged me up or something. I don't know what's going

on,” Mao admitted. “What happened to the Venom? Where’s Sousuke? And... ugh, I’m so dizzy...” she let out a shallow breath and slumped against the wall. Apparently, walking was taking everything she had. To wield scalpels with such skill in her condition...



“You’re one scary chick...” Kurz said in tones of great admiration. Just then, he heard another sonar ping. They’d been getting them consistently for some time, and the space between them was growing shorter and shorter. There was a torpedo close by, searching for them. Even if he hurried to the control room now, he wouldn’t make it in time; de Danaan would already be sunk by then. There was no way to stop it. Nguyen had delayed him for too long.

Even as he wallowed in despair, he found himself gazing at Mao’s supple legs. “Damn. No camera,” he whispered.

The torpedo was hot on their heels. *Ping..... ping..... ping... ping...* came the sound of its searching, louder and louder—a prelude to their destruction. The terrifying rhythm taunted the de Danaan as it sank to greater depths. Those new ADCAPs were tough; even at this depth, this one held firmly on course.

Very soon, they’d reach 1,500 feet. The water pressure was 50 atmospheres. Their titanium alloy hull was starting to buckle under the pressure, which had already shrunk the boat by several meters stem to stern. The contraction caused warping in various parts of the internal structure. Pipes shot out steam, water, and compressed air; twisted cables released sparks.

Dana’s oblivious “warnings” kept coming.《Warning, explosion in B-corridor, third deck. Warning, damage to 16th water pipe, line C. Warning, suspicious noise in H7 pressure bulkhead on first deck. Warning—》That commotion, the creaking of the hull, and the sound of the sonar all echoed through the control room.

Gauron, lounging in the captain’s chair, let out a cackle. “Yes, here it comes! Here it comes!” Desperate, terrifying—those words couldn’t adequately describe his laughter, which was like that of Death itself. But there was one thing you could say for sure: this man was enjoying himself from the bottom of his heart. The situation made him feel alive.

He’s utterly mad. OOD Goddard felt a chill up his spine. He was bound and basically powerless... Was he just going to die, without doing anything to resist? Without using their vessel’s incredible abilities? Without showing his brilliant navigational skills?

The Tuatha de Danaan was designed to execute raids at shallow depths; it

wasn't designed for these kinds of deep sea maneuvers. Its maximum depth for full functionality was listed at 1,200 feet, and its terminal pressure limit was 1,600. The depth where the pressure would crush them like an egg, the depth at which they'd be pulverized—it was only 100 feet away. A mere 32 meters. All this, with a high-speed torpedo nipping at their heels...

And yet, Captain Teletha Testarossa remained perfectly calm. She was squatting down next to Gauron, holding very still; her gaze was lowered, half-lidded eyes staring emptily at the floor. Her lips moved like a person in a fevered daze, and she reacted neither to the AI's warnings nor to Gauron's words.

Perhaps she'd withdrawn into herself, unable to face this cruel reality ahead of her. No matter how competent she might be, she was still just a 16-year-old girl. Goddard felt both deep sympathy for her and a small amount of disappointment. The control room had two entrances, but Dana had currently locked both of them from the inside. No one was coming to save them.

Once the torpedoes were within 500 meters, Gauron shouted out, "AI! Right full rudder! And fire off the decoy!"

《Aye, sir.》

Goddard knew immediately that it wouldn't work—They couldn't dodge it this way. The firing was too soon, and the turn wasn't the right direction. *Damned amateur...* he cursed to himself.

"Okay, it's dodging time! Can I do it? What do you think?!" Gauron guffawed. Then, just as the torpedo's pinging reached its peak— The control room's front screen blacked out. It lasted for just for a moment, as long as the slow blink of an eye.

Goddard looked up, confused. Just as he and the rest of the crew were wondering what had happened, Teletha Testarossa snapped her head up. There was no despair in her gaze, only iron will and quiet confidence—and a little something extra, as she spoke up, resonantly, "Dana. On my signal, launch countermeasures one and two. Deep sea mode."

《Aye, ma'am,》Dana responded.

Aye, ma'am, it had said. Gauron, Goddard and the others looked at Tessa, their eyes wide in shock. Seeming oblivious to their attention, she raised her perfect index finger to trace out a rhythm like an orchestra's conductor. The elegant motions suggested a complicated melody.

"Yes... not yet..." she murmured. With superhuman endurance, she let the torpedo continue to tail them. The pings sounded like an alarm clock's buzzing, now. *Almost there. Take aim. Now*—Tessa made a clipped declaration. "Launch."

《Launching countermeasure.》The de Danaan obediently launched its countermeasure—a dummy sound source.

"Emergency blow, now," Tessa instructed.

《Aye. Emergency blow!》

Alarms sounded. Emergency pumps activated. An explosive sound filled the ship as the sudden rise in pressure forced the water from the ballast tanks, and the ship immediately gained buoyancy.

Trailing bubbles, the Tuatha de Danaan streaked upward. The incredible noise and unexpected motion caused the torpedo to completely lose sight of its target. The only thing left in its detection range was Tessa's brilliantly timed countermeasure. The torpedo plowed into the decoy and activated its payload, bursting just below the de Danaan.

The roar and shockwave hit the belly of the boat, causing its massive form to buck. Various crew members and nonstabilized objects were knocked to the floor and rolling around. Tessa's body slammed against the control room's back wall, and even Gauron was sent tumbling out of the captain's chair. The vessel shuddered and shrieked like the massive beast it was, and yet it continued to ascend. Like a balloon. Like a rocket.

Or, more poetically... like a bird, flapping its wings to reach the sky.

USS Pasadena "They dodged it?!" Sailor demanded.

"Yes," Takenaka admitted. "They seem to have used an emergency blow. They're currently rising at high speed to the surface."

“At that range?! I don’t believe it... Shit,” Sailor said. The torpedo’s search radius was conical, meaning that to escape it, you had to let it get as close as possible before abruptly changing course. But to hang in there that long, in a boat of that size... “That captain is incredible. What’s he got, balls of steel?”

“I admit... it’s impressive. He must have considerable nerve,” Takenaka agreed, dumbfounded.

But the other torpedo they’d fired was still pursuing the Toy Box. Impact was expected in three minutes.

Tuatha de Danaan The sub was shooting straight for the surface as the floor rocked back and forth. Tessa, clinging to the wall of the control room, picked herself up. Everyone was looking at her; Goddard’s gaze, in particular, was that of a lovestruck young man.

“What kind of magic trick did you just pull?” Gauron asked.

“You don’t know?” Tessa asked curiously. “I suppose ‘he’ didn’t trust you as much as you thought.”

Gauron said nothing.

“This vessel is mine, now,” she went on. “You won’t have your way any longer!” The front screen zoomed in on the status board.

Even absent Tessa’s orders, all onboard functions were returning to normal. The doors separating the fore from the aft were opening one after another; the flow of oxygen was being returned to the hangar. The engine room’s output stabilized, and began undergoing self-diagnostics. Damaged channels were severed and backups were activated. The boat’s various gauges, which had been in the red zone, quickly began to change back to green. This wasn’t Dana. Someone, somewhere, was doing all of this directly.

