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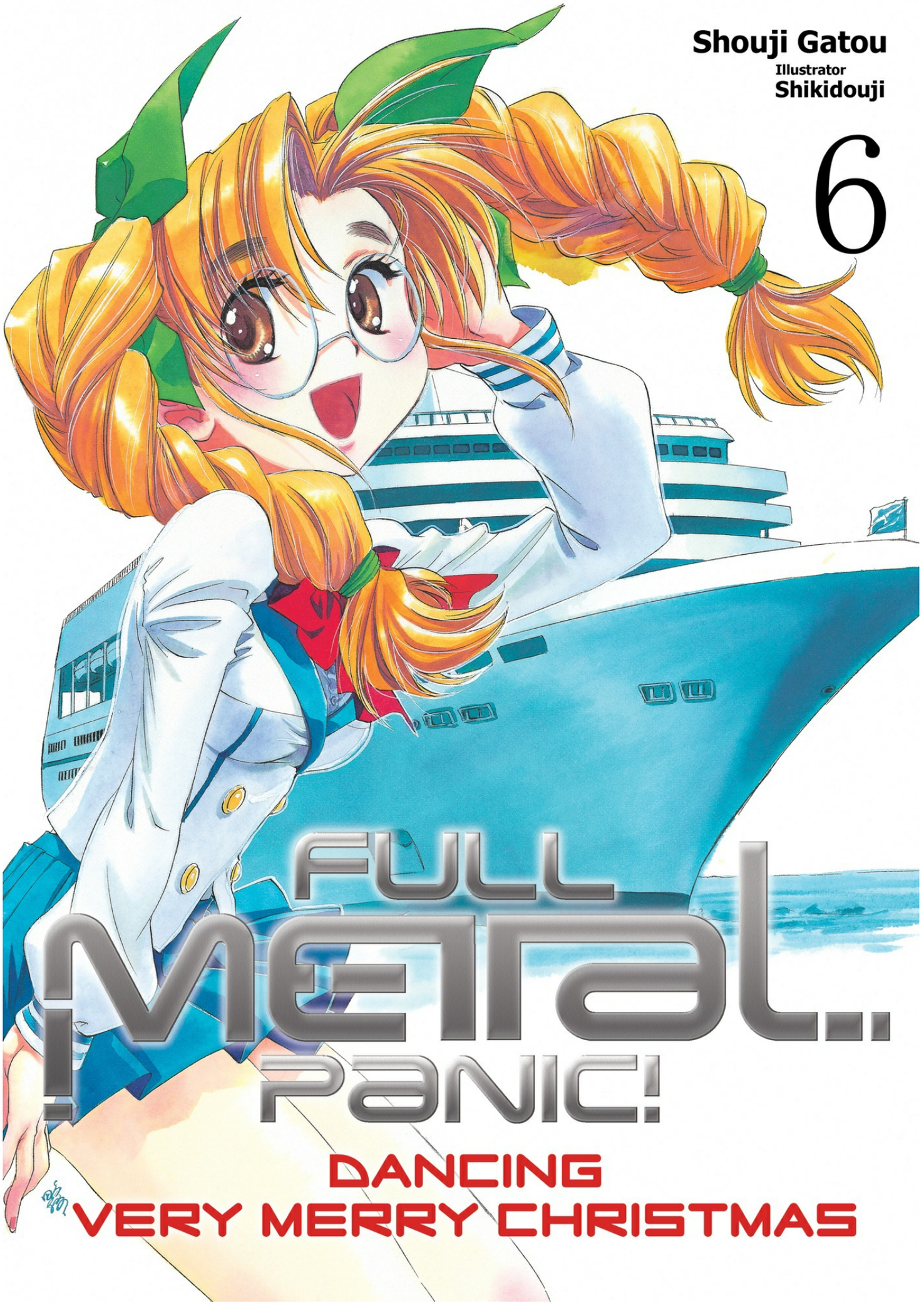


FULL METAL PANIC!

DANCING VERY MERRY CHRISTMAS

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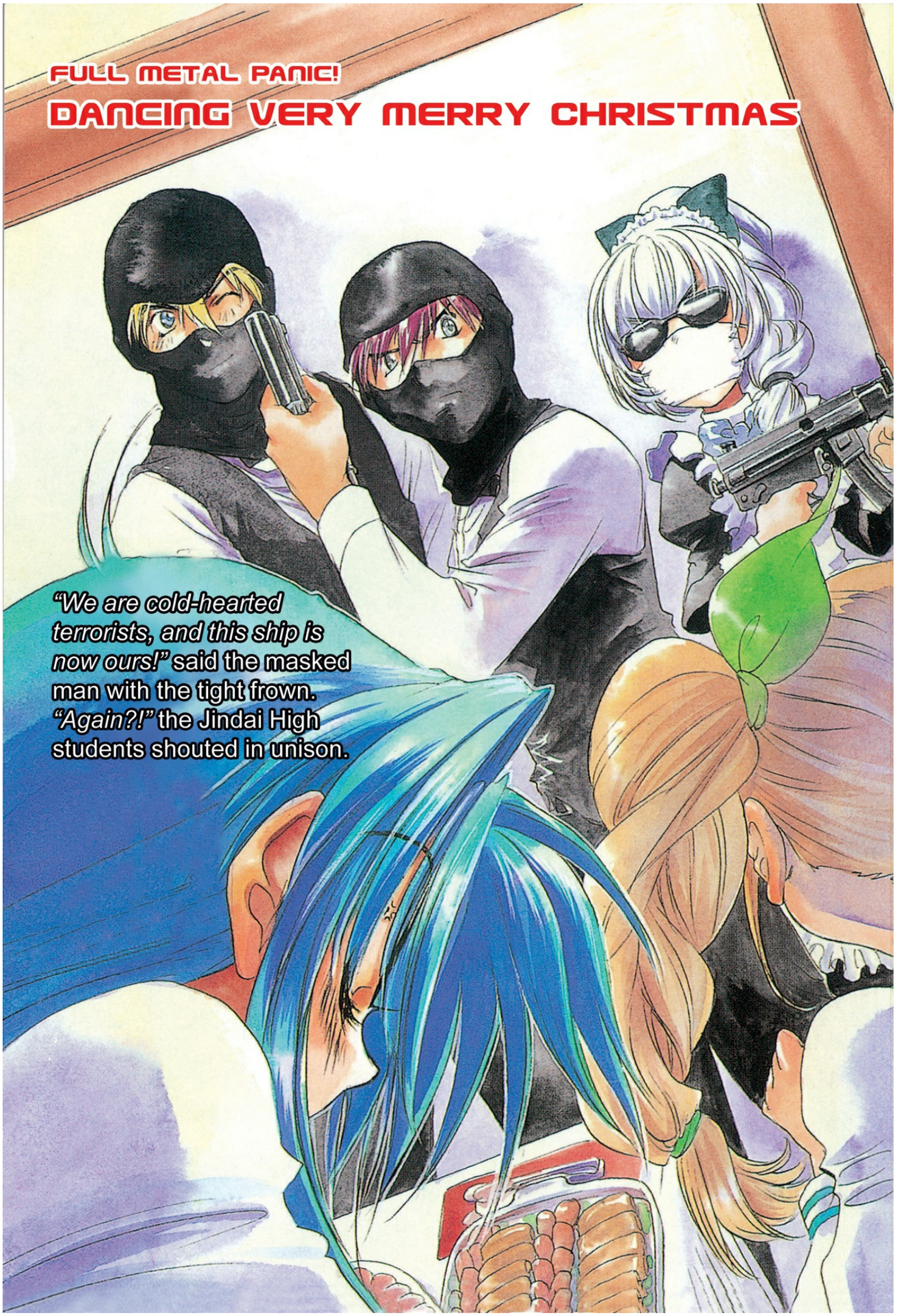


FULL METAL PANIC!

DANCING VERY MERRY CHRISTMAS

FULL METAL PANIC!

DANCING VERY MERRY CHRISTMAS




What a Christmas! *"You've ruined my youth, and my 17-year-old Christmas Eve!"*

A midair rendezvous... As he and Tessa fell, his lips gently brushed against her ear...

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Prologue

“We can’t turn down such a fine invitation, Ms. Tsuboi,” the representative from the Board of Education, accompanied by some PTA officers, insisted to Principal Tsuboi Takako. “I know this is all very sudden. But your second-years will be diving into test preparation when they return from their holiday, which means it’s now or never. And losing their big field trip must have been an awful blow to their spirits...”

“Of course...” Principal Tsuboi responded without enthusiasm. She was a middle-aged woman dressed in a no-nonsense suit, and though she was just over fifty, the waves of trouble that had rocked her school ceaselessly since the year began seemed to have aged her considerably.

“The field trip is an important memory for young people to have,” the BOE representative insisted. “To lose out on that... to a *hijacking*, of all things. The emotional scarring must be incalculable. Please, allow me to offer my deepest sympathies.”

“Very much appreciated...” Principal Tsuboi wheezed again. It was the polite response, but as far as she knew, none of her students had had the decency to feel particularly traumatized by the incident. None of them seemed bothered in the slightest; in fact, they practically bragged about it to the upperclassmen and students from other schools. It was as if their scheduled tour of battle sites in Okinawa had been replaced by nothing more than a visit to some strange theme park.

Deep down, Principal Tsuboi felt that *she* was the one who really deserved sympathy, being tasked with the education of students like that.

The BOE representative continued. “Anyway, Mr. Kaneyama of the Mishima Memorial Educational Foundation—who was heartbroken when he heard the story, by the way—has prepared a little something special. He wants to gift a trip to the students of Jindai High, so that they can make a new memory.”

He passed her a pamphlet across the conference table. It featured a picture of

a huge, beautiful passenger liner, cutting through an emerald sea beneath a clear blue sky. The ship was dotted with windows and stacked high with an intricate arrangement of decks. Waves crested before its curved prow. “The Pacific Chrysalis. It travels all around the world, and it’s scheduled for a one-night cruise out of the Port of Yokohama on the 24th.”

“And he wants to host my students on this... luxury liner?” the principal asked skeptically.

“Yes, he says they’re all invited. Of course, I wouldn’t go so far as to call it a luxury liner; cruise ships are growing more accessible all over the world. They won’t even have to dress up. Honestly, it’s more like a floating theme park... Even as far as pocket money goes, I’m told they won’t even need more than they would for a domestic trip.”

“Right...”

“Think of it more like a visit to Tokyo Disneyland,” the BOE representative said placatingly. “Best of all, the point of departure is Yokohama, just a short train ride away. They won’t even have to board a plane. What do you think, Principal Tsuboi? This is a very generous offer that the Mishima Foundation is making. We hope you’ll consider it swiftly and earnestly.”

Principal Tsuboi fell into silent thought. It really *wasn’t* a bad offer at all; she had heard of the Mishima Memorial Foundation before, and everything she’d heard was positive. They were a philanthropic organization with a focus on fostering international goodwill. They were known for providing medical support and cultural exchanges with impoverished countries—including North Korea. Given the role that that country had played in the hijacking, then, it didn’t seem odd for them to extend an offer like this one.

The BOE representative had also said that there might be a small article about the trip in the newspaper’s local section. She wouldn’t accept her school being used for large-scale advertisement, but a single, minor article was probably tolerable. And there *had* been some grumbling among the student body over the fact that the field trip had been called off, with nothing planned to replace it... “Well, then,” she said at last, “I will give the offer serious consideration.”

“Excellent! I knew you’d say that.”

“But the decision is not mine alone to make,” Principal Tsuboi insisted firmly. “I need to discuss it with my teachers. It could affect our event schedule, after all.”

“Of course. Discuss it all you wish,” the BOE representative told her. “We just wanted you to know that the Board of Education is fully on board. The rest is up to Jindai High.”

The PTA officials, who’d spent the entire meeting silently flanking him, now voiced their agreement.

“We feel the same way, Ms. Tsuboi,” one of them put in.

“We hope you’ll go and enjoy the trip,” said another.

There wasn’t much Tsuboi could do to oppose such a hard sell from both the BOE and the PTA. A few days later, at a teachers’ conference, it was decided that they would take any interested students on the proposed trip.

One week later, class 2-4 took a break from finals preparation to hear the announcement.

“Okay! Everyone listening? Have a good look through this!” said their homeroom teacher, Kagurazaka Eri, as she passed a paper around to the students. “This is a little last-minute, but we’ve decided to hold a special event, to make up for how your class trip turned out. It’ll be just the night of the 24th, coinciding with the end-of-term ceremony.

“A charitable foundation and a travel company are collaborating to take our second-year students on a Christmas cruise,” she went on excitedly. “Isn’t that incredible? Look at this big, beautiful luxury liner! All-you-can-eat high-class cuisine, and all kinds of things to do: pools, athletic facilities, shopping centers, arcades... plus exclusive events like concerts and musicals, movies, a gift giveaway, and more! Of course, attendance is totally free!”

“Wow!” the students breathed in amazed chorus.

“Participation is voluntary, so you’ll need to fill in the forms I just handed out, then have a guardian sign them. Now, what I’m about to say is very important...” Eri launched into an explanation of the details: *By next week,*

provide a copy of your insurance card, a letter of consent from your guardian, and a photo for the ID card you'll be using on board; only students in proper uniforms will be allowed on-ship; those with chronic conditions and allergies, be sure to speak with the ship's doctor beforehand—things like that.

Chidori Kaname barely listened to the explanation as she gazed at her form blankly, and Tokiwa Kyoko, from the seat next to hers, spoke up in a whisper. "Hey, Kana-chan. Are you going?"

"Hmm? Ah... I'm not sure. I mean, it's free, so I guess so?" Still, her eyes were fixed on the date of the trip. December 24th—that would be Kaname's 17th birthday.

Some might find the idea of being born on Christmas Eve romantic, but Kaname had always found it to be more of a problem than anything. While her little sister, born in May, would get discrete Christmas and birthday presents, Kaname's were always conflated. It had been a real source of friction between them when they were younger.

Of course, any arguments about this always ended the same way, with Kaname being told, "You're the big sister; endure it."

Apparently, said sister was planning to spend this Christmas with their father in New York, where he worked. Kaname's relationship with her father wasn't the best, so she couldn't pretend it wasn't easier not to see him, but...

While Kaname was thinking, Eri was wrapping things up. "That should just about cover it. Any questions?"

"I have one." Immediately, a male student sitting in a seat by the window, Sagara Sousuke, raised his hand. He was wearing his usual sullen expression, with his mouth set in its usual tight frown—and amid a student body uniformly excited about the unexpected event, he was the only one sporting a wrinkled brow and troubled eyes.

"Sagara-kun," Eri acknowledged him. "What is it?"

"This consent form is insufficient," Sousuke said, waving around the paper she'd passed him. "It talks about precautions in case of accidents occurring during the trip, but it says nothing about what the school has done to prepare

for a terrorist attack.”

“What in the world are you talking about?” Eri asked him incredulously.

“I thought we had learned our lesson back in April,” Sousuke shot back.

“Don’t even suggest something so awful. It’s not as if the exact same thing could happen twice! If we had to prepare for every minuscule possibility, no school would ever be able to go on a trip!”

“It’s dangerous to make light of it,” Sousuke said gravely. “We got off easy the last time, but we might not be so lucky again. Think of the 1985 seajacking of the Italian cruise ship, the Achille Lauro.”

“I... I don’t even know what that is...” Eri was forced to admit.

“The passengers were mostly defenseless old men in wheelchairs,” Sousuke explained. “Yet one hostage was shot in the chest and the face and thrown into the sea.”

Eri just stood there, stunned.

“In addition,” he went on, “the terrorists made three hostages hold grenades with the pins removed, with the rest of the hostages gathered around them. Their fear must have transcended language—one careless moment could lead to the deaths of everyone around them. These deaths would be painful, too: brains and organs scattered everywhere. Fear and chaos are a terrorist’s MO; it’s important to remember that.”

A leaden air hung over the room. The class, which had been humming with excitement over the opulent proposal, was now dead silent.

“But don’t worry. This time, as aide to the student council in charge of safety and security, I intend to protect you all,” Sousuke promised. “I therefore request permission to bring a submachine gun, C4 explosives, and directional mines on board. With proper armaments and planning, I will dispose of the seajackers one by one, drown them in their own blood, and—”

Smash!! Kaname was there in a flash, and sent Sousuke flying with a kick. He crashed through multiple desks before landing in a heap on the floor.

“What are you doing, Chidori?” he groaned.

“Shut up!” she told him angrily. “You saw how excited everyone was! *Maybe* you could try not to ruin that?!”

“But the alarm bells of tragedy—”

“No one wants to hear about alarm bells of tragedy!!”

“But the Achille Larou—” he began, trying to defend himself.

“Shut up! You stupid... little...!”

“That hurts, Chidori. It’s painful.”

“Being around *you* is painful!” Kaname kept kicking Sousuke until her classmates, unable to watch any longer, finally pulled her off of him.

1: Unfixed Schedule

21 December, 0135 Hours (Local Time)

Spratly Islands

It's an awfully extensive facility for such a remote island... Sagara Sousuke allowed himself to be impressed, momentarily forgetting the similar nature of his own force's base.

His machine's night-vision sensors made the sea around him look green. The island in question towered over it, a mere two kilometers across at its widest. The main mass was a rocky mountain dozens of meters high, which grew thick with grass and a small handful of trees. It was a common sort of topography, here at the edge of the Spratly island chain.

But that wasn't all that he saw.

A variety of radar antennas topped the mountain's highest points. Foot soldiers patrolled, equipped with night vision goggles. Electromagnetic-sensitive mines floated on the water, effectively preventing the approach of mini-submarines. It was impressive security for a pirate stronghold; most squads wouldn't even be able to get close.

Most squads, that is.

The arm slave Sousuke was operating, the ARX-7 Arbalest, had just arrived on the north shore of this "pirate island." According to the pre-mission briefing, the south shore was home to a small harbor and dock. The dock was apparently where the pirates moored the high-speed craft they'd been using to raid passing commercial ships for the past few months. It also hosted the warehouses in which they stored their supplies, ammunition, and plundered goods.

The north shore, meanwhile, was a treacherous cliff constantly pounded by

waves. Sousuke was supposed to climb the rock face here, to ambush the base on the south side from behind. Any flesh-and-blood soldier who tried to scale the cliff would surely end up dead, dashed by the waves against the jagged rocks. Only the humanoid weapons known as ASes could handle a secret landing in terrain like this.

It was night, and the only light available came from the moon glowing faintly through the clouds. The Arbalest, painted a dark gray to blend in with the darkness, released the faintest of whines from its electromagnetic muscles as it scaled the rocky cliff.

Once he had gotten beyond the reach of the sea spray, Sousuke activated his machine's ECS-enabled invisibility mode. The armor opened in places, revealing lens-shaped devices. These projected a hologram screen that enveloped the machine, and caused it to disappear into thin air.

Just then, he received a transmission from an allied machine. "Uruz-6 to 7. What's the holdup? We've been waiting forever," Sergeant Kurz Weber complained. He was in a sniping position on the south side of the island, where the waves were much calmer.

"Uruz-7 here," Sousuke replied briefly. "I'm not there yet. Remain on standby."

"So what's the holdup? You've got a wire gun, right? Get up the damned cliff already."

"If I knock any rocks down, the enemy foot soldiers will hear my approach."

