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4



FULL METAL PANIC!

ENDING DAY BY DAY PART 1

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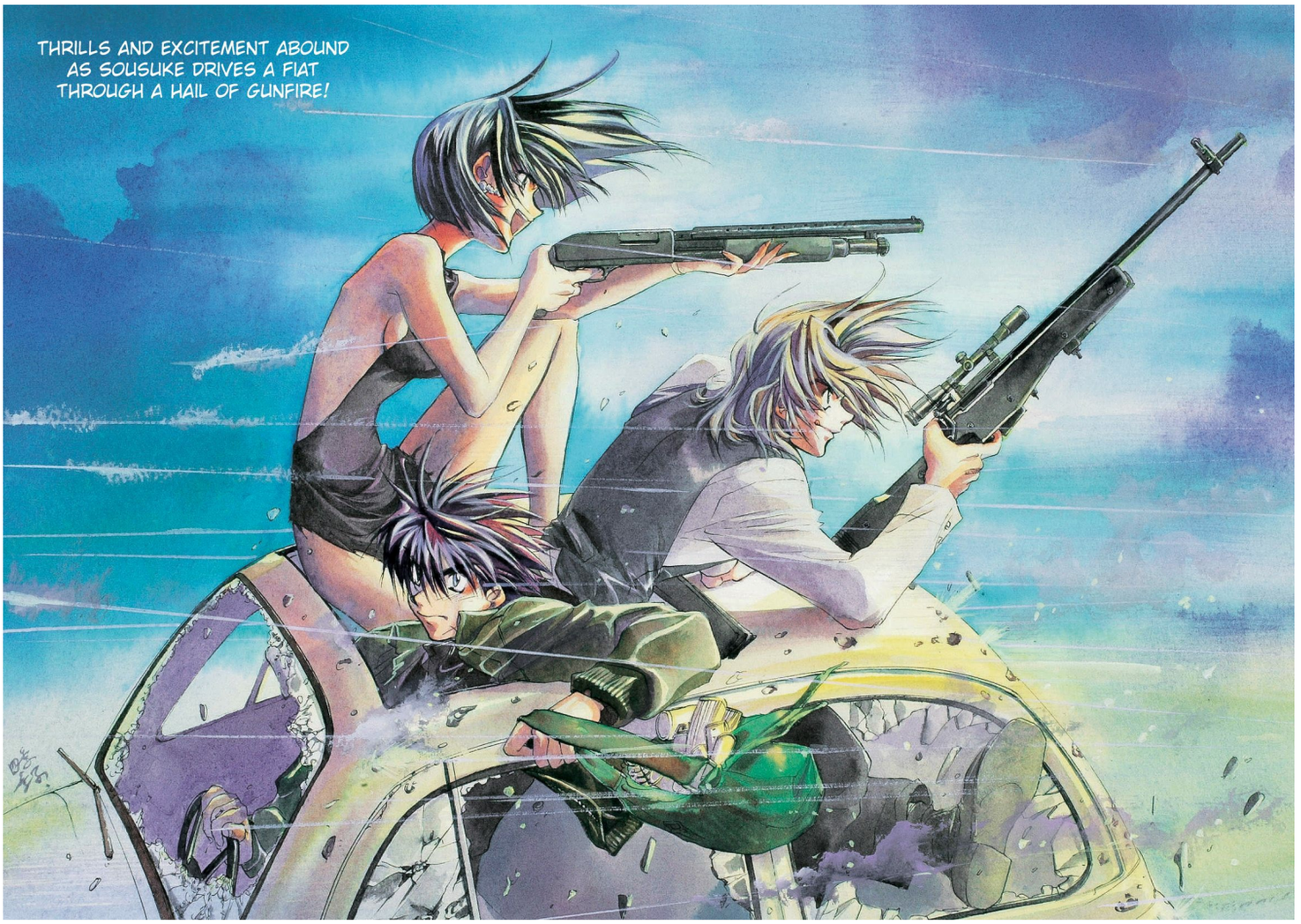
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FULL METAL PANIC!

ENDING DAY BY DAY PART 1


KANAME FELT STRANGELY SELF-CONSCIOUS AS HER CALL WENT THROUGH TO SOUSUKE, A WORLD AWAY IN ITALY...


THRILLS AND EXCITEMENT ABOUND
AS SOUSUKE DRIVES A FIAT
THROUGH A HAIL OF GUNFIRE!


AN UNEXPECTED ORDER FROM MITHRIL. LINES OF UNFEELING WORDS ON THE SCREEN. VIOLENT EMOTIONS SURGED THROUGH SOUSUKE'S BODY...

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Prologue

There was a red kei-car parked behind the north school building: a cheap-looking domestic model from four or five years back. Its tires were worn, its body was peppered in dents; its hood and roof were also dirty from the last few days of rain, which gave it a seedy vibe.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen that car before...” Chidori Kaname said, peering down at the kei-car from a second-floor hall window.

“Oh, yeah?” her classmate Tokiwa Kyoko asked from behind her.

They were on their way back to their classroom, after returning some library books. It was lunchtime, but there were none of the usual students fooling around behind the school building. It was the day before second term midterms began, meaning most students were presently huddled in the classrooms, doing battle with their textbooks and lecture notes.

“It’s a weird place to put it, too,” Kaname mused. “It’s not like that’s a parking lot...”

“You think we have a visitor?” Kyoko wondered in speculation.

“Maybe?”

“Anyway, we’d better get back to class. Test’s tomorrow, you know?”

“Hmm...” Abandoning their interest, Kaname and Kyoko returned to classroom 2-4. They opened their textbooks and spent some time quizzing each other on the chapters covered by tomorrow’s test.

Soon after, the school intercom chimed: “Testing, testing. This is a student council aide speaking.” It was the voice of Sagara Sousuke, their classmate. Kaname looked around; she hadn’t even noticed he was missing. “Whoever parked the red kei-car behind the north school building, please contact the student council room at once. I repeat: Whoever parked the red kei-car behind the northern school building, please contact the student council at once. The number is Tama-50—” After repeating the number three times just in case, the

voice over the speakers went silent. It was the kind of “your vehicle is parked in a loading zone” announcement you’d typically hear in a department store.

“It’s about that car we saw,” Kaname mused.

“What is Sagara-kun doing?” Kyoko wondered.

“Who knows?” Kaname said with a shrug. She didn’t, certainly, but the announcement should be audible in the principal’s and teachers’ offices; the owner of the car would hear it and get in touch with Sousuke right away. In other words, it wasn’t an issue.

Kaname and Kyoko spent the next thirty minutes quizzing each other.

“Okay, what does ‘in spite of’ mean?” Kaname asked.

She had pulled the English phrase right out of their textbook, but it seemed to catch Kyoko flat-footed. “Uh, how should I know? Where did that come from?”

“Page 88.”

“Page 88... Oh, that’s chapter 10,” Kyoko said. “Chapter 10’s not on the test.”

“Huh?” Kaname blinked. “Sure it is.”

“Is not,” Kyoko argued. “Ms. Kagurazaka didn’t mention it.”

“Huh? Yes she did.”

“Did not.”

“Did so!”

“Did not!”

After a brief but fierce exchange, they concluded that they should just ask their English teacher, Kagurazaka Eri, directly. They left the classroom and headed for the teachers’ office.

Test preparation in progress. No students allowed! read the sign on the door, so they called to her from outside. “Excuse us! Ms. Kagurazaka!”

“What is it?” came the response from just behind them.

Kaname turned to see Kagurazaka Eri standing there, holding a white plastic bag. “Oh, hey, Ms. Kagurazaka. Were you out?”

“Yes, I was at a discount store in the shopping district.” She pulled a tin of wax and some auto cleaning supplies from the bag.

“What’s that stuff for?” Kaname asked.

“I just got my license,” Eri said with a bright smile, “so I drove to work for the first time today. I wanted to use the hose behind the school to give my car a nice wash later.” She must have been out of the school during lunch break.

Kaname stared at her dumbly. “Um... did you hear that announcement before?”

The teacher tilted her head. “What announcement?”

“Forget all that!” Kyoko interrupted. “Ms. Kagurazaka, tell Kana-chan that chapter 10 won’t be on the test!”

“She’s right,” Ms. Kagurazaka said. “Chapter 10 isn’t on the test.”

“See? I told you!” Kyoko beamed in triumph.

“Ugh, fine. I’m sorry.” Kaname admitted defeat, but then immediately took off.

“Kana-chan?” Kyoko called after her in astonishment.

“Sorry, there’s something I gotta check. I’ll eat my crow later, okay?”

Leaving Kyoko behind, Kaname strode swiftly away from the teachers’ office. She was heading for the northern building, and though she couldn’t fully explain why, her stomach was churning. She walked down the stairs to the first floor and took an emergency exit that led behind the school to the place where she’d seen the car before.

When she arrived there, she stared in shock: strewn around before her were the gruesome remains of the dissected kei-car. Its tires lay flat on the ground, the hood was leaned against the fence, and the faux leather seats were lined up in rows. Nuts, bolts, and engine parts were piled up everywhere. Even the doors had been removed.

“S-Sousuke?!” she spluttered.

Sagara Sousuke turned as he heard his name called. He had a large sensor of

some kind in his hands, which he was running carefully over one of the seats he'd just removed. "Stay back, Chidori!" he barked at her. "It isn't safe yet. If someone needs to die here, let it be limited to me." His gaze was dead serious. He continued his work, greasy sweat rising from his temples.

"D-Do you not know whose car that is?!" she squeaked.

"I do not," Sousuke confirmed. "It's an unidentified vehicle, suspiciously parked; hence, the need to search it."

"Search it for *what*?!"

"Car bombs," Sousuke replied, with utmost sincerity. "A car like this, mounted with plastic explosives, can easily be transformed into a deadly weapon. Think back to Lebanon, 1983—a Hezbollah truck performed a kamikaze attack on a US Armed Forces base. Do you know how many people died in that one act of terrorism?"

"How would I know?!" Kaname exploded.

"Two-hundred and forty-one! All those brave Marines, dead in an instant!" Sousuke said defensively. "We have no way of knowing that a similar tragedy could never befall this place, as well!"

"The *hell* we don't!" said Kaname, stalking forward to push him over.



Sousuke hit the asphalt, scattering his sensor and tools all around. “Chidori, what are you—”

“That was Ms. Kagurazaka’s car!” Kaname wailed. “She was just on cloud nine about the thought of cleaning it! How could you *do* this to her?!”

“But high explosives—”

“—are not present here!!” Kaname bellowed. Sousuke tried to stand up, but she kicked him down again. “Put it back the way it was! Right now! She’s going to tear your throat out if she finds this— No, knowing her, she’ll probably faint dead on the spot! Which is actually way worse!”

“Is it... Is it really Ms. Kagurazaka’s car?” Sousuke asked nervously.

“Why would I lie about that?!” Kaname yelled.

“Urgh...” Sousuke’s gaze hardened as he stared at the piles of kei-car parts around him. “That’s a problem. The restoration will be time-consuming.”

“You should’ve thought about that before you took it apart!”

Sousuke was still on the ground, when an electronic trill sounded out from his chest. *Bi-bi-beep. Bi-bi-beep.* “Hmm...” He quickly pulled a cell phone from his jacket pocket, turned it on, and spoke in hushed English. “Uruz-7 here. I see, but... 2 and 6? ...Understood. Yes, I will. I’ll head for the scene via Route 10. Yes. Understood.” After a few minutes of that, he shut the phone off and began gathering his tools in a hurry.

“Um, what’s going on?” Kaname asked.

“An urgent task has come up,” Sousuke told her tersely. “I need to leave school early.”

“Again?” She paused for a minute. “Wait, what are you gonna do about the car?!”

“Given my priorities...” Sousuke looked down at the parts, showing genuine distress. “I’m afraid I’ll have to abandon the car. Please don’t tell Ms. Kagurazaka,” Sousuke said, and then ran off with his bag.

“Sousuke! Hey! Are you crazy?! Did you forget we start midterms tomorrow?!

And... he's gone. Darn it." Kaname clicked her tongue as she watched Sousuke flee the scene. *Another 'job,' huh? Why do those people have to run him so ragged?* While she thought that over with a scowl, she also had a look over the dissected corpse of the kei-car. *Guh... guess I'd better beat a strategic retreat, too...*

That's right, she told herself. *It's not as if I'm obligated to put it back together. It's not as if I could, even if I wanted to.* After a dispiriting attempt to imagine how she would explain this later, she swiftly fled the scene herself.

Back in the classroom, she could hear the teacher's distant scream when the bell for fifth period rang, but... Kaname just put her head on the desk and covered her ears. *Sorry, Ms. Kagurazaka,* she thought miserably. *It's all his fault.*

1: Code of Silence

13 October, 2052 Hours (West Pacific Standard Time)

1st Briefing Room, Merida Island Base, West Pacific Ocean

The round black table was surrounded by Teletha “Tessa” Testarossa and the ghosts of nine men. At least, they looked like ghosts—they were pale and slightly translucent, with veils of static wreathing their vaguely defined forms.

This was an online conference for Mithril’s high officials from around the world. The need to thoroughly encrypt their holoscreen projections and transmit them through satellite relays required them to stay at this low resolution. Their movements were also jerky, coming in at about five frames per second, in a way that brought to mind old stop-motion animation.

“In conclusion,” the intelligence official said, after thirty minutes of the droning recitation of his report, “the actions of John Howard Dunnigan and Nguyen Bien Bo were impossible for the intelligence division to foresee. There are hard limits on the degree to which we can assess the character, pasts, and financial statuses of battle group members. The matter thus calls into question the competence of on-site authorities. End of report.”

Four of the nine high officials present let out noises of outrage. Three were battle group leaders like Tessa, and the fourth was Admiral Jerome Borda, head of the operations division. It was clear why the statement would upset members of the operations division: background checks on Mithril personnel were supposed to be the purview of intelligence, yet here they were, passing the buck to them. They were all eager to tell the man to take his report and shove it.

Instead, what Admiral Borda said was this: “I’m going to assume that was a joke. Though it’s not much of a punchline for thirty minutes of setup...” He was typically a mild-mannered man, but his tone was currently full of daggers. The

other three battle group heads expressed agreement with his opinion.

“What he said. Can’t you give us a more constructive analysis?”

“I feel like we got sold a lemon, and now the dealer’s telling us the breakdown is our fault. So what are we supposed to do, walk 100 kilometers without a car?”

“I’d say it’s worse than that. They want us to strap grenades to our chests with the safety pins already pulled.”

The intelligence official wilted slightly under the criticism, but his superior, General Amit, remained unfazed. “It is an indisputable fact that there are limits on what we can track,” he said quietly. “This is especially true for SRT personnel, who are preferably experienced and resourceful, as well as intelligent and shrewd—these are, of course, the qualities we demand from them. But this also means that, if one of them gets it into their head to open a secret bank account and take money from a third party, that would be extremely difficult for us to detect.”

“And we’re asking you to make it work!” Admiral Borda fumed.

“We cannot simply ‘make it work,’ Admiral,” said the head of intelligence, remaining calm. “Do you want us to monitor your personnel 24 hours a day? Or shall we encourage ‘snitching’ in your ranks? The notion is absurd. No one who would tolerate such treatment would ever be chosen for an SRT.” This comeback hit the Admiral where it hurt. The independence, flexibility, and self-reliance of the operations division’s SRTs—special response teams—was one of the keys to their success.

“This is a structural problem,” the head of intelligence continued. “Mithril’s very nature as an organization of mercenaries means that loyalty can never be entirely guaranteed. You can offer them the fairest compensation in the world, but if someone else throws enough money at the right person—five million dollars, according to your Sergeant Weber’s report, wasn’t it?—betrayal becomes inevitable. The human heart is a fickle thing.”

Borda remained silent.

“And there’s one other thing I’ll ask you to remember: it was the operations

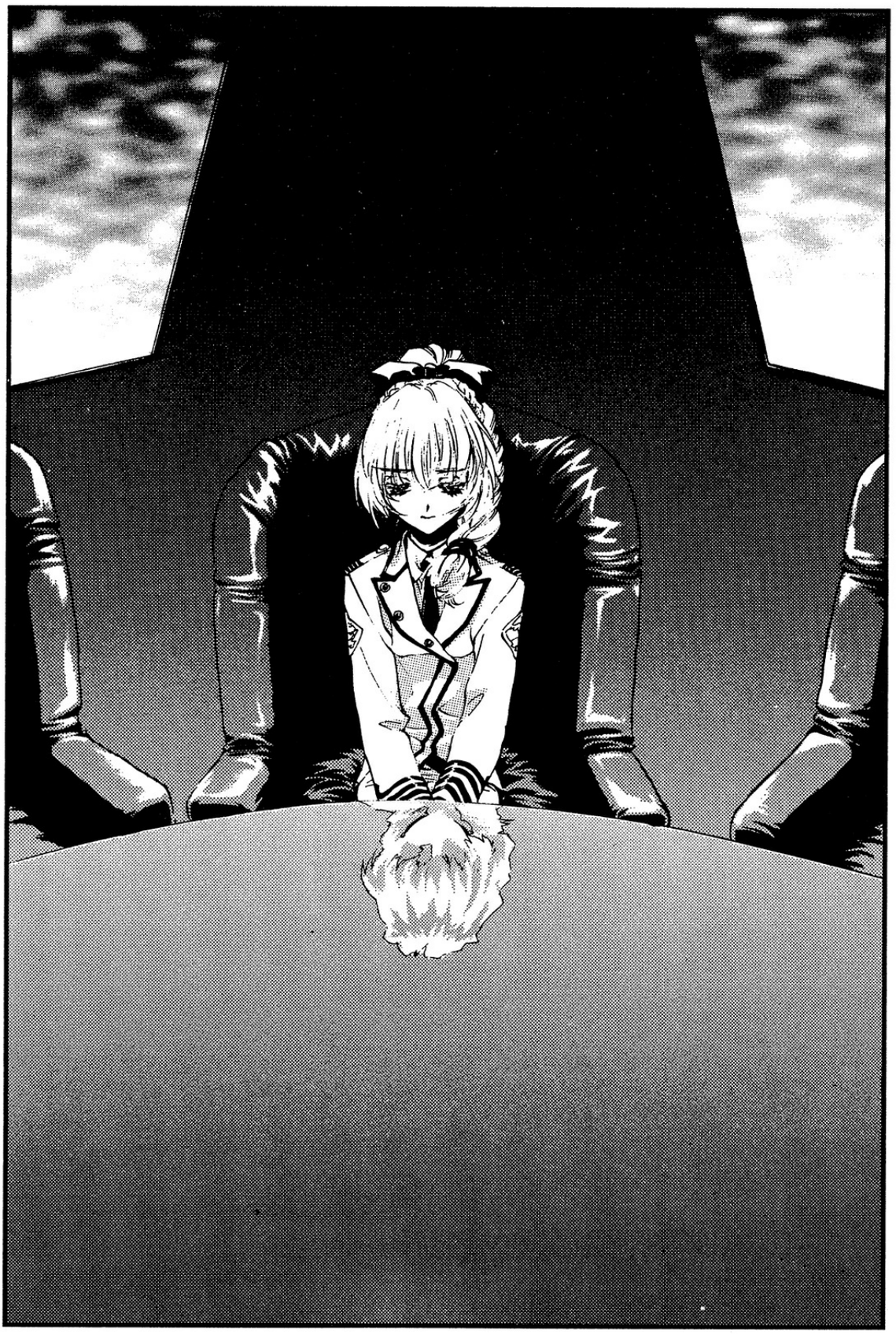
division that employed Major Bruno."

Major Bruno was the one who had placed Dunnigan and Nguyen with the Tuatha de Danaan. Both intelligence and operations now agreed that he was likely a spy for a hostile organization, and that he had been facilitating the terrorists' actions. He had fled the operations division immediately after the incident, and Mithril had been forced to change much of their classified data—encryption algorithms, safety procedures, supply routes and safe house locations—as a result. Physical structures like the Merida Island Base couldn't be moved, of course, so they'd settled for just increasing security—but the process as a whole had proved tremendously expensive.

"If the TDD-1 had just vanished into the ether—as was their plan—Bruno would never have come under suspicion. He would have remained in our organization— excuse me..." The intelligence chief's hologram stopped to light a cigarette, and then let out a satisfied plume of smoke. "—Remained in the organization to cause even greater damage."

"But that didn't happen," Admiral Borda put in, "thanks to Colonel Testarossa."

"Indeed, which is why we are not calling her command into question. Is that a problem?" The intelligence chief's ghostly image cast a glance in Tessa's direction. She said nothing, simply looking down at her own hands.



“Don’t you realize the TDD-1 nearly sank?” Admiral Borda snarled. “We nearly lost the amphibious assault submarine that serves as our greatest weapon and greatest asset.”

“Using a weapon always comes with the risk of losing it. We’ve been taking that risk on for more than a year, haven’t we?” the head of intelligence pointed out. “Since the moment we put it out to sea with a 15-year-old girl in command.”

Admiral Borda had no comeback for that. He just snorted, and fell back into sullen silence.

“Are we all finished?” Noticing that nobody else was speaking up, the previously silent figure of Lord Mallory spoke. He was an elderly gentleman, wearing a three-piece suit and a monocle; his posture was ramrod straight despite his advancing years.

“Good,” he went on. “Then perhaps I might offer my opinion? The structural problems that Mr. Amit so rightly points out were known from the time of our founding. Unlike a national armed force, Mithril has no tribe, religion, or state behind it; we are united only by our belief in the ideal of putting an end to international conflict, and even there, we have differing ideas of how that must be achieved. I assumed you were all aware of this when you joined the cause. Am I wrong?” Lord Mallory cast a glance around to the others, but nobody argued back.