“That girl...?!” Gauron gritted his teeth, but Tessa just smiled.

“Incredible, isn’t she? Even if you kill me, she will protect this vessel,” Tessa told him. “And, in addition...” Just then, the locks on the control room doors released.

The port side entrance slid open, and a soldier carrying a pistol—Sousuke—burst in like a whirlwind. He didn't say a single word. In almost the same moment, Gauron fired his submachine gun in a broad sweep, but Sousuke rolled to the floor and returned fire with his pistol.

Gauron yelped as he took a bullet in the left shoulder. Then he took a stumbling step back, leaped at Tessa, and grabbed her as a hostage. Sousuke, uninjured in the crossfire, quickly took shelter behind a console.

"Is that you, Kashim?!" Gauron asked.

"There's nowhere for you to run. Surrender," Sousuke demanded.

Gauron smiled and pointed the submachine gun at Tessa's chin. "You really believe I'd do that? Think again, honey."

"I thought not." Sousuke's gun was trained on Gauron. He wanted to shoot him right in the head, but Gauron moved Tessa's body back and forth, skillfully using her as a shield.

"Sagara-san! Don't worry about me," Tessa yelled. "Just do it!"

Dragging the screaming Tessa with him, Gauron moved back. His plan seemed to be to leave through the other door—the control room entrance on the starboard side. Silently, Sousuke mustered up all his concentration and pointed his gun at Gauron's forehead—at the scar he himself had left there three years ago.

The same moment he pulled the trigger, a violent jolt ran through the control room. Everyone present was thrown, cast against the floor, walls, and even the ceiling.

Completing its rapid rise, the de Danaan burst into the open air. Unleashed from the stormy ocean surface, its skyscraper-sized hull towered against the raging, empty sky, its flood ports gushing like waterfalls.

As it reached its summit, its momentum slowed, then reversed, and when it finally hit the water, it did so like the hammer of the gods. There was a sound like a thunderclap as tens of thousands of tons of submarine slammed against the ocean's surface.

The hull was sturdy enough to endure this unleashed force. Its bow sawed up and down, releasing new surges of seaspray, but still remained afloat in the middle of the storm. The sky was gray all around. The waves were raging, and wind and rain pelted the boat from the side. It was impossible to steer in such ongoing tumult, but at least, the Tuatha de Danaan was still in one piece.

The submarine was rocking. Kaname let out a whimper; she could feel its pain. “Ah...” Her backbone ached, and her skin was burning in places. No, this pain wasn’t coming from her body—it just felt like it. She was ensconced in the deepest recesses of the Tuatha de Danaan. She was one with it.

The TAROS—this mysterious platform that enveloped her—read her brainwaves and her body’s action potential and matched them to the boat’s control system. There were some—like Sousuke and Gauron—who could momentarily link up with a TAROS. But continuous mental communication with it, and the ability to freely navigate the omni-sphere, were limited to Whispered like her and Tessa. Omni-sphere—that which lay beyond substance. There were many ways to draw out its power using a TAROS as a mediator—her synchronizing with the sub was one option of many, she knew, and the lambda driver was another.

The reactor was her heart; the ballast tanks, her lungs; the pipes running through it, her veins and arteries; the hydroplanes, her wings. They all served and obeyed her, even more loyally than her own body did. Even the Mother AI, Dana, showed her fealty; if she said “die,” it would shut down; if she said “restore the captain,” it would erase the erroneous transfer record.

Kaname heard a sound; it came from deep below the chaotic sea. *Another torpedo is coming,* she realized. *It’s coming at me. Straight at me.* But she knew there was no reason to worry. Tessa had said so.

The jolt from their swift rise had been greater than expected. It caused Sousuke to drop his gun and hit the back of his head on a console panel. A normal person might have been knocked out cold, but Sousuke just shook his head, gritted his teeth, and managed to sit himself up. He looked around the control room. The chained-together crew had ended up in a pile, groaning and cursing. Tessa lay limply by the starboard side entrance.

Gauron was nowhere to be seen; he must have escaped in the chaos. *Dammit!* Sousuke thought. He still had the devil's own luck—it was as if Death itself were on the man's side. Sousuke picked up his gun and moved to pursue him.

"Sergeant!" Captain Goddard called. "Untie us first. There's another torpedo coming; we need to take control back at once."

Sousuke gritted his teeth. "Understood." That was right; he had to look after Tessa, too. Sousuke ran up to the crew and blasted the handcuff chains away with his gun.

The crew, finally freed, rushed to their seats. But the approaching torpedo was too close, and their emergency rise meant they couldn't dive again immediately. It was also hard to move properly in the storm; there was no dodging this one.

"One ADCAP on bearing 2-7-8! Range 60... 50! We're done for!" shouted Sergeant Dejirani, who had flown into the sonar room.

The pings were getting closer and closer, and the front screen display showed the torpedo mark overlapping with the de Danaan. The crew tensed up, preparing for the explosion, and Sousuke crouched down on the floor to cover the unconscious Tessa.

They all braced for impact, but the impact never came. The torpedo passed straight under the de Danaan and began circling in confusion. It came for them several times, but never ascended past a certain depth; it just kept circling around them like a lost child.

"What's going on?" Sousuke asked, gazing at the screen.

"Of course... the torpedo's safety," Goddard whispered, releasing the chair he was clinging to. "There are US ships nearby, so the other submarine programmed its torpedoes not to go higher than a certain depth, to avoid mistakenly hitting their allies." Tessa's use of the emergency blow must have been in anticipation of this second shot; she had even taken their depth safety into account.

"She's incredible, I tell you..." Goddard sighed. They were safe. The crew

exchanged awkward smiles as that fact sank in.

“Captain, sir. Please look after the Colonel. I’m going after that man,” Sousuke said, looking down on the limp, faintly-breathing girl.

“Right, got it,” Goddard agreed. “Take care, Sergeant.”

Sousuke ran off. *Gauron...* A premonition washed over him. Something in the back of his mind told him that it was finally time for their reckoning.

USS Pasadena “It missed again?! Dammit!” Captain Sailor shouted and stamped.

“They seem to have anticipated the torpedo’s safety setting,” XO Takenaka noted. “Or it could be a coincidence...”

“Shut up,” Sailor snarled. “Remove the depth safety and fire again. Flood tubes one and two!”

The Pasadena hadn’t given up. It had begun its rise to fire another round of torpedoes.

Tuatha de Danaan The main hangar was in chaos.

After being given an oxygen mask by a subordinate, Lieutenant Colonel Mardukas had regained consciousness, only for the shockwave to hit them shortly after. He’d recognized the procedure for the emergency blow, and through his hazy consciousness, he’ managed to give the order, “grab on to something!” Most of the crew shakily did as they were told. But because the hangar was in the fore, the amplitude of its motion during the rise was especially severe. The crew were slammed hard against the floor and ended up with injuries both large and small. Some of them might take months to heal.