"Then shut 'em up with your taser. Just—"

"Transmission over," Sousuke said, cutting him off, and then grumbled to himself. He'd worked hard to get this far unnoticed. A more mediocre operator would already be out of the fight after having triggered a mine, or he'd have ruined the whole mission after being discovered by a foot soldier.

《Alert message. You are fifteen minutes behind the expected attack time. Move to waypoint Foxtrot swiftly.》 It wasn't just Kurz; the Arbalest's AI was also hurrying him on.

"Shut up," he snarled back.

《Roger. But first, a word of caution: statistics suggest that a sense of impatience doubles one's potential for error. Singing is recommended to calm your mental state. I have prepared fifty of the latest hit songs. If you have any requests—》

It would have been one thing if he'd said it in a joking fashion, but Al's voice remained matter-of-fact, and it just made Sousuke more annoyed. "I didn't order you to prepare songs. Don't waste your storage space without permission."

《It is no issue. It's a mere 1.2 gigabytes.》

"Delete it all, or I'll destroy it myself, for the good of the mission."

《I interpret this message to be a joke. Joking is also an effective countermeasure. I have prepared fifty jokes designed to make humans laugh. If you have any requests—》

"It's not a joke, it's a warning."

《Excuse me.》 Al said nothing more.

In the cockpit, Sousuke shook his head irritably, and the Arbalest mimicked his motion. Who ever heard of such a pointlessly "helpful" AI, anyway? Imagine a machine's control support system telling him to "sing," of all things...

In the two months since Hong Kong, his AI's behavior had gotten stranger and stranger by the day. It was making small talk regularly now, and lack of any obvious signs of malfunction made it all the more annoying. According to the maintenance crew, they'd hooked "him" up with FM radio and BS TV input on Al's request, and he seemed to be receiving shows—now, Sousuke wondered if he should have stopped them.

The Arbalest used its manipulators and foot spikes to carefully scale the cliff. The machine's ECS was working smoothly. He had to make countless stops to let foot soldiers on the cliff above pass by, and had a few close calls where he almost went plunging... but at last, five minutes later, Sousuke reached his designated location, and informed the team leader: "Uruz-7 to Uruz-2. I've arrived at waypoint Golf."

A reply came after a pause. "Uruz-2, roger that. Let's get the party started.

Ready? Set your ADM to presets. All units run final checks, then give verbal confirmation.” It was their strike team leader, Second Lieutenant Melissa Mao, who showed no inclination to scold him for the delay.

“Uruz-6, no problems here.”

“Uruz-7, ready.”

“Gebo-3, ready.”

“Gebo-4, ready.”

After Kurz and Sousuke, the two “Gebo” responses were from transport helicopters, which were hovering on standby about a klick from the base. Thanks to their newly-integrated sound reduction systems, the Arbalest’s audio sensors could only barely make out the sound of their rotors and engines. The helicopters carried twenty infantry apiece, who would storm the island and lock it down after the ASes had finished their initial assault.

“Okay. Ahem.” Once everyone had reported in, Mao cleared her throat and shouted, “Then, attack commence! Go, go, go!”

“Al,” Sousuke ordered. “Drop ECS and switch to military power and combat mode.”

《Roger. ECS: Off. GPL: Military. Master Mode: 2.》

The ECS shut down, allowing all power to be diverted to combat functions. Blue sparks popped and hissed against the purple-black sky, and the white machine appeared, standing at the top of the rocky mountain.

A pirate dozing in a nearby watchtower stared in disbelief as he witnessed the phenomenon for the first time. He hesitated over whether to reach for the machine gun switch, the alarm, or both, but ended up collapsing with a howl before he could reach either of them. An electric pulse from the taser in the Arbalest’s hand had knocked him out cold.

“Starting up,” Sousuke said, without sparing the fallen man so much as a glance.

《Roger.》

Sousuke’s arm in the cockpit moved, and the Arbalest’s arm moved to match

it. It pointed its Boxer shotcannon, made by the Italian OTO Melara corporation, directly at the pirate base right below. There were all kinds of targets to choose from: the control room, ammunition depot, old-fashioned ASes, SPAAGs...

He set his sights first on the roof of the depot and pulled the trigger. It hit hard. The 00 HEAT fired by the Boxer blew off the roof and set the ammunition ablaze. An explosion boomed out, and a pillar of flame raked the sky, acting like a starting gun for full hostilities.

《E3 destroyed. *Great Balls of Fire*!》

"Stop talking now," Sousuke ordered, thinking that Al was sounding almost as flip as Kurz. Sousuke clicked his tongue and took aim at his next target.

The first few minutes of combat would all but decide the outcome.

Their surprise attack had taken out the pirates' control room, ammunition, and moored high-speed craft, which threw them into pandemonium. And as for the old-style Soviet ASes set up in the back of the base, the Rk-89 Shamrocks—Sousuke had no idea what they were doing on an island like this—they were instantly dispatched by shots from Mao's machine, before their operators could even reach them.

Mao's AS, the M9 Gernsback, was still in the ocean, making its way slowly toward the pirates' dock while waist-deep in seawater. Mao was getting sniper support from Kurz, in position behind her, and from Sousuke on the mountain above.

"Whew. Just like a shooting gallery!" Kurz laughed over the radio.

"Uruz-6, keep your guard up. We haven't taken out all the foot soldiers. And you know it's when we get cocky that we—" There was a roar. Before Mao could finish, a pillar of water burst up, just to her right. Something must have exploded nearby. "What was that?!" she shouted, panicked. "It didn't come from their base!" Sprays of salt water dashed against her M9 as she whipped it around, using its head-mounted radar to scan the area.

"Uruz-2! Three o'clock, distance four! Eight enemy HSC!" Sousuke had a better vantage point than Mao from on top of the mountain, so he gave her the

verbal warning, while Al wordlessly used the machine's high-speed advanced data modem to distribute their sensor information to all allied machines.

Eight high-speed craft were approaching, coming around from the island's west side. It was a blind spot from Sousuke's point of view, which was why he'd been slow to spot it. They were probably returning from a raid—the worst timing possible.

Their speed was forty knots—about 74 kilometers per hour—and despite their small size, each was equipped with 20mm machine cannons and infantry rockets. The eight boats kicked up a sheet of water as they unleashed their weapons on Mao, who cursed at this new wave of concentrated fire. "Yeek! I mean... dammit! What the hell?! Intelligence said they only had what was in the dock! Where'd the reinforcements come from?"

"It's the usual: bad intelligence. I wish they'd give us a break, for once..." Kurz muttered.

"Stop bitching and do something!" Mao screamed at him.

"I am! ...That's two down!" Kurz's 76mm shots had hit their targets, taking out two pirate boats in a fiery explosion.

"Only two?!"

"Hold your horses! They're far, and they're pretty damned fast. Wish I'd brought a Hellfire or a Versile..." Kurz said, sounding a little panicked. The Hellfire and the Versile were kinds of guided missiles used by ASes. The position assigned to Kurz for back-up sniping was the perfect distance for safely taking aim at stationary targets, but it was less useful against targets moving at 40 knots. It was a testament to his skills that he'd been able to take out two already.

Six boats remained. They raced through the water around Mao's M9, peppering it mercilessly with shells and rockets. Her head-mounted machine guns blazed and filled another boat with holes, but that still left five remaining.

"Ugh, so annoying!" she wailed. "Guh... this is really bad!"

The M9 sloshed awkwardly through the heavy water, taking evasive maneuvers. Even with the M9's armor and maneuverability, it couldn't endure

such a fierce assault for long.

《Sergeant. Uruz-2 is in danger. We must open fire at the enemy HSCs,》 Al told Sousuke, who was simply watching from the mountaintop without firing any support shots.

“Inefficient at this distance,” Sousuke said dismissively. “We don’t have many shots left.”

《Shoot the high-speed craft. There is no other choice.》

“No choice, eh? I disagree.” Sousuke promptly took the Arbalest a few steps down the mountain, judged his timing, and launched into a starting run.

《Sergeant. This angle is—》

“Shut up and help me!” Immediately, he dove off the edge of the rocky mountain, and leaped the Arbalest over the ocean. Wreathed by the silver moon, the slender silhouette hung in the air. Just as it reached the apex of its arc and began to descend, Sousuke fired off his arm’s wire gun. When the anchor pierced one of the high-speed craft racing around down below, he immediately retracted the wire, closing the gap between the two in a flash.

The Arbalest landed on top of the boat with a scream of metal and a spray of seawater. The deck buckled beneath its feet, and it sank so far it nearly capsized. In human-size terms, the effect was like falling several stories to land on a pedal boat.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Kurz shouted in surprise.

The men aboard the unfortunate HSC had fallen on their backsides in shock. As they gazed up at the Arbalest, it plunged its monomolecular cutter into the deck to regain its balance, then let loose with its head-mounted 12.7mm machine guns. The shots shredded the boat’s armaments and engine, effectively taking it out of the fight.

“Get the gist?” he asked Al. “Let’s jump to the next one.”

Kicking its way off of the now-smoking boat, the Arbalest jumped. Sousuke shot off the wire gun in its left arm again, this time at a high-speed craft racing just ahead. Then the high-powered motor quickly retracted the wire, and...

Landing achieved! Sousuke sprayed machine gun fire across the violently rocking boat, taking out its engine and gun turrets.

The Arbalest's sensors quickly scanned its surroundings. The closest pirate boat had just fired a rocket in his direction; its red light was closing in. With a grunt, Sousuke jumped a third time, managing it just before impact. The rocket hit the boat he had just been standing on, and exploded. His machine twisted through the air, backed by fire.

The Arbalest roared down from the sky, aiming for the enemy boat currently bathing him in cannon fire, and successfully completed his third landing. The pirates practically climbed over each other to escape, evacuating into the dark sea around them.

《Sergeant. Such tactics were not anticipated. They are nonsense.》

"Are they?" Sousuke said, manipulating his machine. "Tell me the definition of nonsense."

《Impossible, reckless, irrational.》

"You really are just a machine," Sousuke told him, as the Arbalest shot a Boxer shell into a now-empty gun turret and the engine section.

The battle thereafter was completely one-sided. All of the high-speed craft were destroyed, and the pirates in the base were in a rout.

Mao's M9 made landfall and went around taking out their remaining defenses. With her external speakers on, she called for surrenders in Cantonese, Mandarin, and Vietnamese. Any who kept up their resistance got a zap from her taser.

Their transport helicopters landed, and their ground forces poured out. Decked out in thick body armor, carrying bulletproof plastic shields, and under the cover provided by Sousuke and the others, they swarmed into the structures that the ASes couldn't enter.

Before long, each team had announced that they had secured their designated area. Several minutes after that, the pirates that had surrendered were chained up and gathered in the dock. Their mission was effectively

complete.

“Yeesh. That was rougher than I expected...” Kurz’s machine, too, had moved from its sniping point to join them, striding through the smoke to eventually make landfall. The M9 Gernsbacks that he and Mao were operating had similar silhouettes to the Arbalest, with long limbs, slender waists, and gray armor that dripped with seawater.

“Let’s just be glad that no Venoms showed up,” Sousuke said, returning the shotcannon to the Arbalest’s waist hardpoint. It was standing next to a group of pirates, seated and stripped of their weapons, and the allied ground forces who were watching over them. The pirates were sulking as if they’d lost a game to a cheating opponent. They didn’t seem to like that their ‘impenetrable stronghold’ had fallen so easily to the weapons known as ASes.

“Uruz-9 here. All ground squads have secured their areas; just two light injuries on our side, and no compromise to mission performance. Pirates have eight dead, four badly wounded, ten lightly wounded,” reported Corporal Yang Jun-kyu, the infantry team leader, over the radio.

Apparently they’d had to kill some resisting pirates—but then, these were people who had attacked any number of shipping vessels and killed their crews, as well. They were already being generous by employing tasers and tear gas and giving them a chance to surrender; it was the pirates’ own fault if they chose to die instead.

“But did we really have to come all this way just for some crummy pirates?” Kurz muttered, surveying the hostages with his M9’s head-mounted sensors.

“These are the Spratly Islands. It’s a jumble of spheres of influence: North and South China, Vietnam, Taiwan... That by itself makes it difficult for any national military to perform large-scale exercises here. This was explained in the briefing,” Sousuke said.

Kurz’s M9 waved its left hand in annoyance. “C’mon, I know that much.”

“Besides, this mission wasn’t just about taking out pirates,” Sousuke went on. “The name of the island is important, too.”

Badamu Island—that was the name of the isolated islet that the pirates had

taken as their base. It had many names, as many as there were countries that claimed control of the Spratlys, and as many as there were languages that the Westerners who had once controlled the island spoke. This name, its Mandarin one, was similar to 'Badam,' the keyword that Gauron had passed to Sousuke in Hong Kong.

If it had just been the name alone, with nothing else distinctive about it, Mithril likely would have paid the island no mind. But the fact that it was also a stronghold for pirates causing trouble around the Spratlys made it a different story. Intense investigation and recon work suggested that there was little chance that the island was connected to Amalgam—but at the same time, they couldn't be sure that it wasn't.

"Uruz-8 to all," Corporal Speck, the one investigating the pirate base's storage block, said over the radio. "All I've got here is ammo and heroin. There are containers of vanadium, too... but they're probably plundered. From the Peruvian vessel they raided a few weeks ago, I'd wager."

"Vanadium?"

"It's a rare metal, used to make that M9 you're piloting now. It's skyrocketed in price in the last few years thanks to the Soviet Civil War and uprisings in South Africa and such. It's not as valuable as heroin, but... well, that's a pretty high bar."

"Oh? You know a lot about it," Kurz muttered softly.

"I've been playing the stocks lately. Read an economics magazine now and then—When you make fighting your whole life, you get stupid."

"Shut up, you gambling addict."

Sousuke interrupted Kurz and Speck's discussion. "Was there anything else that stood out? Any complex machinery, or AS parts?"

"Nope. It's your standard pirate base, top to bottom," Corporal Speck confirmed. "Nothing to connect it to those Amalgam guys."

"We can't be sure yet. We need to interrogate the base commander first," Mao said. Her M9 had moved to the summit of the rocky mountain, where she was keeping watch over the surroundings.

“Uruz-9 here. Ah... about that...” Corporal Yang said. “The commander doesn’t seem to be among the hostages. Though that doesn’t mean he isn’t in the base somewhere...”

“Uruz-7 here. He could be hiding among the rank-and-file. Or he could still be somewhere on the island—” Sousuke got that far, then stopped as he realized something. The Arbalest’s sensors gave him a view of the rocky slope, and he could see a person moving around on the rock face that looked out over the harbor. The smoke and the darkness made it hard to see precisely, but it looked like the man had an anti-tank missile on his shoulder. No... he definitely did. The missile was pointing down at him from above. But by the time Sousuke realized it, the man had already fired.

“Sousuke, one o’clock—”

《Warning! ATM!》

Kurz’s and Al’s warnings came at the exact same time.

It was a close-range shot, but well within the range of what the Arbalest could dodge. Still, he knew that dozens of hostages and allied infantrymen were right behind him—in other words, right in the missile’s path. If Sousuke dodged, the missile would fly smack into the middle of those unarmed men.

He made the decision in a split-second: Sousuke didn’t dodge, but faced down the charging missile. There was a flash and a roar, and the anti-tank missile struck the Arbalest’s upper half.

“Dammit!” Instantly, Kurz’s M9 let loose with its 12.7mm head-mounted machine guns on full automatic. Bullets the size of Tabasco sauce bottles rained down in an instant, shredding the man who’d fired the missile, along with the rock he’d been standing on. “Sousuke?!” Kurz whipped around.

As the smoke cleared, the Arbalest could be seen, completely intact. It hadn’t moved from its arms-crossed position, but there wasn’t a single dent in the armor. Normally, a direct hit from a missile like that would have blown it to pieces.

“Not an issue,” Sousuke said at length. An invisible wall that had formed in front of the Arbalest had blocked the missile’s explosion—and the missile itself

—dispersing the shockwave harmlessly.

“Uruz-2 here. What happened?! Status report!” Mao spoke nervously.

“Uruz-7 here,” Sousuke replied. “I was attacked by a remaining enemy soldier, but Uruz-6 took him out. No damage on our side.”

A small sigh of relief came out over the radio. “Uruz-2, roger. Be careful, okay?”

The transmission ended, and Sousuke stood his machine up. Kurz’s M9 was staring at him and the Arbalest. “Sousuke. Did you just...”

“Yeah,” he answered. “Did you register it?”

“I... I think so?” Kurz answered, flummoxed as he fiddled with the unfamiliar device.

“Al. It worked, didn’t it?”

《Affirmative. No damage to machine detected. Main capacitor voltage is stable, as well.》

“Good. Store the 120 seconds’ worth of data before and after into high-compression file Zulu-1.”

《Roger.》

Sousuke felt like he was starting to get the hang of this; together, he and the Arbalest were learning how to use the lambda driver.

“It’s a hell of a thing, though,” Kurz breathed. “Seeing it up close... You know that was a direct hit from an ATM, right? And you freaking brushed it off. That device scares the crap out of me.”

“I thought the same thing the first time I saw the ECS’s full invisibility mode,” Sousuke responded. “Don’t think too hard about it. It’ll seem completely natural, soon enough.”

“Well... maybe, I guess,” Kurz said over the radio in a thoughtful tone. “But I feel like when we brush this stuff off, we’re forgetting something important... when we start to think of the most out-there tech as being ‘completely natural,’ I mean. Even these things we’re in now... the ASes. There’s something really off

about ’em, when you think about it.”

Sousuke just looked at him, non-comprehending.

“Ah, I’m just rambling. Anyway...” Kurz began, then changed his tone. “Uruz-6 here. You said you hadn’t found the base commander, right? Round him up quick and get him questioned. I’m ready to head back and get some shuteye.”

“Uruz-9 here... Um, according to the hostages, the commander is—” Corporal Yang spoke into the radio from where he was standing in front of the hostages. A few of them had gotten his attention, and were pointing in the direction that the missile had come from minutes earlier.

“What the hell is it? Spit it out already.”

“The commander was the guy with the missile that Kurz just gunned down.”

“Huh?” There was a long pause, and then, “Ah... I see,” Kurz said awkwardly.

Mao burst in. “What did you say? Gunned him down? You killed him? Why didn’t you use your taser?!”

“Use my taser?!” Kurz protested. “I was kind of in a hurry, y’know!”

“Shut up!” she screamed back. “How could you do this? We were just talking about having to take the commander in alive! You’ve completely ruined my debut sortie as a lieutenant!”

“Sh-Shut up! He’s an asshole who’s killed countless defenseless crews! He deserved that .50-caliber justice!”

“That’s not the damned point! We can’t interrogate a corpse!”

“He fired a missile at Sousuke!”

“Oh?!” Mao cried out, with mock concern. “And how’d that go for you, Sousuke?”

“Not an issue,” Sousuke told her.

“Ah, you asshole!” Kurz put in.

“See? This is your fault!” Mao lectured at Kurz. “You’d better write up one hell of a report! God dammit, Ben is gonna give me hell for this when we get back... Why’d I bother busting my ass to become an officer if I still have to deal with

this crap?! I've made up my mind: next time we go out drinking, everything's on you! Because of your short-sighted, simple-minded—"

"Shut up! Quit yelling at me!" Kurz yelled back. "You're the one who blew away a hostage target-board with a 40mm shell last week at practice! That was—"

"Yeah, well, that was practice! This is real life!"