“Excellent,” he said. “Then let’s have an end to the finger-pointing. That’s not to say I don’t want to see countermeasures; it should be possible to turn a 1% risk into a 0.5% one. That is why I want you to reconsider your current methodologies, and propose realistic ways of preventing such incidents in the future. In addition...” He trailed off for a second, then adjusted his monocle. “Continue investigating this enemy organization. That is all. Good day.” The old man’s image blinked out silently, leaving only the words ‘Connection Closed’ in its place. The other officials took that as a sign that the meeting was over, and disappeared one after another.

In the end, only Admiral Borda remained. Borda was a man transitioning to old age, with streaks of white in his thick black hair. He carried himself with a

dignity appropriate to a man of his years, yet his face and arms were sunburned and toned. He gazed at Tessa with sympathy. “I’m sure you’re not happy about this. You’re the one who lost men, after all.”

There were, broadly speaking, three divisions of Mithril: operations, intelligence, and research. Their operations division was further divided into four battle groups—the Tuatha de Danaan was one of these—and operations headquarters. The intelligence division, which collected, analyzed, and evaluated the information they needed to conduct their operations, was led by General Amit. It also offered information and advice to various countries’ security forces, to try and help minimize the need for the operations division to take direct action.

The relationship between operations and intelligence wasn’t exactly an amicable one. It hadn’t reached the level of open hostility, but they certainly weren’t friendly. It seemed to be a daily occurrence that the operations division would shout, “You gave us bad intelligence and we almost died! What are you going to do about it?!” and the intelligence division would lash back, “Do you know how hard we worked to get *that much* for you?! Give us a break!” Of course, this was a problem faced by most organizations, not just Mithril.

“But Amit did have a point,” Admiral Borda concluded. “The risk will always be there. And someone will always have to pay for it...”

“I am aware of that,” Tessa responded listlessly.

“I wonder if you are. I’m still not convinced your current assignment is a good fit for you,” Borda told her sympathetically. “There are still many things you can learn outside of the field. Come back to operations headquarters. There’s valuable work to be done in the research division, and Mardukas is getting the hang of how that sub works. Please, won’t you—”

“I’ve made my position on the matter perfectly clear. I’m staying where I am,” she said forcefully.

“I could order you if I have to,” Admiral Borda told her flatly.

“I would leave Mithril if you did,” Tessa retorted.

Admiral Borda’s hologram let out a deep sigh. “You get that stubborn streak

from your father. He gave me this sort of trouble, too."

"I'm sorry, Uncle," she yielded after a pause. "But my crew is important to me. And—"

"Is this also about Leonard?" Borda intoned.

Tessa turned her eyes downward as she found her thoughts read. "Yes. He's made his presence known, and in the worst form possible. If they're going to have any hope of facing him, they're going to need my help."

"Are you certain you're all right with this?" Admiral Borda questioned. "We still don't know what he's after, but he doesn't appear to be on our side. Pitting yourself against Leonard will likely just lead to more pain for you."

Tessa said nothing.

"And you still blame yourself for what happened to Bani."

Tessa said nothing.

"But, if that's a dead end... let's get back to the issue of the traitor, Vincent Bruno."

At last, she let a small smile appear on her face. "Of course. That's proceeding as we speak—many, many miles away..."

13 October, 2230 Hours (Europe Standard Time)

Outskirts of Agrigento, South Sicily, Mediterranean Sea

The well-muscled capo entered the old baroque-style room. He had two young men from the Family along as bodyguards, but at his signal, they paid their respects and took their leave.

Bruno stood up from a bench and greeted the boss with a warm embrace. "Vincenzo Bruno. Have you grown accustomed to life here yet?" the capo asked.

"Because of you, Borchia, I want for nothing," Bruno responded in confident Italian.

“Call me Papa. I think of you as my own son, after all. Few people call the big boss ‘Borchia’ these days. It’s like this trend of girls going to college: it feels like a tragedy, but it also makes life interesting,” the capo said with a merry laugh.

In fact, Bruno was much too old for the capo to be his father. He was in his 40s, American, with brown hair, a medium height, and an average build. He had a fairly unremarkable appearance, except for his blue eyes, which always had a certain touch of insolent mischief to them.

He’d originally graduated from the Naval Academy and spent some time in the Department of Defense, but he’d since gone independent and done well for himself financially. Until just a few weeks ago, he had been on staff at Mithril operations headquarters in Sydney—and at the same time, getting very generous compensation as a spy for an organization called Amalgam.

Bruno didn’t consider what he’d done a betrayal. It would be one thing if he’d been in his national military, but Mithril was just a glorified security company. He hadn’t exactly pledged his loyalty to them, and he felt no qualms about taking a ‘side job,’ selling their information to another organization.

Besides... ‘stop international conflict’? What kind of grown man would swallow that superhero nonsense? World peace was a noble concept, but it was a pipe dream pursued only by men with full bellies—at a time when half of the world was starving, and he himself was still only about 80% full.

His acts of espionage had been minor, anyway. He’d merely passed on a few of Mithril’s encryption algorithms and transferred two SRT members to the West Pacific battle group. Unfortunately, these relatively small indiscretions had blown up in a way that had forced him to go on the run from Mithril. He hadn’t wanted to do it, but he knew it was the only way he’d survive.

He hadn’t gone running to Amalgam; it was too easy to imagine what a shady organization like theirs would do to informants that had outlived their usefulness. Mithril and Amalgam were threats to him in equal measure, which was why Bruno had decided to go to the Sicilian Mafia, with whom he had a distant blood connection.

He had gone, specifically, to the Barbera Family, a rapid up-and-comer that sold weapons from Europe to North Africa and the Middle East in exchange for

heroin. Bruno had helped to facilitate a few of their past arms smuggling operations, and a wise man knew to treasure a connection like that.

The Family had firepower on par with a small country's military. This included a variety of firearms, of course, but also armored cars and armed helicopters, and even—though they probably didn't have much use for them—second-generation arm slaves. Even Mithril would think twice about coming after him here; so would Amalgam.

"You can make yourself at home. I have friends across this island," assured Boss Barbera, the "superboss"—Capo dei Capi. "I have supporters even among the police and the military. If anyone matching the descriptions you gave me arrives on this island, I'll know."

"I can't thank you enough," Bruno said sincerely. He'd already given Boss Barbera descriptions of the men he expected to be after him. They'd come from Mithril's Mediterranean battle group, the Partholón—He hadn't been able to smuggle out portraits of their SRT members, but he'd committed their appearances to memory and relayed them. If any one of them set foot in Sicily, they'd be dead before the day was out.

After about five minutes of chatting, Barbera patted him on the shoulder. "Anyway, enjoy yourself tonight. It's my daughter's birthday celebration."

"I think I'll do that. Cheers. To the capo's darling daughter." Bruno held up his glass of wine and offered a sincere toast.

After the drink, he and the capo parted ways, and he headed for the large hall. Built in the 17th century and remodeled many times since, this luxury mansion had an interior both majestic and lively. The walls and ceiling glittered with tasteful gold and ornamentation carved into intricate curves. Elegant music played throughout the hall, which was full of people, people, and more people—all laughing, chatting, and enjoying the sumptuous offerings. The hour had grown late, and the party was reaching its climax.

There were women there too, all dressed up beautifully. Many groups had left their genetic mark on this region, which gave the people there a wide diversity of appearance: Middle Eastern beauties with their bronze skin, Northern European women with blonde hair and blue eyes... The women all returned

Bruno's enraptured gaze with a smile and a wave.

"La bella Sicilia..." he whispered to no one in particular. *This place is like heaven. I should have run away sooner!*

He wandered around the party venue for a while, and he'd just reached a state of pleasant intoxication when a young woman approached him. She was lovely, and probably had some East Asian blood. Her black hair was long and wavy, her eyes had a slight almond shape, and she smelled of some exotic perfume. Her black velvet dress seemed a modest design at a glance, but a closer look would reveal a daringly open back, cut so deeply that it almost exposed her derriere. Bruno found his heart racing as his appetites began to burn.

"Hello, there. Having fun?" the woman asked in fluent English.

Fighting back his slight surprise, Bruno grinned in response. "Yeah, it's an amazing country. It looked a little like a shithole when I first arrived, but..." There were only a handful of grand estates like this in Sicily; most citizens lived a more modest, unassuming lifestyle.

The girl smiled politely at Bruno's unfunny joke. "You're from America, aren't you? I lived there for two years."

"Really?" he asked in surprise. "Is it that obvious?"

"Yes," the woman affirmed. "You have that air to you. Sophisticated, refined... I'm not quite sure how to put it. You smell different than the other men here."

"Well, that's no good. I'm trying to blend in." Despite saying that, Bruno couldn't stop a smile appearing on his face. He had a city-dweller's natural sense of superiority, and he didn't miss the look that came into her eyes, which suggested less-than-toward intentions.

"Where did you live?" he asked politely.

"Baltimore."

"Oh! I lived pretty close to there."

"Really? I'm not sure I believe you..." the woman giggled.

"It's true," Bruno protested. "Though that was very long ago." Aided by

nostalgia and alcohol, Bruno gave the woman his best seduction routine. Old memories and local gossip—of course, he didn't forget to compliment her, as well.

The woman nodded along, not seeming to mind it one bit. At last, she made a suggestion: "Shall we go someplace more quiet? It's so noisy here."

Bruno agreed immediately. "Sure, let's do that. I have a room in the mansion; we can freshen up our drinks there." More importantly, there was a bed there—a bathroom, too. The woman must have known his intentions, yet she boldly took his arm.

As the two of them left the party behind, they found two large Family soldiers standing in the corridor leading to the annex. Each had a gun hanging from his shoulders, and wore sunglass-like goggles with night vision sensors.

"Who's that lady there, Signor?" the man asked in a polite but businesslike tone. Modern-day mafias used high-tech equipment, and their enforcers received specialized training. They weren't carrying the Tommy guns of mobster movies, but the latest model of Belgian-made submachine guns. These had boxy, compact outer shells made of fortified plastic, but they used extremely high-speed propellant that would send their shots piercing through most bulletproof vests.

"Don't be uncouth." Bruno led the girl past the guards. He was grateful for the security, he chuckled to himself, but it could be such a burden at times like this. "Sorry. It's part of being a VIP," he whispered to the woman, and her eyes widened for a moment before she let out a noise of awe.

Soon afterwards, they arrived at his room, where Bruno lost no time in putting an arm around her narrow waist. She didn't have much padding there, but that was all right—he preferred his women slender, anyway. "Now, where shall we begin?" he mused. "That's right, I never even asked your name..."

She laughed at him, her smile mysterious. "You want to know?"

He was close enough now to see how perfect her skin was. *You just can't beat young women...* he thought, and his breathing grew faster, laden with expectation and excitement. "I certainly do. If you don't tell me your name, what will I scream when the time comes?" He pulled her tight against his body.

The slit in the woman's evening gown opened, revealing the smooth curve of her leg. "Just my name? You don't want to know more?"

"Of course I want to know more," Bruno crooned seductively. "I want to have a nice, long talk..."

"You want to know everything?" she asked.

"Yes. Tell me everything. Absolutely everything..."

"I see... I'll tell you, then."

What happened next, Bruno didn't know exactly. One second he was against the wall with a blinding pain in his front teeth, and the next, there was a gun plunged into his mouth. It was a .45-caliber made by Heckler & Koch, a tactical model used by special forces—far too much weapon, he'd have thought, for a woman like her.



He grunted and tried to shout, but his voice was muffled by the steel.

At last, the woman with the gun informed the stunned Bruno: “All right, listen up. My name is Melissa Mao. I’m with Mithril’s operations division, Tuatha de Danaan ground forces, SRT. My rank is Master Sergeant. My call sign is Uruz-2...”

Impossible, Bruno thought in panic. *The Tuatha de Danaan? The West Pacific battle group commanded by that Testarossa girl? What are they doing here?!* He tried again to cry out, but his effort was stymied.

“And if I may add...” Her eyes were cold, brimming with hatred and venom. “I’m a woman who just lost a superior who meant a lot to me, who’s *itching* to pull the trigger on the one who got him killed.”

The sight of this man, gun shoved into his mouth, tears trailing from his eyes, just made Mao more annoyed.

Please. Please don’t kill me, his eyes begged her. All that bravado, gone in a flash. If he’d been a little more dignified, she would have gladly done the deed—but his utter patheticness cooled her rage. She removed the pistol from Bruno’s mouth and pointed it at his throat instead.

“Don’t kill me,” he pleaded. “Please, don’t...”

“Shut up,” Mao snarled at him. “Stay quiet.”

The hall outside was swarmed with mafia soldiers, equipped with walkie-talkies. The Barbera Family was known for its brutality, which was considered extreme even in Mafia circles. Boss Barbera acted the part of the jovial local philanthropist, but this image couldn’t be further from the truth. In reality, he was the kind of man who would kidnap a judge who rejected one of his bribes, slit his throat, shove a wad of bills into his mouth, and then send a picture of it to his family.

The mansion’s security would all be professionals who had sold their souls for money, too—and they were packed to the gills with high-tech equipment. Mao wasn’t anxious to become the next kidnapping target.

“Don’t shoot me,” Bruno tried again. “I’ll do anything. Please.”

“Shut up, then.”

“I’ll shut up. I’ll shut up. So please, spare me... I was a fool. I never meant to turn on Mithril. It all just got out of control... I’m sorry. Please. Ah, please, I beg you...”

“You are just... Ugh.” Mao pulled a syringe gun from her handbag with her free left hand, plunged it into his neck, and pulled the trigger. About ten seconds later, Bruno whispered another “please,” then stumbled a few steps before finally losing consciousness.

“For heaven’s sake...” She removed the stuffy wig and false eyelashes, mussed up her short black hair, and then whispered, “Uruz-2 here. Target secured. I’m disabling the alarm system now.” The micro-transmitter in her ear picked up the vibrations in her skull and carried her voice to her ally. She pulled a tool from her handbag and used it to begin tinkering with the security system’s control box. After a simple bypass of the circuit, she had the alarm for the window shut off; the indicator light that would normally turn red remained green.

That should do it, Mao told herself. An alarm system like that was easy to disarm if you could get to it on the inside. She approached the window, undid the lock, and opened it.

From the small fourth-floor terrace, she could see the stone walls of the annex, a tall fence—and faintly, in the moonlight, the gently rolling hills of the countryside beyond. Lights of a city glowed faintly on the horizon.

“Let’s see...” Mao murmured, walking up to the railing as the cool night wind brushed her cheek. It was almost enough to make her forget that she was in the middle of an enemy encampment.

“Beautiful. You look like the goddess of the night,” said a voice from just behind her. A man was standing behind the open windowframe, in a dimly lit corner of the terrace. He was leaning against a pillar, arms folded, and looking insufferably pleased with himself.

“And how long have you been there?” Mao asked indifferently.

“Since around the time the bastard put his hands on your ass.” The man stepped out of the darkness. Dressed in a tuxedo, Kurz Weber appeared in the moonlight. He was a handsome man with blond hair and blue eyes; done up like this, he could easily pass for a young nobleman. “Anyway, see? I told you that dress was a sure thing.”

“You did,” she admitted. “One look and he was hooked. This is the last time I wear something like this, though... I feel like some brainless starlet at the Oscars.”

“No way. I think you look perfect,” Kurz said, whispering into her ear after approaching with elegant steps.

“I think you just have trashy taste,” Mao told him pointedly.

“No, it’s amazing. From behind, you have an air of bewitching solitude... Did you know that the goddess of the night, Hecate, is also the goddess of revenge? You’re definitely her incarnation tonight...”

“Are you drunk?”

“Si, Signorina. You’ve made me a poet, intoxicated by your beauty.” He chuckled to himself.

“Oh, come on...” Mao scoffed.

Kurz wrapped his arms around her from behind, and the bracing smell of citrus from some kind of cologne washed over her. Caught off guard, she could have easily found herself surrendering to the moment, but—

Unfortunately, Mao was on a mission. She glanced down for a minute, and then reared her head up sharply. The back of her skull cracked against the bridge of Kurz’s nose.

“Urgh!” he groaned.

“Yeah, yeah. You’ve made your point, now back to work.”

“That hurt,” Kurz whined. “What’s your problem?”

“Learn a lesson already,” Mao said curtly. “There’s a time and a place for these things—and right now, our place is ‘surrounded by scary goons.’”

“A tragic reality!”

“C’mon, pull out our gear already,” she ordered.

“Tsk.” With a hand to his nose and tears in his eyes, Kurz reached for the backpack he’d left at the corner of the terrace. It was one of a few bits of equipment that he’d smuggled in a few days ago, alongside the food and decorations for the party.

It hadn’t been easy to make all that preparation, and then to sneak in as party guests on top of it. Knowing that there could still be spies in Mithril’s ranks, they’d had to conduct the mission with almost complete independence; they hadn’t informed the intelligence division, or the North Atlantic/Mediterranean battle group. Their infiltration of the unfamiliar region had been made possible thanks to the personal connections of their commanding officer, Major Kalinin; the computer savvy of Mao; and Kurz’s network from his mercenary days.

Kurz pulled a miniature winch and cable from the bag, and then the two of them worked together to drag the unconscious Bruno onto the terrace. “Just throw me a bone for once, dammit,” Kurz grumbled all the while. “I had to pry a total babe off me at the party to get here, okay?”

“A ‘total babe’?” Mao questioned.

“Yeah. A wealthy widow of Milan,” Kurz boasted. “You should’ve seen her necklace—biggest diamonds you ever saw! And she was hot for me, I’m telling you.”

“Liar.”

“It’s true! ‘You’re marriage material,’ she told me, with tears in her eyes...”

“Oh, really?” Mao sounded skeptical.

They secured the winch to the railing. There was no security visible in the courtyard four floors below; Kurz had taken them out with a stun gun before climbing up. He was getting ready to climb down from the terrace to the underbrush, but Mao stopped him.

“Wait,” she said. “I’ll go down first.”

“If you insist,” he readily agreed, “but why?”

Mao didn't respond. *Oh,* she thought to herself, *he'd just love to know that I'm going commando, wouldn't he?* The dress was very thin, and the back was open 'down to there,' so she couldn't exactly wear underwear with it... and the high slit meant that if a strong wind blew, and Kurz was below her... Well, he'd get a full view of her bare behind.

"You've got me really curious now," he tried again. "Why?"

"Shut up," Mao snarled at him. "Why do you even care?" After removing her high heels, she stepped onto the railing in her bare feet, and then swiftly climbed down to the shrubs below. Next, Bruno was lowered with the winch, and at last, Kurz joined them.

"Is the route to the car secure?" she asked tersely.

"No worries," Kurz reassured her. "I knocked out every lookout from here to there."

"Okay," Mao decided. "Let's make a break for it, then." All they had to do was reach the guest parking area, shove the man into the trunk of their Ferrari, then drive their way out of there.

Kurz hefted Bruno's limp body on his shoulders. Mao had just started towards the parking area, silencer-attached pistol in one hand, when—

"Signore!" came a husky female cry into the courtyard.

"Erk...?" Kurz choked awkwardly.

"Signor Karius! Wait a moment!" A middle-aged woman, adorned with glittering jewels, came running from around the corner of the annex. She was a very round woman, with a prosperous air around her; her ample belly and bosom swung every time she moved, giving her the appearance of a great big rubber ball.

"Would this be... the 'babe widow' you mentioned?" Mao questioned mirthfully.

"Huh?" Kurz blinked. "Um... w-well..."

"And who's 'Karius'?"

"Just a fake name I gave," he shrugged. "It was the name of an old pharmacist

in the sticks where my dad grew up—We'd go there for summer vacation and I'd stop by his place to play. For some reason, he had a ton of Japanese-made tanks and plamodels and—"

"Karius!" The woman dashed right for the hesitant Kurz and threw her arms around him, half-crazed, and wailing furiously. She didn't seem to notice the fact that he was carrying Bruno, or the presence of the dumbstruck Mao next to him. "Oh... Karius, my love. I've been looking everywhere for you! How could you leave me behind like that?"

"Er, well..."

"If I said anything to hurt you, I apologize profusely. It is clear to me now that you're a very sensitive man! Oh, the sorrow behind those blue eyes of yours! Just stay and talk a little longer... Let us nurture the vine from which the fruit of love grows," the widow coaxed. "It takes time for it to put down roots and to bloom... But I'm certain that we'll come to an understanding. So, I beg you...!" Her unrestrained shouting had Mao and Kurz in a panic.

"Hey, lady! Could you keep it down?" Kurz begged. "Please?"

"Don't leave me, Karius! Per favore!" She began to weep dramatically at the top of her lungs.

"Look, the crying isn't gonna—"

"Shut her up already!" Mao hissed at him. "If she keeps wailing like that—"

The farce only went on for about thirty seconds, but that was more than enough time for somebody nearby to hear her. A submachine gun-wielding man in black came from around a corner about twenty meters away. "What's all this noise?! Ah—" A hysterical woman, a beautiful girl with a pistol, and a pretty-boy carrying their VIP American visitor unconscious on his shoulders—The second he sized up the situation, the guard sprang into action. "Intruders! Intruders!" the man cried out, and pointed his submachine gun at them.

Mao pulled her pistol's trigger in almost the same instant. She hit the mafioso in the shoulder and side, causing him to fire at the ground. The muzzle sparked with flame, and the shots kicked up a cloud of dust.