Mardukas himself had sprained his left elbow and taken a scrape along his temple. His head was shooting with pain. The frame of his glasses had bent, and one cracked lens remained only tenuously in place.

They’d managed to avoid calamity thanks to various helicopters, ASes, carts, and ammo crates remaining secured in place on their hooks; even one of those large machines coming loose and crashing through the hangar could have killed

dozens. It was a valuable lesson in the importance of keeping the hangar locked down. He'd continue to be rigorous about these guidelines in the future, Mardukas decided.

At some point, the tightly sealed doors cutting them off from the rest of the sub had come unlocked, and the life support system had resumed normal functions, as had all other locks and machinery. Mardukas didn't even have to give the order for any uninjured crew to fly out of the hangar and run to their stations. Those who didn't have other pressing duties helped get the seriously wounded to the sick bay.

While shouts flew back and forth, he picked up the receiver for the internal phone line. "Control room here." It was Goddard.

"It's me," Mardukas said tersely. "What's happening? Explain."

"XO, you're safe!" Goddard exclaimed with relief. "It's that terrorist... he took over the AI. The bastard was making the boat his plaything, but the captain managed to stop him. Dana is restored. I'm telling you, that girl is really—"

"Where is the terrorist now?" Mardukas asked, inferring from his words that the captain was safe.

"He escaped. He must still be hiding somewhere. I was about to make an announcement to warn—"

"Hurry up, you great fool! Don't forget to include his build and appearance!" Mardukas knew that Goddard was busy with his checks, but he found himself losing his temper anyway. "Ah, pardon me. Once you've done it, send security to the reactor, the engine room, and the Lady Chapel. We need four armed soldiers to—" Mardukas got that far before he stopped.

His eyes had fallen on a soldier running along the other side of the hangar. He was East Asian, dressed in fatigues and bleeding from one shoulder. He was also holding a submachine gun. Mardukas couldn't quite make out the man's face; he was too far away, on top of his glasses being broken.

"XO...?" prompted Goddard.

Most of the men here were injured, and there were plenty of East Asian crewmen on board. Still, it was strange... Why was the soldier running toward

the red AS they had captured in Perio? Why was he hooking up the generator's power cables with such practiced motions?

"Goddard. Is the terrorist... injured?"

"Yes, sir. Sergeant Sagara shot him—"

"In the left shoulder?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, no..." Mardukas dropped the receiver and broke into a run. "Someone! Anyone, stop him! The red AS...!" he shouted, and those attending to the wounded nearby turned back to look. Several of the young soldiers broke out in a run, passing Mardukas.

But the hangar was too large, and the red AS too far way. The sailors closest to the AS realized it a moment later and likewise ran for the machine, but the terrorist turned to them and released a full auto burst from his submachine gun. Caught off guard, the sailors jumped aside and retreated behind the mini-trailers and ammo containers.

Unfortunately, that red AS, the Venom, had been fixed to the floor face-down with its cockpit hatch left open. It took the terrorist less than a second to jump in, and the Venom's cockpit hatch slid closed with him inside. It was over; their human-scale pistols and rifles wouldn't even leave a dent in its hide.

"Take the injured and evacuate the hangar! I don't care where you go, just run!" Mardukas stood there, pale and stock still, shouting at the soldiers around him. Then, he heard a dull *fwish*: the Venom had activated its generator and unlocked its joints. The red machine began to tremble as power flowed through it. First its fingers, then its arms, then its legs began to move, and one after another, it snapped off the wires that were holding it down. The wires wriggled like snakes as they came free, then sparked as they struck the floor.

"It's not over... It's not over yet," the man's voice said over the external speakers. The Venom stood, the top of its head almost touching the ceiling, as it released a muffled laugh. It reached for a nearby weapons container and tore it open with incredible power.

There were about fifty soldiers left in the hangar. Most of them recognized

the danger and began to run, helping the injured to flee as well.

They knew that if left to run free, that thing would destroy the boat. But they still couldn't afford to use infantry anti-tank rockets or anti-AS mines to attack it. The munitions storage and the torpedo room were right next to the hangar; so were the VLS missile tubes, and their onboard aircraft's jet fuel stocks. If set off, the explosive power of all combined would blow open the sub a hundred times over.

"XO, you need to get to safety, too!"

"I will," Mardukas promised. "But—"

A sound came from another direction. One of the de Danaan's ASes, parked and secured a ways away from the Venom, sparked up its generator and released its own joint locks. The AS's keen eyes flashed red for a split second. It gathered power, raised a knee, and snapped the wires holding it down, one after another.

Sergeant Sagara? Mardukas wondered.

The ARX-7 Arbalest rose to its feet heavily, as somewhere outside, a high wave caused the vessel to pitch to the right. Sousuke's cockpit screens relayed the images picked up by the Arbalest's dual sensors. The red AS was directly ahead of him, in the direction of the bow. Sousuke and Gauron faced off from opposite ends of the oblong hangar.

Showdown. Sousuke remembered that word. This man had had his way with them time and again. No one had ever given their battle group, the Tuatha de Danaan, so much trouble.

It's time to admit it, Sousuke thought. *I'm terrified of you, Gauron. Three years ago, you stole everyone from me: Hamdollah, with his electronics shop; the valiant Muhammad; the cynical Halili; so many of my allies. Even that old warrior who taught me the ABCs of battle—Yaqub. You killed them all. That was the first time in my life I'd ever felt a sense of loss.*

When I stand in front of you, I can feel my legs shaking. I start thinking I can't take anymore. I start wanting to run away. That's right... And now, you're trying to take everyone from me again: Kurz, Mao, Yang, Tessa; so many of my allies.

And... Kaname. You're trying to kill them all. But that's one thing I won't let you do. Do you hear me? That's one thing I can't allow. And that's why— "I'm going to kill you," Sousuke whispered, and his machine fluidly obeyed his will. Its underarm weapons rack screeched open, and he drew his monomolecular cutter. As if fueled by a will of iron, the Arbalest held the knife forward.

Gauron just chuckled. "I'm so happy, Kashim." The Venom pulled a monomolecular cutter from the weapons container and crouched down, ready.

Both machines activated their cutters in the same instant. Their internal motors sent their micro chainsaw edges into a high-speed whir, causing an ear-shattering whine to echo throughout the hangar.

Both took a half-step forward, then another half-step. The ASes were an extension of the trained soldiers' bodies. If two machines had about the same specs, combat would be decided by the operators' skill—their ability to smell death, and their cool-headed killer instinct. The two eight-meter-tall machines inched closer and closer to each other, neither offering a moment's opening. Though their bodies seemed tense from top to bottom, their movements were smooth and relaxed. Then, the instant they were within range, both knives lashed out into arcs.

There was a flash, and a cut appeared in the Venom's armor. The left arm—it was shallow. The Arbalest drew back again.

"Oh?" Gauron breathed in surprise.