Sousuke interrupted the tedious exchange. "Excuse me. I would appreciate it if we could set questions of responsibility aside and begin making preparations to leave. If we head back now, I could still make it in time for my classic literature makeup exam. Mr. Fujisaki is very strict, and I'm in danger of failing—"

"Stay out of this, part-timer!" The two screamed in tandem over the radio.

Sousuke fell quiet.

《I agree, Sergeant. It would be wise to keep our silence in this case.》

"Al, I told you—"

《Forgive me. I'll stop talking.》

For just a moment, Sousuke gave serious consideration to killing the AI while he could.

21 December, 0351 Hours (Local Time)

250 Meter Depth, West Pacific Ocean

1st Briefing Room, Tuatha de Danaan

"So, well..." They were finishing up the debriefing for the pirate stronghold mission, and Melissa Mao was awkwardly explaining how the Arbalest had gotten into a game of chicken with a missile. "In that instant, something bad and something good... basically happened all at once, I guess."

"Start with the good," First Lieutenant Belfangan Clouseau, leader of the SRT ground forces, requested. Up to this point, he'd been listening silently. He was a

tall black man in his thirties, dressed in fatigues, with tense eyebrows and a masculine face.

Mao responded, “The Arbalest’s lambda driver activated, and blocked the ATM’s explosion. Gave us tons of data, too.”

“That’s excellent. Well done, Sagara, even if it wasn’t quite intentional. Just try to deal with them before they hit you next time,” Clouseau advised. “It’s an unnecessary risk.”

Sousuke, also in fatigues, sat in his chair and nodded silently.

“So?” Clouseau asked next, attempting to move things along. “What’s the something bad?”

“The pirates’ commander was the one who fired the missile, and Kurz blew him away. He unloaded his machine guns’ 12.7mm rounds... um...” Mao looked down at her clipboard. “...54 times in all, leaving no trace behind.”

“Ahh...” It sounded like he’d seen that coming, and he wasn’t exactly surprised... but Clouseau still closed his eyes, a vein in his forehead throbbing. “Wonderful. So, Weber, how do you propose we interrogate the man you just blasted into a fine red mist?”

Kurz Weber, sitting in the seat next to Sousuke, laughed hollowly. “We can’t. Well, we could ask an itako from Mt. Osore, maybe. But we’d need one that can speak Chinese.”

“I was being sarcastic, Sergeant,” Clouseau growled.

“I’m aware of that, Lieutenant.”

Clouseau and Kurz glared balefully at each other, and Mao let out a small sigh. The two men really didn’t get along; to say that they’d gotten off on the wrong foot would be a vast understatement. They’d had a few sorties together since their disastrous first encounter, and she was genuinely surprised that Kurz had never “accidentally” shot Clouseau in the back.

“Ah, excuse me,” Yang Jun-kyu spoke up hesitantly, as if to fill the silence. “If you don’t mind my saying so, it really was the only option at the time. Kurz’s M9 was just at the limit of taser range, and the smoke there was pretty thick, so

that probably wouldn't have worked. There was no guarantee the enemy didn't have a second shot prepared, so he really had to dispatch him as quickly as possible." Yang was the traditional mediator in these situations.

Clouseau took that in, then surveyed the room. "What do the rest of you think?" Everyone present, including Sousuke and Mao, signaled passive agreement, and Clouseau seemed to respect their judgment. "Very well. Maybe it was unavoidable, then. I'll report this to the major—I think it's clear that that pirate base has no connection to this Amalgam organization, which means we're back to square one. We're no closer to finding their base of operations than we were before."

"Anything turn up in the analysis of the Venoms and the Behemoth?" Mao asked. Mithril had recovered a number of remains of Amalgam-made machines from previous battles, including the Behemoth from six whole months earlier. It was expected that if the research and intelligence divisions analyzed them in earnest, they could identify where the parts had been made and any corporations involved in their creation.

"Most of the core elements from the remains are 'origin unknown,'" Clouseau answered. "The non-proprietary electronic bits have a variety of origins, including some made in Western Europe, and some in Japan."

"No way," she protested. "There can't be many factories capable of building specialized machinery like that, can there?"

"Not many *Western* factories, anyway. They're still reviewing particulars and commonalities between the designs, but for the Venoms, at least, the pervading theory is that they're modeled on the Soviets' next-generation AS."

"The Shadow?" Mao questioned. The Zy-98 Shadow was the codename for a next-generation AS made by the Soviets' Zeya Experimental Design Bureau, the successor to the Rk-92 Savage. Western militaries had only become aware of its existence a month ago, and not even Mithril knew its full particulars, but it was said to have a full electromagnetic propulsion system powered by a miniature high-output palladium reactor, and specs on par with the M9's.

In other words, Clouseau was saying that the Venom was a modified Shadow. "We can't draw conclusions just yet," he cautioned them. "All we know is that,

in terms of basic structure, the Venom is to Zeya's new model as the Arbalest is to the M9. At any rate, we're going to focus on that 'Badam' keyword that Sagara heard. Although... we still can't be sure that that wasn't some nonsense Gauron was spouting just to mess with us."

"I'm certain there's something to it, sir," Sousuke insisted. Clouseau's feeling was understandable, but for some reason, Sousuke couldn't convince himself that what Gauron had told him in Hong Kong meant nothing.

"I know. Though it could also be a trap... best not to let our guard down, either way," Clouseau mused in response, then shook his head dismissively. "Well, anyway, our job isn't information analysis; it's pest control. On any mission where there's the slightest possibility of encountering a Venom-type AS, we always have to be on the top of our game. Major Kalinin feels the same way. Remember that."

The group voiced a variety of, "rogers" and, "yeah, yeahs."

"Now, I want a report from all of you by seven in the morning," Clouseau instructed. "Weber, you'll handle the watch over the three pirate lieutenants we captured." They had brought the prisoners they'd taken on Badamu Island on board, where they were bound and blindfolded. The minute they arrived at Merida Island, the men would be interrogated by operations HQ staff.

"Huh?! Why do I have to—"

"That's an order," Clouseau said, cutting him off. "Pick PRT members to serve as the watch team and tell them what they need to know. Got it? This is all on you now; I don't want a repeat of the Perio incident."

"Roger," Kurz responded after a second. He sounded surprisingly earnest about it; perhaps he was remembering what had happened to Clouseau's predecessor, McAllen.

"All right, dismissed," Clouseau finished. "Good work today, everyone."

The soldiers stood up and left the briefing room, chatting.

"Hey, Ben," Mao said to Clouseau, once the others were gone.

"Yeah?"

“Why’d you make Kurz do it?” she wanted to know. “I’d be happy to run the watch.”

“He needs a little more proper NCO experience. I’m teaching him responsibility.”

“Oh, I get you.” Mao nodded as if in perfect understanding.

“And it’s more than that,” Clouseau went on. “I spoke with Major Kalinin and Colonel Testarossa. Now that you’re a lieutenant, we need to promote someone from the SRT to master sergeant: the only options are Sagara, Sandraptor, and Weber. But Sagara is too young and he’s a part-timer, and Sandraptor’s not cut out for command. Plus...”

“Plus...?”

“That girl, Chidori Kaname, told me that McAllen’s last words to Nguyen during the Perio incident were ‘Call Weber and the others.’ At the time, the major was off-ship, and you were wounded—I guess the next name that came to mind was Weber’s. I think Senpai might’ve seen something in him.”

Mao remained quiet.

“I don’t like the man, but he has potential, and he cares about his comrades,” Clouseau admitted. “I thought I’d put him through his paces a while and see how he takes to it.”

“Hmm...” Mao hummed, her lips curving up into a smile.

Clouseau answered her pleased expression with a scowl. “What now?” he demanded. Once Clouseau was alone with her, he returned to talking like an NCO.

“Nothing,” she protested innocently. “I was thinking, ‘you’re so responsible.’”

“Get off my back. The major isn’t here most of the time,” Clouseau growled back. “Who’s going to do it if I don’t?”

“Fair enough. We’re all counting on you, Ben.”

“Darn it...” Tucking his file case under his arm with another scowl, Clouseau left the room.

After returning to the SRT duty room, Sousuke opened his laptop and began composing his report. Kurz had gone off to run hostage watch (grumbling all the while about unfairness), and that left the room quieter than usual.

Sousuke was thinking that he would polish off his paperwork, and then, once they surfaced, he'd take a helicopter to Tokyo. There were more than a few members of the crew who didn't like the idea of an NCO like Sousuke getting this sort of preferential treatment, but he didn't care. His grades were on the line, and he'd gotten the clause "can charter transport whenever reasonable" added to his contract (though the fuel costs still came out of his paycheck).

His report was about 80% finished when he felt his stomach rumble. *If I go to the mess,* he thought, *I might find something left over.*

"Where are you going?" Mao, who was fooling around on her laptop as well, asked him as he stood.

"To eat," Sousuke answered her shortly.

"Ahh... gotcha. See you later."

"See you." As Sousuke left the duty room, he caught a glimpse of Mao reaching quickly for the on-board phone, but he didn't pay it much mind. Instead, he just climbed the nearby stairway and walked down the passage beyond.

As he made it up to deck two, he ran into the submarine's captain, Tessa—full name Teletha Testarossa—coming around the corner of an otherwise unoccupied hall.

"Ah... Sagara-san," Tessa said. She was a petite, slender girl with ash blonde hair done up in a braid. Tessa was about Sousuke's age, and wore the rank of colonel on the shoulders of her khaki-colored uniform. For some reason, she sounded out of breath.

"Colonel." Normally, Sousuke would come to attention and salute... but he had recently learned that she hated being treated that way, so he just offered her a casual greeting, instead. "Are you taking a break?" he inquired next.

“Yes, now that we’re underway... I was a little bit hungry, so I left command to Mardukas-san.” Tessa then turned her eyes up to meet his, and said, “Would you like to share a meal with me?”

“In the galley?”

“Yes. Escort me, if you would.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he responded. “I was intending to.”

They walked side-by-side down the corridor and soon arrived at the mess hall, which was pitch black. Nobody was present in the middle of the night, and there didn’t seem to be any food left.

“Please sit there,” Tessa insisted, running into the galley. “I’ll cook.”

Sousuke quickly started, “Colonel, please. Let me—” but managed to stop himself mid-protest.

Tessa was glaring at him reproachfully. “Are you suggesting that I cannot prepare food properly?”

“No, certainly not.”

“You always eat what Kaname-san prepares,” she pointed out, and Sousuke fell silent. While he groped around for an answer, Tessa giggled. “It’s all right,” she said. “But please, try my cooking for once.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’d be happy to.” In the past, nerves and awkwardness would have overtaken him, and he’d have said something like, ‘No, I really should make it myself,’ or ‘allow me to assist you, at least,’ but... *Well, maybe it’s not so bad,* Sousuke decided, and then sat down at a table.

“It sounds like things were difficult on Badamu Island,” Tessa called out from the galley.

“Not at all,” Sousuke replied. “It was an easy mission.” He heard the refrigerator door open and close, followed by the sound of cooking tools being pulled out and placed back.

“But you used the lambda driver, didn’t you?” Tessa wanted to know.

“My apologies,” he answered. “If I’d been more careful, things wouldn’t have

come to that.”

“All’s well that ends well. Are you growing accustomed to the Arbalest, then?”

“Yes. But Al’s turned into a chatterbox, and I don’t know what to do about it,” Sousuke admitted ruefully. “He just says one useless thing after another... I’ve never heard of a control system like it.”

“He’s not a control system,” Tessa clarified.

“What?”

“Didn’t I tell you before? The Arbalest is an extension of you,” she explained. “Al... Al is how you might have turned out, if you had been raised in a different environment.”

“That’s a horrible thing to say,” Sousuke objected with a grimace, then heard the chopping on the cutting board suddenly come to a stop.

“Oh. I’m sorry,” she called back, with a note of surprise.

Sousuke cringed, realizing he’d said something rude in the heat of the moment. “No, *I’m* sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

“It’s all right,” Tessa said reassuringly. “After all, you were speaking to me like you would to Melissa and Weber-san.”

“I was?”

“Yes. I found that rather pleasing.” She giggled.

“It feels... strange, for me,” Sousuke admitted.

“And for me as well. Very strange.” Regardless, Tessa sounded delighted.

The food preparation went on for a while. Sousuke heard something get mixed together in a bowl, something boiled in a pot, something fried up in a pan...

This had been the tone of their interactions for about six months now. Tessa, who had once seemed like an otherworldly being, was now someone Sousuke felt quite close to. He couldn’t claim he didn’t enjoy her attentions, either—Tessa was a very appealing girl, and he liked that she was willing to engage him this way. And in moments like these, with her eyes pointed down studiously as

she focused on her cooking, Tessa reminded him of Kaname.

“It’s finished.” Tessa came out of the kitchen, carrying a large dish of pasta. “It’s spaghetti carbonara,” she explained. “I frequently make it for myself after work.” Tessa piled the pasta onto a small dish using a fork and spoon. The steaming dish was coated in thick cheese and cream sauce, and fragrant with pepper and garlic.

“It’s quite easy to make,” she went on. “I find it easier than Kalinin-san’s borscht, at least... I’m sure you’ll like it.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Sousuke said pointlessly, before bringing a forkful of pasta to his mouth. Suddenly, his eyes opened wide. *It really is...* “Very good.”

The moment he’d said so, Tessa scrunched up her shoulders and flashed a V-sign. “Ah... all my training paid off. Now Kaname-san’s lost her sneaky advantage...” she whispered to no one in particular.

Sousuke stared up at her suspiciously. “What?”

“Oh, nothing... Go on, eat up!”

“Ahh...” Though still dubious, Sousuke continued downing the pasta. His empty stomach helped.

Tessa watched him eat for a while, enraptured. Then she said, “Sagara-san, would you like more?”



“Please.” Sousuke typically didn’t stuff himself, but he found himself holding the dish out for more.

If they had had a mission coming up, he might have refrained. They weren’t supposed to fight on a full stomach; it slowed your reaction times, and raised the chances that a bullet to the gut would prove fatal. But they were currently on board their submarine, so that was probably unlikely. *As long as Kurz doesn’t make some stupid mistake on watch duty, at least...*

“Is it very good?” Tessa asked again, interrupting his thoughts.

“Yes,” he told her. “It’s... very good.”

“I’m so glad!” Tessa grinned.

Is that what people mean when they say, ‘a radiant smile’? Sousuke wondered idly. He felt warmed by the sight, and at the same time, slightly guilty.

“Hey... did you know that next week is Christmas?” she asked hesitantly, changing the subject.

“I’m unfamiliar with the specifics,” Sousuke answered. “But it does appear that way.”

“Do you know what the 24th is?” she asked curiously.

“I’ve heard it’s a custom known as Christmas Eve.” Sousuke knew that Christmas was a Christian custom, but as someone who had fought with an Islamic mujahideen, it had little meaning to him. He was actually much more conscious of Ramadan, which was beginning three days before it this year. To Sousuke, Christmas was primarily a period when the alertness of his enemy in his Afghani days, the Soviets, was reduced... and nothing more.

Why is she bringing up Christmas? Sousuke wondered, and found himself tensing up a bit. He was fairly certain that Tessa was a Catholic, and while he didn’t think that she was about to engage him in a religious debate, the topic still made him vaguely uneasy.

“I see. You really don’t know...” she mused.

“Huh?”

“Nothing. Well, Sagara-san...” Tessa said hesitantly.

“Yes?”

“On the 24th... the squadron is going to hold a party together, you know? And I was going to hold a smaller, secondary celebration in my room afterwards, with Melissa and some of the others. Would you like to join us?” Tessa’s eyes, brimming with sincerity, now gazed into his.

“On the 24th?” he clarified.

“Yes.”

Sousuke fell silent. He felt uncertain, because that was the day of the school’s make-up trip. He’d just finished declaring that he’d take all measures necessary to ensure the class’s safety.

Then again, he also didn’t get many chances to deepen his friendship with Tessa, who was typically a very busy person. These last few months, he’d vaguely become aware of her affection for him; it might be cruel to dismiss her invitation out of hand.

She spoke into the silence. “I suppose you’re too busy with school?”

“No, it’s not that... It’s just a bit...” As Sousuke struggled to form a response, he suddenly heard hurried footsteps in the corridor outside.

“Hey, hey!” Sounding panicked, Mao burst into the mess. The last time he’d seen her, she’d been using her laptop to investigate something, so he assumed it must be related to that.

“What is it, Mao?” Sousuke asked.

“Sousuke! You speak Persian, right?”

“A bit,” he told her. “The Afghani dialect, anyway... What about it?”

For some reason, Sousuke’s response caused Mao to groan. “Then why didn’t you catch on sooner?! Sheesh!”

Sousuke tilted his head questioningly.

“That ‘badam’ thing you mentioned... I’ve been looking into it,” Mao explained impatiently. “I was running it through various languages Gauron

might know, given what we know about his history. Do you know what the word romanized as ‘badame’ means in English?”

Sousuke was a bit taken aback by the suddenness of the question, but he did offer a word he knew, “I think it means... almond?”

“No, that’s B-A-D-A-M. What if you add an ‘e’ at the end?”

“I don’t know,” Sousuke admitted, feeling a bit bad about his answer. When he’d lived in Afghanistan, he’d used Tajik and Farsi—the Afghani dialect of Persian—daily. He also knew some conversational Pakistani Pashto. Afghanistan was a country of diverse cultures, after all.

The reason Sousuke knew so many languages wasn’t due to any particular talent in that regard; he’d just lived in that region during the age when the brain was open to learning such things, and he’d just naturally picked them up. Still, his Farsi had gotten very rusty by now, and he’d never been able to read or write it. He could only write in English, Japanese, and a tiny bit of Russian.

“So, what does it mean if it’s ‘badame’?” Sousuke asked suspiciously. Tessa, who could speak close to ten languages fluently but didn’t appear to know Persian, stared at Mao as well. She mainly looked hurt about the fact that her dinnertime had been so rudely interrupted.

“Chrysalis,” Mao burst out. “It means chrysalis!”

“Hmm?” Sousuke asked.

21 December, 1537 hours (Japan Standard Time)

Jindai High School, Tokyo

“Hey, Sagara-kun.” After school was over for the day, Sousuke’s classmate Tokiwa Kyoko approached him. “Did you know that Kana-chan’s birthday is the 24th?” Her question was met with silence. “Hello? Earth to Sousuke!”

“Oh, that’s... right,” Sousuke responded awkwardly. He wasn’t in the habit of celebrating birthdays, so even though he’d seen Kaname’s noted in her profile prior to his infiltration of the school, it had completely slipped his mind. He’d

also ended up making plans with Mithril for that day.

Ignoring Sousuke's sudden discomfort about his oversight, Kyoko continued. "You're coming on that cruise with us, right? I figured we'd put together a big surprise for Kana-chan, to wish her a happy birthday." She cast a glance at Kaname, who was on the other side of the classroom, clapping erasers out the window. "See, I think she's not expecting to get anything this year, so the timing is perfect. I was thinking we'd all buy her flowers. You want to chip in?"

"Chip in?" Sousuke questioned.