The sound of the submachine gun was far louder than the woman's wailing,

and an alarm reminiscent of a police siren immediately blared out across the vast estate’s grounds. Mafia guards poured like an avalanche from the main building, from the annex, from the guardhouse and the barracks. There were angry shouts and gunshots; trained dobermans barked madly as they took chase; spotlights combed the grounds for the intruders. The old-fashioned mansion was suddenly as loud and lit up as a disco on the weekend.



“Darn it!” Mao cursed as the gunshots rained, forcing her on the run. “This was supposed to be a quiet, elegant operation, and now it’s a damned firefight. This is your fault, okay?!” she shouted angrily, holding back tears, as she took shelter behind a waist-high stone wall.

“Look, it was out of my control,” Kurz argued as he joined her a few seconds later. He seemed exhausted from all the running with the heavy Bruno on his shoulders. “Come on, I’m a nice guy. We had some pleasantries, some small talk, and then all of a sudden, she got serious. Though I think I see why her husband died young...”

“Is now really the time?!” Mao screamed back. “I’m pretty sure we’re gonna die here!”

Incidentally, the widow in question had jumped out of her skin when the shooting started and then fainted dead away. Mao and Kurz left her behind, ran across the grounds, and made it to a corner of a garden in full bloom, but...

“Behind us, a three-meter fence,” Mao went on screaming at Kurz. “In front of us, 100 mafia guards. We’re trapped! And all we’ve got for weapons is a SOCOM pistol and a taser!”

“But aren’t you glad?” Kurz asked, looking for a silver lining. “Just the other day you said that expensive gun of yours was a stupid purchase, because you hadn’t gotten to use it in live combat.”

“Like hell!” she screamed back.

Their bickering did nothing to stop the enemy fire from continuing to ricochet all around them. Stone shards and soil went flying and rained down on Mao and Kurz.

“Ugh, dammit!” She thrust the pistol in question out from behind their hiding place and fired five times. She managed to hit two charging dobermans in the heads, which caused them to fall and writhe in pain on the ground.

“Ah, poor things,” Kurz said sympathetically.

“Who cares!” Mao retorted. “I’m not going to be their dinner.”

“Fair, but... ah, whoops!” Kurz fired his taser at a man who came leaping at

them from the shadows in another direction, just a few meters away. A bolt of lightning erupted from it and took the man down. “Damn, wish I had a rifle,” Kurz lamented. “I see a commander-type in the window of the main building there...” With Kurz’s skill, he probably could take out the commander in one shot. Though he might share a name with a kind of 9mm cartridge, this particular Kurz was a master with a rifle, a sniper who could take out an enemy at any distance.

“I’m not sure severing the chain of command would really help us at this point...” said Mao.

“We gotta do something, though,” Kurz argued, changing the battery cartridge in his taser. “They’ve almost got us surrounded.”

“And whose fault is that? Maybe we should get it over with before they take us down...” Mao swapped a clip and cast her eyes at the peacefully sleeping Bruno.

“What, you mean kill him?” Kurz asked. “We came here to kidnap him.”

“I’m joking,” she sighed. “Just a little wishful thinking...”

It was then that they heard a new voice in their earpieces. “Don’t abandon hope yet, Uruz-2.”

“Huh?”

“It seems I’m just in time. Get down.”

“What? Are you nearby? Sou—” Mao’s words were cut off by a blast and a shockwave.

The fence exploded in a roar of flames and flying shrapnel; someone had blown up the fence from outside the grounds. Black smoke wafted up from the explosion site, temporarily cutting off all visibility. The mafiosos shouted at each other and continued firing, haphazardly. Mao looked around in confusion.

“I’m at four o’clock with your back to the wall,” said the voice over their transmitters. “Run.”

The smoke stung her eyes, but Mao held back her tears, grabbed Kurz by the shoulder and ran as instructed—behind them, to the right. About two meters’

worth of fence was down; an explosive of some kind had blown it free from the outside. As they stepped over the rubble to the other side of the fence, they could hear the sound of braking from somewhere in the smoke.

“This way!” a familiar voice yelled. On the road that circled the estate they saw a secondhand Fiat; a boxy, cream-colored coupe, so small that even four people might make for a tight squeeze.

Their eyes went wide as they saw who was driving. “Sousuke?!” They were being rescued by their comrade, Sagara Sousuke, with his disheveled black hair, a sullen expression and a tight frown—he currently had on a black combat uniform underneath an olive green flight jacket. Their surprise was only natural; they’d left Sousuke in Japan. He wasn’t even assigned to this mission.

“What’s going on? I thought your midterms were starting today!” Kurz said, chucking Bruno into the Fiat’s back seat.

“Affirmative. But there was a change in the escape plan; the Major ordered me here to pass on the message and offer assistance.”

“A change?” Mao questioned.

“You won’t be going to Marseilles by sea; the fishing boat captain we’d hired was hospitalized for alcoholism,” Sousuke told them. “So the major pulled some strings elsewhere, and instead we’ll fly from a NATO—”

Enemy fire, piercing through the smoke, tore through the Fiat’s rear view mirror. Mao yelped.

“—We’re going to fly from a NATO air force base to Turkey,” Sousuke went on. “Then we’ll take a series of air shuttles along the usual route. Tomorrow morning, fake US military IDs and marching orders, as well as Marines uniforms, will arrive at a post office in Catania so that—”

“Explain later! Drive now!” Mao screamed as she climbed into the passenger seat.

“Understood,” said Sousuke, slamming on the gas. The Fiat launched into sudden acceleration. Its engine roared, the back wheels kicked up dirt and pebbles, and Mao was almost thrown from her still wide-open door.

“Whoops! Hey, watch it!” she yelled at him, desperately trying to hold down her dress’s flapping hem.

“It was necessary to avoid enemy fire. Although...” Sousuke cast a glance over at her. “That’s an unusual bathing suit. Were you planning on swimming to Marseilles?”

“No! It’s not a swimsuit,” she said defensively. “This was for the party!”

“I see.” Sousuke turned the wheel sharply. The car tilted hard to the left, and Mao banged her head on the passenger door’s window. The unpaved road made for a bumpy ride and threatened to tear apart the economy car’s suspension.

“A little rough on the driving, aren’t you?!” Mao asked him.

“Not an issue,” Sousuke responded calmly.

“By the way, Big Sis. What should we do about our Ferrari in the parking lot?” Kurz whispered.

“Just forget it,” she said. “It’s a rental, anyway.”

“You sure?” Kurz asked uneasily. “I left a satellite transmitter and stuff in the trunk...”

“What?! You idiot...”

“I rigged it with explosives, too, though—I flick the switch, it goes boom in fifteen. So we can clean up after ourselves if we need to...”

They’d left a transmitter full of their codes behind. While Mao sat there, speechless at the thought, Sousuke hesitantly addressed her. “Well? Should I turn back?”

“Of course not! Don’t you—” She heard the sound of something whizzing through the air, and a bullet tore its way past, just over their heads. A black 4WD vehicle was rushing down the road just 100 meters behind—It was a Cherokee, and it was heading right for them. A man was standing out of the sunroof, firing a submachine gun on full automatic. The bullets zinged through the air, putting holes in the Fiat’s rear window and scattering glass shards through the car’s interior.

“—Don’t you realize the situation we’re in?!” Mao screamed. “Hit the detonator! Blow the damned thing up!”

“Roger that. There.” Kurz pressed the button on the cellphone-sized remote detonator. “There, it’s activated. Goodbye, Ferrari. Welcome, Fiat.”

“This car’s not as bad as all that.” Sousuke held the jerking wheel tightly and increased their speed. Still, the Fiat’s lack of power put hard limits on what they could do—on top of that, they were being chased by a car with four-wheel-drive and over twice their engine displacement.

“They’re going to catch us,” Mao predicted flatly. The black car was coming closer and closer. Noticing there was a big curve ahead, she stood up out of the Fiat’s sunroof. “Dammit!”

Holding her pistol tightly, Mao opened fire; she landed a hit on the hand of the enemy that was holding the gun, causing him to drop back out of sight. She fired again, causing sparks to fly from the Cherokee. None of her shots left a dent; they must have modified the vehicle to be bulletproof. Still, she emptied her clip, landing about ten .45-caliber shots into the car’s driver’s side. None of them pierced the bulletproof glass, but each produced a spider’s web of cracks that eventually turned the whole windshield white.

They were approaching a sharp curve in the road. With great finesse, Mao loaded her last magazine and fired some more: three shots on the left and three on the right, to take out their headlights.

“About to turn!” Sousuke called out.

A second later, the Fiat plunged around the corner, suspension screeching. The car tilted alarmingly as the right-side tires left the ground. Mao, Sousuke, and Kurz all leaned to the right to compensate, and—

“Whoa!”

The car righted itself, and its tires touched ground once more, allowing the Fiat to regain its traction and round the corner successfully. Then, with the wobble of a stumbling drunkard, the puny car picked up speed again.

Meanwhile, their pursuers—windshield cracked and headlights out—didn’t seem to see the curve in front of them. They barely slowed down at all as their

wheels left the road, and their vehicle ended up careening down the steep slope beyond. With the sharp roar of an engine, the black car sailed into the night air. It seemed to hang there, weightlessly, for just a moment... Then, rolling hard to the left, the 4WD smashed into the ground. It flipped over two or three times, scattering debris, and even caught fire as it continued on its course.

“Poor guys. If they had wings they could have flown. Heh heh...” Mao blew them a kiss, as if to salute them.

“What is this, spy movie day?” Kurz muttered.

The Fiat put the unpaved road behind it and got up onto the pavement. They were now in a region full of low hills and gentle, winding curves. It was late enough at night that there were hardly any cars coming the other way. One minute, two minutes—the car continued uneventfully down the dark road.

“Is it all over?” Kurz wondered.

“Seems too easy, somehow...” Mao put in.

Far behind them, coming from the other side of the hill, they caught the light of one set of headlights. The driving was reckless. It was running full speed—a new set of pursuers, apparently.

“Another car?” Kurz asked.

“Just one, but it’ll still be hard to handle,” Mao replied. “My gun’s out of bullets...”

“No, look closer,” Sousuke said.

There was indeed just one car at first—but as they drove further, their sight lines changed, and they got a better view of what lay behind the hill. They saw another set of headlights. Then another. And another. The trail of lights seemed to go on and on—

“Th... Thirteen cars...” Kurz’s jaw dropped.

“Sousuke, can’t you go any faster?!” Mao asked urgently.

“No. We’re overweight, after all,” Sousuke responded calmly enough. The Fiat was a low-horsepower compact, meant for city driving; it wasn’t made for a car

chase carrying four grown people inside. Besides that, they had no weapons. They'd hidden a stockpile in an old church in case they needed them during the escape, but that was in a poor village far from here.

Mao turned her gaze intently to Bruno, who was still snoring in the back seat. "Maybe we really should kill him and dump him?"

"Yeah, I'm starting to think that's a great idea," Kurz responded. Vincent Bruno didn't hear a word of their earnest discussion over his fate.

"To lighten the load?" Sousuke inquired.

"Yeah. They'll catch up with us if we don't."

"You'll need to dump more than him," Sousuke said. "I have weapons and ammunition stored under the back seat; throw that out first. An assault rifle, a shotgun, a disposable rocket launcher with high-performance grenades. It's about 40 kilograms in all, so—"

"You have *what*?!" Kurz shoved Bruno aside, and scrambled around in the cramped car to lift up the back seat. Beneath it lay a minor weapons storehouse —German-made assault rifles, Italian-made shotguns, American-made rockets —a perfect stockpile of heavy arms, perfect for shattering even bulletproof glass.

"Why didn't you say something earlier, stupid?!" Mao and Kurz yelled in unison, faces purple with rage.

"I didn't mention it?" Sousuke asked innocently.

"No! Darn it..." The two cut short their anger as each picked up a gun, clacked levers into place, and checked pre-loaded ammo. Kurz smashed out the bullet-riddled rear window and took aim with his rifle. Mao climbed out the sunroof again, now with a slug-loaded shotgun at the ready.

"I guess the party's not over yet," she remarked. That familiar sensation of steel on her skin—It filled her with joy. "You ready, crew?!"

"Anywhere," Kurz said affirmatively.

"Anytime," Sousuke agreed.

The pursuers were drawing closer, and were almost right on top of them.

Yes... Mao thought gleefully. *At the end of the day, this is how I like it.* "Rock 'n' roll!" Shouting over the howling wind around her, Mao let loose with her shotgun.

"I've never been so humiliated!" Boss Barbera shouted, in a full-body rage. "They kidnapped my guest from the venue, on the day of my daughter's birthday party! Now I'm sending waves of my men after the bandits, and they're still getting away!"

"I'm terribly sorry, Capo dei Capi," his chief of security said with fawning humility. They were standing in the mansion's parking area; about half of the cars parked there had been dispatched in pursuit of the bandits. "But we'll have them very soon. The net is tightening around them. We will bring back Bruno and slaughter those vulgar—"

"I don't care about Bruno!" the boss said with perfect honesty. "The man was nothing but trouble anyway. Kill him if you must! Do whatever it takes! Deploy the arm slaves if you have to! Step on women, children—anyone who gets in our way!"

"Er... the arm slaves, sir?" the chief of security asked in shock.

"Yes," Boss Barbera fumed. "I bought those robots in preparation for something like this. Send the mercenaries at once! You hear me? Kill them! I want their heads on my desk!"

"But if we deploy ASes, the state government might be forced to—"

"Don't argue with me!" Barbera snarled. "If they get away, I'll have *your* head too!"

"Yes, sir. Excuse me!" In what was perhaps a habit from his military days, the chief straightened up before running straight for the security center.

"Hmph!" Barbera watched him go, still fuming. Then, as if with great effort, he pulled out a cigar and lit it. He was hoping it would calm his nerves, but he just couldn't enjoy it. Each thought of the humiliation he'd endured made him feel like exploding with rage again.

He'd clawed his way to the top by slaughtering anyone who stood against

him. That included members of his own family, even children—he'd been absolutely ruthless. The point was to plant fear and doubt in his enemies, and he'd made sure his son and daughter witnessed every moment.

That's right, my daughter, he remembered. *I have to comfort her. The dear, sensitive girl must have been traumatized...* Having reordered his priorities, Barbera began walking out of the parking area with his guards.

There was a line of the guests' luxury cars in the lot: Jaguars, Benzes, Lotuses, Porsches, Rolls Royces, Lamborghinis—He was just striding past a bright red Ferrari F40 when suddenly, he heard a beeping sound. It was coming from the Ferrari itself. He stopped, listening in curiously as the beeping tone became higher and higher pitched. Instinctively, he turned to peer at the Ferrari that was making the strange sound.

One second later, the five kilograms of plastic explosives rigged up to the car went off. The shockwave tore the car to pieces. Fireballs from the burning gasoline rose up, sending a storm of destruction all around. The hood tore through the air like a frisbee and lodged itself in the main estate's wall 50 meters away.

Nobody even knew that Barbera was dead. Unfortunately, his order to kill the bandits would remain in effect for some time after.

Same Timeframe, Jindai High School, Chofu, Tokyo, Japan

Chidori Kaname knew nothing of the chaos that was unfolding halfway across the world.

She was a girl dressed in a school uniform, with long black hair, and a lively appearance that belied the aura of maturity she had about her. Her eyes had a sort of sharp, understated beauty to them, and while her figure wasn't exactly that of a supermodel, most people would call her pleasingly slender.

Peaceful Japan, peaceful high school; peaceful weather, peaceful skies... Thanks to the absence of a certain not-so-peaceful person, yesterday's tests had gone off without a hitch.

It was morning, and Kaname was getting ready for their first test of the day.

There was a classmate talking on the phone in the seat next to hers, and she couldn't help but listen in.

"—Ah, hello? It's me. Yeah, I'm about to start the test. Yeah, I think so. Haha... I know, right? Yuck! ...I told you, I'm trying. You know that, don't you, Hiro-kun? ...Yeah. ...Yeah." She was probably talking to her boyfriend. Kaname remembered hearing he was off at college somewhere.

"Yeah... Hey, what are you doing right now? ...Just finished an all-nighter? ...Ahaha, sorry. Yeah, that report, right? ...Yeah. ...Yeah. That's true. I'll try to keep up..." The syrupy tone in her voice... she sounded so unlike her usual self.

Hmph. She thinks she's so great... Kaname thought to herself, resentment on full blast. *It's a little early in the morning for that stuff, isn't it? Lost in some world with just her and her boyfriend. She sounds like a lovesick puppy!* As dismissive as her thoughts were, it would be a lie to say that Kaname wasn't a little bit envious; it would be nice to hear from someone special just before a big test like this. What would it feel like to have a guy like that in her life? What kind of man was that girl talking to right now, and about what?

If I ended up in a relationship with someone like that, and we lived in separate places, Kaname mused, *maybe I'd make puppy-dog eyes and call him all the time, too? Then... hypothetically, what if that guy was... him? It's hard to imagine...*

Kaname didn't have much time to dwell on the idea before Kyoko spoke up. "Hey, hey. Kana-chan."

"Huh?" said Kaname, coming out of her daze.

"How are you feeling, math-wise? I think I'm doomed." Kyoko punctuated this statement with a mock sob.

"Ahh... Sorry to hear it. I think I'll do okay, maybe?" Kaname dodged the question with the stock phrase reserved for those well-prepared for upcoming tests.

She'd probably get a near-perfect on English. In classics, she'd probably do okay. Science, she'd have a perfect no problem. Math II, a certain perfect. She was pretty confident she'd get another near-perfect in physics, too, the subject

that usually gave her trouble.

Tessa's prediction had come true, after all; she'd awakened as a Whispered, and her intelligence had skyrocketed. She wasn't actually creeped out by it; it felt a little bit odd, but no more than that.

For some reason, though, Kaname didn't feel like she'd gotten any smarter at all. She could go on and on about the conductivity of an AS's drive system and the chemical formulas for its shaped memory polymers; she could speak about the principle behind single-electron elements making use of quantum tunneling, and come up with unique applications for it that nobody had ever considered. But that didn't feel any different to her than talking about the best way to make a mackerel miso soup; after all, how many people knew that adding a little bit of grated ginger really made the flavor pop? That was all it felt like to Kaname. Otherwise, she still laughed at stupid comedy shows and talked to her friends like she normally did, and since thinking too hard about it would just depress her, she'd decided not to dwell on it.

The only problem was the apparent abundance of people who *really* wanted to know how to make perfect miso soup...

"Oh, you liar!" Kyoko said, noting Kaname's confidence. "Like you didn't take top of the class on our last math final!"

"Oh, well... I just got lucky," Kaname returned, modestly.

"How'd you study, or did you cheat? Give me all the dirt!" Kyoko's large eyes were twinkling behind her glasses.

"Can't," Kaname retorted. "You lack the appropriate clearance." Then, she laughed. "Just kidding."

"Pfft... Oh, that reminds me; Sagara-kun's absent again, right?" Kaname's little joke seemed to remind Kyoko of Sousuke. Even though they were in the middle of their all-important midterms, Sousuke wasn't at school. He'd abruptly gone missing for a few days at a time in the past, but this was his first time doing so during a test.

"I guess. Doesn't that jerk care if he gets held back a year? After all the trouble he's caused us already..." Kaname snarked, but she was also genuinely

worried. She wished he'd care more about his standing as a student. As laid-back as their school was, even these teachers would be forced to take action if this kept up. "Seriously, it's a real problem." She sighed.

"Well, have you called him? He might come by if you threaten him," Kyoko said, and pulled out her own brand-new PHS. It was a recent purchase, so naturally, she was ready to use it at the drop of a hat.

"Not happening," Kaname said. "When he runs off like this, it's total radio silence. He's probably off fishing in some middle-of-nowhere mountain town."

"Aw, you don't know that," Kyoko coaxed her. "He might actually pick up!"

"No way. Forget it," Kaname insisted offhandedly, but Kyoko still fiddled with her PHS and then put the receiver to her ear. She stayed silent for a while, waiting for an answer. "See?" Kaname said pointedly. "Nothing, right?"

"Hmm..." Kyoko hummed.

"It's like this every time," Kaname told her. "You can't even get his voicemail. Honestly, he's so—"

"He picked up," Kyoko informed her.

"Huh?" Kaname blinked in surprise.

"See?" Kyoko held out her PHS.

Beside her, the classmate from before was still flirting with her boyfriend over the phone. For some reason, Kaname envisioned herself projected onto that scene. Fighting a sort of inscrutable self-consciousness, Kaname hesitantly took the PHS and spoke into it, with a measure of disbelief. "Hello?"

"Chidori?" Sousuke sounded alarmed. "What is it?!" She could hear shouting in the distance, and the call was thick with static, but the speaker was definitely Sousuke.

"Ah... Sousuke," she said hesitantly. "Where are you?"

"Canicattì!"

"Canicattì... What?" Kaname had no idea what that meant. What was he talking about? She was concerned about the long gap between responses, too...

“Um... We started tests yesterday, you know? Did you forget?”

“No, but a job came up!” Sousuke yelled. “I had to go!”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Kaname argued back. “I spent three hours tutoring you in classical literature so that you wouldn’t completely suck at it! And now the test’s about to start!”

“I’m——ry about that!” The static grew worse for a minute.

“Don’t ‘sorry’ me, you jerk! I covered for you wrecking the teacher’s car too, just so you know!” The explanation she’d given Kagurazaka Eri had turned out thusly: *Sousuke wanted to do you a favor by running some maintenance on your car. But halfway through, he got sick, and he had to run off to a hospital for treatment. He said that he’d fix your car once he was feeling better, but he hopes you can get by for a few days.*

It was a pretty strained excuse, but the overly-trusting Eri had replied, with tears in her eyes, “I see... I didn’t know he had a chronic condition like that, but if that’s the case, I’ll wait.” The car was still out there behind the school, all in pieces covered in plastic tarps.