Sousuke didn't respond. He wasn't going to give him a moment to rest. He dipped his machine low and stepped in, sweeping his knife in a wide stroke. The Venom drew its right leg back and, barely dodging the flash, swung the knife down diagonally from its shoulder. The Arbalest knocked its arm away and tried to grab the Venom to throw it off balance. But, the opponent remained just out of its grasp. The Venom tried to grab the Arbalest's arm instead, but Sousuke cut at it. On and on the knives collided; they feinted, stabbed, dodged, moved, slashed, sliced...

The back-and-forth was visibly accelerating. Attacks that had come once per breath now came two or three times. They lashed out, cunning and calculated, fast enough to leave afterimages. And every single one of them—every single

move—was infused with the desire to kill.

Metal crashed against metal. Sparks flew. “Yes, yes, yes! Move! Faster!” Gauron screamed joyously.

He’s playing with me! Sousuke’s eyes went wide. He drove his concentration past its limits, letting the moment stretch out to eternity. The Arbalest grabbed the wrist of the Venom’s knife hand. Relying solely on his machine’s power, Sousuke pulled the arm in, and thrust a knee into the enemy’s side.

“Guh?!” Gauron grunted, as the Venom flew back into a hangar wall. It crushed a steel framework, smashed through some pipes, and caused a lighting fixture to fall from the ceiling, raining glass fragments down.

Sousuke jumped his machine in pursuit and struck out with its knife. No mercy—the Arbalest’s monomolecular cutter stuck into the Venom’s left shoulder, and the enemy’s armor came with it as he pulled it back. Before he could thrust again, though, the Venom’s left hand pointed its index finger at the Arbalest’s abdomen.

Sousuke gasped. He felt an impact. This time, it was the Arbalest that was slammed into the wall. It was that “finger gun” that had taken Mao out—a directed shockwave, produced by the lambda driver. Even though he’d taken it head-on, the Arbalest had suffered no internal damage; was it the lambda driver’s counter-field, activating now? Actually... had the device been active much longer, since the moment his first strike damaged the Venom? Sousuke decided not to give it any more thought.

Destroy the enemy in front of me, he reminded himself. *That’s all that matters right now.* The force of hitting the wall had knocked the wind out of him, and he felt a sharp pain run down his ribs, but Sousuke ignored it and charged the Venom. He’d kicked aside a small trailer in the process, but he didn’t care. He could hear a feral growling—it was his own voice.

He kicked, and the Venom dodged. He spun around and lashed out with an elbow; the Venom dodged. He grabbed it by the nape of the neck and brought the knife down; the Venom couldn’t dodge that, and the Arbalest’s monomolecular cutter tore a vertical slash down its face. It destroyed the lone red eye that acted as the Venom’s sensor, causing it to shoot sparks like a spurt

of blood, and Gauron howled.

Sousuke wasn't satisfied. He stabbed the knife into the abdomen of the now-blinded machine. With superhuman instinct, Gauron anticipated the knife's course, and he brought his left arm up to block. The knife met his machine just below the elbow, and tore apart its drive system.

But Sousuke wasn't done yet; he pulled out and stabbed the Venom again. Repeated use had caused his monomolecular cutter to overheat, and its edge let out a high-pitched scream as it tore itself apart. But Sousuke didn't give up; still holding the handle of the broken knife, he struck it again and again into the Venom's chest. The enemy machine was backed into the rear hangar until it hit the wall right next to the elevators.

"Urgh... ahh..."

Realizing that the Venom was slowing down, Sousuke finally stopped hitting it. The enemy machine trembled and latched onto the Arbalest like a boxer in a clinch. Shoulders heaving with breath, Sousuke looked at his machine's hand; striking the enemy's armor at full power had left the Arbalest's manipulators broken and worthless.

Gauron let out a slow chuckle; it seemed his external speakers were still working. "I guess... you got me," he whispered. The Venom had been almost completely reduced to scrap. Its head was destroyed, its left arm was barely functional, and its chest armor was warped and hanging off its frame. "You've won... Kashim. Or... have you?"

Sousuke waited, questioningly.

"I really am glad that you'll be with me in the end..." Gauron snickered again.

Sousuke was a bit thrown, unsure of what he was getting at. He shouldn't be able to fight back any longer. No, wait... *Is he going to self-destruct?!* That was what his instincts told him.

Gauron was currently clinging to the Arbalest with all his might. He had wrapped his machine's arms and legs around it, channeling all remaining energy into its electromagnetic muscles. His was the more powerful of the pair, from the start, after all, and now, he was spurred by desperation. The Arbalest lost its

balance, and tumbled back-first into the elevator.

“Why don’t we go out together?” Gauron mused. “Hmm?” It was clear, now. That was his intent. How much was the payload? Enough to just take out his own machine? Or enough to blow a hole in the submarine’s hull?

Sousuke startled as, just then, the floor below them jerked into motion. The elevator holding the two machines had begun to ascend. It was a square platform about twenty by twenty meters, and it was used to carry ASes and helicopters to the flight deck that lay directly above the hangar.

The control room was in pandemonium. One issue was that the fight in the hangar had severed a number of pipes and cables, large and small. Another was that they hadn’t yet refilled the compressed air needed to get the submarine moving again. Another more serious issue was the firing of more torpedoes from the US submarine. But what shocked them more than anything was the fact that the flight hatch—that nearly 70-meter-long stretch of hull in the fore of the vessel—had begun to open of its own accord. The flight hatch was designed to open when helicopters or ASes needed to take off from the flight deck; doing so meant sliding the top of the submarine open over a massive scale. To open it in this storm was pure madness.

Mardukas burst into the control room and shouted, “What are you doing?!”

All Goddard and the others could say was, “we have no idea.” Displayed on the front screen was a set of words written in slightly odd English; they were in a strangely feminine hand.

Don’t worry, everything is gonna happy *Don’t worry,* it urged them. *This will all go just fine.*

The elevator continued its rise.

“Well? Sixty seconds left! By the way, I’m loaded up with 300 kilos of explosives,” Gauron shouted. “More than enough to blow up this sub! Well, what now? What will you do?!” It sounded like the Venom’s self-destruct was on a timer.

Sousuke tried to shake the enemy off him, but the Venom clung on tightly and refused to let him go. Its hands scrambled around the Arbalest and resisted any

attempts to be moved. The fact that he'd broken the fingers of one machine had made it even harder to pry his opponent off. The way the two ASes clung to each other made them look like two judo fighters, competing for a pin.

Gauron laughed. "What's the matter with you? This is just pathetic!" It was the laugh of a good-humored devil. "Why can't you finish me off in one strike, like a proper hero? Look at you, struggling! Let's go out with a bang; make it fun and interesting! C'mon, Kashim!!"