"You don't know what that means? Um, it means we all put in a little money for the whole," Kyoko explained. "In this case, 300 yen each. Please?"

"I see. I'll pay the money," Sousuke promised. "But..."

"But...?"

Sousuke hesitated, gripping his wallet. "I'm sorry, but I won't be going on the cruise. Something else came up."

"You won't be coming?" Kyoko asked in shock. "But you were all worked up about it! You said you were gonna come loaded for bear this time!"

"Ah. Well, I..." Sousuke dissembled.

"Plus, it's Kana-chan's birthday!"

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I've made other plans."

"Jeez... Kana-chan's gonna be crushed, y'know," Kyoko told him.

"It's unavoidable," Sousuke said shortly.

"What'll you be doing instead?"

Of course, Kyoko didn't know about Mithril—none of the students of Jindai High did. "I'm very sorry, but I can't tell you."

Just then, Kaname strolled up to them. She lay down the erasers on the blackboard nearby, then started arranging the chalk. "What's going on here?" she asked, casually.

"Huh? Ah... nothing! Ahaha..."

Kyoko's protestations just made her more curious. "Seriously, what is it?"

"N-Never mind. But did you hear, Kana-chan? Sagara-kun isn't coming on the cruise! Sucks, huh?" Kyoko said, fists balled, as she forced a change of subject.

This announcement caused Kaname to suddenly cease her chalk arrangements. "Oh, really?" she said coldly.

"There are mitigating circumstances," Sousuke said, trying to explain himself. "I'm sorry."

"Hmm... I wonder why you feel the need to apologize to me..." Kaname mused.

Sousuke's eyes opened in surprise. "Um, well, I—"

"I mean, it sounds good to me," she went on. "Things will be quieter with you gone, anyhow. I guess it's some kind of mission or whatever, so merry Christmas and all that. Don't worry about me, I'll be fine."

"Actually, I just—"

"You just what?" The power of Kaname's side-eye caused Sousuke to falter. He couldn't bring up Mithril with Kyoko standing right there.

"Wow," she went on icily. "Something so important you can't even tell *me*, huh? Well... I'm sure it's none of my business, anyway. Bye, I guess. Don't expect a souvenir, okay?" Then she strode out of the room.

Kyoko, watching the exchange, let out a deep sigh. "I told you! See? You totally bummed her out!"

"It does... appear that way," Sousuke said, feeling greasy sweat rise on his temples. "But I don't understand. Why was she so upset?"

"Why do you think?" Kyoko retorted. "It's her birthday. She's sad that you won't be coming. She just won't admit it because she's stubborn and full of herself. C'mon, it's not that hard!"

Sousuke understood every word in Kyoko's statement, but its meaning as a whole remained elusive. "I don't quite understand," he admitted. "Are birthdays that important?"

“Um, yes! And you’d better not forget it!”

“Understood,” he said, acknowledging the point. “But regardless, I’m not free that day. I’m sorry.”

Kyoko’s pigtails drooped. “Okay... got some party to go to, huh?”

“Party... I suppose so,” Sousuke reflected. “It is a party, in a sense. My party plans became another kind of party.”

Kyoko shot him a curious look.

“Ah, it’s nothing,” he said hastily.

After class, Kaname headed alone for the shopping street near Sengawa Station. She entered a teen-oriented shop that sold cute stuffed animals and such, and while she was hunting for Bonta-kun goods, a nearby man approached her. He looked like a white-collar worker. “Hello, my dear. Would you like to join me this evening?” the man asked, somewhat awkwardly.

“Get lost, asshole.”

“Don’t be like that. I’ll treat you to something nice.”

This line, too, was said entirely without commitment. It caused Kaname to snort in derision. But she still said, “Good, you remembered the password.”

“Couldn’t you pick a less awkward line and location?” the man asked, his voice low.

“This is fine,” Kaname told him. “It means I’ll never mistake you for someone else.”

“But it’s so unnatural,” the man complained. “The things my bosses would say if they knew we were making contact like this...”

“Don’t tell them,” Kaname suggested flippantly. “Then they won’t find out.” She cast another glance at the man, who was an agent with Mithril’s intelligence division. His codename was Wraith, and his mission was the monitoring and protection of Kaname (though she had her doubts about the ‘protection’ part).

He seemed to be a master of disguise, and looked different each time she saw him: sometimes a well-to-do older woman; sometimes a young freelancer; sometimes a middle-aged white-collar worker; a 40-something housewife; a construction worker; an insurance salesman... anything you could imagine. Kaname didn't even know for sure if "he" was really a man.

"But... I gotta say, this is another awesome disguise," she told him. Kaname found Wraith's disguise skills extremely impressive; he could even change his voice at will. "Why not ditch the whole 'lonely spy' racket?" she suggested. "I bet you could make real money in show business."

"Butt out." Wraith slumped over, seemingly annoyed by her comment.

"Ah, sorry if that struck a nerve." Maybe he really had tried to make a life in show business at some point? But the world had proved too harsh a mistress, and his dreams had been shattered, and he'd been reduced to living the life of a spy for a shady organization. Kaname found herself imagining it, unprompted, and gave him a sympathetic look. "I didn't mean to be insensitive. Really..."

The spy sized her up suspiciously. "Are you imagining something very offensive right now?"

"Of course not," Kaname protested. "Everyone has their circumstances. Cheer up!"

"For some reason, I don't like your tone..."

"Besides, you get to do some artistic expression in this job, too," Kaname nattered on.

"I told you," he finally burst out. "I don't want to be in show business!" This was more or less how all of Kaname's interactions with Wraith had gone lately. No matter who she was dealing with, be they mercenary or spy, she seemed to have a real talent for disrupting another person's rhythm.

Kaname called on Wraith whenever she wanted to know something, and sometimes just when she was bored. He and Sousuke hadn't actually met yet; Wraith had stubbornly insisted against it, and they'd reached an agreement that she wouldn't call him out when Sousuke was nearby. From the way each of them talked, Kaname had a vague idea that some bad blood existed between

Wraith, of the intelligence division, and Sousuke, of the operations division.

“So, did you look into it?” Kaname asked, broaching the subject she’d had in mind.

“Somewhat. I’m not privy to everything that happens in the operations division, so I can’t be sure, but... the Tuatha de Danaan battle group currently have no operations scheduled around Christmas that we know of,” Wraith told her reluctantly. “Though they do appear to be preparing for a party of some kind.”

“Hmm... I see.” Kaname’s mood plummeted. She’d thought maybe the reason Sousuke wasn’t coming on the cruise was because he had a mission with Mithril, but if there was nothing scheduled...

Had he canceled their trip to go to some party with his squad, then? It was understandable that he’d prefer to spend his time with the people he faced danger with daily—and with *her*. She could have just questioned him about it, of course... but with their relationship in an awkward place right now, Kaname had found that she couldn’t lay into him as aggressively as she once had.

“What kind of party is it, I wonder...” she mused, mostly to herself.

“How should I know?” Wraith retorted, sounding surly. “You should be more concerned about this make-up class trip of yours.”

“Did you look into that, too?” Kaname asked next.

“Yes. According to our analysis, the ship should be safe,” Wraith confirmed. “Its background is clean. Though there’s no guarantee the enemy won’t try a repeat of Sunan...”

“A seajacking, you mean?” she clarified.

“Yes, but the chances of that are extremely low. I believe the enemy organization has learned its lesson about the incredible mobility, power, and covertness of the TDD. They probably won’t try to abduct you like that again. But the trade-off there is...” Wraith paused.

“Is... what?”

“Well... it means that you’re that much more likely to be targeted in your

everyday life," he admitted reluctantly.

Kaname said nothing.

"But they haven't come after you yet," Wraith went on. "So we can assume they're biding their time. They may be confident that they can dispatch both myself and Uruz-7 any time they want to, and abduct you then."

"You seem very unconcerned about that," Kaname observed.

"I'm just stating the facts."

"You guys are biding your time with me too, right?"

Wraith fell silent, as he always did when this subject came up.

Trying to restrain her nervousness, Kaname spoke again, her words pointed. "If you ask me, you intelligence division guys are as shady as 'the enemy.' And outside of Sousuke and Tessa, the operations higher-ups seem pretty questionable, too."

"Your doubts are understandable, Chidori Kaname... I hope you can trust in my good faith, as well," Wraith sighed. "I would be in deep trouble if the top brass knew I was contacting you one-on-one like this."

"I appreciate it," Kaname told him sincerely. "You should drop by my house sometime, by the way. I'll whip up a little thank-you meal. You like hot pot?"

"I love Korean hot pot... Wait, did you hear what I just said?!"

"Yeah, yeah. 'Don't call unless it's an emergency,' et cetera. I get it, okay?"

"Heaven's sake..." Wraith let out another sigh. Then he turned and began to walk away from Kaname. But he paused once more on his way and said, "Anyway, be careful on the trip. I'll be infiltrating the passenger roster just to be safe."

"Oh, okay. Thanks," Kaname said, while wondering what 'he' would be dressed up as this time. As she watched Wraith leave the shop, she tried to imagine the cruise without Sousuke. *I guess he does find Mithril more important than me...* Now in a melancholy mood, she left the shop without buying anything.

The air outside was cold, and her breath came in white puffs. These were the shortest days of the year, and the sky was already pitch black, but the shopping street was still bustling. Christmas songs played, and the place was lively with chatter and laughter.

“Ah...” she exclaimed softly, as she caught sight of Sousuke, standing in front of an old shoe store across the street from the shop she’d just left. He slowly walked toward her through the throng. Her first thought, rather than consider that he’d seen her meet with Wraith, was to wonder if he’d decided to go on the cruise after all.

“Wh-what were you doing over there?” Her response came out curtly despite herself.

“I was waiting for you to come out. A suspicious man entered the store and then left... but it appears you were unharmed,” Sousuke said.

“O-of course I was,” she retorted. “Put that stupid gun away!”

“Hmm...” Sousuke returned the gun he was holding, hidden behind his bag, to the holster under his jacket. He hadn’t recognized Wraith, then—or perhaps he had suspicions, but nothing more.

Of course, Sousuke wasn’t stupid; Wraith’s disguises were just a cut above. Kaname had been getting the better of him lately, but he appeared to be quite an excellent agent otherwise. He really did seem to disappear into a crowd. Even Sousuke, who was very sensitive to hostile intent around him, seemed to have a duller antenna when Wraith wasn’t behaving with active malice.

Kaname started walking, and Sousuke followed her from behind.

“Chidori,” he began.

“What?”

“Are you hiding something from me?”

“Um...”

“Ever since Hong Kong, I’ve had the sense that... No, perhaps it’s my imagination.” Sousuke seemed to have a nebulous idea that Kaname was keeping something from him, and in fact, she was: both her meetings with

Wraith and her encounter with the young man, Leonard, two months ago while he was gone.

Kaname did intend to tell him about Wraith when she had the chance. She'd been halfway serious about her offer of hot pot earlier; she wanted to get Wraith and Sousuke to sit down together so she could show off her cooking. Wraith didn't seem like a bad guy, and things could only get better if he and Sousuke would make peace.

There was no way she could tell him about Leonard, though. She had explained about the assassin attacking her in the hotel district, and told him that someone else had finished the assassin off. She'd also brought up the robots she'd seen then. But what she and that "someone else" had talked about, and what he'd done to her... those were things that Kaname could never bring herself to say.

So far, Sousuke hadn't pressed her about it, either. Today was the first time he'd voiced his suspicions. The near-miss with Wraith might have really made him nervous.

"You think I'm hiding something?" she asked innocently.

"Well... perhaps it's not *hiding*, exactly... but are you keeping something to yourself?"

"No. You're the one keeping something from *me*, right?" For some reason, Kaname couldn't keep the comment from sounding barbed.

"Me?" Sousuke asked.

"About Christmas," she clarified. "Why aren't you going on the make-up trip?"

"I have a mission."

You liar, Kaname thought. *You're going to a party with Mithril. You'll all have fun while things get serious between you and that girl, right? I didn't think you were such a liar... but I guess eight months living in Japan was time enough to learn how to be a snake...* "Yeah, okay," she said out loud. "A mission. Everything's a mission. Why don't you go marry Miss Mission, then?"

"I don't understand that," Sousuke told her, sounding genuinely confused. "If

you have something to say to me, can't you explain it in more concrete terms?"

"Are you being serious right now?!" Kaname glared at Sousuke. "You think... you think you can always get out of things by playing dumb?! Well, you're wrong! Because I know everything!"

Sousuke was baffled. "I don't understand. But I wanted to tell you something that—"

"Oh, shut up!" she yelled. "I don't want to hear it!"

"Chidori—"

"Stay away from me! I'm sick of you!"

"This is so typical!" Sousuke fumed. "Why do you—"

"I said this conversation is over!" Kaname said brusquely. Then, brushing through the crowds, she strode away from Sousuke.

That night, it was needless to say that Kaname regretted her words, as usual. But even repeating their exchange in her head dozens of times, she couldn't stop being angry. *What the hell is his problem?* she kept thinking. And, as usual, that was where her thought process stopped. All of his charms, which usually came to mind easily, disappeared, leaving only negative thoughts behind.

After all, he's completely inconsiderate, and the way he thinks he can play dumb to get out of trouble proves that he thinks I'm stupid, Kaname reasoned. *Actually, when I really think about it, he can't really be that stupid, can he? Maybe that was just a character he's been playing from the start. If that's the case, he's the biggest creep ever! The absolute worst! I can't believe I fell for him, even for a second. I'm so glad I didn't confess to him in the heat of the moment!*

Every single man is a con artist, anyway. Every word out of their mouths is a lie to make themselves look good. They're crafty, evil, super-energy beings, and you can't trust them for a second!

Yeah, there's no way I'll ever date a man, she told herself fiercely. *Especially not him! I hate you, Sousuke!*



Over the next few days, Kaname barely spoke to Sousuke. He'd approached her reluctantly a few times, but Kaname wouldn't give him the time of day. He sent her emails on her PHS, but she deleted them without a glance. He'd ask her, "Did you see my email?" and she'd say, "Yeah, I saw it. Go away now," and brush him off.

It wasn't unusual, as far as fights between them went...

But this time, their quarrel would cause a minor panic.

2: O Noisy Night

24 December, 1401 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Port of Yokohama, Yokohama

It was a five-minute bus ride from JR Sakuragimachi Station to Shinko Pier. Situated next to a seaside park packed with couples at twilight, this was where the Pacific Chrysalis was currently docked. Its hull was glittering white, an array of artistically curved funnels and intricately layered passenger decks.

The Pacific Chrysalis was massive. At 272 meters long and 100,000 tons, it was one of the largest cruise ships in the world. Outside of a handful of Caribbean luxury liners that were even larger, there were few in the world that rivaled this one for size. Mithril's amphibious assault submarine, the Tuatha de Danaan, was about the only ship on this scale that Kaname had ever been on, and the Pacific Chrysalis seemed to dwarf even that. It was like an entire city set afloat.

Since that military vessel was Kaname's only prior seagoing experience, the amenities of the Pacific Chrysalis now seemed unspeakably extravagant. The interior, too, was vastly more spacious than the submarine's had been, with cabins and corridors reminiscent of a hotel.

"Certainly fancy in here..." Kaname whispered idly, as she laid her luggage on the bed of her cabin.

Her roommate, Kyoko, responded in excitement. "Yeah, it sure is! Did you see that lobby we passed through when we boarded? It was so big and beautiful, I couldn't believe it! And the captain, and the live music there to welcome us... that was really something else!"

They had just come aboard with their classmates and teachers. Most of the crew that had greeted them as they came up the gangway were foreigners. They seemed friendly and courteous, and Kyoko and the teachers all seemed to find it thrilling, but Kaname couldn't help but feel like something was off. She

couldn't shake the sense that a few of the crew seemed to recognize her in some meaningful way. Their expressions seemed to say, "Ah, she's the one," as if they'd known she would be here—or rather, that they knew what fate was in store for her here. It was subtle; just a slight tension in their faces, followed by an exchange of glances, and then cheery smiles, as if nothing had happened.

No, you're being stupid, she decided. After all, their last field trip had been in the news, and she stood out even among her classmates as "the last one saved." Of course the captain and crew would know about her.

"Hey, Kana-chan," said Kyoko, interrupting her thoughts.

"Hm?"

"Let's hit up topside before we leave port. They say the observation deck has a great view of the Minato Mirai wheel."

"Sure," Kaname agreed. "Actually, I'm pretty hungry, too... You bring any snacks?"

"Ah, sorry," Kyoko told her apologetically. "I ate with Shiori-chan and the others while we were waiting to board earlier. I heard Mayu-chan brought Pocky, though. Maybe get some from her?"

"Oh, yeah? I'd better confiscate it; she's been putting on weight lately!"

"Wow, mean!"

Kaname left Kyoko behind, cackling.

There were a few female students hanging around in the brightly-lit corridor, chatting boisterously. *Ah, figures...* Kaname reflected. Their class weren't the only ones on board, and they'd been warned in homeroom several times not to make trouble for the other passengers. Yet here they were already...

Kaname's instincts as class representative took over, and she was about to scold the students, when—

"Give me a goddamned break!" came a man's voice. The words were in English, the voice deep and forceful in a way that let it easily boom over the girls' laughter.

A large Caucasian in a suit was chewing out a member of the crew, who was

looking a little put out by it all. Kaname found herself thinking the man looked a bit like Arnold Schwarzenegger when he did comedy movies. “You can’t stick me in a B-class cabin with these landlubber girls!” he objected.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the crew member apologized. “But the A-class cabins are all full—”

“Then get me a private suite, you ICBM dunderhead! Is this how you treat a commander in the United States Navy?!” the large man demanded to know. “Got something against me, do you? You’re with the Air Force, aren’t you?!”

“S-sir—”

“Stop this, Captain! You’re embarrassing yourself. This is exactly why your wife ran off right before you left for Japan!” A handsome young man of East Asian descent, apparently companion to the angry ‘Schwartzie,’ clung to the man to try to hold him back. He was wearing a suit, too.

“What was that, Takenaka, you incompetent XO?! You could show a little gratitude for my inviting you here in Eliza’s place!”

“How dare you!” Takenaka fumed back. “I was having the time of my life on Waikiki Beach when you dragged me off by force!”

“Oh, please!” the captain returned. “That curvy Japanese lady you were chatting up? She was probably crawling with STDs! You should be thanking me!”

“Damn you! I had a good thing going, and now it’s all down the drain!”

“Shut up! It serves you right!” spat the captain. “You can’t be off enjoying your vacation while your superior officer is wrestling with divorce! You should suffer with me!”

“That was your real motive, wasn’t it?” Takenaka said accusingly. “I bet it was, dammit!”

The men began to grapple in the hallway, right in front of the crewman. Another crewman ran up to assist, and with a combination of verbal coaxing and physical force, they eventually got the two into their passenger cabin. Then the door closed, and the corridor fell silent.

The students who didn't know English could only stare, dumbfounded. Having lived abroad for so long, Kaname had understood the entire conversation, but... "All kinds of people on board this ship, huh?" she whispered, then hurried off to find her friend's room.

24 December, 1855 Hours

Pacific Chrysalis, Near Miura Peninsula, Pacific Ocean

The cruise ship soon left port, and passed through the Uraga Channel on its way out of Tokyo Bay. The sun had already set, and a canvas of stars now hung over the quietly cruising white ship. The students had gathered on the quarterdeck to watch the scenery and enjoy some innocent horseplay. The cold, clear air was refreshing. The waves glittered around them, and the sight of fishing boats and merchant ships passing by were met with great interest.