“Do you even realize what I go through?!” Kaname wailed.

Sousuke didn’t respond immediately. Five seconds, six seconds, seven seconds passed. Just as her annoyance was about to reach a breaking point, he spoke. “I do!”

“No, you don’t! You’re so ungrateful!” Kaname said accusingly. “Don’t you realize all the leeway you’re getting? From *everyone*? Why do you always have to cause trouble?! Hey, are you listening?!”

“Yes! I am liste—” A second later, she heard a roar like thunder. It was followed by a violent rumbling sound, and then a wave of high-pitched static. After a pause, Sousuke continued: “I am listening! —We’re coming to a straightaway!” Sousuke shouted, inexplicably.

Kaname sat there, stunned. “Huh? What are you talking about?”

“That wasn’t to you!” Sousuke said urgently. “I’m driving, all right?!” Just then she heard another sound over the phone—it was like the whiz of a firework

shooting for the sky.

Same Timeframe, Outskirts of Canicattì, Southern Sicily

The Mafia Benz took a rocket to the undercarriage and flew into the air, burst into flames, flipped, and slid along the cobblestone road, where it was hit by another pursuing car and sent into a violent spin. The two became entangled as they crashed into an abandoned marketplace, but Sousuke paid them no mind.

Their flight had taken them into an old city, clustered with buildings made of stone. Sousuke drove the Fiat through this night-cloaked town at top speed, showing no hesitation at their surroundings.

“That’s ten down! Three cars left!” Mao shouted, tossing aside the one-shot rocket launcher. Her dress was covered in soot and torn so thoroughly, it had left her half-naked.

“Was that our last rocket?!” Kurz shouted, changing his rifle’s clip. He’d already tossed his tuxedo jacket aside, and his blond hair was a mess.

“Affirmative,” Mao told him. “We’re down to grenades!”

“Dammit,” he cursed.

“Focus fire on the grills!” she yelled. “I’ll keep the gunmen in check!”

A new set of pursuers quickly moved to take the place of the ones they’d just dispatched. They opened fire, which Kurz and Mao returned. Then... amidst all the howling and noise, Kaname spoke up, casually, through the satellite channel. “Excuse me? Did you mean you’re driving a car?”

“Affirmative!” Sousuke yelled into his transmitter headset while jerking the wheel back and forth, hard.

“Um, isn’t that dangerous? It’s illegal to use a cell phone while you drive, right? Plus, you’re not old enough. Can’t you just pull over for a minute?”

“I can’t!” he told her urgently. “If I stop, I’ll never be able to take the makeup tests!”

“Huh?”

Sousuke's Fiat was in a miserable way, riddled with bullet holes and scratches; it looked like a junkyard on wheels. It was basically a miracle that the engine remained mostly intact.

"Well, I guess you'll have to take some makeup tests, sure... but you're seriously in danger of failing your classes, okay?" Kaname lectured. "You've been missing class all the time lately."

"It's for missions!" Sousuke said, defending himself. "I can't help it!"

The Fiat plowed through a pile of vegetables on the roadside. He sent the car's back wheels into a drift, taking them onto the sidewalk, and then into a narrow alleyway. The enemy remained on their tail. A bulky BMW plowed through cases of wine, trash cans, bicycles, and carts in pursuit.

"Yeah, but it's not like you can tell the teachers that, right?" she reminded him. "And if you don't pass your classes, you'll be held back a year, you know? You won't become a third-year."

"I hadn't thought of that!" Sousuke admitted.

Gunshots, gunshots, gunshots. The walls of the winding back alley blurred past them at terrifying speeds. The pursuing car's front bumper smashed into the Fiat's rear, and its wheel went out of control. The frame creaked.

"What if you get held back?" Kaname lectured him. "We'll all end up graduating without you."

"I don't like that idea!" said Sousuke.

Smoke poured from the pursuing car's engine; Kurz's rifle must have done its work. It swayed back and forth, slipped, then spun into a stone wall, taking it out of the chase.

"Two cars left!" Mao reminded them.

As the Fiat flew out of the alley, one of the enemy cars that had gotten around ahead of it tore after them on the main road.

"I don't like it either," Kaname replied softly.

"What was that?!" Sousuke asked, unable to hear her as Mao and Kurz went on shouting at each other and firing.

“Umm... Nothing.”

“I couldn’t hear you! Could you repeat—”

They were focusing fire on the enemy’s front tires. A hubcap went flying and bounced along the roadside. As they came to a T-intersection, Sousuke quickly yanked the wheel.

With its own front tires spent, the pursuing car was unable to complete the turn at the intersection; it went up onto the sidewalk, and slammed into an unoccupied restaurant. Fragments of glass and dust went flying; the downed car’s horn let out a shrill, constant whine.

“One car left!” Mao shouted.

“What’s going on?” Kaname wondered. “Is someone else there?”

“Nothing to worry about!” Sousuke reassured her. “Anyway... could you repeat what you said?!”

The final pursuer slammed into them from behind, tires squealing. This one was a huge pickup truck; it sped up again, got alongside them, and slammed recklessly into the Fiat.

“Oh, just forget it!” she scoffed. “You’re not even paying attention, are you?”

“No, it’s just pretty noisy where I—”

They were rocked by a powerful jolt, followed by a violent vibration as their compact car scraped the wall. The truck slammed into the Fiat once more; the rear bumper had fallen and was scraping the ground, sending up blinding sparks.

“Sousuke?” Kaname said.

“It’s just pretty noisy here!” he told her. “But it’ll be over soon!”

“Yeah, yeah... Sousuke, sometimes I wonder if you listen to a word I say!”

“I always try to listen! Even now—”

“Sousuke, brake!” Kurz shouted as he pulled the pin on a grenade and threw it into the bed of the truck slamming into them. Sousuke reacted immediately: The brakes squealed and the Fiat screeched to a stop, nearly pitching over, as

the enemy pickup truck passed them by. “Get down!” Kurz yelled again.

“Hello?” said Kaname.

A second later, the grenade exploded in the bed of the truck that just passed them. Some of the shrapnel hit the Fiat, tearing holes through it as if it were made of tissue paper. Meanwhile, the pulverization of the back half of the pursuers’ vehicle had immediately thrown it off-balance. Wreathed in black smoke, the truck skidded into the town plaza—but even crashing into the rim of the central fountain didn’t stop it. It just sent the car into an arc, toppling end-over-end on its side, where it fell onto the center of the fountain, and—

There was a loud metal crunch. Sousuke had stopped the Fiat just before the plaza, and as they all turned their eyes to the fountain, they could see the black pickup truck speared upside-down on its spire-like centerpiece. Its wheels continued to spin fruitlessly as smoke rose up out of the wreckage.

“Now that’s art,” Kurz said admiringly, touching the tips of his fingers together to make a picture frame. “A perfect fusion of the medieval and the modern.”

“Down to zero cars, now,” Mao groaned, fixing the slipping bust of her dress. “But... wow, what a mess.”

The Mafia men poured out from the truck’s open doors and splashed through the fountain water, climbing over each other to escape. It seemed that they’d finished off the last of their pursuers.

Sousuke readjusted his headset and swiftly called out to the person on the other end of the line. “Chidori, I’m finished now. So... what were you saying again?”

There was no response, and an uneasy silence hung over the line. Eventually, Kaname whispered, “Forget it.”

Sousuke blinked in confusion.

“Just get back here ASAP, okay?” she told him.

“All right. I wi—”

“Jerk,” she interrupted sullenly, and the satellite connection to the cell phone he’d left in Japan shut off. Sousuke switched off his transmitter and let out a

deep sigh.

They'd escaped their pursuers, but they couldn't rest easy yet—The local police would be on their way by now. They didn't have a spare car, so they'd have to use their roughed-up compact to get some distance from the city. It was a bumpy ride, but the Fiat bravely persevered.

"Anyway, head east," Mao said. "We'll abandon the car just before Delia, then switch to a loaner there."

"How do we get one?" Sousuke asked.

"We'd probably be best off stealing it," she said with a sigh. "If we avoid the main highways and drive all night, we should make it to Catania by daybreak."

"Ah, so it's an all-nighter... Typical." While Kurz grumbled, Vincent Bruno remained in peaceful slumber beside him. He mumbled the name of some woman, with a perfectly relaxed smile on his face. "I can't believe this bozo. Is he really a spy?"

"That's what the major and Tessa said. He admitted to it also," Mao responded, and then peeked into the cracked rear-view mirror. She quickly wiped the soot from her face and straightened her disheveled hair.

"What's this world coming to?" Kurz groaned. He yanked off his bow tie and threw it out the window.

They could hear the rattle of the car's frame and the clatter of tires kicking up pebbles. They were riding through hilly terrain now; if the sun had been up, they would have had a breathtaking view of the verdant countryside. But their one remaining headlight showed only the dark road ahead, and the only other light came from the moon and stars above.

I might not even get *back to Japan in the next two days...* Sousuke thought to himself, feeling a lurking fretfulness in the back of his mind. He'd missed his tests; he might not make the makeup test. How would he explain his absence if his homeroom teacher, Kagurazaka Eri, asked about it? He'd also have to justify his disassembly of her car.

He wanted to advance to the next grade. He wasn't sure why, but... he really

wanted to.

He spent at least a few minutes wrapped in those thoughts, but just as the car crested a low hill, he was interrupted by a sound.

At first he thought he was just imagining things—but he wasn't.

He thought it was an issue with the car's engine—but it wasn't.

It was there, in the distance. The high-speed whir of turbine blades; the low, muffled sound of exhaust; the regular rhythm of heavy footsteps—they all added up to tell him that something was approaching.

"Hey," he called to Mao and Kurz. But even before he'd even gotten the word out, they were both up and alert, scanning the area. The sides of the country road the Fiat was traveling were thick with black shrubs and brush, making visibility poor.

"Five o'clock," Kurz said. Behind them and to the right, far beyond the underbrush, he had seen a sudden rain of leaves. Something huge was out there, pushing trees aside as it ran parallel to the road.

The sound grew louder. Its identity was now clear: this was a bipedal creature, mounted with a gas turbine engine. In other words...

"It's an AS," Mao said grimly. "Not good..."

"The Mafia has them?" Kurz asked incredulously.

"As part of their product lineup, yeah," Mao replied. "They buy them secondhand from Eastern Europe and Russia and sell them to guerrillas and dictators in Africa. There are major restrictions on Western machines, so lately, the Soviet ones are—"

"It's coming!" Kurz interrupted.

A massive figure appeared, mowing down the shrubs behind them. It was a Soviet arm slave, the Rk-92 Savage—The eight-meter giant stood tall among the falling leaves. It had a round, egg-like torso and a large head that resembled a frog's. It also held a small autocannon in its right hand. Its two red eyes glowed faintly as it sized up their Fiat. The next instant, the AS began to run, its acceleration explosive.

“Hell... it doesn’t rain but it pours,” Kurz cursed. “These guys don’t give up. Think this is the last of it?”

“It’ll be the last of *us*, if we don’t do something!” Mao said. “Can’t we go any faster?”

“I’m sorry to repeat myself,” Sousuke rebuked her politely, “but this is our limit.” He was driving a compact car, carrying four people down an unpaved back road. There was no way to get it over 100 kilometers per hour. Meanwhile, even on uneven terrain, the pursuing Savage could reach a top speed of 130 km/h—and that was just the recommended maximum listed in the catalog. With modifications, a machine like that could go even faster.

There was more than one pursuer. Two—no, three... One after another, they broke through the underbrush and bounded over the road towards them.

“We can’t shake them,” Sousuke whispered. Passing classes and taking make-up tests were the least of his worries now; one wrong move and he’d never make it back to school ever again.

“We could surrender...” Mao considered. “Though, I doubt they’d accept it.”

“Yeah, not after all this...” Kurz agreed.

As they spoke, the first Savage began closing in on the Fiat; it was leaning forward, running at top speed. The dark-green machine brandished its stout left arm. The AS wasn’t going to use its gun—it was going to punch them.

“Get down!” Sousuke slammed on the brakes. The Savage swept its left arm and hit the top of the car, tearing the Fiat’s roof off and sending them on a dangerous tilt.

Another strike was on the way, and they all braced for impact. Sousuke turned the wheel to avoid it, sending their vehicle towards the Savage’s feet. It nearly got them stepped on, but they just managed to avoid the enemy’s strike.

Still, the Fiat was almost at its limit. The front tires were letting out a strange cry, and the engine was spewing white smoke. He couldn’t get its RPM up. Their speed continued to decrease.

The Savage slowed a little and straightened up; it seemed it was going to stop

striking and start firing. It pointed the autocannon in its right hand in their direction.

“It’s no use...” Kurz groaned.

But just as they’d resigned themselves to their fate—something long and thin struck the Savage’s front armor, where it exploded; an ear-piercing roar tore through the area a moment later.

The group stared in shock. It had only been visible for a second, but Sousuke had recognized it as an anti-tank dagger—the thrown AS explosive had struck the enemy machine dead-center. The Savage staggered, then caught flame, and finally toppled over. The two machines following the first seemed thrown off by the suddenness of it, but immediately took evasive maneuvers.

“Who did that? Where are they?” Mao began looking all around. In front of them, down the dark country road, they could make out a vague silhouette. The air rippled, and a pale blue electric glow spilled forth—and then, as if bleeding through some invisible membrane... an AS appeared. It had been using an electromagnetic camouflage system—an ECS—to turn invisible.

“An M9?” Sousuke wondered.

The lithe form of the newly-revealed machine was immediately familiar to them. It was an M9 Gernsback, one of the third generation ASes that Sousuke and the others used every day. But it differed from their M9s in several key ways—It had bulkier thighs and upper arms, and the head’s shape was different; it actually looked more like the Arbalest. In addition, rather than being gray, its paint job was matte black. From its head to its toes, the only color visible was the faint orange glow from its head-mounted sensors.

“Who’s it with?” Kurz wondered.

“No idea,” Mao told him.

The black M9 launched into a sprint. The two remaining Savages decided to leave Sousuke and the others for later and prepared to engage the machine of unknown affiliation. They dashed in opposite directions and moved swiftly to try to flank the M9 with their attack...

But before the shots came, the black M9 leaped into the air. It vaulted over

their autocannon fire, wove sharply through the terrain, and made skillful use of natural obstacles as it closed in on one of the two machines. Crossing the distance in the blink of an eye, the M9 drew its underarm monomolecular cutter and stuck it into the Savage's chest as they passed.

The Savage's armor let out an ear-splitting squeal. It was another precise blow to the cockpit—the operator must have died on impact. The M9's actions crackled with ruthless efficiency.

The remaining Savage didn't even have time to flinch; it just charged at the black machine, autocannon firing wildly. The M9 used the enemy it had just butchered as a shield to endure the barrage.

As both sides approached each other, the M9 suddenly threw its "shield" aside and made a flitting movement with its hand—the next instant, the final Savage exploded. The M9 had thrust an anti-tank dagger into it at close range, and then immediately moved itself clear of the explosion's danger zone. To a watching amateur, it might have looked like a blur.

The fire finally reached the fuel tank of the machine it was using as a shield, and that one exploded into flame as well. The three Savages lay burning in the area around the Fiat, which could now only putter along, emitting black smoke. The battle had lasted a mere 30 seconds since the first shot was fired.

"Whew," Kurz whistled at length. It had taken out three opponents with only its complement of knives; not a single firearm. Even if the M9's maneuverability was much greater than that of a Savage, it was still clear that the machine's operator was extremely skilled.

The black machine ran alongside the Fiat. It didn't seem like it was going to stop. The M9's head was installed with dual sensors similar to those of the Arbalest, and as the hawk-like "eyes" looked down at Sousuke and the others, the M9 let out a roar. It was actually the sound of exhaust being expelled from its cooling devices, and while they knew it was no more than a standard venting of steam after a battle—it somehow sounded like a lion's call of dominance.

The three of them remained silent. The M9 simply pointed east, then it changed its own course southward and dashed into the distance. It hadn't said a word; it hadn't even tried to.

Mao looked on questioningly. “Hang on a minute...”

Parts of the machine’s armor began to slide, exposing red lens-like devices. Its ECS activated. The M9’s laser screen scorched the air around it to wreath the machine in a veil of light, and it immediately disappeared, as if dissolving into the darkness. Only a faint purple haze remained, lingering over where it had once been. Silence fell over the area again.

“What’s going on?” Kurz demanded to know. “Who was in that thing?”

“I don’t know,” Mao told him plainly.

“But it’s a Mithril machine, right?”

“I’d imagine so, but...”

“Who was it, then?” he asked again. Stunned, all they could do was watch the mysterious machine’s invisible departure. They wouldn’t find out the black M9’s identity that night.



The only organization in the world currently using those cutting-edge M9s was Mithril—even the US military's test prototypes were still in the EMD (engineering and manufacturing development) phase. And the only ones who knew about Mao and Kurz's Sicily operation were Tessa, Mardukas, and Kalinin. The most likely explanation was that Kalinin had called in further aid from somewhere—but that didn't explain why it had appeared without revealing its affiliation, and then disappeared without so much as a word. In the end, Mao used Sousuke's satellite transmitter to call Kalinin and ask for an explanation.

"You're not authorized to know," came Kalinin's typically businesslike response.

"Not even me, the operation commander?" Mao asked.

"You'll find out soon enough. Focus on your escape for now."

"Yes, sir," she agreed, hesitantly. "Uruz-2 out." Then, after closing the transmission, she went right to grumbling. "Ah, it's so annoying! Why does he always have to be like that? That old man, I swear..."

"Right? Yet all the girls on base are nuts for him. Even though I'm way younger and more handsome, and I'm also nice," Kurz grumbled.

Sousuke looked surprised. "Nuts? For the major?"

"Yeah," Kurz sighed again. "You never heard? Try listening to 'em in the mess sometime. The communications and logistics girls are always blabbing away, 'Oh, the major's so hot.' There's been rumors of him having private rendezvous with Nora-chan in engineering, too."

"Lieutenant Lemming?" said Sousuke, feeling bewildered. "What kind of rendezvous?"

"What other kind is there? The major's got needs too, after all, and I guess she's seeing to them..." Kurz chuckled lasciviously.

"Hmm..." Sousuke wasn't entirely sure what Kurz was talking about, but judging from his laugh, it was the kind of thing he couldn't imagine Kalinin doing. As far as Sousuke was aware, Kalinin's only romantic partner had been his wife, who had died in an accident back in Russia—Her name was Irina, and

she had been a rather famous violinist, with a slender countenance and a frail constitution. Though, now that he thought about it, Second Lieutenant Nora Lemming did resemble her a bit...

“Anyway, enough with the gossip,” Mao finally declared. “Let’s get off this damned island already.”

“Good idea.”

After some discussion, they decided to hurry towards the city of Catania, as initially planned. Their escape proceeded so smoothly from there that it was almost a let-down; they changed cars in a nearby town, drove all night, got their fake IDs and US military uniforms in Catania, and then proceeded from there to a nearby NATO air force base. Mao was a former US Marine, and the remote base’s security was fairly lax, which made it simple for them to get inside. They had no trouble boarding a transport at the Aviano Air Base in Northern Italy, either.

Their hostage, Vincent Bruno, remained asleep the entire time—they’d stuck him in a retired officer’s uniform and propped him up in the seat. Their pretext was that he’d been in a coma since getting badly wounded on a secret mission in the Middle East. He’d spent his best days in Sicily, and his family’s only wish was to have him brought here, the story went—and because he was related to a prestigious member of Congress, they had to keep the trip under-the-radar. Sadly, not even the sounds and smells of this nostalgic place had stirred any signs of wakefulness in him.

“So he’s... unconscious? Really?” The transport’s steward seemed skeptical of the supposedly coma-bound man’s fit physical state.

“He is. Fortunately, his organs are all intact... What are you looking at him like that for?” Mao, wearing the rank of a first lieutenant, raised her voice to the corporal.

“Er, well—”

“Don’t you look at him that way. He was injured in the line of duty, fighting for his country. Don’t you realize the hell he’s seen? I won’t allow a second of pity or scorn for him!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am,” the steward stuttered. “Please excuse my rudeness...”

“No, I think you need an attitude adjustment,” Mao declared. “I want your name, rank, number, and squadron!”

With tears in his eyes, the corporal gave up his ID and squad numbers, apologized profusely, and didn’t ask any more questions about Bruno. It was a success they wouldn’t have achieved at a civilian airport.

“You’re quite an actor,” Kurz said admiringly, once the corporal was gone.

“It is impressive,” Sousuke agreed.

Mao just looked weary. “Talking like an officer is exhausting,” she grumbled. “I almost tossed a few F-bombs in there...”

The rest of the boarding went smoothly, and their transport took off a mere ten minutes behind schedule. They could rest easy, at least for now. From here, Mao and Kurz would head for Australia, where they’d drop Bruno off at operations headquarters; Sousuke would part ways with them earlier and return to Japan alone, likely to arrive in Tokyo the next day.

The roar of the turboprop engine carried even into the cabin—loud, but not so bad once you got used to it. Most of the cabin was empty, with just five or six soldiers present.

The sunlight of Sicily in autumn streamed in through the aircraft’s windows and made it hard to sleep. They hadn’t slept a wink the night before, and they’d need a bit more time to steady their nerves before they were ready to try. Nevertheless, the three of them were hit by the lethargy that follows the end of a combat operation.

“Hey...” Kurz said, slouching down in his barebones seat—his were the first words spoken in the listless silence that had pervaded for ten minutes after takeoff. “Are you gonna be okay?”