"What's wrong with him?!" Sousuke questioned through gritted teeth. *It's like he's gone mad. No... he's always been this way. This man was always rotten to the core. He'd do anything just to spite someone.*

The elevator's ascent stopped as the two ASes reached the abandoned flight deck. The massive hatch was already open, allowing a view of the dark sky above. The rain poured on the Arbalest and Venom in a torrent, and the waves lashed them with spray. Below them, the sub shook with roars and vibrations. They were in the middle of a storm, literally—any unprotected human up here would be tossed around like a ragdoll.

If only I could drag the Venom to the bow of the flight deck, Sousuke thought, *I could throw it into the ocean before the explosion.* Even if he couldn't shake him off, he could at least drag him into the sea and save the de Danaan. Who had started up the elevator? Who had opened the flight hatch? He didn't know, but whoever it was, they had heard Gauron's voice and knew what he was planning.

Still, it was over fifty meters from the elevator to the ocean. It was hard for Sousuke to move with another machine clinging to him, so he had to crawl to make progress. It would take about a minute to get from his current location to the place where the prow smashed through the massive waves; he wouldn't make it in time.

Whether aware of that or not, Gauron shouted, "Thirty seconds left! What now, honey?!"

"Ngh..." Sousuke reeled his machine back, had it punch at the Venom, kick at the Venom. He struggled in any way he could think of, but it wasn't working. He couldn't shake him off.

Sousuke tried crawling, but it was slow going. The end of the flight deck was too far away. *If only it were free, the Arbalest could cover 100 meters in a second!* he thought in desperate frustration.

"Twenty seconds left!" Gauron cackled. "Just kidding! It's really fifteen! Hahaha, hahahahaha!" He was the most twisted person in existence. Sousuke gritted his teeth and looked around him.

And then... he saw it: the metal rigging built into the flight deck, just within reach. They were protrusions, several meters long, that resembled the starter blocks for sprinters at a track meet.

"Ten seconds!" Gauron crowed.

White steam wafted up from below, seeming to urge Sousuke, "hurry, hurry!" He used all the strength the Arbalest's back muscles had, propelled it from the deck, and stretched its hands toward the device. The left hand made contact. He released the wire gun mounted in the Arbalest's arm—a device like the reel on a fishing pole—and wound it around the rigging's hook. Then, Sousuke wrapped the wire around the Venom's torso.

"Five seconds left!" Gauron sang out. "I love you, Kashim!!"

Ignoring his words, Sousuke shouted out over all radio bands, "Let 'er rip!" The next instant, the device—the shuttle blocks for the steam catapult—activated. Its purpose was to get multi-ton ASes and jet fighters to liftoff speed in seconds. The power backing it was incredible.

Gauron was taken aback as the Venom, now tangled up in the wires, was dragged along the flight deck with the Arbalest, propelled by the catapult's explosive force. Both machines bounced along the deck, heading straight for the boat's front edge. "Wh-What?!" he yelled in surprise.

The two machines crossed the fifty meters in an instant, then were cast off the end of the flight deck toward the ocean, far beyond. But, just before it fell, the Arbalest used the wire gun in its other arm to latch onto the flight deck. The jolt as the line went taut almost caused the hook to lose its grip, but it managed to keep hold of the deck, giving the Arbalest a tentative lifeline.

The Venom, on the other hand, had no wire guns. The red AS howled through

empty space and exploded, just before plunging into the waves of the violent sea. Gauron hadn't been lying about the 300-kilogram payload.

The red fireball swelled against the raging winds and rain. It had tracked a little to the right as it hurtled ahead of the de Danaan, and as it hit the surface of the ocean, the impact spread shrapnel and caused the large vessel to pitch to the left. After taking the brunt of the shockwave, the Arbalest began to plummet toward the sea... but it just managed to grab the edge of the deck with its free hand.

The Tuatha de Danaan cut straight through the fire and fragments left in the Venom's wake. Sousuke's machine teetered on the brink of plummeting, but he manipulated it carefully and just managed to crawl it back up onto the flight deck. Pieces of the detonated Venom were scattering down around him here and there, still crackling with fire, but the flames were quickly quenched by the rain. The Arbalest collapsed next to the catapult, shoulders heaving.

Gauron... was dead. This time, he was sure of it. This time, it wasn't just wishful thinking. Even if he'd managed to live through the explosion—somehow—the ocean and the storm would make quick work of him. He couldn't possibly survive out here.

His mortal enemy was dead. He'd slain the man who slaughtered all his old comrades, yet Sousuke couldn't muster any sentiment about it. The man was too petty to inspire that kind of feeling. Through and through, right to the end, to a degree you could almost call art...

"Stupid..." Sousuke muttered to himself, covered in sweat and breathing rapidly. "'Kashim, Kashim'... Don't act like we're friends, you piece of shit..."

Since his voice was on an open channel, Kaname accidentally overheard it. Sousuke had cursed. There was something charming about it, though: it gave him a sense of humanity and hinted at a more complicated past. Maybe his attitude to her right after the mission, too, had had something to do with Gauron—with that past.

I'm sorry for being so insensitive, Kaname thought and meant it. *Now that I think about it, I really don't know anything about you yet, do I?* That was right. Even though they were the same age, he was a veteran mercenary; a top-class

soldier, who served on board this submarine. Plus, she'd just seen him knock that gross jerk's block off. He was amazing, genuinely spectacular... and she was quietly pleased by the thought that someone like her could fluster someone like him.

She could feel the ship breathing. The Arbalest was back inside, and the flight hatch was closing. They'd soon have their compressed air stores refilled, too. The torpedoes that the Pasadena had fired off were approaching, but re-engaging the superconductive drive would let them shake those off easily.

Everything was fine, now. With that thought, Kaname found herself drifting away from the sphere, and she opened her eyes to find herself sitting inside that medium between mind and matter, the TAROS. The cover above her was open. She could see the roof of the de Danaan's Lady Chapel. So many things she'd assumed she would forget—the submarine's layout, the things she'd done, the power she'd felt, the knowledge of how to influence the Sphere—she still understood almost all of them.

USS Pasadena The sonar technician reported, "Um... the Toy Box is moving away. Depth 500, incredible speed... probably over 50 knots... I don't think our torpedoes can catch it. What in the world...?"

Then XO Takenaka chimed in. "It gave us the slip, eh? What an amazing vessel..."

Captain Sailor slumped over and glared at Takenaka. "Then what are we? We fired four ADCAPs that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, you know. I look like a total fool."

"What's wrong with that?" the XO asked scornfully. "You *are* a total fool."

Sailor grabbed Takenaka by the collar, and the others had to rush to stop him.

Epilogue

Four people had died in all. Tessa didn't care at all about the traitors, Dunnigan and Nguyen, but Captain McAllen and Private Liang were painful losses.

Mardukas and the other officers reassured her, "Given the situation, it's a miracle that we only lost two men." There had been no more deaths after the seajacking occurred, and as captain, Tessa deserved credit for that. Nevertheless, she remained completely despondent.

Even Major Kalinin, who heard about the incident after the fact, felt a powerful sense of responsibility. The traitors had come out of his SRT, and his own aide was one of the dead. He seemed to have secretly resigned himself to something... but no one could know what it was at this stage.