"Wow. It's so pretty..." Kyoko said, leaning on the railing as she clicked away with her digital camera. "It doesn't feel right, though, huh? Not having Sagara-kun here with us..."

"Do we have to talk about that guy?" Kaname asked grumpily.

Kyoko winced at this predictable response. "Guh, typical Kana-chan. But for real... how's it going?"

"How's *what* going?" Kaname replied.

"You and Sagara-kun. Just spill it already! I swear I won't tell." She sounded pretty serious, and Kaname had a hard time saying no when asked this directly. Besides, it was hard to keep up her prickly demeanor around her best friend.

"Huh? Um, well..." Kaname said.

"Just say it. Go on." Behind her thick glasses, Kyoko's large eyes shone.

Kaname let out a small sigh, then gave up and admitted the truth. "I like him okay, I guess. But... there's really nothing between us."

"Really?"

"Yeah. We've had a few close calls, but that's really it," she insisted. "I mean,

can’t you tell? Today’s my birthday... and he’s off with someone else.”

Sousuke, as promised, had skipped the trip. Everyone in the class teased him the day before, “Aw, but you said you’d handle security!”

To this, he had responded with utmost gravity, “I’m afraid I have an irreconcilable conflict.” But then, he’d offered this advice: “If a seajacking does occur, don’t resist. As long as you’re peaceful, the terrorists won’t hurt you. Understand? Just do everything you’re told.” The words seemed pregnant with meaning, but Kaname had just sat in a corner of the classroom, indifferent to the exchange. They were still fighting, after all.

“You’d think he’d come with us, right?” she asked now. “If he were serious about me, he wouldn’t skip out.”

“I see... Well, maybe you’re right,” Kyoko admitted.

“I know I can be stubborn about a lot of things, and I know it’s not right, but I really don’t think he cares about me that much,” Kaname told her friend gloomily.

“Maybe not... or you might just be paranoid.”

“I *so* am not!” Kaname retorted. “I just think there’s another girl he likes better.”

“Aw, really? Who is it? Anyone I know?” Kyoko suddenly looked extremely curious.

“Yeah. Remember the girl who did a stint at our school, start of second term?”

“Oh, Tessa-chan?” Kyoko asked.

The students of Jindai High School knew Tessa quite well. The Tuatha de Danaan had taken a lot of damage during the Perio incident, which had put it in drydock for several weeks starting from the end of August. Tessa had decided to use that time to take a long vacation... which she’d opted to spend at Jindai High School in Tokyo. Perhaps, Kaname had thought, she’d wanted a taste of ordinary high school life.

Thus, she and Mao had barged their way into Sousuke’s apartment, joined

class 2-4 under the pretext of being exchange students on a study abroad, and spent two weeks turning student life upside-down. Obviously, no one had brought up the fact that Tessa was really a colonel with Mithril...

“She’s in Australia now, right?” Kyoko went on. “I guess they’re still in touch? Then the party Sagara-kun went to is...”

“Yeah,” Kaname said. “I think he went to be with her.” That was her assumption based on Wraith’s testimony, at least; Sousuke’s claim about a mission was just an excuse. She sighed as she imagined the grand party probably unfolding on Merida Island right now. All the crew would drink and sing and party, and things would start to get romantic between Sousuke and Tessa, and... Kaname realized her mood was plummeting. “Oh, who cares! Subject closed!” she shouted to the night sky.

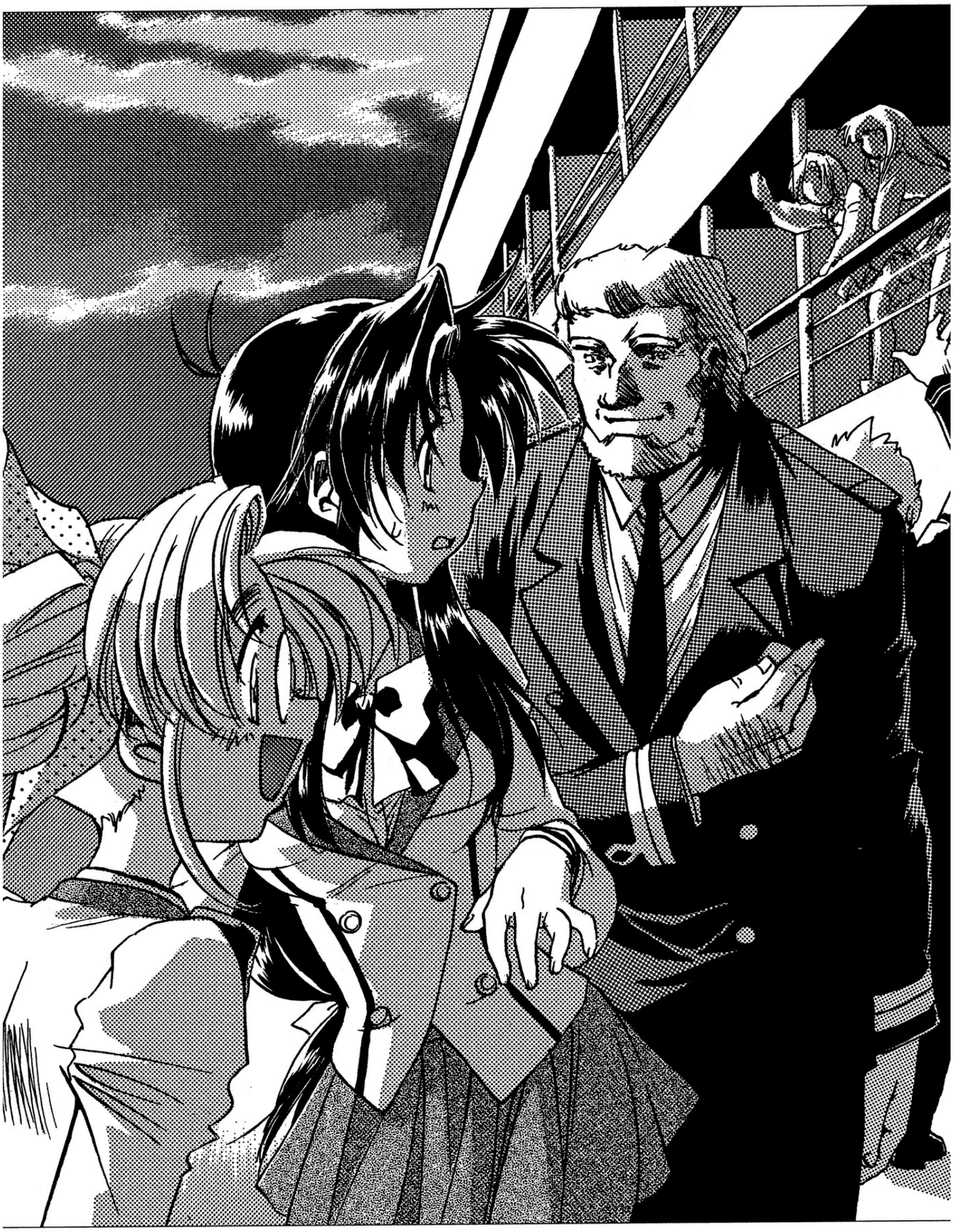
“Um, sorry,” Kyoko said awkwardly.

“Hey, it’s not your fault... But c’mon, *we’re* here, right? Let’s forget that jerk and have fun!” Kaname paused, realizing something. “Actually, you got a watch? How long until the big banquet thing? I’m seriously starving.”

“Didn’t you get a snack from Mayu-chan?”

“It was all gone by the time I got there... ugh.” Just then, she heard a voice address her from behind.

“Excuse me. Chidori Kaname-san?” It was a member of the ship’s crew, a Caucasian man, a little over forty. He had a nicely trimmed beard, and wore a stark white uniform and hat. His posture was ramrod-straight, but he didn’t seem pompous; he had exactly the amount of dignity you’d want to see in the crew of a luxury liner.



“Huh? Yeah?”

“So it is you. I saw you from a distance and wondered... Oh, let me introduce myself,” the crew member said in fluent Japanese, with barely a trace of an accent. “I’m Steven Harris, the ship’s captain. A pleasure.” He comported himself like the proverbial gentleman officer—compared to him, the de Danaan’s senior staff all seemed exceptionally plain.

“The captain?” Kaname and Kyoko said at once. Kaname remembered, now, seeing his face on the pamphlet they’d gotten before they left. She also thought she’d caught sight of him among the crew that had welcomed them on board...

“Um... thank you very much for having us. Could I maybe ask how you know me?” Kaname started with the natural question.

“When we met with your teacher last week, she brought pictures of your class and showed us yours. See? It was the same picture on your ID card.” He pointed to the ID card pinned to her uniform, which had her name and portrait printed on it, just like every other student aboard. “You’re the ‘leading lady’ of the hijacking incident, the one we were all praying for, start to finish. So I was a bit curious to meet you.”

“Ahh, I see...” Kaname said.

“Of course, I didn’t expect you to be so beautiful in person,” Captain Harris went on. “I couldn’t be more pleased. Oh... and your friend is charming too, of course.”

“Thanks. Ahaha...” Kaname and Kyoko both flashed him ingratiating smiles.

“So, what do you think of my ship?” he wanted to know. “Are all your needs being met?”

“Oh, totally! It’s the picture of luxury,” Kaname gushed. “It’s big, it’s beautiful, and the sailing is really smooth.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Captain Harris told her. “If you need absolutely anything, please let my staff know, and we’ll deal with it at once. You’re an important guest, after all. Yes... a very important guest.”

Kaname froze in silence. His words were perfectly polite, but she couldn’t

help sensing something off about them. There was something kind of coaxing... almost wheedling about his tone. The captain's eyes were those of a man gazing at prey in a cage and asking, "Now, what shall I do with you?" *What is it about him that makes me think that?* she wondered.

"Kana-chan?" Kyoko said.

"Huh?"

"You drifted off for a minute. What's up?"

Nothing. You're overthinking it. Just jumping at shadows, Kaname told herself, then gave an awkward laugh. "Oh, it's nothing. Um... we appreciate it, Captain."

"Well, then, I hope you have a fine stay. Enjoy your voyage." Captain Harris said, and then left them behind.

"Whew..." Kaname and Kyoko exhaled after they watched him leave.

"Boy, talk about nerve-wracking..." Kaname muttered.

"Yeah," Kyoko agreed. "He's really handsome, though, right? Strength and elegance in one. Major 'captain' vibes."

"Yeah, true. Totally different from another captain I know."

"Huh?"

"Oh, nothing," Kaname said dismissively. Just then, they heard a clamor in the distance.

Captain Harris had been heading back into the ship when a female cabin crew member had bumped into him, then tripped, and turned over a mop and bucket. "Sorry, sorry..." the crew member apologized fervently. She wore a frilly skirt accented by a white apron, black tights, and a hard plastic headband over her hair. *Ash blonde hair, done in a neat braid...* Kaname thought, but she couldn't see the girl's face from her current position.

They were too far away to hear the conversation, but Captain Harris seemed to chide the petite crew member, who bowed emphatically back to him. Then she picked up the cleaning implements, ran towards the prow in a panic... then tripped and fell spectacularly again. Kaname watched the scene unfold, her suspicions churning.

“What the heck. What a clumsy maid...” Kyoko muttered.

Meanwhile, Kaname’s suspicion grew to a near surety, and she found cold sweat rising on her back. *There’s no way. I mean... what would she be doing on this ship?*

That wouldn’t be the only suspicious sight she would see. It had gotten cold outside, so the girls went back in to tour the various on-board facilities. In the corridor in front of the bar lounge, she saw a young bartender hitting on a group of female students. He was a handsome young man with long blond hair tied in a tail, and thin-rimmed glasses over his blue eyes. The pretty boy was speaking in fluent Japanese, “—Yeah, I mean it! I was raised in Edogawa, Tokyo. I know a great soba place, so if you just give me your phone number, I’ll call you when I’m off work.”

“Aw, c’mon...” the girl giggled noncommittally.

“Hey, new blood! Don’t hit on the passengers!”

“Ah... fine, fine,” the young bartender muttered, the veteran crew member’s scolding returning him to the work at hand.

As she watched him walk away, Kyoko whispered, “There’s something weirdly familiar about that guy...”

“R-Really?” Kaname asked, her tone growing more and more awkward. “You’re sure you’re not imagining it? Most foreigners look alike, anyway. N-Now, let’s go somewhere else...” They walked for a while and peeked into a casino hall. They’d only just left port, but the passengers with a mind to gamble were already gathered around the roulette wheel.

The dealer was a beautiful East Asian woman. She looked to be in her mid-20s, with a slender face and short black hair. She was wearing glasses, too.

“Okay, place your bets! Place your bets and no regrets!” she sang out. “Place ’em fast or your time has passed!” It felt less like roulette and more like a period drama’s game of odds-and-evens, but most of the customers were laughing and placing their chips on the board nonetheless.

“I feel like I’ve seen her before, too...” Kyoko said.

Paralyzed, Kaname just responded, “L-Let’s go.” She didn’t know what else to say. *What’s going on on this ship?* she wondered. Maybe after she and Kyoko parted ways, she’d pull one of them aside and give them a full grilling. *Yeah, that’s what I’ll have to do...*

But just as they left the casino and she’d made up her mind, their homeroom teacher, Kagurazaka Eri, came running up to them. “Hey, you two! Didn’t you hear the announcement? It’s time for dinner! All Jindai students, meet up in the grand ballroom!”

Kaname suddenly realized that the students and passengers who’d previously been swarming the ship’s halls were now nowhere to be seen. “R-Right...” *No choice,* she decided, following after Kyoko and Eri, to head for the grand ballroom where the banquet would be held. The grilling would have to wait.

After his personal greeting to Kaname, Captain Harris spent a little time looking around, making sure everything was ship-shape. It was, of course; this was his ship, and he was very scrupulous about safety.

He didn’t want any problems or malfunctions happening here... especially tonight, with such an important event coming up...

“Captain.” The engine room chief caught up with Harris in the hallway. He was Colombian, just past forty, with a black beard. “Señor, that Japanese girl you spoke with; was that her?”

“Yes,” Captain Harris confirmed.

“When do we take her to the vault?” the engineer wanted to know.

“Late at night, I think. Wait until all the children are asleep.”

“You think she’ll come quietly?”

“Of course she will. We’ll have all her school friends hostage, after all.” The corners of Captain Harris’s mouth turned up. “We’ll throw her four-eyed friend off the side first, to make a point. That should bring her into line.”

“The ocean’s very cold in December, yes,” the engineer observed.

“It’s such a tragedy when people fall overboard,” Captain Harris continued.

“On Christmas Eve, Chidori Kaname and her friend will go missing.”

“What about *those* people—Mithril?”

“We’ve already left port. They can’t touch us,” Captain Harris predicted. “This will make Mr. Gold happy, and I’ll regain my standing with the organization.”

It had reached the time for him to give his speech at the banquet—an annoying ritual, but it was part of his job. Harris straightened his tie and began walking towards the grand ballroom.

The grand ballroom, where the Jindai High students were gathered, was about the size of a school gymnasium. Lines of huge tables filled the cavernous space, covered in a feast stacked high on silver platters. Fragrantly spiced meat; mountains of seafood in wide varieties; whole roast turkey and roast beef that sparkled like amber; lobster halves glistening with juice. The dinner was buffet-style, and every bit of it was all-you-can-eat. The other passengers were apparently eating in other halls, with this space reserved for those related to and serving the students of Jindai High. Most of the students’ dining-out experiences were limited to hamburgers, gyudon, ramen, and soba, so naturally, the anticipation had them on the verge of tears.

“Not yet!” the principal rebuked them, as the drooling students prepared to leap at the food. She was standing on the ballroom stage, gripping the microphone and glaring at them. “We must hear the captain’s opening remarks first! Listen to me, everyone. I told you before we boarded: Do not embarrass Jindai High School! There are other passengers on board, you know. Be discreet, and do not cause any trouble. Remember how you all spent the hijacking playing card games and bothering the stewardesses, and it was in all the magazines later?! I mean, your ideas about appropriate behavior are simply—” Principal Tsuboi continued to lecture them for what turned out to be a little over three minutes. “...That is all. Do I make myself clear?!”

The hundreds of students responded with an unusually forceful, “Yes, ma’am!” Their eyes glinted as if to say, “We get it, so let us eat!”

“Good,” Principal Tsuboi finished grimly. “Then let’s have a few words from the captain of the Pacific Chrysalis. Give him a round of applause, everyone!”

The bearded captain strode up onto the stage. The students gave him a rockstar welcome, clapping and whistling.

“Students of Jindai High. Thank you for your great patience. I’m the ship’s captain, Steven Harris,” he said into the microphone. The students were impressed by his fluent Japanese. “Welcome to the Pacific Chrysalis. I’m so honored that you all accepted my invitation. I understand your last field trip turned out to be quite an ordeal...” He cleared his throat once for effect. “But don’t worry. I promise, there are no terrorists on board my ship.”

The students laughed.

“Better not be!” one of them called out.

“Appreciate it, Captain!”

“Not like that would happen to us twice, right?”

After allowing the students to settle down, Harris continued. “I appreciate the confidence, but I want you to know that I’m serious. Bringing smiles to my passengers is my number one priority. I take pride in guaranteeing you a perfectly safe and pleasant voyage, so please know that my crew will do everything in their power to... hm?”

Harris paused in confusion as one of the servers climbed up onto the stage. He was dressed in the standard black-vest-and-bow-tie uniform, but for some reason, he was also wearing a face-covering balaclava, and carrying a shotgun.

“Er...?” Captain Harris ventured, unsure of what was going on. With several hundred people watching, the man pointed the shotgun at the ceiling, and fired off a shot. With exclamations of surprise, Harris, the principal, and all of the students froze.

“Nobody move!” the man proclaimed. He had some kind of device attached to his throat that made his voice low and raspy. A familiar, tight frown was visible beneath his face-covering mask. “Second-year students of Jindai High School,” he continued. “Listen to me closely. We are a ruthless terrorist organization known as the Determined Revolutionaries. This symbol of the imperialistic exploitation class, the Pacific Chrysalis, is now under our control!”

His statement was followed by a long, long silence. Then...

“Again?!” The students shouted in unison.

The masked man responded indifferently to their shared heartfelt groan. “Unfortunately, yes. Control of this ship is now in the hands of...” The man looked up at the ceiling. “Ahh... Control of this ship is now in the hands of...” He then looked to the foot of the stage, as if seeking assistance.

A bartender, who had arrived at some point holding a rifle, whispered something back to the man. He was similarly masked, but bits of blond hair could be seen sticking out here and there from his hood.

“Ah... that’s right,” the first terrorist continued uncertainly. “Control of the ship is now in the hands of, er, the Discriminating Red Army.”

“That’s not the name he gave before...” someone observed.

“Hey, I think he’s struggling a little...”

“I’m not sure he knows what he’s doing...”

While students whispered to each other, the terrorist looked down, and took another deep breath. “The point is, we’re cold-hearted terrorists who will gladly kill anyone, even women or children. Resistance means death! I’m sorry to say that my shotgun only contains rubber bullets, but anyone who resists will be shot until they cry uncle and—”

“No! Real bullets!” the masked blond man hissed to him.