“In what sense?” Sousuke responded sullenly, flipping through a world history vocabulary sheet.

“That. Your tests,” Kurz pointed out. “You missed ’em, right?”

“Yeah.” Missing his midterms was disheartening, Sousuke had to admit. He’d

been called out abruptly on the overseas mission, and his grades in several subjects were already sagging from countless unexplained absences. Kaname was right—at this rate, he might end up repeating a year. “But my work here is important. What would you have done if I hadn’t arrived last night?” Sousuke pointed out, noting Mao and Kurz’s dicey condition at the Mafia mansion.

“We’d have made it out somehow,” Kurz told him. “Right, Big Sis?”

“Hmm, maybe,” Mao answered, leaning back in her seat. “I won’t say I hadn’t thought of a few potential next moves...”

“I see...” Sousuke looked down with a sense of alienation. He felt vaguely like he was being told he wasn’t needed and should have just gone to school.

“That’s not to say we aren’t grateful for the help,” Mao added, seeming to catch onto his mood. “But I’m a little worried, too. About... you know.”

“Whether I’ll pass my classes?” Sousuke clarified.

“Not that. Everything about your current situation,” Mao told him. “Protecting Kaname at school, taking part in these missions, having the Arbalest forced on you... It’s not becoming too much for you to handle, is it?”

Sousuke said nothing.

“At first, I thought it would only be temporary, so you could handle it... and you’d been keeping up with your work pretty well. But lately—”

“I haven’t made any errors,” he interrupted defensively.

“That’s not what I mean,” Mao told him. “I’m talking about simple issues of physics and time. Things are slipping for you at school, right?”

“Well... yes.”

“I know we’re short-handed,” she went on, “but there have to be limits. If I were in your situation, I’d give the major a serious chewing-out over this.”

“But when you think about it,” Kurz threw in, “what’s the big deal? It’s not like he *has* to do well at school. He’s attending under a forged ID anyway. Is there some reason he really needs to graduate?”

The only reason Sousuke was going to Jindai High was to make guarding

Kaname easier. Acting as a mercenary for Mithril was still his primary job; his life at high school was merely a temporary situation. He was different from Kaname and the other students on a fundamental level—Kurz was right, in that there was no particular reason why he needed to graduate.

"That's true, I suppose..." he responded unhappily, and Mao cast a glance Sousuke's way.

"I hope this isn't too prying, but... what do *you* think?" she wanted to know.

"About what?"

"About what you'll do from now on," she said.

"I'll follow my orders. That's all I can do," Sousuke responded lightly, staring into the bright light that poured in through the window.

Typically, Mao would laugh at such a typically guileless answer from Sousuke... but for some reason, this time, it seemed to annoy her. "That's what you always say. I'm talking about a plan for your life. You're only seventeen, right? What are you going to do with your future? Have you ever thought about it? Are you sure all this talk about orders and missions isn't just an excuse to run away?"

"You think I'm running away?" he asked, surprised.

"Yes," Mao answered bluntly. "It's a lot easier to just live your life doing whatever people tell you to."

Sousuke said nothing.

"You seem weirdly mad about this, Big Sis," Kurz said.

"I'm not, especially. I've just been thinking about it for a while," Mao responded, then fell silent.

They could see Mt. Etna through the window in the distance. It was Europe's largest active volcano. The air was foggy today, so it seemed dimmed by misty gray.

What to do from now on... Mao had been pretty harsh with him, but Sousuke found he wasn't annoyed. It actually made him think. And Kaname had said something similar to him last night, too...

A plan for his life. He could infer what that meant, more or less, but when he really thought about it, he also felt it was the first time he'd heard the phrase. It was like a strategy for his personal long-term campaign. A set of self-imposed guidelines, based on what he expected to be doing in five or ten years... or something like that.

Sousuke had never thought about where he might be five years in the future. He had never even considered the concept. Most of Sagara Sousuke's life had been lived in a maelstrom of battle and survival. Could a wild animal concerned mostly with finding its next day's meal really think about five years from now? There was no word that felt more hollow in his ears than "future." The future? What did that matter? He was more concerned with where he'd get his next ammo clip. That's how he'd always felt—at least, until six months ago.

Sousuke had a vague idea that a change had been slowly coming to this barren mental state of his. This new life—going to Jindai High School, interacting with Kaname and the others—had been exerting an unseen influence over his mind. It was like the permafrost had begun to melt, revealing signs of fertile soil beneath.

A future... Will I have one, too? Sometimes, somewhere in his mind, he'd find himself asking that. He didn't know the answer. But at the very least, he'd finally begun to ask it. It was new.

The passage of time could change anyone. Every way of life would reach its end someday, and he, too, was being swept along by the waves of transformation. The end of one routine would bring about a new future—though he was vaguely aware of that principle, thinking about it made him feel a little restless. "Kurz..."

"Yeah?"

"What will you be doing in five years?" Sousuke asked suddenly.

Kurz seemed stunned. "Not sure. Well... I'd like to get set up in a nice life with a pretty girl."

"Do you think it will happen?"

"Not sure," Kurz repeated, pulling the brim of his shabby uniform's cap low

over his eyes. Then he folded his arms and yawned, adding, “but it doesn’t hurt to think about it. Nighty-night.” That was the last word from Kurz. Sousuke looked at Mao and saw her leaning her head against the wall, already fast asleep. Mt. Etna continued to recede into the distance. The transport was leaving Sicily behind.

2: The View Below the Water II

16 October, 0853 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Jindai High School, Chofu, Tokyo

It was the fourth day of midterms, and their first subject was world history. Twenty-three minutes had passed since the test started. The only sounds in the room were the rustling of answer sheets and the scratching of pencils. Things were so quiet that even the cars passing outside the school seemed intrusively loud.

Kaname's eyes ran over the question sheet: the Golden Age of the Roman Empire; the Five Good Emperors; Augustus; Cicero; the Sicilian revolt. One thing after another, all kinds of words she'd memorized but didn't really understand —She'd probably forget them all the moment the test was over, too.

Honestly, standardized tests are such a pointless ritual... she thought, glancing in the direction of the window. Sousuke's seat was empty. She hadn't heard a word from him since she'd called him before the test two days ago. She assumed he'd come today, but he was still absent. He'd been AWOL since the day tests began.

Darn it... For some reason, she found herself sighing. Sousuke's absence had left things at school pretty quiet, and in theory, this should have been a load off her mind... So why did she feel this strange impatience, like she was missing out on something?

Crud. I'm in the middle of a test. Gotta focus... Kaname directed her attention back to the question sheet: the fall of the Han Dynasty; the Mongol Invasion; the Yellow Turban Rebellion; Emperor Ling; Cao Cao; the Battle of Red Cliffs. One thing after another. She'd read manga about the Three Kingdoms period, so she knew the material pretty well. She couldn't remember all the name kanji, though... How did you write the 'Zhuge' in 'Zhuge Liang,' again?

Where even is he? she couldn't stop wondering as she struggled with the question. *What kind of job is he on? Something dangerous again, I guess... I hope he's okay. Or did he go off to meet that girl? That's right. He sounded pretty weird on the phone the other day...*

She snapped out of the line of thought. *Ugh, not again. My mind keeps wandering away from the test...*

"Darn it..." she muttered. *It's all his fault, for skipping school and missing his tests. That's why I can't stop worrying. I* am *a class representative, and we* have *been through some things together... That's the only reason it bothers me. What a pain in the neck... If he'd just come to school, I'd be able to focus!*

Just then, the classroom door opened. "I'm sorry I'm... late." Panting and breathless, Sagara Sousuke entered the classroom. He looked like he'd been in quite a hurry; his sullen face was covered in sweat. On top of that, instead of his school uniform, for some reason he was dressed in dark green fatigues, completely different from his usual battledress. On the chest were the words "US MARINE."



“Sagara... You’ve come to take tests *now*? And why are you dressed like that?” the teacher proctoring the test asked.

“I’m extremely sorry,” Sousuke apologized again. “I didn’t have time to get changed...”

“Fine, never mind,” the proctor sighed. “Just sit down.”

“Right.” Sousuke quickly moved to his seat.

On his way there, his classmate Kazama Shinji whispered to him. “Sagara-kun. Why are you dressed like that?”

“Circumstances,” he responded shortly as he sat. He accepted the test paper from the teacher, took out his pencil box, and quickly started looking through the questions.

Kaname gazed at him, glassy-eyed, from afar. A wave of relief washed over her; it was like a weight had been removed from her chest.

Their eyes met for a second. In lieu of a greeting, Sousuke held up his pencil. Kaname quickly broke off her gaze and focused back on her test.

17 October, 1609 Hours (Australian Standard Time)

Mithril Operations HQ, Sydney, Australia

This is my second time visiting an interrogation room with Major Kalinin like this, Tessa thought. The last time, they’d observed a boy in his mid-teens; this time, it was a middle-aged man. Vincent Bruno, the man Mao and Kurz had brought back from Sicily, sat on the other side of the one-way glass. He was reclining in his seat impudently, arms folded, and wearing a thin smile on his face.

It had to be false confidence, she decided—This wasn’t a police station, it was the headquarters of Mithril’s operations division. He had no attorney, and there wouldn’t be a trial; the man had to know that.

Tessa was only wearing a thin coat over her usual uniform; following her arrival in a Mithril jet, a limousine had fetched her straight from the airport,

which had kept her from civilian eyes. Kalinin was with her, similarly clothed in his olive green battledress. The minute they'd heard about Bruno's successful abduction, they'd taken the first flight to Sydney from the Merida Island Base in the West Pacific.

This was the man whose scheming had nearly gotten her submarine destroyed—Tessa knew that for a fact, yet somehow, it didn't feel real to her. She should be seething with rage towards this man for what he'd done, but right now, all she felt was a kind of even-tempered scorn. "It's hard to believe," Tessa whispered. "How could someone so... worthless... have come so close to sinking my vessel?"

"That apparent worthlessness might be what allowed him to do what he did," Kalinin said. "And it's easy to imagine someone like him being vulnerable to an enemy's overtures."

There were two others with Bruno on the other side of the glass: a first lieutenant and a corporal, both assigned to operations headquarters. Kalinin had informed her that the lieutenant came out of their intelligence division in Peru and could easily handle an interrogation like this.

"Let's start simply, Mr. Bruno," the lieutenant began. "You were formerly a secretary of human resources. At the end of June of this year, you arranged to have John Howard Dunnigan and Nguyen Bien Bo placed with the SRT of Mithril's West Pacific battle group, the Tuatha de Danaan. You effectively forced the understaffed Tuatha de Danaan to accept them by downgrading or deleting data on four other active NCOs, as well as up-and-comers from Belize and other training camps. Is that correct?"

"Don't know what you're talking about," Bruno boasted, gazing calmly into the distance.

The lieutenant gave him a placid smile, then addressed the corporal waiting beside him. "Do it."

"Yes, sir," the burly corporal responded, then immediately socked Bruno in the face.

Bruno cried out and nearly fell out of his chair, but the corporal grabbed his collar and hefted him back up. He slapped his hand down onto the table, seized

his pinkie finger, and began to wrench it upwards. “P-Please, no—” There was an unpleasant crack; Bruno’s pinkie had been broken, and a chilling scream echoed through the interrogation room.

“Don’t worry. That’s the end of it,” Kalinin said to Tessa, as she cringed and averted her eyes from the sight.

He was right, of course: Bruno was already a sobbing wreck, and as the corporal prepared to move on to his ring finger, he abruptly shrieked, “No... please, no! I’ll tell you anything! Please... just don’t hurt me!”

“Answer me, then. Did you arrange Dunnigan and Nguyen’s placement with the TDD-1?” the lieutenant repeated icily.

“Yes! It was me!”

“Who asked you to do it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t lie,” the lieutenant warned him.

“Wait! I r-really don’t know the names!” Bruno told him. “They just said they worked for Amalgam!”

“‘Amalgam’?” the lieutenant questioned. “Like an alloy?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t! I assumed they were some intelligence organization; the Soviets, maybe... and they didn’t deny it,” Bruno insisted. “At first... I just thought it was easy money! They paid me 200,000 dollars in advance... can you imagine? 200,000! Who could say no to that? I agreed on the spot!”

“What do you think?” Tessa asked Kalinin, breaking her silence.

“He doesn’t appear to be lying, and I can’t imagine why he’d hide it. It appears he simply never knew much to begin with,” Kalinin said, gazing at a nearby LCD screen, where a computer was analyzing Bruno’s speech in real time. This system was like an improved version of a polygraph: it could read a subject’s subtle vocal inflections and detect, with considerable accuracy, if they were lying. The interrogators’ initial act of violence had been partly to fluster their suspect, which made him easier to analyze.

"'Amalgam'... the name feels like a slight at us, somehow," Tessa mused. "Mithril" was a fictional kind of silver; it seemed like some kind of spiteful joke that the enemy would call themselves Amalgam, after a real-life term for a metal-mercury alloy.

"I don't know who they are! I mean it!" Bruno wailed from the other side of the glass. He turned a glare towards their dimly lit room, his pale face covered in cold sweat. "Are you happy now?! I know you're listening! Stop hiding and show yourselves!" he frothed. "You call yourselves Mithril... the 'silver that slays evil'... but I see how you treat people now! You can go to hell, you wannabe-hero wolves in sheep's clothing!"

"Calm down, Mr. Bruno," the lieutenant advised.

"I've done nothing wrong!" Bruno claimed. "To the devil with you, murderers! You bastards! You're all bastards!"

Tessa tried to let the abuse roll off her back, but she couldn't keep a few words from slipping past her lips. "How dare you..." The faces of the men she'd lost that day flashed into her mind, and she suddenly felt like her blood might boil. She wanted to flash the lights on in the dark room, reveal herself to this man, and lay into him with all her might.

You're the murderer here, she thought savagely. *You killed my men. You're the one who should burn in hell. What would you know, anyway? You're a pathetic man reduced to spitting venom in an interrogation room; nothing but a low-born, greedy coward! How dare you speak to me this way? Learn your place, before I order that corporal to break the rest of your fingers!* The dark, violent emotions rose higher inside her. This was more than just anger; it was an urge that stemmed from a place of deeper arrogance.

"Colonel." Kalinin's voice snapped her back to reality.

Tessa's palms were soaked, and her head was swimming. She was filled with a sudden self-loathing. She couldn't deny it—*I'm happy to watch this man suffer...*

"Colonel, let's let the lieutenant finish his work," Kalinin said. "I'm told Admiral Borda is waiting."

"I see," Tessa responded weakly after a moment. She turned her back on the

still-raving Bruno. “It’s not a pleasant way of doing things...” *Not for him, and not for us,* she added internally.

“I won’t disagree, but it *is* effective. He’ll live—and a single finger will heal soon enough.”

“I know that, but...” Tessa hesitated, casting a glimpse at Kalinin’s expressionless face. *Doesn’t he feel anything? Wasn’t he shaken in the slightest by what we just witnessed? Kalinin lost men to Bruno’s actions, just as I did...*

The instant after she’d thought that, the Russian added coolly, “If I were the one in there, I would have *cut* the finger off.”

Tessa and Kalinin left the interrogation room behind and headed for the office of the head of operations. They were currently at Mithril’s operations headquarters, in a corner of downtown Sydney.

Most people, if you told them that a central office for a worldwide organization like Mithril was located here in Australia, would look at you with skepticism: It was common knowledge “in the business” that transport convenience, inter-organization communication, and various other factors made it far more convenient to house your operation in Europe. That belief, though, was twenty years out of date—Satellite communication and the Internet had flooded the world with information, which made the physical location of a group’s headquarters much less important than before.

Moreover, cities like Paris, London, Brussels, and Geneva were already well-populated with storied old intelligence agencies, which made it harder for a new organization to establish a large-scale headquarters there—It was, to put it simply, an issue of settled turf. Mithril was still young; they had been founded just about ten years ago, and while there had initially been plans for an operations headquarters in Europe, a series of minor issues had ended up inclining them this way, instead. Currently, most of Mithril’s outposts in Europe belonged to the intelligence division, but even their scale was minuscule.

The Sydney-based operations HQ was located in a building not quite tall enough to be called a skyscraper. On paper, it was owned by a security company called Argyros; this was one of Mithril’s front organizations, although

they did, in fact, operate security agencies all over the world—a side business that brought in quite a bit of income. Most of Mithril's current personnel were Argyros employees on paper, and since this was a common career path for decommissioned soldiers, anyway, it made for a very convenient form of camouflage.

Mithril controlled a few such companies, in fact—Roth & Hambleton, which had created the M9's generator; Umantac, the core of their marine transport; the legacy corporation Martin Marietta, which produced their aircraft. Everything from cutting-edge enterprises on the rise to well-established companies that they had rescued from near bankruptcy fell under their umbrella. They had dedicated investors and shell corporations; fronting, funding transfers, equipment supply, personnel recruitment... if Mithril had a need, there was a company to fill it, even if most of their employees didn't even know of Mithril's existence.

Despite its old-fashioned exterior, security for the Argyros building that housed their operations headquarters was strict. It was covered in listening devices and surveillance cameras, and plain-clothed security guards were on constant lookout for intruders.

When Tessa and Kalinin arrived at the door to the head's office, the man's secretary came to greet them. "It's been a while, Colonel."

"Oh, Jackson-san. It's so nice to see you again," Tessa said. "But you really don't need to call me 'colonel'..."

The man in his early 40s smiled cheerfully in response. "I can't exactly call you 'dear' anymore. I'm told you've been doing a fine job since you left us, so I want to show the appropriate respect."

"I... appreciate it. I'm doing the best I can, of course." Before being appointed commander of the Tuatha de Danaan, Tessa had spent some time on staff here at operations HQ. She had served as an aide to Admiral Borda while also conducting research on amphibious maneuvers, special operations, and underwater combat. This meant that she'd spent a lot of time around his secretary, Captain Jackson, who tended to call her 'Dear' and 'Little Teletha'; the rank of colonel had only come with her new assignment.

“Is the admiral in?” she asked.

“He’s on the phone right now, but he said you could go in,” Jackson told her. “Be warned: he’ll probably do his best to get you back with us.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Thank you.”

With that, Tessa and Kalinin entered Admiral Borda’s office. It was a room about the size of a small cafe; the wall behind him was covered in tall shelves packed with books. Most of the furniture was made of aged wood and had a dull sheen. With the mellow natural light and indirect fluorescent lighting, it had the look of an old library.

Admiral Borda was seated at his desk, speaking on the phone. “Yeah. ...Right. Understood. ...Yeah. ...I could say the same to you. We’ll clean up our own mess, thank you. I’ll send you the interrogation record, of course. Don’t be so suspicious. ...To him? I don’t know what you’re talking about.” While speaking to whoever it was, Admiral Borda returned Tessa and Kalinin’s salutes, pointed to the chairs, and mouthed “sit down.” “...I’d say that’s up to you. ...Right. We’ll discuss that another time. ...Yes, it’s worth considering. ...No, I have visitors. I’m hanging up now.” Without waiting for a reply, he turned off the phone, dropped the receiver onto the desk like it was something dirty, and then slowly stood up.

“Welcome. Can I get you a drink?” the admiral asked, heading towards the minibar in a corner of the room.

“The offer is appreciated, but I’ll just have water,” Tessa replied.

“Major?”

“The same, please.”

“You two; no taste at all...” With a shrug, Admiral Borda fetched a bottle of Perrier from the fridge. “How are those M9s doing you, Major?” he asked in lieu of a greeting.

“Sir. There’s always room for improvement, but they’re serving us well, more or less. There are still a few issues on the maintenance side. There’s not much in the way of part compatibility with other machines, which could lead to inventory issues if it comes to it,” Kalinin replied briskly.

“Still the same old Kalinin... but I’ll keep that in mind,” the admiral said with a smile.

At a glance, the head of the Mithril Operations Division, Jerome Borda, looked like your average, kindly-faced older man, with a mild demeanor that made him seem more suited to a hotdog vendor’s apron than a military uniform. Though he was approaching 60, he had a full head of hair—black, with streaks of white—which made him look ten years younger. Even Tessa, who was young enough to be his granddaughter, found the admiral’s appearance quite charming. He probably wouldn’t have liked to hear it, but she found that the gentle droop in his eyes and mouth gave him the air of a cute little dog.

That’s not to say he was entirely without gravitas; anyone who met him could see that he was brimming with intelligence, experience, leadership, and grit. He’d spent over thirty years with the US Navy, in fact, where he had ascended from sailor to admiral, and there was a world-weariness in his eyes that made him not so different from Kalinin.

“That was the head of the intelligence division,” Admiral Borda said, pouring the water into glasses. “They’re furious that we made a move on Bruno without informing them. They’d found him in Sicily, too, see—and they were keeping close tabs on the Partholón to make sure we didn’t get the drop on them.” The Partholón was one of the four battle groups that served in the operations division. Normally, they’d have been the ones sent to carry out the operation in Sicily; the decision to have Tessa’s West Pacific battle group, the Tuatha de Danaan, take action instead—and to mobilize only a very small number of their forces—had caught both Bruno and the intelligence division off guard.

“Intelligence wants you to hand Bruno over to them, then?” Tessa asked.

“Yes,” Borda affirmed. “I refused, of course. By the way, did you catch his interrogation?”

“Yes...” Tessa trailed off.

“There’s something you need to learn from that... if you want to keep serving as a commander, anyway. It’s a bloody road that lies ahead of you—the long and treacherous path of a soldier.” A mysterious tone entered Borda’s voice.