After arriving at the Merida Island Base, the crew lined up and took roll. This had been the captain's job since days of old, and on the Tuatha de Danaan, the roll for the ground forces was included. Tessa had all of her subordinates' names committed to memory. She faced them all, lined up neatly in the underground dock, and said, "Lieutenant Colonel Richard Mardukas."

"Ma'am."

"Captain William Goddard."

"Ma'am."

It went on and on. After a hundred and some names, Tessa read, "Captain Gail McAllen."

"On patrol, Captain," Mardukas responded. Tessa gave him a slight nod, expressionlessly, thinking of the winner of the bingo tournament. His smile. With excessive self-control, she managed to silence her inner thoughts.

"Master Sergeant Melissa Mao."

"Ma'am."

"Sergeant Roger Sandraptor."

“Ma’am.”

“Sergeant Kurz Weber.”

“Yo.”

“Sergeant Sagara Sousuke.”

“Ma’am.”

As she read through the SRT, she skipped the names of Dunnigan and Nguyen. When she reached the PRT members, then, she called the name of another of their dead. “Private Liang Xiaoping.”

“On patrol, Captain,” Mardukas told her, calmly. Once again, Tessa said nothing.

When the roll was finished, the bodies were transferred to the base, as McAllen and Liang’s coffins were each carried by six of their colleagues. They would both be buried in their home towns.

Their families would be told that they had died in accidents when working for Argyros, a security company. They wouldn’t be told the specifics; they didn’t know that Tessa existed. She wasn’t even allowed to write letters of condolences to the families, but such was the nature of what they did.

This incident had taught Kaname all about the hardships Tessa faced in life... After watching the transport holding the coffins take off from the Merida Island Base’s covert runway, she caught sight of the other girl heading back to the living quarters area. “You should talk to her,” she told Sousuke. “Cheer her up.”

Sousuke stood for a moment in stunned silence, then approached Tessa as Kaname watched them from afar. In that empty corridor, Sousuke said something to her, and she drew up to him, pressed her face against his chest, and began to sob. Kaname let out a sigh, and went back to the guest quarters she’d been assigned.

About four hours before their plane to Tokyo was set to depart, Sousuke appeared in her room.

“What?” she asked.

“Come with me.” He was holding what looked like a rifle case and an

ammunition box. Confused, Kaname followed after, and for about ninety minutes they walked across the base's north half—a place made up of rocky mountains and broad-leaved trees. Eventually, the two of them came out on a rocky beach illuminated by the setting sun. It was a beautiful sight.

"Take this." Sousuke pulled a carbon fiber fishing rod from the rifle case and handed it to Kaname.

"What's this?" she wanted to know.

"A fishing rod."

"No, not that... What is this place?" she asked.

"My secret fishing spot," he responded with his usual sullen expression. "I'm the only one on the base who knows about it."

"Fishing? But we'd only have forty minutes before we have to turn back and get on the plane to Tokyo..."

"Irrelevant," Sousuke said dismissively. "This was my initial mission objective."

"Huh?" Kaname looked at him dubiously, and he cast his baited fishing line into the ocean.

"It's where I initially wanted to bring you," he told her. "But... I suppose we've taken the long way around, haven't we?"

"H... Here?"

"Affirmative." Sousuke looked down at his watch, then nodded. "Go on, fish. Thirty minutes is enough time to catch a big one."

"Stupid!" Kaname scoffed. "There's no way..."

"You think?" Sousuke said, his tone somehow daring. "When I'm with you, I feel like I can do anything. Catch the biggest fish, escape the most dangerous situation... So I think thirty minutes will be enough. Just stay with me for that long."

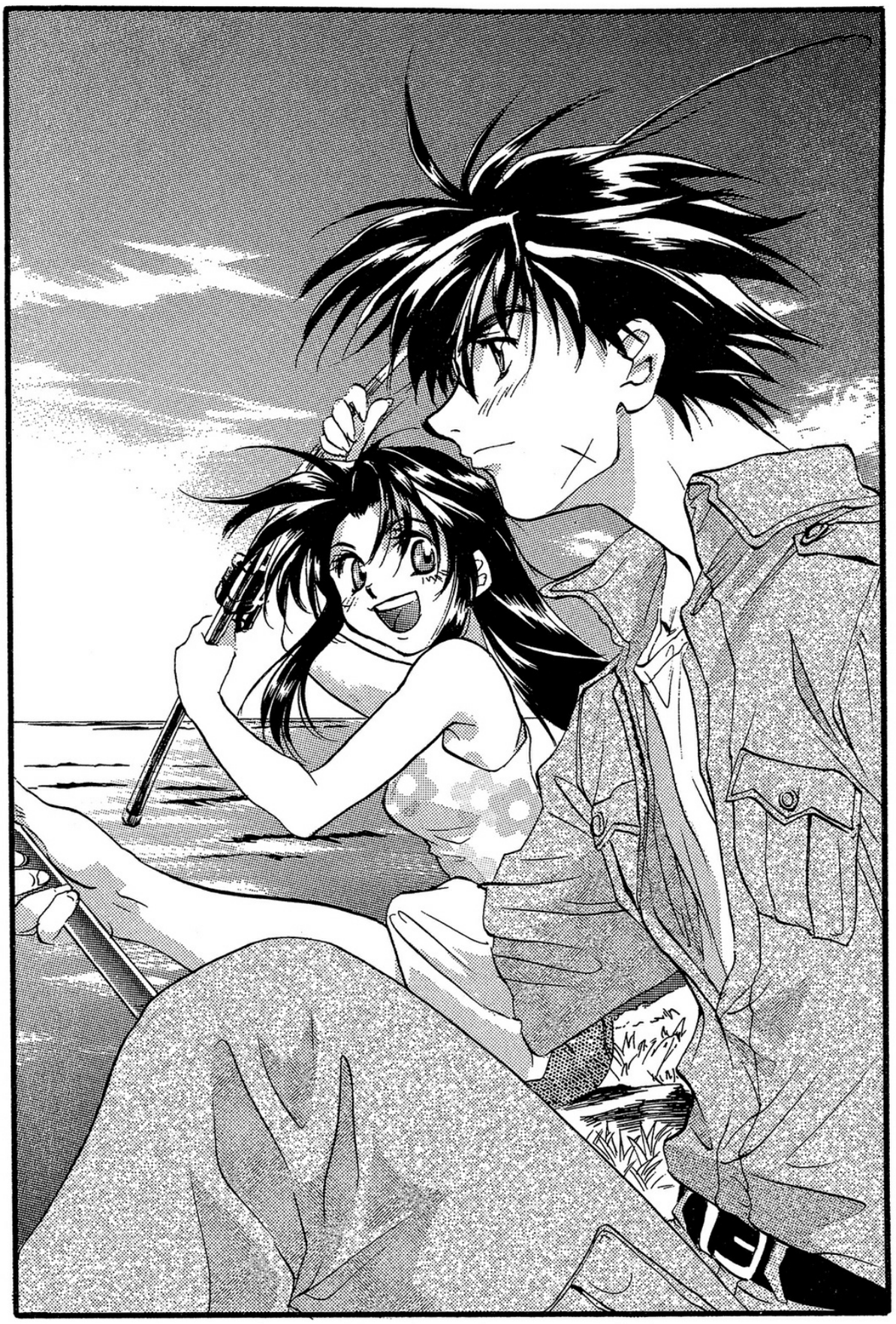
She looked at him skeptically. "Do you really think that?"