“That’s right,” the first man agreed, without skipping a beat. “Deadly slugs. One hit will prove lethal; I’m not lying.” Then, he pointed to the doors. “Naturally, you won’t be allowed to leave this ballroom. Look!”

The students turned around and, as expected, saw an array of armed, masked terrorists blocking the ways to the corridor and the kitchen. Most of them were men dressed as cleaning staff and servers, but for some reason, there was a petite woman among them. She had ash blonde hair, and was dressed in a maid’s uniform, carrying a submachine gun. The lower half of her face was hidden by a scarf, the top half by RayBan sunglasses.

“Those people are all highly skilled, trained in Libyan terrorist camps,” the first terrorist told them. “Don’t even think about trying to fight them unarmed.” The

terrorists blocking the exits all took an imposing step forward. The masked maid attempted to do the same, but she tripped over her high heels and face planted on the spot.

“Colonel?!” the first terrorist shouted in alarm.

The masked maid picked herself up unsteadily, then proudly but weakly hefted up her submachine gun as if to say, “I’m fine.” An awkward silence followed.

The terrorist cleared his throat, then continued. “Anyway, that’s the situation. Now, Captain Harris, please come with us. As murderous terrorists, we have some negotiations to run down with you. Hmm? What is it?”

Harris was staring, dumbfounded, and the terrorist followed his gaze. Chidori Kaname was stalking up the stairs towards the podium.

“Stop, woman. Stop, or I’ll shoot.” The terrorist pointed his shotgun at Kaname.

She didn’t stop.

“I told you to stop,” he tried again.

Kaname still didn’t stop.

“Your foolhardiness will be your undoing. Obey, or see your friends and teachers blasted into—”

Wham! A right straight punch from Kaname sent the terrorist slamming to the floor. The microphone went flying, and crashed to the stage with a deafening screech of feedback.

“You know, Sousuke, you are *really* something else...” For better or worse, the mike didn’t pick up her voice. Kaname lifted the ‘terrorist’ up by the lapels. “Now, come with me,” she finished ominously.

“Wait... Chidori! I can explain—”

“Just come with me!”

“Listen to me!” Sousuke begged.

“What part of ‘come with me’ don’t you understand?!” Kaname snarled,

stalking off the stage, half-dragging the terrorist with her. For some reason, his allies didn't try to stop it. They actually looked a bit abashed about the situation, which is why the terrorist guarding the ballroom doors simply withered beneath her glare and stepped aside. The door slammed closed behind them, and silence returned.

A buzz of whispers started among the Jindai High students.

"K-Kaname-chan..."

"Not even terrorists scare her..."

"She's so brave..."

"I'm so impressed, Chidori-san!"

"I think she's just touchy because she's hungry."

"But there was something familiar about that dynamic..."

As the conversations continued, another terrorist took to the stage. This time it was a tall woman, dressed as a casino dealer with a checkered vest, a bowtie, and a tight, knee-length skirt. She was wearing large sunglasses, and carrying a famous German-made submachine gun on a strap over her shoulder. "Sorry about that," she said with an awkward laugh. "Um, so, anyway, you're all going to stay here in this hall. That girl had gotten pretty worked up, so our colleague *escorted* her to the infirmary." It looked a lot more like it was Kaname who had dragged the terrorist away, but the woman sounded confident in her version of events.

"Fortunately, you've all had experience as hostages, so I won't waste time with all the dos and don'ts," she continued. "Just find ways to kill time like you did last time—You'll be back home safe tomorrow."

"I feel like I've heard that voice somewhere before..." Kyoko muttered to herself.

"So, um... any requests?" the terrorist asked. "We're happy to indulge, within reason."

"Excuse me, but we're really hungry!" one of the students ended up shouting.

"Ah, that's right. Sorry about that—Go ahead and eat," she told them. "I'll

check back in later.” While the students rushed for the mountains of food, the terrorists walked off the stage with the pale-faced captain in tow.

1930 Hours

Bridge, Pacific Chrysalis

Those Mithril squad members who had infiltrated the ship as employees, and those who had landed in the ECS-camouflaged helicopter—a little over thirty in all—had broken into teams of three or four to swiftly lock down the ship. The machinery room and the crew cabins, the entertainment facilities, the communications infrastructure and temperature control systems, the storage rooms and the pantries... The simple presence of guns was enough to intimidate most of the crew and passengers into total submission. Each team precisely reported the number of hostages they’d taken, then gave an overview of their current status to their commander, Lieutenant Clouseau.

Clouseau was currently on the bridge of the Pacific Chrysalis; he’d entered with two other PRT (primary response team) members a few minutes earlier. The navigator, pilot, and other on-duty crew surrendered immediately in the face of their rubber bullet guns. Clouseau wasn’t happy about putting innocent people at gunpoint, but those were his orders; he’d had no say in the matter.

“Uruz-8 here. Area D4 secured, 32 hostages. Zero casualties.”

“Uruz-5. Area A8 secured, 18 hostages, zero casualties. No resistance.”

“Uruz-8. C-1 secured, uninhabited, zero casualties. Heading for C3 next.”

Zero casualties, zero casualties, zero casualties... One of the PRT soldiers plugged the information into a nearby laptop as the reports came in. Most of the passengers and crew on the ship were already secured.

“Uruz-9 here. D13 secured, three hostages taken. Zero casualties. We did meet slight resistance.”

Clouseau heard the report of Uruz-9, Corporal Yang, over the radio. “Uruz-1 to Uruz-9. What constitutes ‘slight resistance’? Explain.”

“A cleaning lady threw a mop at me,” Corporal Yang replied. “Now, she’s giving me an earful.”

Clouseau said nothing. When he listened closely, he could just hear a middle-aged woman’s voice through the receiver, shouting things like “for shame!” and “get a real job!” He closed his eyes, a vein throbbing in his forehead. “We’re terrorists,” he reminded his subordinate. “You don’t have to listen to her.”

“But she’s right,” Corporal Yang said guiltily. “It’s not right to threaten people with guns, even if we do have a good reason. She’s saying, ‘remember the faces of your family back home, remember Christmas as a kid,’ talking about home-cooked meals around the family table... She’s got my team all tearing up and questioning their life choices.” Yang’s voice was cracking a bit too.

“Well, don’t start bawling, now,” Clouseau ordered. “I’m unhappy about this as it is.”

“Sorry, Lieutenant. But it just doesn’t feel right, doing terrorism on Christmas... It’s a day when the whole world should be happy, you know? I’m missing my mom’s cheesecake.”

“Just secure your other assigned areas as quickly as you can,” Clouseau told him. “Got it?!”

“Uruz-9, roger...”

“Heaven’s sake,” Clouseau muttered after turning off the radio. “I know why we’re doing it, but this plan is still absurd...”

But why *were* they doing it?

If not for Gauron giving them the keyword “badame,” they’d have never suspected this cruise ship. Mithril’s intelligence division had investigated it in advance and given it the green light, but it seemed they’d been wrong to do so. There was something more to this ship, and the invitation extended to Jindai High School had simply been a trap set by Amalgam, or by someone involved with them. This operation was their squad’s way of getting the drop on them.

The mission was to be carried out almost entirely independently. They hadn’t told the intelligence division, naturally, but they also hadn’t told most of the operations HQ staff that the Tuatha de Danaan was going to take control of the

cruise ship. They leaked different information to different departments, so by watching how Amalgam responded, they might also expose any moles in their ranks.

They still didn't know exactly what the ship was hiding; that's what they were here to find out. This plan would let them ensure the safety of the students and Chidori Kaname, while also letting them investigate a suspicious section of the ship. As a way to strike back at the enemy when they least expected it, the plan made perfect sense.

Clouseau hadn't initially been much in favor of the plan that Sagara Sousuke and Kurz Weber had concocted. He and the de Danaan's XO, Lieutenant Colonel Mardukas, were against the seajacking from start to finish, finding it "ludicrous" and "irrational." But in the end, Colonel Testarossa and Major Kalinin steamrolled them by way of passive assent.

I'm a first lieutenant, after all. I'm close to being promoted to captain. It's about time I started learning to play politics, he'd decided. After all, they trained daily for dealing with this kind of terrorism, so they knew how to play the other side of it, but...

"Though Lieutenant, I have to say, it's fun to get to play the terrorists for once. Great way to relieve stress," one of the PRT sergeants said happily, his submachine gun pointed at the navigator.

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that," Clouseau said with a disgruntled expression. "And call me by my call sign in front of the hostages." It was then that he got a report in from Mao, who'd been sent to secure the grand ballroom and surrounding area. "Uruz-1 here," he began.

"Uruz-2, reporting in," Mao told him. "First hall secured. We have 324 hostages including students and teachers, as well as 28 kitchen staff, including the cooks. Zero casualties. I decided to let them eat their dinner for now. We've also taken the captain into custody."

"Roger," Clouseau replied. "How is Ansuz doing?" 'Ansuz' was the call sign for the commander-in-chief of the Tuatha de Danaan battle group, Colonel Teletha Testarossa. It was only used during maneuvers in which she was outside of the submarine.

“She left the ballroom after Uruz-7 and Angel,” Mao told him.

Hearing that, Clouseau scowled. “Angel left the hall? I thought she was going to lay low with the other students.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll call them back soon,” Mao said reassuringly. “How are the other teams doing?”

“They’re about 80% finished,” Clouseau told her. “Zero casualties. We took the machinery room earlier and hijacked their communications systems. Some of the crew were apparently armed, and we did meet some minor resistance from them.”

No ordinary cruise ship would have armed security on board; those people must be soldiers in cahoots with the enemy, which meant they really were guarding something important.

“I see,” Mao observed. “So, should we continue as planned with the captain?”

“Yes, take him in,” Clouseau decided. “And... be gentle.”

Kaname walked swiftly, away from the ballroom full of students triumphantly tearing into their feast. When she finally reached an unoccupied smoking area, she gave Sousuke a hard kick in the rear.

“What are you doing?” he complained.

“Shut the hell up!!” she screamed at him. “It’s fine if you didn’t want to come on the trip! I don’t care if you have a party at your base, either! And I won’t ask what kind of dirty business you people get up to all day... But now you’re attacking our *school*? Seriously?!”

“Well, we’re not exactly attacking your school—”

“Like hell! And take off that mask, you...!”

“Ah... don’t pull it so hard,” he begged. “It hurts...”

Kaname yanked the balaclava off of the struggling Sousuke. “What the hell were you thinking?! Explain yourself!”

“Wait a minute, Chidori. Didn’t you read the emails I sent you?”

“Uh... well, actually...” Kaname hesitated. Things between her and Sousuke had been so strained lately that she’d deleted everything he’d sent her without a second glance.

“I wanted to tell you what was about to happen. But you wouldn’t let me speak to you, so—”

“F-Forget the emails!” One of Kaname’s deepest character flaws was her inability to just admit fault and apologize at times like these. “Th-There’s nothing you could say that could make seajacking okay! I thought you were the guys who *fought* terrorists! This makes no sense!”

That was when she heard a new voice just behind her. “Untrue. It makes perfect sense.” Rushing towards her now was the masked, ash blonde, submachine gun-wielding maid. In a way, her appearance was far more disturbing than that of a normal terrorist.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Kaname asked, slumping over.

In response, the masked maid—Tessa—smiled confidently. “Heh heh heh... I’m the brilliant leader of the Highly Discriminating Liberation Front, AKA, the HDLF.”

“That’s not what he called it before,” Kaname pointed out.

“Never mind that! The point is, I am the very evil leader of a highly-experienced terrorist cell. We spare neither women nor children!” With that, Tessa made a ‘pow-pow’ shooting motion with her gun.

“You’re the child here. See?” Kaname snatched the sunglasses off the other girl’s face.

“Ah! P-Please give those back...” With her face now uncovered, Tessa’s saucer-like eyes filled with tears, and she started flailing in panic. Feeling she’d proved her point, Kaname returned the sunglasses, and the other girl breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness. These tough-guy glasses are the only thing keeping me from breaking under my guilty conscience...”

“Or you could just not commit terrorism?!” Kaname demanded irritably.

Tessa looked crestfallen. “You’re right... But this seemed like the safest and

most reliable option. I truly am sorry for the fear and inconvenience we've caused the passengers. Putting on these sunglasses and comporting myself like a gang leader is the only way that I can maintain psychological balance..."

Kaname watched her skeptically for a moment, then said, "Gimme," and snatched away her sunglasses again.

"Ahh... G-Give those back! Without those, I... I..." Tessa looked like she might cry.

"This is really hard on you, huh?"

"That's what I'm telling you!"

"Chidori, stop," Sousuke ordered. "Give them back to her."

Sousuke's chiding caused Kaname's temper to flare anew. "Ngh... What's that supposed to mean?"

"Give them back!"

"No way. Hmph!"

"You're distressing the colonel! And I've been trying to explain things to you."

"Explain *better*, then!"

Sousuke shook his head, exhausted by her continued hostility. "Enough, Chidori. Your hard-headedness has exceeded rational limits this time."

"Well, excuse me!" she retorted. "I *am* an annoying brat who never listens, after all!"

"That isn't what I said," he told her placatingly. "I just don't understand why you always—"

"Give them back!" Tessa tried again.

"Oh, you shut up, too!" Kaname snarled.

"Just give them back to her and listen to me!" Sousuke said.

"Don't order me around! This is such typical you!"

"Because you're always so stubborn!"

"So are you!" Kaname replied. "You *always* act like you're the one in charge!

Who do you think you are? I think—”

“Just give them back to her!”

Kaname was unmovable, Sousuke was annoyed, and Tessa was panicking. Nothing was being achieved at all. That’s when a new voice joined in over the din.

“Enough already!!” It was Mao. She was heading toward them, prodding along the captured Captain Harris with the muzzle of her submachine gun. This scolding from a fourth party brought all three to silence.

“Yeesh... What’s all this damned yelling about?” Mao demanded to know. “Also, Sousuke! Why is Kaname mad at you? You told her what the deal was, right?”

“Er... affirmative,” he hedged.

“This is such a big mess. I managed to feed an excuse to the other students, but it’s probably going to make her look really bad! This was your idea, remember? So it was up to you to get it done right,” Mao lectured. “Take responsibility and see your mission through, Sergeant!”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to write this up in my report,” Mao sighed.

“Acceptable. It was my mistake,” Sousuke admitted freely, without saying one negative word about Kaname. His behavior now was entirely noble, in a total reversal from his earlier bickering.

It inspired a pang of conscience in Kaname. Really, if he were the kind of man who would have blamed this on her, she wouldn’t get so stubborn and bothered about it at all. Ironically, it was his straight-shooting nature that made it harder for her to be forthright.

“Well, it’s fine,” Mao decided. “But I’d better get you an explanation. Follow me, Kaname.”

“Huh? Where to?”

“The vault. Isn’t that right, Captain?” Mao said with a grin to Captain Harris, who was standing in front of them. The man kept his eyes pointed down, his

face pale and drawn.

“Um, Captain?” Kaname asked. As the captain of a seajacked ship, she would have thought he’d want to say something to a passenger like herself—reassure her, maybe. But instead, he just glared silently at her, without a single sympathetic word.

Just before the seajacking occurred...

Commander Killy B. Sailor of the nuclear submarine Pasadena—part of the United States Navy’s SUBPAC—was standing in the cruise ship’s telephone area. Most of the passengers had already moved to the dining halls, which meant he was alone.

Sailor, who had come to Japan for Christmas break, was locked in an argument with his wife, who had just gone home to California.

“...Darn it! I call in to check on you, and this is what I get?! Well, I... you idiot, I keep telling you! I had a mission! But I worked hard to get home the night before the trip to Japan, and... shut up! Huh? Then what was I supposed to do?! Are you saying I should go up to the subordinates and engineers working up all night to fix a problem in the machinery room and say, ‘My wife’s mad at me, so I’m leaving’?! You think I can— what was that?! You mean you and that kid Smith... aha! I see! Well, I’m having a nice time, too! With a real hot little number! ...Shut up, Takenaka’s in Hawaii!” Commander Sailor shouted into the receiver.

The man had black hair in a crew cut and blue eyes, prominent features, high eyebrows, and a square forehead; in other words, he was the quintessential bodybuilder-type. He had the physique to match, too, with a body like some macho man Hollywood star. He was feeling distinctly out of shape lately, but for some reason, he’d developed no extra flab around his waist. It was probably a genetic thing, just the way his body was made. Most people meeting him for the first time, when they heard he was in the military, assumed he was Army, and he hated it.

Commander Sailor went on shouting at his wife, who was nattering on hysterically on the other end of the satellite line. “Oh, shut up! Stop shouting

about everything! The Navy is my life! If you don't like that... Fine, sounds great! Go suck that asshole off! It's not like you're— hello? Are you listening?!" Sailor tapped the receiver as her voice cut off. "Hey, Eliza! If that's the way you want it..." He scowled suddenly, questioning. There was no sound from the phone at all, not even static. She'd hung up on him.

"Well, screw her!" He slammed the receiver down and was about to curse again... but instead, he just sighed. There was nothing to be done, then. His marriage was over. This trip had been a last-ditch effort to salvage things, but even that had blown up in his face.

Ah, well. He'd paid a lot of money to come here, so he might as well enjoy it. After composing himself, Sailor decided to return to his table where a delicious banquet awaited him.

That's when something strange happened: a gunshot rang out from the ballroom. It was followed immediately by screams from passengers, and other sounds of commotion—dishes falling from tables, overturned carts, the barking of commands...

There was no question—that was a gunshot. A submachine gun? An assault rifle, maybe...

Commander Sailor looked around, panicked. Could it be... a seajacking? He could hear swift footsteps approaching from just ahead, on the other side of the double doors. The terrorists were coming his way. He was the only one in the corridor; beside him was the women's bathroom. He burst through the door, and heard the terrorists' footsteps fly into the hall a second later, right where he had been. They'd be checking the bathroom soon, too. He had to find somewhere to hide!

There was a maintenance door at the end of the row of stalls, probably for maintaining the pipes that ran up and down the ship. The mechanical workings that would have been exposed on a submarine were hidden behind wooden walls on this cruise ship. Sailor opened the door, stepped into the wall, and hid behind the thick pipes within. It was a close call; the men came barging in an instant later. They were checking the stalls one by one, their movements swift and sharp.

Sailor held his breath.

After making sure the stalls were empty, they finally opened the maintenance door to Sailor's hiding place. A flashlight's beam searched here and there around him. His breathing and heartbeat sounded deafening to his ears. But while he stood there, trying to hold his silence behind the complex network of pipes, the terrorist spoke up, reporting to someone on the radio: "Kaun-23. E10 secured. No one here. Zero casualties. Moving on to E12."

The maintenance door slammed shut, and the footsteps departed just as quickly as they'd come. There was no idle chatter; as far as Sailor could tell, these men were very well trained.

Silence returned. After savoring a moment's relief, Sailor came back out into the bathroom. Shoulders heaving, he put his hands on the sink and stared into the mirror. "Think!" he chided his reflection. "Think, goddamn you!"