It occurred to Tessa, then, that he must have arranged for her to see what she

saw. The NCO who came to meet her when she arrived had said, “The admiral is occupied at the moment. Would you like to watch Bruno’s interrogation?” What could have been his reason for making sure she saw it? What was she supposed to learn from it? That there was no such thing as ‘clean’ and ‘dirty’ where combat was concerned? That seemed a rather elementary sort of lesson for someone like him to give. Of course she knew that she hadn’t seen as much of the ‘dirty’ as adults, like he and Kalinin, had—She was well aware of that fact.

What that middle-aged gentleman had wanted to teach her, then, had to be a more abstract concept, something complicated despite its simplicity. Was that scene meant to symbolize something that couldn’t be expressed with conventional words and logic? An ominous premonition, a melancholy microcosm, a shard of future events? Was it a hint as to some unyielding dilemma she’d face herself, someday? Was there some principle at work that a teenager—even a genius one—could not possibly grasp? And was that principle presenting itself to her now, through the admiral’s actions?

“Don’t stress yourself about it now,” the admiral said, holding a glass out toward her. “You’ll find out eventually, sooner or later.”

“What’s going to happen to Bruno now?” she asked after a pause.

“The rules allow for capital punishment—or so I’d like to call it, but as we’re not a proper military, it’d be more like a lynching—in the form of execution by firing squad. We’ve never done that before, though... The more reasonable punishment would be long-term confinement, then: We just need to hold him until his knowledge of Mithril’s equipment, hierarchy, and personnel becomes out-of-date.”

Tessa knew the rule in question. Five years of holding wouldn’t be enough; it would more likely be ten, or maybe fifteen. But would the organization still exist that far into the future? The question drifted into her mind, apropos of nothing.

“This isn’t some light-hearted gentlemen’s club. He needs to be dealt with in an appropriate fashion. Of course, the council won’t decide what that is until after the interrogation is over.” Borda sat down on the sofa across from them and changed the subject. “Now... I called you here to consult with you about something else: I think it’s time to do some reorganizing.”

“What... What do you mean?” Tessa asked.

“I looked through the reports of the Perio Archipelago incident. Those two Japanese kids... Chidori Kaname, and Sergeant Sagara,” Borda clarified. “It’s impossible to overstate their value to us. Judging from your report, they’re also the ones who saved the TDD-1.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Tessa agreed.

“It’s becoming hard to deny their significance. The Whispered, the ARX-7... We can’t treat them as developing issues anymore. We’re getting complaints from the intelligence division about that... and regarding Wraith, as well.”

Tessa said nothing.

“I think it’s about time to reconsider how we treat them. Don’t you agree, Major?” Borda asked.

Kalinin averted his eyes and responded, hesitantly. “Of course, sir. But—”

Borda immediately raised his hand to cut him off. “Spare me the bureaucratic response. Excuse it all you like, but the fact remains: the way we’re doing things now is inefficient.”

“Sir,” Kalinin acknowledged noncommittally.

“What do you think, Teletha?” Borda asked, turning towards Tessa.

She hesitated. “You’re correct, of course. But...”

Borda assumed an exaggerated scowl and looked straight at her. “But what?”

“Nothing.”

“Good. Let’s hash out some details, then.”

17 October, 1459 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Jindai High School, Chofu, Tokyo

One week after tests, the school held a post-graduate guidance assembly. Despite the grandiose name, though, it was really just a long series of lectures from school staff.

First, the principal: “—I’m sure you’re all thinking, ‘I’m just a second-year; I don’t need to think about this.’ But your second year is the best time to start considering your post-graduation plans. Especially these days—given the state of the economy, employers will be less interested in your schooling credentials and more interested in what you’ve learned, and what you can do. So think carefully about that when making your plans—” One thing after another.

That’s all pretty vague, Kaname and the others thought.

Then, their class adviser: “—Get it? Don’t assume you can afford to take a year off after graduating. That self-assurance will always be your undoing. Most sekitori never make it to yokozuna, so they’ll tell themselves ‘I just need to make it to juryo.’ But once they start thinking that way, will they even make it *that* far? Of course not. The world is an unforgiving place. What I’m saying is—” One thing after another.

We’re not going into sumo, though, Kaname and the others thought.

None of the 320-or-so second-years gathered in the gymnasium could muster up much enthusiasm. Kaname was starting to nod off from boredom by the time the final lecture reached its end: “—So, please keep that in mind from now on. We’ll leave a variety of materials in front of the post-graduation guidance rooms, so be sure you take what you need.”

The students dispersed, leaving the gymnasium in class order. The assembly had taken the place of 6th period, which meant they’d be able to go home soon.

Sitting in the largely empty train car as they headed back home, Kaname let out a big yawn.

“Looks like you got a nice rest, Kana-chan,” Kyoko said from the seat beside hers.

Sousuke was standing in front of them, wearing his usual sullen expression. There were bags under his eyes, as if he hadn’t been sleeping well. He’d spent nearly every free minute he’d had since Sunday fixing Ms. Kagurazaka’s car.

“I mean, yeah. Who can take that guidance stuff seriously?” Kaname said,

stifling another yawn. She wished they'd focus less on that abstract stuff, and more on practical information, like 'here's the average yearly salary for a defense attorney,' or 'here's how hard it is to get into so-and-so famous company,' or 'if you're thinking about becoming an animator, don't.'

"I dunno, some of it was pretty good. It actually got me thinking."

"Huh! Kyoko, you actually listen to that stuff?"

"Yeah. I mean, it's my future we're talking about," Kyoko defended herself. "I was thinking about going right to work after graduating, but now I'm not so sure..."

Kaname let out a vague, thoughtful hum. Kyoko, who typically had a very childish air about her, suddenly seemed like the more mature of the two.

As if noticing Kaname's gaze, Kyoko shot her a slightly abashed smile. "I mean, I'm not taking it *that* seriously... Anyway." Kyoko turned her gaze intently to Sousuke. "Sagara-kun, I've been wondering... have you been growing your hair out lately?"

Sousuke looked back at her dubiously. Following Kyoko's example, Kaname also turned to stare at Sousuke. His hair was as disheveled and haphazard as ever, but when she looked carefully, she could see that it was all-in-all longer than before. More of his bangs seemed to be falling into his eyes; from certain angles, you couldn't even see them. It wasn't quite to the point of "unsightly"—it helped that he had a very masculine face, and it hadn't grown out that much—it was just long enough to be bothersome.

"Now that you mention it..." Kaname mused.

Sousuke picked at a lock of his bangs as Kaname expressed her concern. "Does it look strange?" he wanted to know.

"Nah, it's not that bad or anything..." she reassured him. "Hey, that reminds me. Do you go to a stylist or what?"

"What's a 'stylist'?" Sousuke asked.

"Like a barber."

"Ah. No, I've never been to one. I cut it myself."

“With scissors?”

“With this.” Sousuke produced a heavy-duty combat knife from beneath his uniform.

“Ah-ha. There’s one mystery solved.” Kaname finally realized why his hair was so messy and uneven.

Just then, something seemed to occur to Kyoko, and she raised a finger and spoke with glee. “Hey, I just had a great idea! Why don’t we take Sagara-kun to a stylist? He’d be super hot with a makeover, I bet!”

“Hmm. That... That *is* intriguing,” Kaname decided.

“Right? I say we go with a pompadour.”

“Nah, he needs a crew cut.”

“How about a mushroom cut? And some color-tinted glasses to go with!”

Kaname snorted, then burst out in snickers. “Or how about a punch perm? I’d die!”

“Like in *Honki to Kaite Maji!*?”

“They could give him dog ears, too.”

“Oh, like a stylist could do that!”

The two girls joked around with each other, oblivious to Sousuke’s feelings on the matter. But though their conversation was purely in the spirit of fun, Sousuke’s next words gave it a dimension of reality: “I wouldn’t mind.”

“Huh?” Kaname blinked.

“Visiting a stylist,” he clarified. “That’s where high school students typically get their hair cut, isn’t it?”

Kaname and Kyoko ended up taking Sousuke on a short walk out the south entrance of Chofu Station. Their destination was a slightly upscale salon. *It’s very different from the barber shops in Afghanistan,* Sousuke thought as he examined the shop’s exterior.

There had been barber shops in the war-torn region where he’d grown up,

but he'd never been inside one; his desire to visit one now signified a degree of ambition for personal growth. It was a sign of the new motivation that had begun to work inside him, invisibly: He had to try harder to adjust to life here, in this city. The idea probably wouldn't have occurred to him if not for Mao's words to him the other day—and of course, simple curiosity also played a role.

"Is this place okay?" Kaname asked.

"Yes," Sousuke answered her. "I trust your judgment." With that, the three of them entered the salon.

"One haircut, please. For this guy here," Kaname said to the stylist who met them. The man seemed to understand the situation immediately and urged Sousuke to a seat with a smile.

"Hmm..." With awkward movements, Sousuke sat in the chair. The stylist wrapped a towel around his neck and then covered him with a plastic sheet. "So, what are we going for?" the stylist asked Kaname and Kyoko.

"What did we decide on, Kana-chan?"

"Let's see... we should probably drop the obvious gag stuff," Kaname said, "like a mohawk."

"I think a mohawk would look great, though. I've always wanted to try one myself," the stylist joked.

Kaname and Kyoko laughed and batted around a few ideas. After about three minutes of consultation, they arrived at a safe choice: "Just make it short enough that we can see his eyebrows. Also his hair is way thick, so try to thin it out some. Is that okay, Sousuke?"

"Yes," he said shortly.

"Go to it, then. We're leaving him in your hands—We'll be over there." Kaname and Kyoko waved as they withdrew to the waiting area.

Sousuke suddenly felt very alone. No, that wasn't all—there was a feeling of unease about him. Even though there was nothing suspicious here, he still felt butterflies in his stomach. Instincts cultivated over years and years told him that something was wrong here.

Is it... my imagination? He couldn't be sure. Then again, his instincts had never been right about anything here in this peaceful city, so it was probably safe to ignore them. How many humiliations had he suffered due to trusting his instincts?

"Okay, sir. I'm going to shampoo now." The stylist was about to pour the shampoo on Sousuke's head.

"Wai—" he started, but stopped himself.

"Yes?"

"No... please, continue."

The stylist looked at him dubiously, then poured the shampoo onto his head and lathered it up. This complete stranger—this man he'd never seen before—was moving his unfamiliar fingers around his scalp.

"Any itching anywhere?" the stylist asked.

"No," Sousuke grunted out. He was actually itching all over, but he kept his answer short.

He was nervous, extremely nervous. What if the bottle contained some kind of a transdermal toxin? What if this man had a poison needle in his finger? What if he was hiding a small automatic pistol under that white smock of his? There would be no way for Sousuke to fight back.

Stop worrying, he told himself. *It's just soap... he's just a barber...* There was no way the man could be an assassin. They'd come here on a spur-of-the-moment decision, and Kaname had chosen the location. It couldn't possibly be an enemy trap.

"Now, right this waaay," the stylist told Sousuke, as he filled the sink in front of him with hot water. Sousuke watched him questioningly. "We need to rinse out the shampoo," the man clarified.

"Right..." Sousuke agreed. The man seemed to be asking him to plunge his head into the basin. But if he did that, he'd lose all visibility—he'd also leave his neck exposed to others. It would be a trivial matter for the stylist to plunge a knife into his spine, or stick him with a syringe—someone outside the shop

could take the chance to target him, too.

"What's the matter?" the stylist wanted to know.

"Er... is this strictly necessary?"

The stylist stared a moment, then smiled awkwardly. "Of course it is. I can't cut it like this, can I? Come on, now."

Sousuke said nothing. He was in agony as he hesitantly bent over and plunged his head into the basin. As he did, he pulled his pistol from its holster under the plastic sheet—it made him feel a little safer.

The stylist spoke as he massaged his hair. "How does the water feel?"

"Fine," he managed to answer, but he was completely beside himself. He couldn't even feel the water. *Will this man try to kill me if I show a moment's weakness?* he wondered. *Why does he keep encouraging me to lower my defenses? Have they anticipated my movements in a way I couldn't predict, and sent this man ahead to pose as a stylist? Or is there another enemy here that might try to come after me in my moment of vulnerability?*

That's right, he remembered. *I have no reason to think I'm safe. People are still after Kaname... If I die here, who will protect her?*

"There, all done. Great job!" Mopping his hair with a towel, the stylist slowly eased him back in the chair. The towel compromised his vision in a way that felt like torture. "Okay, let's get cutting!" The barber snipped the scissors eagerly and seized a lock of his disheveled hair. A total stranger was now standing behind him, holding a blade...

Something in his head started blaring a warning. *Can't do this. Stop it. If I don't stop it—*

Sousuke'd reached the limit of what he could take, and his body acted instinctively. Before the scissors could even get close to his head, he grabbed the stylist's arm, stood up from the chair and smashed him against the mirror.

"Wh-What are you—"

"Don't move!" Sousuke barked. He trailed his eyes, and the barrel of his gun, over the other surprised employees and customers, scrutinizing them

carefully... But there was no sign of a possible enemy. The stylist he'd shoved against the mirror just let out a weak groan, and squirmed in confusion.

Sousuke realized that he'd failed again, as always. *There's no threat here. Neither inside nor outside the shop...*

"Sousuke?!" Kaname was charging at him from the waiting area, a rolled-up fashion magazine in hand. She was clearly furious.

Correction. There is one threat... Sousuke bravely took the improvised club to the top of his head.

"I can't believe it!" Kaname was fuming as they walked back to the apartment. "You asked me to take you, so I took you. What on earth possessed you to lash out like that?!"

"I'm extremely sorry." Sousuke followed behind her, sluggishly.

Following the chaos, he and Kaname both bowed and apologized, but the stylist still asked them to go elsewhere, forewent payment—as if the two of them were yakuza of some kind—and then shooed them away. Once they were out, Kyoko had laughed and said, "Well, it is what it is." Then they'd parted ways, and headed for home.

"It was simply too dangerous to remain so unguarded that close to an armed stranger," he argued.

"Oh, yeah? Don't tell me to take you to a stylist then," Kaname snapped back. "Didn't you realize they'd have to do all that to cut your hair? You could have really hurt that totally innocent guy! You've gotta get it out of your head that you're always surrounded by assassins and enemies!"

"I can't do that." This was one matter on which Sousuke held firm. "The enemy is out there; that is a fact. You could be attacked at any moment."

"But..." Kaname hesitated. She tended to forget that until it was pointed out to her. Her strange existence as a Whispered really had made her a target.

"Protecting you from the enemy must remain my number one priority," Sousuke said seriously.

When he put it that way, Kaname couldn't find the heart to lecture him anymore. Instead, she just whispered, in a slightly resentful tone, "But... that only happened the one time."

"True," he agreed. "But that's no reason for me to let my guard down."

"Oh, come on..." she moaned. Since the field trip incident, the so-called 'enemy' hadn't made a single attempt on her directly—at least, as far as Kaname could see. She'd been in danger quite a few times since then, but that was always the result of her getting dragged into something unrelated. Her daily life in Tokyo was the picture of peace and quiet—well, maybe a little more chaotic than a normal teenager's, thanks to Sousuke's constant troublemaking.

Is there really an enemy out there? Couldn't he and Mithril just be making a big deal over nothing? Kaname frequently found herself wondering, and her doubts were only natural.

They found their pace slowing. It was just before evening, and the residential district was full of people. It was getting deeper into autumn; the weather was turning chillier, and the sun was setting earlier, too.

"It's been about half a year now, hasn't it..." she mused. Sousuke had come into Kaname's life in the spring; that was almost exactly six months ago. "Time sure does fly, huh?"

"I suppose," Sousuke agreed.

"And yet you haven't made an inch of progress."

"Haven't I?"

"Nope." She giggled at him, and Sousuke tilted his head. Since he'd never actually gotten his hair cut, it was still damp and disheveled, which gave him a bit of a "shaggy stray dog" air. He looked so pathetic, it almost felt irresponsible for her to leave him on his own. "Hey..." she said, after thinking for a minute.

"What is it?"

"You want to stop by my place?" Kaname suggested. "I can finish the cutting, if you want." Her invitation must have come as a complete surprise; Sousuke showed a rare widening of the eyes and blinked at her. "Is that a no?" she

asked.

“It’s not that,” he said. “It’s just...”

“Worried I might attack you, too?” she teased.

He shook his head rapidly. “No, not at all. You’re different.” Kaname found herself enjoying his indignant denial more than she expected to.

Family circumstances had left Kaname living alone in a three-bedroom apartment, but her bathroom turned out to be rather cramped as she dragged in a chair and said, “All right, sir! Please take a seat.” As Sousuke did so, she briskly wrapped a bath towel and a plastic sheet around his neck. She’d already gotten changed into a flimsy T-shirt and jeans. “Not choking you, is it?” she checked.

“No, it’s not an issue,” he told her.

“Okay, then here we go.” She laughed wickedly and snatched up the scissors with a grin.

Sousuke, suddenly nervous for reasons unrelated to assassins and enemies, asked her, “Chidori, do you... have any experience cutting hair?”

“Nope,” she responded lightly. “I’ve messed with Kyoko’s hair before, but never cut it.”

Sousuke fell into nervous silence.

“Hey, calm down!” she protested. “At the very least, this has gotta be better than cutting it yourself.”

“Please attempt to avoid cutting my ears off,” Sousuke begged.

“Right. I’ll try my best.” After another laugh, she grabbed a lock of Sousuke’s hair and gave it a snip. Then, she repeated the motion. Kaname started off carefully, but as she went on, the *snip, snip, snip* came faster and more rhythmically. “Hey...” she said, still cutting. “You had some job or other that made you miss the tests, right?”

“Yes,” Sousuke agreed.

“More fighting stuff?”

“Yes... Why do you ask?”

“No reason... Were you hurt at all?”

“Just a few scrapes. Not an issue.”

“I see...” Kaname cut his hair in silence for a while. Occasionally she’d cast a glance between his head and the mirror, at which time she’d hum to herself speculatively, screw up her face, then start cutting again. Hair tumbled down the plastic sheet in clumps.

“Hey...” Kaname finally whispered. “Tessa told me that there was someone else protecting me. Someone besides you.”

“Did she?” he asked casually. It was Kaname’s first time talking to him about this, and Sousuke wondered if she’d been thinking about it since their conversation on the way home.

“But I haven’t... seen any sign of them, you know?” she went on. “So sometimes I forget it’s all really out there. Like... everything that’s happened, all this Mithril stuff... doesn’t feel real.”

Sousuke’s primary mission in Tokyo was to protect Kaname, but in practice, he couldn’t watch her all by himself. An agent from Mithril’s intelligence division had also been dispatched to stay close at all times; it was that agent’s presence that allowed Sousuke to leave Kaname’s side to go overseas. Members of the operations division like Sousuke and Kalinin referred to that agent as “Wraith.”

“Sousuke,” she asked, “have you met that person?”

“No,” he told her. “I haven’t talked to them, either.”

“Do you know who they are?”

“No. It’s probably not someone you’ve ever met.”

“You think I can really trust them?” Kaname wanted to know.

Sousuke said nothing.

“And, um... Mithril and stuff, too.” There was a thick anxiety behind her

words. No matter how cheerily she might go about her day, she was always under threat—it was a fact that Sousuke always took for granted, but in that moment, it felt very real to him. If somebody really was after Kaname, Mithril would be the only ones she could count on. The police were in no position to help her.

"Of course, you can trust us," Sousuke assured her, but he didn't fully believe his own words.

Wraith was always a remote presence. They were outside the school when classes were on; when Kaname was at home, they were a few blocks away from the apartment. They were watching her from afar, distantly, but persistently—that was why Sousuke didn't have to be with her every hour of every day. If Kaname called to the agent, they wouldn't respond under any circumstances.

Wraith also hadn't acted when Kaname had found herself in danger in the past—when she'd been accosted by delinquents in town, or taken off to a stranger's mansion, or abducted by A21 terrorists. Of course, she'd gotten out of each situation safely enough... but once the danger was past, Sousuke always felt a certain irritation. *Why didn't they act? Why weren't they protecting her in my place?* he wondered.

His reports to his superiors frequently contained the phrase, "I have strong doubts regarding the abilities of intelligence agent, codename Wraith." But the reply was always: "We'll take it under consideration. Continue your mission." Neither Kalinin nor Tessa would offer him an explanation, either. "Just keep going," they assured him.

As a result, Sousuke felt extremely nervous whenever he was away from Kaname. Even if his orders told him to leave it to Wraith... he found it hard to believe that this agent was actually taking their mission seriously. Was Wraith just waiting patiently for the "real" enemy to appear? Were they treating Kaname like bait on the line—not to be pulled up until a big fish bit, no matter how much the bobber moved? That would explain Wraith's persistent absence in the field.

No... it still didn't make any sense. Letting Kaname die before the enemy struck would defeat the entire purpose of the exercise. It was chilling to think

back on those times, but she'd been in several situations now where she easily could have died. Why hadn't Wraith ever offered their assistance? Sousuke didn't know. A cold, calculating theory was beginning to form itself in his mind: Could the intelligence division have discovered something they weren't telling him?

"Sousuke?" Kaname called Sousuke out of his reverie.

"Hmm?"

"What's wrong?" she asked. "You looked miles away just now."

"Well..."

"If you're worrying about what I said, don't. Because, um... no matter what I might say..." Kaname stopped her clipping and hesitated a moment. Then, as if making up her mind—but with eyes still turned away from the mirror—she said, "I do trust you, Sousuke."

Sousuke didn't respond at first. He felt a strange feeling washing over him; something warm and gentle and unknown began to envelop his heart. His face felt hot, and he felt something rising up from deep inside him. He didn't know why, but it felt familiar. He'd felt this feeling before. *What was it called?* he wondered, but he couldn't remember.