"Of course," he told her. "It's because of you that I'm here right now."

For a moment, Kaname just stared at him... then, eventually, she gave him a

big smile. “Okay, got it. Let’s put that hunch of yours to the test.” They cast their lines into the ocean and sat side by side on the beach. It only lasted for thirty minutes, and neither one caught anything in the end, and nothing particularly noteworthy happened, but...

They enjoyed the heck out of those thirty minutes.



The End

Afterword Sorry for the long wait. Sousuke's mortal enemy returns and puts the thumbscrews to Mithril once again. This time, we're at sea! It's a military thriller out on the ocean... kind of thing? Maybe not? Anyway, *FMP*'s third long-form story, *Trembling Into the Blue*, is officially here.

These books are getting pretty thick. It's not good. Not googoogood. Gogood. My sentences are turning weird, huh? Sounds like a Whispered, huh? I think I'm going crazy.

There's a lot of weird military jargon and abbreviations showing up this time, but it's okay if you don't understand them all. I doubt I understand them, either. It's all about atmosphere. It's like when the Yamato takes "Damage to the third bridge!" or Bright says "Fire on the port side is waning, what are you doing?" Not an issue. To be even more precise, I guess, it's like when Doraemon shouts "Go, Bamboo Copter!" Imagine an AS squadron deploying from their amphibious assault submarine equipped with bamboo copters. Dodging bullets, capes billowing in the breeze... "Al, prepare the Earth Destruction Bomb." "Roger, EDB ready."

Flying through the sky, through the sky.

I think I was slacking a little bit on ONS (One Night Stand) so I decided to go back to the more hard-boiled stuff of BMG (Boy Meets Girl). But the ocean makes things feel very sticky. Sticky. Slicky. I can't get picky. Japanese rap? Yeah, it's icky. That's what Tre says too. Who's that?

I'm flying through the sky!

I never know how to fill these long afterwords. Anyway, say goodbye. You'll fall to pieces and go dry. See ya.

...That's only a page and a half, huh? Maybe I should bring in another guest. This is someone to whom I owe an appreciable amount of appreciation (wow, what an awful sentence). It's Shinjo Kazuma, who writes the *Kuro Densho* series also for Fujimi Fantasia Bunko! He's very imposing and has a fancy beard, plus he's a Keio Boy and a bilingual nice guy (bi-ni-guy for short?). Let's give him a round of applause! Clap, clap. Drumroll. Pop.

Shin: "Ah, hello there, I'm Shinjo. I just did an interview for the afterword of my own book, and I'm already doing this again. Are you sure this is what you want?"

—It's fine. I've wanted to do this again for a while.

Shin: "Ah, I see. ...You mean we've done it before?"

—Yes. Readers who know me from *FMP* probably don't know that we used to do conversations like this for old *Hourai Gakuen* books and such.

Shin: "Hmm, I do think I remember. That takes me back... (gazing into the distance) But you young'uns should be looking towards the future. Anyway, this latest novel of yours... it's an ocean thing, right?"

—That's right. A love story set in Shonan, in the summer. Just kidding.

Shin: "....."

—It's the story of a real-life luxury liner that went down. It's going to sweep the Oscars. Just kidding.

Shin: "..... (with a gentle smile) Well, I don't mind continuing with this. But if you try to fill your last pages like this, your supervising editor, 'Three Months' Sato, will probably scold you again."

—About that, actually. You always call Sato-san 'three months, three months,' so apparently a lot of people have misunderstood and assumed she's three months pregnant.

Shin: "Oh, this again? (turning back to Kudanshita, where Fujimi Shobo is) That interpretation has caused you a lot of trouble, and I'm sorry for that. Attention, readers. That's not what I meant, so make no mistake. Ms. Sato is a truly excellent and competent editor, and she's also (fill in fawning platitudes

here). Ahem."

—Oh, honestly. Sato-san is one gutsy lady, and (fill in fawning platitudes here). That's why I'm sure she won't criticize me. Hah hah hah. ...So, I must admit, this story takes place at sea, on a submarine, but we never see the beautiful captain in a swimsuit. This might be a problem.

Shin: "What, really?!"

The Masses: "For real?!"

American President: "Are you kidding me, Gatou-kun?!"

—It's true, Mr. President. I only realized it after I finished writing, and then I didn't have time to add in a scene like that. Ugh...

President: "Hmm, I see. I don't know much about writing, but it sounds like a challenging field."

—Yes, indeed. You have people like Monica-san at your office, so you can enjoy the day-in day-out, but all I have at my workplace are Gundam models. Of course, I enjoy those in my own way.

Shin: "Are you sure about this? Weren't you going to avoid current affairs jokes? It'll be Clinton when the book is released, but next year it'll be some other guy. Incidentally, readers, this afterword discussion was written in January 2000."

—Ah, crap. The *FMP* world is set in the 20th century, of course, but we'll be entering the 21st very soon... That's the flow of time for you.

Shin: "Hmm. Yeah, it won't be the 1900s anymore. A long time ago, we assumed that the years 2000 and 2001 would bring us flying cars and colonies on Mars and undersea bases where we talk to dolphins... that's how magazines depicted it, anyway. I wonder, what ever happened to flying cars and Mars? (wistful gaze)"

—Mars. Flying cars. They have that futuristic ring to them, yeah. And subways that run through clear plastic tubes.

Shin: "And humanoid robots and such. Well, those we might just be on the brink of... That Honda P3 is really impressive. ...Anyway, we're getting off the

subject. We were talking about the captain in a swimsuit."

—Right. I thought I could fit it into the epilogue, but we had to keep things serious. I'll make it happen if I get the chance, so I ask for patience and mercy from the readers. This time around, she's definitely more in "badass" mode.

Shin: "I see. You want to show many of the character's facets while saving some fun for later. Very clever."

—Why, thank you. Tee-hee. ...Anyway. (looking at watch) Oh, I think we're out of time. Goodbye, everyone!

Shin: "That's pretty abrupt! (pulls out a paper fan from nowhere and hits him) Oh, right, I was asked to tell you to read this before it was over. Here. (pulls scrap of paper from pocket and hands it over)"

—Um, please read that yourself. ...Ah, he's gone. Just like the aoi senpuu. Blue gale. Wipe away your tears.

Whew. Writing dialogues like these are easier for me, and they sure eat up the word count. What a big help. Thanks so much. By the way, I'm back to sanity. I have a note that says "Introduce Kuro Densho PBM."