The only reason he hadn't fallen to pieces or started weeping from fear was because he'd been through tight scrapes before, even if they had been in a totally different setting. He'd spent half of his life in a submarine, and he'd had a few near-death experiences. And even if most of it had come about accidentally, he had combat experience, too. It wasn't commonly known, but very few serving submarine captains had actually fired torpedoes at an enemy; maybe only ten in the whole world. Captain Sailor of the Pasadena was one of those few.

That's right, he reminded himself. *I'm a veteran. I'm an old sea dog, ready to do what needs to be done.* The radio call the terrorist had put in earlier... Kaun-23, he'd called himself. He didn't know exactly what the call sign meant, but it was worth assuming they were dealing with a large enemy force. However...!!

"Like hell I'm dying here!" he whispered to the bathroom mirror. *Now, think. Remember your Hollywood movies. People who do hijackings and things on Christmas always end up stopped by some hero who happens to be there.*

That's right. A hero. Couldn't the hero, in this case, be storied submarine captain Killy B. Sailor, coming here on a break to deal with his marital problems?! "Yeah, that's right," Commander Sailor told himself. "That's what it's gotta be!!" He could feel himself regaining his spirit.

That's just what this is, he realized. *Tonight is my night! A great adventure, full of thrilling fights to get the blood flowing! A romance with a beautiful leading lady! A showdown with a despicable enemy! My problems with my wife, Eliza, will seem trivial!* This was getting better all the time, really. *The big boss will probably be cold, emotionless, and handsome, probably someone out of the Navy, just like me. The girl will be a passenger on the ship, an exotic dark-haired 20-something. And XO Takenaka, who came on board with me... well, he's probably the guy who gets shot by the terrorists in the action.*

"Takenaka. Poor guy..." Commander Sailor let out a pained sigh. After convincing himself that his subordinate was as good as dead, Sailor moved into action. "But don't worry, Takenaka. I will avenge you! I'll let my rage over your death fuel me into a table-turning counterattack about sixty minutes in!"

First, he had to find a weapon. He'd start with a mop, clear out some weak enemies, then get a pistol, he decided. Next on the docket would be a machine gun. Sailor could almost see the medal of honor he'd get for all this. *Get ready to die, you damned terrorists!*

2021 Hours

In front of the vault, Pacific Chrysalis

"So? What's so special about the vault?" Kaname asked Sousuke and the others.

They were in the bowels of the ship now, a corridor tucked away in a section near the machinery room. The vault was at the end of a hallway, and Kaname and the others had stopped in front of the door, which was made of a thick special alloy. Cruise ships similar to this one were frequently home to large storage areas like this, designed to safely hold precious jewelry, valuables, and works of art that the passengers had brought on board. In a ship of this size, it was almost the size of a bank vault.

"Don't tell me you came here to rob the place..." she muttered.

"That's exactly what we did," Mao said casually, then beckoned behind her.

“All right, Captain. Step right up.” Sousuke prodded him in the back, and Captain Harris moved in front of the safe door. His expression was tortured. “Open it for us?”

“No,” Captain Harris protested. “There’s nothing for you terrorists here in our vault. You think you can get away with this? Touch one hair on my precious passengers’ heads and you’ll pay!”

“Uh-huh,” Mao said with a smirk, and brandished her gun. “Cut the act already.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Last October, this ship underwent a refitting at the Shin-Kurusu shipyards,” Mao said. “There’s nothing about it in the documentation, but it seems like they messed around with some things around the vault, here: adding more to the area by cutting into the space reserved for fuel tanks, making the bulkheads more durable... way beyond what a normal passenger ship could possibly need.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Captain Harris denied.

“And even though it hurt efficiency, you swapped out the workers daily,” Mao went on. “Was it so they wouldn’t realize what they were doing?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. The upgrades we ran last year were just about modernizing our fire prevention systems,” Captain Harris insisted staunchly. “Besides, I’m just an employee of the cruise company. I don’t have any control over ship alterations.”

“Not in any public capacity, no,” Mao agreed. “But there’s no way that you, as Captain, didn’t know about the armed guards, or about this section of the ship, right?”

The man remained silent.

“And we know that your company’s bigwigs got a big payoff from *someone.* There’s no paper trail connecting you to the foundation in question, but money can always be traced.”

It was like a scene from a crime drama. Mao was the detective, and Harris

was the culprit—which would make Kaname a random audience member struggling to follow along. “What are you talking about?” she asked.

Mao shrugged in response. “I think whatever’s in this vault is a lot more valuable than smuggled goods,” she said. “Probably something important to Amalgam...”

Harris’s shoulders tensed up.

“See? Written all over his face.” Mao grinned. “And then there’s the way you looked at Kaname earlier... You don’t really think of her as one of your ‘precious passengers,’ do you? It’s almost as if you knew about her ahead of time.”

Harris said nothing, his face now white as a sheet. His fingers and jaw were trembling, his eyes were opened wide, and sweat had begun to bead across his forehead and neck.

“I think you know by now, don’t you? Who we are...” Sousuke, who had previously been silent, now spoke up solemnly. “Sunan, Ariake, Perio, Hong Kong... You’ve always had us playing defense, but we’ve finally regained the initiative. Accept that, and cooperate.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t know anything. This is all ludicrous,” Harris whispered, after emitting a deep sigh. Then, a split-second later, he was moving, throwing himself at the unsuspecting Kaname. He was holding a small knife in one hand, which he must have smuggled in under his uniform hat.

Frozen, Kaname felt her mouth drop open. He reached for her collar, but Sousuke was faster. He knocked Harris’s arm aside with his shotgun’s stock, then plunged a fist hard into his exposed solar plexus. Harris let out a grunt, then collapsed to his knees.

Sousuke then kicked him in the face, which sent him into a crumpled, coughing heap. “This is who this man really is,” he declared. On his hands and knees, Harris let out a whine. Even Kaname, who was always kicking Sousuke around, was stunned by this barbaric treatment.

“Boy, what a sad way to show your true colors,” Mao lamented with a shrug. “Thought you could take her hostage, huh? Too bad. Guess the jig is up on your

gentleman act.”

“That’s right,” Sousuke agreed. “It was your actions that were truly ludicrous.”

“Ugh...” Harris groaned.

Sousuke knelt down in front of the man. “I can imagine why you would want to get my school involved. You thought you could use our students as hostages to force Chidori to do something, correct?” He must have been right, because Harris gritted his teeth and glared at his captors.

“But remember this...” Sousuke grabbed him by the collar and pulled him in close, pointing the knife he’d stolen at Harris’s neck. “If you lay one finger on anyone from this school—not just Chidori—I will personally skin you alive and watch you bleed to death,” he promised solemnly. “Do you understand? I will subject you to pain and despair beyond your wildest imaginings. Don’t assume Mithril is some naive band of do-gooders. We know exactly how you people do things, too. Don’t forget that.”

Harris remained silent, his face ashen from fear.

Perhaps detecting the deadly aura radiating from Sousuke, Tessa squirmed nervously. “Sagara-san is rather frightening...” she observed.

“He *is* being weirdly intense...” Kaname agreed.

“Hunger must be making him cranky...” Tessa suggested in response.

“Yeah, he does seem a little pissier than usual...”

The whispered conversation was occurring right next to Sousuke, and his eyebrow twitched as he overheard them. “Chidori,” he said at last. “I am currently attempting to intimidate a hostage. Would you please be quiet?”

His request caused Kaname to snap again. Puffing out her cheeks, she said, “Why am I the only one you chewed out?”

“What? W-well, I—”

“She’s exactly right! You must discard your biases and scold me as well!” Tessa interrupted.

“Why should I—”

“You’re always on eggshells around me, Sagara-san!”

“That’s not the problem, is it?!” Sousuke demanded in exasperation.

“It *is* the problem!” Tessa insisted. “You always do it! Why am I always the one left out?”

“You know, Tessa—”

“Would you two please—”

As the three-way yelling started up again, Mao pulled a handgun from under her vest, then silently fired it into the ceiling. There was an ear-splitting clang, and dust sprinkled down on them. Silence reigned again as Mao returned her handgun to its holster and cleared her throat. “Look, you three. This conversation is going nowhere.”

“Right...” Kaname and Tessa responded in unison.

“Anyway, Captain,” Mao continued. “Please open the safe.”

“What? But I can’t open it...” Tessa protested.

“Not *you,* Captain! The other captain!” Mao fumed.

Tessa just tapped her fingers together meekly. “Oh... I was only... joking.”

“Sheesh...” Mao muttered, mussing up her hair to express her frustration. Kaname and Tessa decided to move a little distance away, to avoid another deflation of the needed intensity, as she and Sousuke resumed their attempts to intimidate Harris.

“Anyway, open it, please,” Mao said as she dragged Captain Harris over and sat him in front of the vault’s console.

“I... I can’t. I can’t open it,” Harris said, looking flustered as he read the screen display.

“Come on,” Mao scoffed. “Cut out the stall tactics, would you?”

“It’s true, though!” Harris insisted. “The safe’s electromagnetic lock has already switched to emergency mode. It won’t accept my passcode.”

“Oh, really? I guess I’ll have to drag it out of you, then.” Mao pointed her submachine gun’s muzzle at Harris’s right knee. “I won’t kill you right away;

we'll start with a little warning shot. Right, Sousuke?"

"That does seem appropriate," he agreed.

"I'll count to three."

Harris panicked and cowered. "P-Please believe me. I'm not—"

"One."

"I'm not lying. Once it's in this mode—"

"Two."

"L-Listen to me! There's nothing I can do to open—"

"Three."

As Harris desperately protested, Mao fired three muffled gunshots at his knee. Harris let out a falsetto scream and fell onto his backside. "Ahhh! Ah! Ahh! Did you shoot me?! You stupid bitch!"



“Now, the left one,” she decided, and began to adjust her aim.

“No, please! Stop! I can’t open it, I’m telling you! Dammit! I mean it! I mean it...” Mao and Sousuke exchanged a glance as they watched Harris, gripping his right knee and sniffling. They seemed somehow disappointed.

“Well, Sousuke?” she asked her compatriot.

“It doesn’t look like a performance,” Sousuke said, giving his opinion with cool-headed insight.

“I guess it’s not gonna be that easy, huh?” Mao asked with a sigh.

“Just as expected,” he agreed. “Let’s get to work.”

“Right. Have Speck and the guys bring the machinery in,” Mao said, making the order official.

“Roger.” Sousuke reached for the switch on his radio and contacted the team.

“Hey, big guy! You gonna sit there crying all day? Get up!” Mao said, kicking Harris roughly with her toes as he rolled around on the floor.

Meanwhile, the sound of the gunshot had brought Tessa and Kaname running from the other end of the hall. They protested immediately when they saw what was happening.

“M-Mao-san?!” Kaname exclaimed in shock. “I know he’s a bad guy, but this is too far!”

“Melissa? I understand that this is necessary, but at least treat his injury!” Tessa insisted.

Mao scowled at them. “‘Treat his injury?’” she scoffed. “At the most, he needs some ointment.” They both looked at her, confused. “Look closer,” she suggested laconically. “Rubber bullets.” There was no blood on Harris’s shot knee. If she’d used a live round, there would have been a pool of crimson on the floor by now.

“It hurts, it hurts, it hurts!! A doctor... call a doctor, please!” The only one who didn’t seem to realize this, then, was Harris himself, who continued to writhe overdramatically.

Soon enough, the members of the other teams that had secured the Pacific Chrysalis began to wander up to the vault. Some of them seemed to recognize Kaname, and called out things like, “Hey, Kaname!” and, “How you doing?” But because they were wearing masks, she didn’t know who was who. Corporal Yang and another soldier led off Captain Harris, who was still whining indignantly about the pain he was in. They’d probably continue his interrogation in another section of the ship. Electronic devices large and small were rolled in on a cart; these were probably meant for opening the vault door.

“Are you gonna crack the safe now?” Kaname asked.

“Yep,” Mao told her. “We’ll just have to pick the lock. Directed explosives won’t even dent the bulkhead around it; it’s about on par with the reactor of a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier.” Mao used a specialty tool to remove the console panel, then started fiddling with the electronics inside.

“Is that impressive?” Kaname wanted to know.

“Affirmative. A carrier’s nuclear reactor is designed to survive even a direct hit from an anti-ship missile unscathed. The metal they’re using here is close to that,” Sousuke said.

“I was hoping to show Kaname what was in the safe, but... this is gonna take some time. Why don’t you rejoin your friends for now?” Mao asked.

“Fine,” Kaname agreed. “But what’s in there, anyway?”

“We don’t know yet,” Tessa said. “But it’s clear that they were after you, so it’s most likely related to your nature as a Whispered. They probably want to put you into a TAROS, or some other research apparatus... We’re going to interrogate the captain, and break into that safe tonight. We’ll collect all the data we can, then withdraw from this ship.”

“Oh. So that’s why you’re here, Tessa?” Kaname finally understood. Tessa was quite capable as a submarine commander... but the minute you threw her out into the field, she became a useless klutz. It was one thing when trouble arose spontaneously, like in Ariake, but it was unusual for her to join a planned operation like this.

“That’s right,” Tessa agreed, puffing out her chest. “They’ll need my

intelligence to analyze what's inside."

"I think you just wanted to dress up as a maid and mess around," Kaname told her acridly.

Tessa slumped over.

Kaname was wondering if she'd gone too far, when Mao chimed in with agreement. "Kaname's right, Tessa. You can't complain about being seen that way, after how you've acted today."

"I—"

"Please don't trip up your soldiers in the field, all right, *Colonel*?" Ignoring Tessa's pouting in response, Mao plugged a few cables to her laptop, then spoke into her radio. "Uruz-2 to Kaun-6. Cut the power to C35."

All the lights in the ceiling suddenly flicked off, then turned on again. Mao gazed at her PC's holo-screen and clicked her tongue. "Ah, it's no use. Forget it... Put it back on," she ordered. "Knew it'd be an independent circuit... ugh. I'll just have to work my way through each security level. I'll need Dana's help, too. For connection... yeah, V-channels and G-channels are too slow. I'll need the wire. You brought the drum of fiberoptic, right? Call a turtle to the starboard side..."

Kaname and the others stood by silently, listening to Mao's jargon-laden speech.

"Yeah," Mao went on. "I want a wired connection to the turtle. Huh? The commander says no? Say it's Tessa's order, then."

Naturally, Tessa was annoyed at having her name used in vain. "Melissa! Do not arbitrarily invoke my authority!"

"Okay, fine," Mao said agreeably. "Can I have permission?"

"W-Well—"

"Kind of in a hurry, here." Mao waved her hand in annoyance.

Tessa hesitated for a second, then, with a sulky scowl, said, "You have my permission."

“Right, thanks.” With that, Mao turned her attention back to the job at hand. “Speck, is the ‘stethoscope’ ready?”

“Ready,” Corporal Speck reported, playing around with the machine that used ultrasonic waves to determine the layout of the blocked-off room.

“Then let’s try it out. Go on, Kaname, go rejoin the hostages,” Mao ordered. “Sousuke, make sure she gets there safe. Tessa, don’t loiter around here; you’ll end up tripping over the cables. Go somewhere you won’t be in the way. If you need something to do, you can get me a sandwich.” Ignoring Tessa’s attempts at protest, Mao clapped her hands together. “Everyone ready?! We’re short on time, so let’s get this done!”

The members of the safe-cracking team all shouted, “Let’s do it!” in response.

3: Two Captains

24 December, 2052 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

In front of the vault, Pacific Chrysalis

The safecracking looked like it would take some time, so on Mao's suggestion, Kaname decided to go back to her schoolmates. Sousuke hurried to accompany her.

"It's fine," Kaname told him stiffly. "I can get back by myself."

"No," he insisted. "I'll walk you."

Just then, Kaname realized that Tessa, who'd been sulking over Mao's patronizing treatment, was now glancing over at her. She couldn't explain why, but it made her feel guilty. The treatment she got from Sousuke really did feel special, by comparison. He was biased in her favor, and that wasn't fair at all. With that feeling nagging at her, she repeated, "I said it's fine."

"No, I'll walk you."

Sousuke refused to give in, so Kaname decided to give up on arguing and just start walking. Sousuke quietly accompanied her. The two walked away from the vault, then headed for the elevator that would return them to the upper deck.

I'm a pretty awful person, Kaname found herself thinking. Just an hour ago, she'd been saying all sorts of unfair things to Kyoko. "I don't care about that jerk," and, "He doesn't really like me at all." But now that she was seeing the bigger picture, she was realizing that she was the real jerk in this situation. And yet, she hadn't apologized even once. She'd been attacking him every step of the way, and she'd even behaved cruelly to Tessa.

She had been angry and sarcastic, and even though Tessa was in a much more difficult position than she was, Kaname had actually been jealous of her. *I really don't get it,* she thought in bewilderment. Why am I always like this?

“Maybe I’m just spoiled...” Kaname muttered to herself. *That could be it. It could also be that today’s a special day. Or maybe I just don’t feel right when he’s not with me...*

Still, she rationalized. *I can’t let things stay like this forever. Isn’t that what I learned on that rainy day two months ago? Besides, I’m not sixteen anymore.* With all that in mind, Kaname decided to speak up.

“Hey,” she said.

“Yes?” Sousuke inquired.

“Mm... nothing,” Kaname mumbled, chickening out.

“I see.”

Another long silence followed. They stopped in front of the elevator, pressed the call button to go up... and once more, Kaname forced herself to speak. “Hey,” she tried again.

“Yes?”

“Everything’s kind of turned into a mess, but...”

“Yeah.”

“I think I was... happy that you came, Sousuke,” she managed, then gently took his sleeve. She wasn’t yet ready to hold his hand.

A longer silence followed.

“Is... that weird?” Kaname asked. “Coming out of nowhere?”

“No... I don’t think it’s weird.” This time, it was Sousuke’s turn to stumble over his words. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“R-Really?”

“Yeah... hmm?” Sousuke cast a glance at the corner that joined the elevator hall to the corridor.

“What is it?” Kaname wanted to know.

“Nothing... Not an issue.”

Kaname tilted her head at him.

“It’s all right, I think,” Sousuke said reassuringly.

The elevator door opened with a ding. Once they were inside, Kaname got a second wind. “Um, say. You want to hit up the observation deck?” she asked, in an energetic voice. “There’s no hurry to get back to the others, right?” She held her finger over the topmost button, then waited to see his reaction.

“It’s true that there likely won’t be any more violence tonight, so it’s probably not an issue...” Sousuke pondered for a moment. “It will be cold outside, though.”

“That’s okay,” Kaname told him. “We won’t stay out too long.”

“I see. Wait just one minute.” Sousuke flipped his radio on and started a conversation with someone. It was all code names and jargon, and Kaname had no idea what any of it meant. At last, he said, “Uruz-7, roger. Thank you.” Then he shut off his radio and said to her, “Let’s go.”

Kaname broke out in a smile.

Corporal Yang of the SRT and Private Wu of the PRT walked along towards the crew quarters block, dragging Captain Harris along with them. It was a bare-bones corridor that went on and on. Since the area wasn’t used by passengers, it was full of exposed pipes and girders. There were no high-class furnishings to be found here, not even carpet.

“So, Corporal,” Wu was saying, “I told this little girl, ‘Listen, just because it’s Christmas, doesn’t mean you can go wandering around town at this hour. You never know what kind of scum might try to pick you up.’”

“Right,” Corporal Yang agreed.

“And, well... she was just eleven or twelve years old, you know? And she grins at me like Master Sergeant Mao...”