"Thank you," he eventually managed.

"You're very welcome," she said smoothly, then resumed her clipping. "Hey, could you turn a little more to the right?"

"Ah... sure."

"Not that way, the other way." Kaname's slender fingertips nudged his cheek. They felt cool and pleasant to the touch. It was like a moment's gentle breeze in a sweltering jungle.

In a corner of his vision, Sousuke could see the swaying of her black hair and white T-shirt; the cheap, thin cotton fabric was a little transparent in the light. When she came around in front of him to cut his bangs, he could make out the vague contours of her body, from her underarms to her hips. The smooth, slender lines of her legs... Sousuke averted his eyes, as if he'd looked into the

sun.



Kaname smirked triumphantly. “I think I’m getting the hang of this...” From start to finish, she was gentle and careful with him. She took off more hair with thinning shears, evened the edges with a razor, and then combed it out carefully... As it went on, Sousuke found himself dozing off.

What’s going on here? he wondered. *There’s a potential weapon near my head, yet I’m getting sleepy... This can’t be happening. It seems impossible... I don’t know why, but I feel so comfortable. Chidori. Is it possible, I—*

“Okay, rinse-off time!” She plunged his head into the basin then dumped on the cold water, and that was the end of his daydreams.

“Not bad, if I do say so myself,” she said with satisfaction as she turned off the dryer.

“It doesn’t seem very different to me,” Sousuke commented, peering closely into the mirror. It was definitely shorter than it had been, but he didn’t feel like there was much of a change. It felt more like he was back to where he’d been a month earlier. The cut was still shaggy and haphazard, though maybe a bit more symmetrical than before.

“What are you talking about?” Kaname retorted. “You look totally different.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, it’s way better,” she told him confidently. “Ask around at school tomorrow.”

“Hmm...” Sousuke peered into the mirror once again, and then stood up. “Well, I appreciate the aid. Perhaps I’ll cut your hair next time.”

“Heck no,” Kaname said, wrinkling her nose.

He helped her clean up the washroom. They shared a simple dinner, and then as Sousuke said goodbye, he got the vague impression that Kaname didn’t want him to leave.

By the time he left, it was dark outside; it must be past 8:00 already. There were still a lot of people on the sidewalks—office workers on the way home,

kids returning from cram school, housewives walking their dogs... Cutting across the flow of people, Sousuke headed for his own apartment, which stood across from Kaname's.

For some reason, there was a lightness in his step. No... he felt truly elated. Perhaps it would be most correct to say that his morale had greatly improved. Now, things were different. Now, he felt like he could take on the world. Guarding Kaname, dealing with Japanese society, training at Merida Island, live combat... anything he did, he would do well.

She's counting on me, he told himself. *That means I need to have faith in myself.* "That's right..." He could kick himself for his failings another day. For now, he had too much to do.

First, he'd return home and write a report to Merida Island about the day's events. He'd do his maintenance on his supplies and his weapons. Then he'd check the various sensors he'd set up around the neighborhood. After that, he'd study for his makeup exams.

Sousuke returned home swiftly, turned on his satellite-connected laptop, and spent five minutes writing up a basic report. He ran it through a powerful encryption algorithm, then sent it immediately. Shortly after, a "report received" message came from the Merida Island communications center, and a new encrypted file arrived in his mailbox.

Sousuke looked puzzled. The file was a tasking message from command.

Priority order 98J005-3128

191121Z

From: West Pacific Battle Group Command (Merida Island Base)

To: Uruz-7/Sergeant Sagara Sousuke

A: Operations leadership and battle group command hereby issue cancellation to priority order 98E001-3128 (Operation: Guardian Angel) effective today 1500 hours (GMT).

B: Uruz-7 to withdraw from current safehouse, return ASAP to Merida Island Base via Route 3b.

C: Uruz-7 to submit letter of withdrawal by post to Jindai High School. Reason given for withdrawal to be left to the discretion of Uruz-7.

D: Ongoing protection of Chidori Kaname to be entrusted exclusively to codename Wraith.

E: Further contact with Chidori Kaname is prohibited effective today 1500 hours (GMT).

Message ends.

Sousuke rubbed his eyes and read over the orders one more time. The content didn't change. He read them again and again, but there was no interpretation that could lead him to any other conclusion: he was being permanently removed from bodyguard duty for Chidori Kaname. The fact that operations leadership was mentioned meant that someone above even Tessa or Kalinin was involved; there would be no room for Sousuke to protest.

Silently, he looked down at the LCD screen. He remained perfectly still for some time—it might actually have been more than ten minutes—not moving a muscle. He could hear his back teeth grinding.

Ongoing protection of Chidori Kaname to be entrusted exclusively—

The next thing he knew, he had slammed his fist down on the computer. The alloy frame warped, and keys freed from their board were sent flying through the air. A maddening unease rippled through his body. He left the computer—which now reeked of burning plastic—behind him, and headed straight for the veranda. He passed through the glass door, grabbed the railing, and looked around.

"Where are you?" Sousuke whispered, shoulders trembling. He saw the residential district at night. It was as peaceful as ever... "Come out, Wraith! Come talk to me!" he shouted with all his might.

Anger wouldn't solve anything. He knew there was no way he could appeal the decision. Yet he couldn't stay quiet. "I know you're here! Why don't you answer me?!" His shout echoed through the neighborhood. People walking below looked up in curiosity.

No response came. Sousuke knew well that this wouldn't be enough to get the spy to come out, so the next thing he shouted was this: "I am Sergeant Sagara Sousuke! Mithril operations division, West Pacific battle group, Tuatha de Danaan! I was ordered to Tokyo on the twentieth of April to guard a certain individual! She's believed to have been targeted for the following reasons: One,

due to her status as a special entity known as a Whispered! Two, because Whispered possess classified knowledge related to military—”

Suddenly, the phone in his apartment rang. Sousuke immediately stopped and went back inside. He picked up the phone beeping mechanically on his desk, and turned it on.

The speaker on the other end tore into him immediately. “Are you insane?!” The voice was low, thick, and digitized; whoever it was must be using a voice changer. As inhuman as the voice sounded, though, it was clear that its owner must have called him in a panic. This had to be Wraith, the agent deployed by the intelligence division. “What kind of agent bellows classified information to the whole neighborhood?” the voice continued. “You’re compromising our operation.”

“I had to. You were ignoring me,” Sousuke said coldly.

“You must know it’s dangerous for us to talk like this. Uruz-7, what you’re doing now is—”

“Answer me. Is your mission to protect Chidori Kaname? Or is it simply to monitor her?”

“I don’t owe you an answer,” Wraith told him.

“I could spend the whole night shouting what I know off the veranda,” Sousuke said flatly. “I’m being relieved either way, after all.”

“Is that a threat, Uruz-7? I’ll file an official complaint with operations.”

“Go ahead. But answer my question, first.”

He heard a sound like a tongue clicking. After a few moments’ hesitation, Wraith seemed to relent. “To protect her, of course.”

“I don’t believe you,” Sousuke denied.

“That’s your prerogative. I was tasked to keep codename Angel from falling into the hands of another organization. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Then why won’t you help her?” Sousuke wanted to know. “She’s faced danger multiple times in the past.”

“Danger from bands of minor hoodlums,” Wraith replied scornfully. “I’m not obliged to interfere in the affairs of the local riff-raff.”

“I see. But then what about the A21 incident? You didn’t even try to save her then.” As he said it, Sousuke began to wonder if it was less ‘you’ in the singular and more ‘you’ in the plural.

The agent said nothing.

“Well?” he demanded. “Answer me.”

“I was watching the situation develop when things abruptly escalated beyond what I could handle,” Wraith replied coldly. “I was terrified by your battle at Fushimidai Academy, but in the end, my decision not to interfere was the correct one, as the terrorists never seemed to realize her importance. They were little more than thugs themselves.”

“I don’t buy that excuse,” Sousuke argued back. “I don’t think you really intend to protect her.”

“I’m not seeking your approval, so you can fret all you like,” the composite voice mocked. “The intelligence division should have taken this mission over right after Sunan, but operations intervened to keep you on it. They said you would be useful as a decoy—but as far as I’m concerned, you’ve been nothing but a hindrance. I even considered killing you and making it look like an accident.”

“It’s not too late,” Sousuke challenged. “Try me.”

“I’m kidding. I wouldn’t expect to win a fight with you unscathed. Though I did get some entertainment out of considering it...”

“What?”

“You seem to get nervous when a rifle barrel is trained on you from afar, or if the bolt of a submachine gun is moved in the shadows. Your soldier’s instincts are incredible, but they frequently lead you err,” Wraith pointed out. “I enjoyed the chaos at the salon today, as well.”

“You...”

“Don’t be so mad. What’s done is done.” Wraith’s voice took on a note of

triumph. “Either way, the games end today. You’ll return to base and resume your standard missions. I’ll keep things up here. We’re both professionals; let’s not squabble over petty details.”

“I can’t do that,” Sousuke denied. “What about Chidori?”

“Her safety is no longer your concern. You’ve received the order to withdraw, haven’t you? Unless you’re planning to go rogue...”

“I...” Sousuke was at a loss for words.

“Don’t forget that it was Mithril who gave you this life in the first place. You’re not really a high school student,” Wraith reminded him. “You’re a mercenary; a killer. Even your family register and school records are forgeries.”

Sousuke said nothing.

“You can criticize me all you like, but do you really believe you’re capable of protecting her? You’ve had no success in adapting to Japanese society in the six months you’ve spent here. Your presence with her is at best unnecessary, and at worst, an active threat.”

Sousuke felt like he’d been slapped, as the air around him seemed to grow heavier and stickier. Wraith wasn’t wrong.

“Sorry to inform you,” the composite voice went on, “but you’re a third-rate bodyguard. You’ll never be anything but a burden to her, and your presence might even increase the risk to innocent bystanders.”

Sousuke remained silent.

“It’s over, Uruz-7. Follow your orders and return to base.” Sousuke remained silent, unable to retort, and so the other person just hung up on him. Listlessly, he set down the receiver.

It was only a few moments later that the feeling of rock-bottom helplessness washed over him.

3: Black and White

20 October, 0810 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Jindai High School, Chofu

“Morning, Kyoko!” Kaname slapped Kyoko on the back as they met up at Sengawa Station that morning.

“Morning... Jeez, you’re peppy today, Kana-chan,” Kyoko grumbled, a bit sleepily.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. Did something good happen?”

“Not really. Or... maybe it did, I guess? It’s not like a whole *thing* or anything...” Kaname giggled.

Kyoko looked confused. “You’re being so weird...”

Kaname and Kyoko were walking to school in a crowd of other students. Sadly, it was raining that day, and a bit chilly on top of that. They both had their umbrellas out, a fact which made Kaname a little anxious—Her friend was quite a bit shorter than her, which put her umbrella’s ribs just about level with Kaname’s eyes.

“But yesterday was something, huh? I guess Sagara-kun hasn’t changed much,” Kyoko said, after a bit of walking.

Kaname nodded. “I know, right? The guy is so dense. I keep telling him to chill, but he keeps freaking out anyway. I wish I could give him a shock collar or something. Every time he does something stupid... *zap!* It’d work, I think. I’m serious.”

Kyoko laughed. “What, like for a dog?” Then, she changed the subject. “So, what happened after I left?”

“Hmm? Oh, I... I went home. Why do you ask?” Kaname said, playing dumb. She wasn’t sure why, but she didn’t want to admit that she’d taken him back to her place and cut his hair. It really *was* pretty forward, wasn’t it? Most girls didn’t get that close to their male friends, did they? Was it possible her classmates would be a little put off if they learned what it was she’d done?

Well, it’s fine, she told herself. She’d just accost Sousuke ASAP and tell him to say he cut it himself. That would take care of everything.

“Talk about a good mood, though...” Kyoko observed.

“Who’s in a good mood?”

“You are.”

“Huh? N-No I’m not,” Kaname denied. “Ahahaha...”

“Hmm,” Kyoko teased, “I’m skeptical...”

That was the end of that conversation.

They talked for a while about the Japan Series, then passed through the school’s front gate, put on their slippers and headed for the classroom. They dropped their bags on their desks and looked around. There was no sign of Sousuke.

Not here yet, huh? Kaname asked herself. She glanced at her watch. It was 8:27. Class would start soon. *Where could he be?* she wondered. She wanted to see the reactions from the class when they noticed his new hair.

While her other classmates were chatting, the bell rang for class. The students noisily moved to their seats, but Sousuke’s remained empty.

He’s gonna come late again? That stupid jerk... with his makeup tests coming, and everything... Kaname opened up her textbook, feeling a little deflated. But one hour passed, then another, and Sousuke still didn’t show up.

He didn’t show up all day.

20 October, 1719 Hours (West Pacific Standard Time)

Merida Island Base

Tessa was looking through some documents in her office when the intercom on her desk buzzed. It was from her secretary in the next room. “Yes?” she inquired.

“Colonel, ma’am,” said the secretary, “Sergeant Sagara has arrived.” Major Kalinin was his direct superior, but he wasn’t on base at the moment, so he’d probably come to her to give his report personally. The major had remained in operations headquarters in Sydney; he had a few equipment issues to discuss with the Roth & Hambleton engineers.

After a long pause, Tessa said, “Let him in.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Tessa set down the receiver and minimized the documents on her desk’s holoscreen. The progress reports for the new submarine communication system, the VME bus receiver, were still classified, and Sagara Sousuke lacked sufficient authorization to view them.

She felt depressed. The fact was that she was the one who had issued him the order to return. She hadn’t had a choice, of course—she was just executing the will of the admiral and the operations division—but in practice, she’d effectively torn him and Kaname apart. The fact that she’d been jealous of their relationship in the first place only added to her sense of guilt.

If only Kalinin were here, Tessa thought wistfully, and that moment of weakness just depressed her further. She couldn’t just give an order like that and then hide behind one of her subordinates; what kind of commander would she be then? *But what am I even going to say to him?* She’d been wondering that the entire time since she’d gotten back from Sydney, and she still hadn’t figured it out.

“Reporting in, ma’am.” Sousuke came in. He walked right up to her desk and snapped to a salute. She returned the gesture, and he immediately lowered his hand to go into ‘attention’ posture.

“Welcome back,” Tessa greeted him. “At ease.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Sousuke, quickly shifting to ‘at ease’ posture. Sousuke always acted this way around his superiors, but his behavior today seemed even more absurdly formal than usual. Was it just her imagination, or was this how he’d treat a complete stranger?

Neither of them said anything for a while. It was a long, long silence.

Sousuke wasn’t looking at Tessa; he was standing ramrod-straight, eyes fixed on the large map behind her. Even though they did know each other. Even though they were the same age... It occurred to her suddenly that his formality was like a form of silent protest towards her.

“Did you say goodbye to Kaname-san?” she asked, unable to bear the silence any longer.

“Ah,” Sousuke responded vaguely. “Requesting an explanation, ma’am,” he said then, still looking at the map.

Tessa clenched her fists, and after a moment’s silence, launched into her grueling explanation. “The top brass and I came to a decision. With the intelligence division getting settled in Tokyo, it’s no longer necessary for you to stay with Kaname-san.”

“Permission to voice my disagreement, ma’am,” Sousuke said woodenly. “The intelligence division’s protection is insufficient.”

“You’re wrong,” Tessa told him. “And you underestimate your own importance as well. Putting you on that redundant mission was a dereliction of my duty as battle group commander. There’s a much more important duty you need to focus on.”

“Requesting clarification, ma’am,” Sousuke asked, as if skeptical that anything could be more important than guarding Kaname.

“The Arbalest,” Tessa said, and Sousuke’s expression tightened a bit. “Your focus must remain on operating that machine. Because you’re the only one who can.”

He said nothing.

“During the Sunan incident, the lambda driver registered your brainwave

patterns. Or perhaps ‘imprinted on’ would be a more apt phrasing... Following that initial deployment, all systems—which until then had been completely blank—automatically restructured themselves to match your specifications. In the moment you activated it, the artificial nerve network that runs through its frame mapped itself to your nervous system through the TAROS. These are changes that cannot be altered.”

“I don’t understand,” Sousuke finally said.

“From the moment you first piloted it, the Arbalest became... like your avatar,” Tessa explained, squeaking back and forth in her chair. “Mithril does not currently have the resources to create another lambda driver-mounted AS. Which means that, if we end up facing another enemy machine like the Venom or the Behemoth, you and the Arbalest remain our only hope to oppose them. The intelligence division will protect Kaname-san, and you... you must focus on learning how to operate the Arbalest properly.”

After patiently enduring the long explanation, Sousuke looked down and let out a small sigh. “And there’s no room for leeway in that decision?”

“No,” Tessa responded weakly. “Please try to understand, Sagara-san.”

“Is that an order, ma’am?” His words, full of scathing disdain, felt like a physical blow.

He did that intentionally, Tessa thought. *He said that to me to attack me. I’m doing my best to explain things to him, and he says, “Is that an order?” As if our friendship meant nothing. And on top of that, the reason he’s so angry... is because of her.*

“Yes, it is,” she said, inadvertently sharpening her tone. “If that will get you to accept it, I *will* order you. That’s how organizations like ours work, after all. I will not play favorites with my men. Even if it means tearing you apart from Kaname-san, I *will* do what must be done.”

“Colonel, ma’am...?” Sousuke’s expression betrayed a hint of dismay, but that didn’t stop Tessa.

“You have no idea how the upper echelons work,” she said, suddenly furious. “I can’t do anything by myself—I’m merely a child, as you know. But what

would you know about hierarchies, or politics, or horsetrading?! Oh, it must be wonderful for you! You can just blame me for everything and set your mind at ease.

"But I don't have that luxury," Tessa continued angrily. "I need to think not just of her safety, but of the safety of my whole crew! Do you understand? You've fought the Venom and the Behemoth, haven't you? You know how dangerous they are! Not even an M9 can fight an AS with a lambda driver! The next time we encounter one, someone could die again! One of *my* people! The next time, it could be Melissa, or Kurz-san! Our entire ground force could be wiped out in an instant! So I need to do whatever I *can* do to stop that from happening!"



Sousuke cringed very slightly. The dam had burst on her words; her voice cracked, but she couldn't stop them from flooding out.

Ah, what am I doing? I'm crying, Tessa realized. *There's never been a commander more pathetic than I am... I'm a failure.* But even knowing that, she couldn't stop the emotions once they'd started.

"I—" Sousuke started, but Tessa cut him off again.

"What are you looking at?" she demanded. "Can't you think about anyone but her? Have you ever considered my feelings in the slightest?!"

"I... I cannot apologize enough, Colonel. I—"

"Stop it!!" Tessa said, her eyes red and swollen. "You're the absolute worst kind of person. You pretend to be faithful and kind, when all you really care about is yourself. And on top of that, you also lie to yourself... Why don't you just come out with how you really feel? 'I want to be with her. Don't get in my way!'"

It was Sousuke's turn to look like he'd been struck. He was completely dumbfounded; his eyes blinked rapidly, he shook his head, and he flapped his mouth, stunned.

"It would make things... so much easier... if you would." That was all Tessa could say. She realized that, at some point, she'd risen to her feet. And so now, she relaxed, slumping back into her chair.

"Forgive me... Colonel. I apologize. I... this situation, it's... my understanding is so lacking, I..." As Sousuke stumbled over his words, his entire body tense, the intercom on the desk buzzed once again.

While wiping the tears from her eyes with her sleeve, Tessa slowly picked up the receiver. "What is it?"

"Colonel, ma'am. Lieutenant Clouseau is here," said her secretary, Lieutenant Viran.

"Could you... give me a moment?" Tessa requested. "I'll have him in soon."

"Yes, ma'am."

Tessa set down the receiver, then took out a tissue and blew her nose. Still sniffling, she once again wiped her eyes with her sleeves and whispered, in dire tones, “I hate you, Sergeant Sagara.”

“...Forgive me,” he apologized humbly.

“I hate the way you apologize for everything.”

“...I’m sorry.”

“We have nothing more to discuss,” she told him. “You are dismissed.”

“...Yes, ma’am.” Hesitantly, Sousuke left the office.

Once the door was closed behind Sousuke, a new wave of self-loathing swept over Tessa. Were a few harsh words from her subordinate all it took to get her in a self-righteous fury, crying and shrieking? Pathetic didn’t even cover it—her behavior was contemptible. She’d never done anything so wretched before. The only silver lining was that nobody else had witnessed the display. Even so, she couldn’t believe she had said all those awful things to him so bluntly. He must completely loathe her, now.

Tessa regained her calm, straightened up, and gave herself three minutes. She checked her appearance in the mirror, then told her secretary to send the visitor in.

From the same door through which Sousuke had gone came a tall black man. He saluted her. “Belfangan Clouseau, at your service.”

“Welcome to the West Pacific battle group, Lieutenant. I am its commander-in-chief, Teletha Testarossa,” she greeted him, betraying no sign of her earlier difficulties.

“It’s my pleasure, Colonel,” Clouseau replied. “I appreciate you taking the time to see me.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” she returned politely. “Have you been able to have a look through your new workplace yet?”

“Not yet. By the way... that sergeant was Sagara Sousuke, correct?” he asked, as if to confirm what he already knew. They must have passed each other in the waiting room.

“Yes,” she admitted after a moment. “I suppose I should have introduced you.”

“No need. I’ve met them all already,” the man said, unsmiling.

“So you’re saying, you made Tessa cry again?” Kurz asked, staring at Sousuke. They were sitting at a corner of the bar in the base’s only izakaya.