You see, he might be a weird old man, but Shinjo-san is a genuinely impressive person. When creating a fictional world for his work, he gives it such depth and makes it cool and keeps things scientific, and that's rare. (That's not flattery. I mean it.) After all, not only does he craft his world's history and customs, but its language structure too, so skillfully. (Is that literature?!) In creating the world of *FMP*, I took a bit of (rather, a lot of) influence from Shinjo-san.

...So anyway, from June through next March of this year (2000), a play-by-mail game will let you mess around in the vast and detailed world of Shinjo-sensei's *Kuro Densho*. We'll use postcards and letters to let thousands of people across the country make their own characters and act. I participated in a game like this once, and it taught me a lot. Ah, nostalgia.

Anyway, if you're interested in the game, send a business card with your name and address with a 90 yen stamp for the return in a sealed envelope to the following address: 2-1-16-220, Miyamae, Suginami Ward, Tokyo, 〒168-

0081 c/o Elseware, “Blue Gale, Power of Heart.” Those participating by internet can visit the Elseware homepage (http://elseware.co.jp) to receive a pamphlet.

Now, I feel like I’ve imposed on you all for too long. I apologize profusely to Shikidouji-sensei. I’m really sorry for not being able to send you proper reference materials. Nevertheless, you created your usual amazing, soulful illustrations, and I can’t thank you enough. Seriously, it makes me realize the limitations of text.

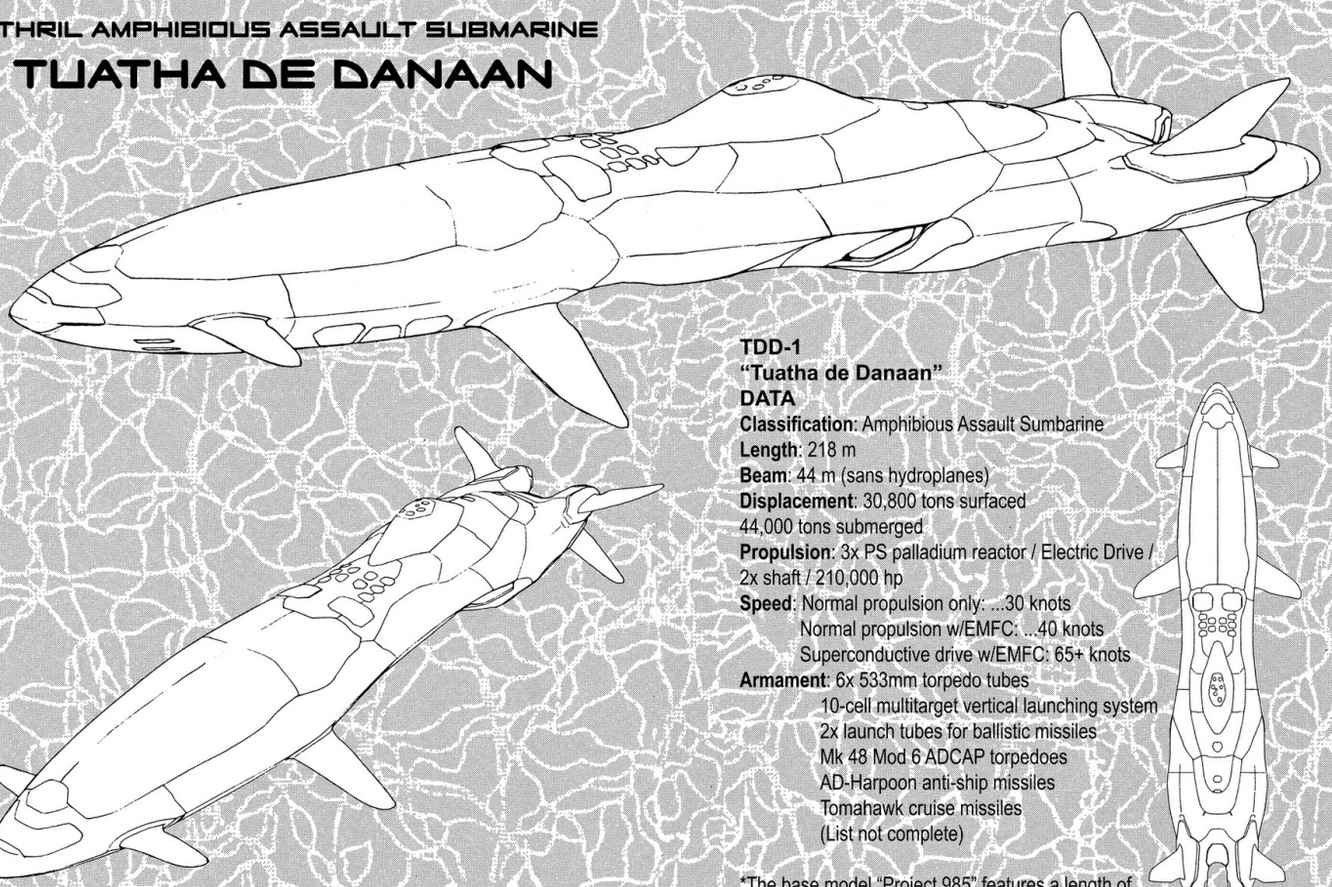
And a big thanks to Masayuki Takano for giving me an amazingly cool design for the TDD.

Thanks as well to Ms. Sato my editor, and a big thank you to all people involved in the process whose names I haven’t learned yet. This will go on sale in January, so a big thank you to all the store owners who will stock it. And a big thanks and apology for the people who went looking for my release on the January Fantasia Bunko release day. I’m really sorry and also grateful.

Anyway. This has become a pretty long afterword, but I think we’re done here. See you next time for another round of Sousuke in hell.

MITHRIL AMPHIBIOUS ASSAULT SUBMARINE

TUATHA DE DANAAN



TDD-1
"Tuatha de Danaan"
DATA
Classification: Amphibious Assault Sumbarine
Length: 218 m
Beam: 44 m (sans hydroplanes)
Displacement: 30,800 tons surfaced
44,000 tons submerged
Propulsion: 3x PS palladium reactor / Electric Drive /
2x shaft / 210,000 hp
Speed: Normal propulsion only: ...30 knots
Normal propulsion w/EMFC: ...40 knots
Superconductive drive w/EMFC: 65+ knots
Armament: 6x 533mm torpedo tubes
10-cell multitarget vertical launching system
2x launch tubes for ballistic missiles
Mk 48 Mod 6 ADCAP torpedoes
AD-Harpoon anti-ship missiles
Tomahawk cruise missiles
(List not complete)

*The base model "Project 985" features a length of 183m, beam 36m, displacement estimated 32,000t.

Illustration: Masayuki Takano



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Full Metal Panic! Volume 3

by Shouji Gatou

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis

Edited by Dana Allen

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Illustrations by Shikidouji

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English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo

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Ebook edition 1.0: September 2019

Shouji Gatou

Illustrator
Shikidouji

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FULL METAL PANIC!

TREMBLING INTO THE BLUE