“Er... affirmative,” Sousuke responded, from the seat beside him. He was slumped over, head drooping, absently gazing into the glass of grapefruit juice sitting on the counter before him.

“You know... you’d make a pretty good gigolo,” Kurz mused.

“What’s a ‘gigolo’?”

“Forget it. But... hmm. I gotta say: it fits,” Kurz said thoughtfully, folding his arms.

Sousuke gave him a sidelong glance. “You sound almost happy about this...” The last time, when he’d made Kaname cry, the man had sucker-punched him. Sometimes, Sousuke couldn’t understand what went through his partner’s head.

“I’m not,” Kurz told him. “But you feel bad about it, right?”

“Well... of course, but...”

“Then don’t beat yourself up about it. Tessa’s a nice girl,” Kurz said offhandedly, then downed his scotch with a gulp. “She’ll forgive you soon enough.”

Around them, the place was roaring with conversation between soldiers of the PRT (primary response team) that had just finished their training, and members of the maintenance team who had punched out for the day. There was casual boasting in various languages, coarse laughter, and tales about girls hooked up with in Guam. Cigarette smoke hung thick in the air.

“The colonel is a truly impressive person,” Sousuke said after a bit. “I don’t think I understood half of the responsibilities she’s under. And the way I spoke to her... she must have been furious with my insubordination.”

“That wouldn’t be enough to make her cry,” Kurz said with a hint of irony, a corner of his mouth quirking upward.

Sousuke looked over questioningly. “What do you mean by that?”

“Eh. It’s a little galling, so I don’t think I’ll tell you.”

Sousuke just looked even more confused.

“You really don’t know? Sheesh... no wonder she’s mad at you.” Kurz’s flabbergasted tone caused Sousuke to slump over further.

“I think... I really have been a fool,” Sousuke said glumly. “The colonel’s assertions were entirely correct. There was... no real reason for me to remain on as Kaname’s bodyguard. From a resource allocation perspective, our existing arrangement was... improper.”

Hearing Sousuke’s murmurings, Kurz grimaced for a while. At last, he shrugged and said, as if speaking to himself, “That’s no way to be.”

Sousuke looked up. “What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing. Forget it,” Kurz said, and decided to address Sousuke on his own terms. “It’s true that, even for a member of the SRT, it’s too much to both test an experimental AS and guard a girl at the same time...”

“Exactly. But...”

“But?” Kurz urged him on.

But Sousuke just gripped his glass and said in a strained whisper, “No, it’s nothing,” then fell silent.

There’s no point in confiding in Kurz, Sousuke thought. The dilemmas he was facing—his orders, his duty, Kaname, his own lack of insight, everything—wouldn’t be solved by talking. Even so, a part of him desperately wanted to vent his thoughts.

Kaname trusted me. It’s me she relies on, not some intelligence agent. Yet one word from the higher-ups, and I completely betray her trust, he thought. *I know that the Arbalest is a vital machine. The colonel is right when she says that it’s the only thing that can stand against a Venom or a Behemoth. And Kaname will probably be safe in the care of an intelligence division specialist... but still. But*

still, I can't accept it.

Logic isn't enough. Neither is rationality. I know that this is the strategically correct decision; it's a simple equation that produces the same answer every time. Why, then, does it get so deeply under my skin?

"Hey, come on," Kurz told him. "If you've got stuff to get off your chest, I'll lend an ear. Hit me."

"No... it's all right," Sousuke told him, despite his heavy thoughts.

Kurz glared at him silently. "You're one awkward piece of work. But I think that's part of your—" Kurz started, then stopped himself.

"My what?"

"Nothing." He gave an offhanded chuckle, and then gulped down his scotch. "So, what did Kaname say when you left?"

Sousuke made a noncommittal grunt in response.

"You made her cry, right?" Kurz predicted. "I can't imagine it was a smiling sendoff."

"I don't... want to talk about it." The truth was, Sousuke hadn't said anything to Kaname. He hadn't given her a single goodbye. He'd gotten the order right after the haircut... How could he justify himself to her, after the conversation they'd just had? He didn't have the courage to face her again. He'd sent his notice of withdrawal to the school, and most of the things in his apartment had just ended up transferred elsewhere in the city. In his cowardice, he'd left all of that for others to deal with.

What is the right thing for me to do next? was never a question he'd had to worry about on any of his old battlefields.

"Ah, okay." Kurz backed off with surprising ease. He asked the bartender for another drink, exchanged some joking insults, and then let out a weak laugh.

It was then that a slight hush fell over the bar's raucous talk. The rough jeering, the clinking of utensils, the singing and the flirting all died off, replaced with a faint sense of wariness. It wasn't quite the silence that would fall over a bar in an Old West movie—this place wasn't exactly a den of lawlessness—it

was a more subtle change.

The source of the change became immediately obvious: An officer—an unfamiliar one—had just entered the bar. He was a black man, dressed in a combat uniform. There was a badge on his shoulder, stitched with the letters "FLT": a first lieutenant. He had broad shoulders, a V-shaped torso, and long, straight legs. He looked quite tall from a distance, seeming to have a good ten centimeters even on the 180-centimeter-tall Kurz.

"Never seen him before. Where do you think he's from?" Kurz whispered.

Sousuke felt as though he'd seen the man somewhere before. Was he the one he'd passed outside of Colonel Testarossa's office?

The man cut through the restaurant, brushing past Sousuke and Kurz to take the seat at the counter furthest back, right next to Kurz's. "Water," he said, placing a five-dollar bill in front of him.

The bartender grimaced openly. "Idiot. This is a bar. Order some alcohol, why don't you?"

"Allah forbids the consumption of alcohol," said the stranger. "Water, please."

"Then don't come to a bar, idiot." Despite his objections, the aging bartender poured some Volvic into a glass and slapped it down on the counter. The man took the glass and, without any sense of propriety, turned his eyes toward Sousuke and Kurz. He then returned his gaze forward and drank down the water, as if losing all interest in them. There was a philosophical air about the man—He had brown skin, and a glint in his eyes that spoke of both intelligence and guardedness. His lips were drawn into a thin line, and he might have had some Caucasian or Arabic blood in him.

"Ah... Excuse me, Lieutenant," Kurz said. "We don't know each other, and I don't mean to be unfriendly, but could you find another seat?"

"And why should I do that?"

"There's a kind of unspoken agreement that the three seats at the bar, here in this corner, are for SRT only," Kurz advised him. "And you're sitting in the one furthest back."

“Is that really a rule?” the man asked—of the bartender, rather than Kurz.

The bartender grimaced and shook his head. “They just made it up. Of course, folks from other departments have claimed some of the tables and the other side of the bar under the same principle. It’s just how the people who come here divide up their territory.”

“So it’s more like a custom,” the lieutenant mused.

“You could say that,” the bartender agreed. “But listen, kiddo. That seat you’re sitting in... I guess you *could* say it’s spoken for.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s where our commanding officer sat before he died,” Kurz said. “Sorry, but I don’t like seeing some stranger’s ass planted on it.”

“I see.” The man looked down and nodded. “What was the name and call sign of your late superior?”

“Uruz-1. Captain Gail McAllen.”

“I see no need to move, then. The man was a coward,” the lieutenant said, a cold smile appearing on his lips.

“What was that?” Kurz leaned forward. Sousuke watched the exchange silently from the sidelines, but he didn’t miss his partner’s hand tightening around his shotglass. “A coward? Did you just call him a coward?”

“Yes. He was a useless little man.”

“Wow. Boy... that’s harsh. Hey, you hear that, Sousuke? A useless little man. Well, I won’t say it’s not apt, but—” One minute Kurz was cracking wise; the next, he’d thrown a drink in the man’s face, and at the same time, lashed out with a right hook. It happened so fast that even Sousuke couldn’t stop him—But the fist never found the man’s cheek; he dodged the strike by a literal hair’s breadth.


MTSLLL

Silently and suddenly, then, the man was right in front of him, shoving a palm against Kurz's jaw. A shove—that was all it looked like. But it sent Kurz's body flying back several meters, almost hitting Sousuke in the process, before a table stopped his momentum. Plates and glasses crashed to the floor. The bartender scowled and shook his head, and the soldiers in the bar quickly looked in their direction.

"You possess a disgraceful lack of patience, Sergeant," the lieutenant said, wiping his face with a napkin. "They must have been joking when they said you were a sniper."

"You bastard... now you've really set me off..." Putting a hand on the overturned table, Kurz started to pick himself up. But as he was halfway to his feet, suddenly—his eyes widened in shock, and his knees gave out from under him. It was as if an invisible hand had struck him in the back of the head. Kurz fell onto his backside, then onto his back. "Shit," he muttered, and then lay still.

"Kurz!" said Sousuke, mildly alarmed.

"He'll be fine. It's just a mild concussion," the lieutenant said to Sousuke, as the latter ran to Kurz to help him. "I'm surprised he could get up at all after a hit like that... but it's the best medicine for a drunk who takes swings at a superior. It's clear now that your entire SRT, from that sergeant to your dead captain, are all fools. I'm disappointed."

Sousuke shot daggers at the openly hostile man.

"What are you looking at me that way for?" the lieutenant asked.

"I don't know who you are, and I apologize for my comrade's rudeness, but I must request that you take back your comments about Captain McAllen." Sousuke was usually unfazed by such criticism, but this was one thing he couldn't ignore.

"That's funny, Sergeant. Are you giving me an order?"

Sousuke said nothing.

"And what if I refuse? Will you strike your superior? Are you capable of it? You seem the prim-and-proper type... Or maybe you're just a coward."

Sousuke, feeling like the man had seen right through him, clicked his tongue. If he hit this man, he'd be sent to detention—but that, in itself, didn't matter much. Kurz had probably felt the same, when he'd reacted.

Even after everything he's done, Sousuke wondered, *why can't I act?* Sousuke's hesitance didn't come from a fear of being disciplined. It was a more fundamental resistance towards the concept of "breaking the rules." Punching a superior, refusing an order... any time he did something like that, he felt the structure of the world he lived in break down a little bit more. That threat would throw cold water on his feelings, every time.

The lieutenant interrupted his self-interrogation. "I see you really can't do anything if there's not an order behind it. Well then, Sergeant. Why don't you join me for a little game?"

"A game?" Sousuke questioned.

"You want to defend the honor of this 'Captain McAllen'? It so happens I have some time to kill. Follow me." He lay a hundred-dollar bill on the counter, then started walking.

"Where are we—"

"The AS hangar. You're a pilot, aren't you?"

I completely took the bait, Sousuke thought. He was now in the cockpit of the ARX-7 Arbalest, standing in a large steel cage with no notable features except for patches of rust. It was an elevator, and he was taking it to the surface of Merida Island.

Most of the base's facilities were underground, after all: the residences; the communications facilities; the munitions storehouses; the Tuatha de Danaan's maintenance dock... almost all of it, in fact. The surface, by contrast, was almost entirely pristine jungle, which provided an ingenious layer of camouflage for everything else, from their runways to their communications antennae. The island had a perimeter about equal to that of the Yamanote Line in Tokyo, and the ground forces made good use of the space in their daily training.

The Arbalest had returned to its pristine white exterior after the submarine

incident in August. Its dark-gray paint job had completely peeled off during the fight in the hangar; the supervising engineer said it “proved that the lambda driver had activated.” Something about those bizarre forcefields made it impossible for the Arbalest to hold a normal paint job for long.

Sousuke ran the machine through its checks. The procedure was almost exactly the same as in the standard M9: generator, functioning; control systems, functioning; vetronics, functioning. Sensors, drive systems, shock absorbers, cooling devices, FCS, alarm systems—all functioning. The only thing in its arsenal was the training knife, stored in its left underarm weapons rack.

The elevator arrived on the surface. Sousuke walked his machine out of a 12-meter cage covered in vines and leaves from the local trees, and on to the damp ground outside. Each squishy stomp sent a spray of mud flying. The sky was crimson—it was twilight in the tropics. A flock of wild birds nearby, startled by the appearance of the 8-meter giant, burst into flight.

Pressing the voice command switch on his control stick, Sousuke said, “Al.”

《Yes, Sergeant?》 the machine’s AI, Al, responded immediately.

“Give me the local air temperature and humidity.”

《Temperature, 26 degrees. Humidity, 83%.》

“What’s the average EOF of the muscle packages?”

《Checking... 99%. Maximum level.》

The order response system’s voice was deep, unemotional, and male. It would be easy enough to change it, but Sousuke had decided to stick with the default. He was reminded that Kurz had sampled the voice of a Japanese idol singer for his own AI.

Kurz... he thought. He’d left him behind for the bartender to look after, but was he going to be all right? The way that lieutenant had hit him with the heel of his palm... It would take a lot more than a light shove to knock out a guy like Kurz, so there was probably some kind of Eastern martial art principle behind the strike.

The elevator descended, then began to rise again, probably bringing the lieutenant’s M9 from a different hangar. It had turned out the lieutenant was an AS operator, as well... and he’d challenged Sousuke to a fight. He’d said that Sousuke would have to beat him if he wanted him to take back what he’d said at the bar. *If you’re afraid of being charged with unauthorized use of an AS, I can order you, if you want,* he’d said. That comment had stripped away the last of Sousuke’s reserve.

All right. I don’t know who you are or what you want, but I’ll show you—I’m more than some wet-behind-the-ears rookie, Sousuke thought. *I’ve been piloting ASes since I was ten years old. During my Afghani guerrilla days, we*

stole a Soviet Rk-89, and Hamdullah and I modified it to work for a child's limbs. Despite my handicap, I took out ten Rk-92s—they were cutting edge at the time, you know? And it's been seven years since then. I've been through countless battles; I've operated every machine in creation. This weapon, this AS, is like an extension of myself... "I'm going to make you regret this," Sousuke whispered to himself. After everything he'd been through, he needed something to vent his frustrations on.

He waited, and eventually, the elevator completed its ascent. "Sorry for the wait," the lieutenant's voice came over on the external speakers.

When Sousuke saw the AS that stepped out of the cage into the evening light, his eyes went wide. It was a jet-black M9, with heavily armored thighs and biceps. Two sensors glinted on its head, like eyes. If not for the lack of the "scroll in the mouth" design feature, it would look just like the Arbalest. A black M9—This had to be it: the machine they'd seen in Sicily, during their last operation.

"I should probably introduce myself," said the other pilot. "I'm First Lieutenant Belfangan Clouseau, out of the Mediterranean battle group, the Partholón. I'm joining the Tuatha de Danaan's SRT as of today. Incidentally, my call sign is Uruz-1."

Uruz-1... Sousuke realized. He was taking over Captain McAllen's position, which had been vacant since the man's passing.

"Sergeant Sagara Sousuke," Lieutenant Clouseau was saying. "Major Kalinin tells me that you're an unparalleled AS grappler—Would you care to give me a demonstration?" The black M9 opened the arms rack in its left side and drew its training knife.

20 October, 1843 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Sengawa Shopping District, Chofu, Tokyo

Sousuke didn't come to school at all, that day. Things were certainly a lot quieter with him gone, just as they'd been during exams. That wasn't to say he

would be running around with a gun in hand all day long otherwise... His lack of common sense usually only caused a commotion—for reasons no one could anticipate—maybe once every day or two. Yet even so, the school seemed quieter without him around.

At least, that was how Kaname felt. Even when she was chatting, having fun, and laughing with her other schoolmates, she felt like something was off, something was lacking. “Maybe I’ve caught whatever he has...” Kaname whispered, as they walked home from school, after the sun had gone down.

Kyoko cackled in response.

“What?”

“It’s just... it must be a pretty weird disease, when you put it like that.”

“Huh?” Kaname was struck dumb, failing to grasp her meaning.

“Well, it’s fine if you don’t get me,” Kyoko sighed, “I just can’t put my finger on the kind of person you are sometimes, Kana-chan.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. It’s like... you seem so mature, but you’re also so childish. You look like you could be in college, but you act like you belong in elementary school.”

“Hmm...” Her friend’s words had sent Kaname deep into thought. She was inclined to think Kyoko was strange in the opposite way—She had a childish outer appearance, yet she sometimes spoke with a college student’s grasp of the world. Then again, maybe that was the reason they got along so well.

Tokiwa Kyoko—She was much shorter than Kaname. They didn’t have much in common, hobbies-wise, and while Kaname was as bold as they came, Kyoko was shy and retiring. Kaname was a skilled athlete in a way that Kyoko wasn’t; just from seeing the two walk side by side, the contrasts were obvious.

But sometimes, when Kaname looked at Kyoko, she found herself thinking, “That girl is on another level.” Their college talk yesterday was just one example. She sometimes caught herself wondering, “Why does Kyoko even hang around with an idiot like me?” Ever since Tessa’s mention that she had an ‘intelligence division bodyguard’ watching her in addition to Sousuke, she’d

wondered, from time to time, if that person could be Kyoko. That didn't really seem possible, though—she'd been by her house to hang out a million times, and she'd met her mother and her siblings.

"Kana-chan?" asked Kyoko.

"Hmm?"

"Ah... Are you thinking about Sagara-kun?"

"Yeah, right," Kaname scoffed, a bit too late to be convincing. "Give me a break already!" Kaname was just about to let out a laugh, when just then, she saw a flash in the corner of her vision. She looked towards it, questioningly.

They'd been walking down a shopping street near Sengawa Station, the kind of road that was so narrow and packed with foot traffic that a car might just barely make it through. From nearby, she could hear the calls of a greengrocer echo loudly through the crowds. The flash had caught her eye from the roof of a stationery store further down the street. Was that... a lens catching the light?

The roof was obscured by darkness due to the late hour, and it was pretty far away. But Kaname was sure she'd seen it—the movement of a black form, there, in the dim place where the roof blended into the shadows. It had to be a person; Kaname had caught a glimpse of his face. She even thought their eyes might have met, for a second.

It was a lean man with short hair, and thin slivers for eyes. He had the expression of a machine; there was the same air about him as the knife-wielding man who'd attacked her on the submarine that summer.

Kaname got the sense that he was smiling—and then, he vanished from sight. Kaname stopped and stared hard at the spot, but there was no further sign of movement.

"What's wrong, Kana-chan?" Kyoko asked.

"Hmm? Oh... nothing..." Kaname answered, eyes still focused on the building's roof. "Nothing at all. Let's go."

Kyoko looked at her in puzzlement as Kaname started walking again.

What could it be? Kaname wondered. Her stomach was churning. She didn't

know how to explain it, but... something was wrong. There was no sense of tangible danger nearby, but that one fleeting moment had filled her with a sense of wrongness.

That's right, something felt wrong. She was seized by a sense that something she'd quietly feared for six months was finally coming to pass. It was a feeling that was hard to describe—like the footsteps of Death itself approaching, long-delayed, yet unavoidable.

That one flash of light on the building's roof took Kaname back to Akami Pier at the end of June, to the submarine at the end of August. The same smell that had hung over her then, now resurfaced in the back of her mind. *Something's wrong. Something bad... Something very bad is about to happen...* she thought. *No, I don't know that. I'm just afraid...*

"Kana-chan?"

Ignoring Kyoko's call, Kaname pulled her PHS out of her bag, and sent a call to a familiar number. "Sagara Sousuke," read the name on the phone's LCD screen. *It's okay,* she told herself, waiting for the call to connect. *I got through the last time... Even Kyoko's phone got through. He'll pick up. He'll answer right away, and then come to me. And he'll... he'll... he'll say, 'not an issue.'*

"Sousuke..." *I think I'm going crazy. Why am I so freaked out about this? Why am I so upset that my phone hasn't rung all day?*

"Sousuke?!" She heard the sound of a phone being picked up. "Hello? Sou—"

"The number you have dialed is not in service. Please check the number and try again. The number you have dialed is not in service. Please check the number and try again. The number you have—"

She'd never heard a voice so cold and uncaring in her life.

Continued in Part 2

Afterword (Midword?)

Sorry about the wait. We've had to divide this volume into two parts, so this is Part 1 of *Ending Day by Day*. I'm aware that splitting volumes is a bad deal for you students on a budget. I'm afraid there were circumstances beyond my control, reasons it had to be done this way... so, I beg your forgiveness. Very sorry.

A lot of "interval"-type episodes are packed into this volume. Clean-up for the events of *ITB*, explanations of the internal structure of Mithril, portrayals of the dramas of school life, and other things that I usually can't put center-stage. Even though "Ending" is in the title, we're not actually anywhere close to the end of the series. Unlike in the short stories, in the novels, Sousuke and the others experience growth in various ways. But the real serious changes are still to come.

When I read back on this part of the story, though... I'm not sure why, but everyone seems kind of on-edge. Every character who appears is in a bad mood, lashing out and getting annoyed. Of course, this is no reflection on my own personal mood.

By the way, Admiral Jerome Borda, who appears in this volume, is based on a real military man (who died a few years ago in a 'mysterious circumstances' suicide), but if you happen to recognize him, please imagine him as someone else. I only used him as a basis, just as an idle daydream of "what if that man had survived in the *FMP!* world?" The way he talks and acts is just how I imagine him from what people who knew him say, anyway.

I want to bring you Part 2 ASAP, but the earliest will probably be right after the new year. Is that late? I'm really sorry. Please be patient as you join us on their journey.

And since the story isn't over yet, I'll leave it at this for now: Sousuke can't find his power. The real villain approaches Kaname. Powerful enemies appear and take center stage. Will our two heroes find each other again?

Now, if you're about to say, "But in the *Lethal Weapon* short story..." I'm going to ignore you and move on. Just forget that for now, okay? I'll offer my apologies in Part 2.

See you next time for another round of Sousuke in hell.



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Full Metal Panic! Volume 4

by Shouji Gatou

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