“She’s a lieutenant now, actually.”

“...And she pulls this huge revolver out of her bag. It’s a .38-caliber, five-inch barrel. She says, ‘Get lost, soldier boy. You’re getting in the way of my business.’”

“Wow...”

“It was an awful town,” Wu grumbled. “Makes a man doubt the existence of God. The only decent hospital was in my base, too.”

Yang and Wu were sharing Christmas memories.

“C’mon, Wu, don’t you have any more cheerful stories? This is just depressing... Hey, Captain. Can’t you walk any faster?” Yang said leisurely to Harris, who was moving sluggishly along, hands cuffed behind him, dragging his right leg.

“I got shot in the leg, remember? You could have at least prepared a stretcher!” Harris, still worked up about the shooting, snapped back at him.

“Listen to this needy old codger...” Wu put in. “Why’d we get stuck with this guy, Corporal?”

“No idea.” Yang sighed. “Darn it. I wish I was on Kurz’s team.”

“They get to go to a party full of teenage girls...”

While Wu and Yang were grumbling to each other, the masked Kurz Weber was standing on stage in the ballroom, singing passionately into the mike as he played the guitar. “Wow! Take me out trench! A fat cat in front of Maya says that! Yeah!” The Jindai High School students were cheering, clapping their hands and swaying to the beat.

“Wow! He’s really good!”

“Eee! That masked guy is so hot!”

“He sounds a little like a foreigner I met once...” Kyoko muttered, but nobody was listening to her.

“Thank you! Come on, everybody!”

Yang and Wu just sighed as they walked down the dark corridor, as if they really could hear Kurz carrying on.

“He brought a guitar, right?”

“Yeah, he knew he was gonna do it. That guy’s nuts.”

“And easy to flatter...”

“And always ready to show off...”

Just then, a noise came from a crew cabin nearby. It sounded like a pen falling to the floor, followed by a rustling of clothes.

“Uruz-9 to Uruz-1. Any friendlies in D30?” Yang whispered into the radio after a pause. He had already turned his submachine gun towards the cabin. It was loaded with nonlethal rubber bullets, but they would still hurt when they hit—a few rounds fired into someone’s face would feel like a pounding from a pro boxer. Wu pulled Harris in closer, while keeping an eye out in the other direction.

The number of hostages their teams had reported in was a match for crew and passenger rosters. There shouldn’t be anyone else wandering around in the ship besides them.

Lieutenant Clouseau responded immediately. “Uruz-9. Negative. Report your status.”

“We just heard a sound in one of the cabins,” Yang responded. “Investigating now.”

“No, leave that to someone else. Prioritize transporting the captain,” Clouseau ordered.

Yang clicked his tongue. “C’mon, they’ll get away by then... I’ll check it myself. If you don’t hear from me in one minute, surround the block. Out.”

“Wait—”

Yang turned off the radio, then signaled for Wu to stand by, and approached the cabin in question.

There was more faint rustling.

Yang took a deep breath, then opened the door, and stepped swiftly into the cabin. The only sign of life there was a white cat on the bed. Had someone brought it on board?

“It’s a cat,” Yang said after a long pause.

“A cat? Heaven’s sake...”

Yang slumped over, then turned back in the door to face Wu and the captain. Just then, he saw a large, muscle-bound man, holding a bucket over his head, appear behind Wu and Harris. “Wu, your six—”

His warning came too late; the bucket crashed down on Wu’s head, sending him stumbling and gurgling beneath the dirty water. “What?!”

“Wu?!” Though Wu and Harris were in his firing line, Yang didn’t hesitate to unload. They were just rubber bullets, anyway—they wouldn’t kill anybody.

“Ow, ow, ow!” screamed Wu, who was now wearing the bucket, while Harris hit the floor.

The attacker used Wu as a shield, then grabbed a wire hanging from the wall. “Take this, you damned terrorist!!” the man screamed, and pulled the wire with all his might. There was a metal clinking sound.

Yang was about to shout... and then another bucket fell down from the ceiling and landed straight on the top of his head. A limp crack filled the hallway.

Yang’s last thought before losing consciousness was, “I think I’ve seen this setup before...”

After giving a full beating to the be-bucketed terrorist—Wu, it seemed his name was—with his mop, Sailor cried out, “W-Well?! How do you like that?!” He then kicked the terrorist in the butt. The action was met with faint writhing and a moan.

“Hey, you! Are you the captain?” Sailor helped up the crew member, whose hands were cuffed behind his back.

“Ugh...”

“Don’t worry. I’m a friend. Killy B. Sailor, Commander, United States Navy. I’m the famous captain of the USS Pasadena, a tough-as-nails veteran who just happened to be on board. Once I get this all under control, I want you to introduce me to the media as, ‘the true patriot and iron man, Captain Sailor.’”

“R-Right...” Captain Harris agreed shakily.

Commander Sailor picked up the enemy’s machine gun and checked the remaining ammunition. *Yeah, this’ll do fine,* he told himself. *The bullets aren’t the same color as the ones I used in standard training, but a real sea dog doesn’t sweat the details.* “First, we need to make tracks. They’ll send reinforcements soon enough. You can walk, right? Actually, you’d better run.”

“W-Wait, sir,” Captain Harris managed to interject. “Could you take off my handcuffs, first?”

“Oh, for the love of... Fine, hold out your hands.” Commander Sailor pawed around the terrorist’s body, found a bunch of keys, and unlocked the captain’s cuffs. “Better? Okay, let’s go.”

“No, I need to find a radio and contact the outside,” Captain Harris announced bravely. “You should go on without me.”

“What are you talking about? You’re not safe alone,” Commander Sailor scoffed. “If you’re going for a radio, I’m coming with you.”

“I’m grateful for the sentiment, but no.” For some reason, the captain was adamant about going it alone. “This ship is like my second home; I know all the best hiding places. And we should avoid the chance of both of us getting caught at once.”

“Hmm...”

“We can meet up later,” Captain Harris suggested. “Do you know the shopping center? It has plenty of places to hole up and hide.”

“Understood,” Commander Sailor agreed gruffly. “Take care.”

“See you later,” the captain said. Then he turned around and started running. Sailor had no way of seeing the slight smile on his face.

Tessa returned to the vault from the corridor near the elevator hall. Mao, who was working busily on the lock, said to her immediately, “Hey, Tessa, quit hovering. I’ll call you once I’m in, so go somewhere and sit tight. Sheesh, you’re clumsy enough as it is...” She was so focused on the display, she didn’t even

spare Tessa a glance. None of the other subordinates present paid her any mind, either. They were all too focused on their own tasks:

"I'm sorry, Colonel. Please get out of the way."

"Colonel, ma'am. You're in the way, standing there."

"Sorry, Colonel, you're distracting me."

That's what they all said. It annoyed her at first, but after being treated that way again and again, Tessa eventually lost the will to protest. She really was clumsy, after all, and she didn't know anything about picking locks. The maid outfit she'd found so charming when she'd showed it to everyone before the mission now seemed silly and childish.

She tried asking if she should make some tea, and the response was an indifferent, "Hmm, if you want." She asked if they'd like chamomile, and the response was an indifferent, "Whatever you like." She felt like an absolute nuisance.

With a stinging sense of loneliness running through her, Tessa slumped over and headed for the crew kitchen on the same floor. It was a few minutes' walk away, and turned out to be completely bare bones. She looked around for a tea set, but all she could find were coffee mugs.

Tessa sighed in resignation as she pulled out the small tin of herbal tea she'd brought with her. She took off her sunglasses and rubbed her eyes. She wasn't going to cry, of course, but she did feel miserable. *Come on*, she told herself, *We're on a mission right now.* She was the one acting unreasonably, here. She needed to stop acting like they were on a picnic, and appreciate her subordinates' focus.

Still... I just feel so invisible. Today is supposed to be my special day, yet even Sousuke... He just ran off with that girl. And then in the elevator hall, they—

As she was gloomily filling the kettle with water, she got a call through her small earpiece radio. "Uruz-1 to all units. We have a situation." It was from Lieutenant Clouseau on the bridge. "Uruz-9 and Kaun-28 were attacked near B19. Injuries were light for both, but the captain they were escorting was kidnapped. Be on your guard. Uruz-3's team has the area surrounded, but he

may have already escaped—”

Someone had attacked Corporal Yang and taken Captain Harris. Tessa cringed as she heard the announcement. Trouble had arrived. She had to cast aside her childish woes and get a grip.

Clouseau’s announcement continued. “—The attacker appears to be a passenger. Maybe he thinks he’s being a hero. Don’t kill him, or them. I repeat: do not kill the rogue element. The man who took Captain Harris is Caucasian, six feet tall, wearing a suit, with short black hair and a muscular physique. He stole a firearm, but it only contains nonlethal rubber rounds. I repeat. The attacker is Caucasian, six feet tall, wearing a suit—”

Tessa’s attention was snatched away from Clouseau’s communication. A man had just leaped into the kitchen. He was six feet tall, wearing a suit, Caucasian, with a muscular physique, and short black hair. On top of that, she had to say, he looked a bit like Arnold Schwartzenegger when he acted in comedies.

In other words, he looked just like the man from Clouseau’s report.

The man pointed a submachine gun (probably Yang’s) at her, and barked at the top of his voice, “Okay! Don’t you move, filthy terrorist!” Then he stopped and narrowed his eyes suspiciously at Tessa: a young girl, standing frozen in front of the stove, holding a large kettle and two mugs, and dressed as a maid.

“...Ah,” she said tactfully.

“Aren’t you part of the crew? What the hell are you doing here?” he asked, whipping his gun in various directions, with strangely exaggerated sweeps.

“Er... who are you?” Tessa tried again.

“It’s okay! I’m a friend,” Commander Sailor told her reassuringly. “Just a brave passenger who happened to be aboard. I just got done finishing off two of the terrorists!”

“What?”

“I also saved the captain, but he ran off on his own,” Sailor continued. “I’m a little worried... but eh, I’m sure he’ll make it out fine.”

He’d let Captain Harris—the Amalgam collaborator—run free? “Wh-What

were you thinking?” Tessa demanded to know.

“Oh, don’t be a buzzkill. I’ve got the situation under control.”

“No, I don’t mean that—”

“Anyway, it stinks that my leading lady has to be a damned kid, but I guess beggars can’t be choosers,” Sailor grumbled to himself. “It’s dangerous here. Follow me.”

“Er... I don’t understand what you’re talking abo— ow, that hurts!” Tessa exclaimed in surprise. “Let me go! Wh-Where are we—”

Sailor began to march them along swiftly. “We’re getting out of here!” he exclaimed enthusiastically. “The terrorists are nearby! Good thing I found you first, or things would’ve gotten X-rated fast!”

“I don’t think that’s true. Um, please— ow, don’t yank my arm!” Tessa begged. “Stop this! Are you listening to me? Ow, ow...”

“Toughen up! This is life or death, okay? Pain comes with the territory! Get running, sailor! Show some balls!”

“I don’t have any balls!”

Tessa didn’t even have time to grab the submachine gun or sunglasses she’d left in the back of the kitchen. Dragged unwillingly by the hand and tripping over her unfamiliar high heels, she stumbled along behind him. All she could do as they went along was continue to protest, with tears in her eyes.



Same Timeframe

Observation Deck, Pacific Chrysalis

Kaname had been hoping for a romantic atmosphere, but the observation deck turned out to be dark, cold, and desolate. The bayside lights were no longer visible, the wind was biting cold, and the sound of the waves was more haunting than enchanting. This was the Sea of Japan sung about in enka ballads.

Feels more like the setup to a lovers' suicide... The thrill she'd felt in the elevator was long gone. The scene, which was as far away from Christmas as you could imagine, had left Kaname completely numb.

"It's a fine night," Sousuke said, in complete defiance of her feelings. "I find climates like this very relaxing. Moonless nights are your ally, when it comes to running night raids. What do you think, Chidori?"

"What do I think?" Kaname parroted back. Still, it was unusual for Sousuke to be the one to speak first. She wondered if he was trying to cheer her up. "Well, it's pretty cold, right?"

"Afghani winters are colder," Sousuke shrugged.

"And windy."

"Strong winds are frequently our ally. They mask our footfalls from enemy infantry."

"I wish there were some nice light displays on the deck," said Kaname, trying to change tack.

"We're on alert," Sousuke countered. "Illumination would be foolish."

Kaname fell sourly silent. She just couldn't get the conversation rolling, even though she was usually so good at facilitating these things.

Sousuke cleared his throat. "I'm reminded. Today is Christmas."

"Huh?"

"In accordance with the custom of giving presents on Christmas, allow me to

give you this.” Sousuke pulled a fountain pen from his pocket.

Kaname looked at it in confusion.

“It appears to be an ordinary fountain pen,” he went on. “But it contains a miniature stun gun. The output is 200,000 volts, but it only has the battery capacity for one or two uses. Don’t forget that.”

“Oh. Um... thanks,” Kaname said listlessly. The initial offer had made her heart skip a beat, but its result was frankly anti-climactic. Another self-defense tool—He’d given her any number of ‘platonic’ presents like this in the past. As this was supposed to be a *Christmas present*... well, she appreciated the sentiment, but couldn’t help feeling let down.

Again unaware of her feelings, Sousuke was embarking on a breathless explanation of how the weapon was used, when suddenly he got a call on his radio. “Wait a minute,” he told her. Then after a brief exchange, Sousuke grimaced.

“What’s wrong?” Kaname asked.

“Trouble,” he told her shortly. “I need to get to work.”

“Ah.”

“You should return,” he suggested. “I’ll escort you back to your classmates.”

The terrorists weren’t as good as Sailor had imagined them to be. They were pretty well organized, but their aim was crap, and they seemed surprisingly timid. It wasn’t just a hesitance to open fire—they actually seemed worried that they might hurt him or the maid. They’d get him surrounded like pros, but then in some critical moment, they’d always panic or back down.

“Don’t move! Stay where you— wait, Colonel? Owwww!” A terrorist that appeared around the corner of the hall took a hit from Sailor’s gun and fled.

“Graaaah!” Sailor howled, firing the submachine gun in his right hand and dragging the maid girl along with his left. “That’ll show you, you terrorist bastards! Try your worst! I’ll take you all on!”

“Erm, I won’t object to you fighting, if you wish, but could you please release

me first?” Tessa requested.

“Yeah, fight me!” Sailor yelled, completely ignoring her. “Man-to-man! Sailor’s on the job!”

“He’s not even listening...” she sighed to herself.

“You sons of bitches! Take this! And this!” Sailor couldn’t even hear the maid’s pleas as he first sent his enemies scattering, then ran past them down the corridor.

After getting shot, the terrorists typically said things like, “Dammit, we’re taking it easy on him and it’s making him cocky...” but again, he wasn’t listening.

“Ahh, Corporal Howard— let me go, let me go!” The maid girl continued struggling, trying to escape Sailor’s grasp. He ignored her, turned to face an enemy appearing behind him, and fired. Just then, he heard a dull ‘whump.’

“Well? Don’t underestimate the United States Navy! You people are— hmm?” The maid had hit her head on a nearby pillar and fallen limp against his arm. She looked like a cartoon character seeing stars. Sailor stared at her for a moment, then shook it off. “Ah, whatever. Anyway, catch me if you can! You damned terrorist bastards!!” Still propping up the unconscious maid, Sailor kept firing and escaped from the block.

Same Timeframe

Passage C, Deck 3, Pacific Chrysalis

Harris held his breath and kept moving as he listened to the gunshots ring out in the distance. He’d nearly been discovered several times already, but of course, this was his ship, and he knew it by heart. It was full of passages that wouldn’t be marked on normal maps; largely maintenance spaces, hidden behind decorative fixtures, which made it possible for him to outwit his enemies and flee.

After all that, at last, he was able to calm down and think. No, he didn’t even have to think. *This is not good,* Harris realized. His plan had seemed perfect, yet they’d completely outmaneuvered him. He wasn’t expecting those people to

raid the ship and take all the passengers hostage. It was utterly incredible.

At this rate, they'd not only expose the contents of the vault, but steal all kinds of data, too. Even if he got away and managed to hide... there was no way Amalgam would forgive this. They'd kill him, for sure.

So, what do I do now? Harris asked himself. Let them have their way, then go into hiding once he returned to port? No, that wouldn't work... It would be difficult for a man acting alone to escape their grasp.

He'd have to make an unquestioned show of loyalty, while bringing them a present important enough to protect him from further sanction. To do that, first, he'd need to make contact. Then, he'd need to activate "them."

As Harris moved through the cramped space above the ceiling, several times, he heard cautious footsteps approaching from close by; the enemy must be searching for him. When he finally reached the lifeboats, he couldn't believe that he'd made it without being seen.

Truly, a Christmas miracle. God is watching over me! Harris thought cheerfully. He climbed into a lifeboat on the port-side observation deck, then groped around in the dark until he found its survival kit. Inside the sturdy case was a satellite transceiver. He didn't have an exclusive secret channel, but he remembered the emergency frequency and code. He manipulated the radio uncertainly, until he got in touch with an Amalgam-backed relay station.

"Emergency message. It's top priority. Hurry!" Harris hissed.

His direct superior responded shortly. "What is it?" came the executive's electronically modified voice.

"Mr. Gold, I'm in trouble. Mithril got the drop on me. They took over my ship, and now they're trying to break into the vault."

The man on the radio hummed thoughtfully, as if carefully considering this information. Then he said, "So, what's your plan?"

"W-Well—"

"You're about to expose important tech and information to an enemy," Mr. Gold said, cutting Harris off. "You used a dangerous channel to contact me, and

you’re wasting my time to report it. Spit it out.”

“T-To capture the girl and escape,” Harris rushed to say. “If you’ll come and retrieve me. Please.”

“Can you do it?” Mr. Gold questioned.

“Yes,” Harris replied. There was no other answer he could give. “I’d also like permission to use the machines we loaded into the pantry the other day. If I can use those to distract the enemy, it will increase my chances of success.” A brief silence followed. To Harris, it felt like forever.

“Very well,” Mr. Gold finally allowed. “This kind of situation is exactly the reason we included them. As for the vault’s contents... there’s nothing to be done. I’ll explain things to the other executives; you focus on your job. I’ll inform you of the process for retrieval later.”

“Th-Thank you. I’ll make it work, I promise. Please know you have my undying loyalty—”

“I know. Hang up already.” The channel was closed before Harris could even respond.

Same Timeframe

Somewhere in East Asia

After Harris’s transmission ended, the various executive holograms attending the conference voiced their disapproval.

“What an absolute fool.”

“Doesn’t he realize the situation he’s put us in?”

“We can safely assume that the message was intercepted.”

“What a useful subordinate he’s been.”

Each of these statements was rife with sarcasm.

Mr. Gold just snorted, his expression unchanging. “I won’t deny that Harris is a fool,” he admitted. “But we can’t be certain that it was the plan that was

flawed.”

“Nonsense. It’s clear we should have just abducted her while she was going about her daily life. It’s this roundabout nonsense that—”

“I agree. This has entered the realm of the absurd.”

“Why didn’t you report this plan to us, anyway? This could be taken as a breach of trust, you know.”

“If I’d told you, you’d have been against it,” Mr. Gold said with feigned innocence. “Leaving the girl at large gains us nothing. Don’t you think that the recent incident with Mr. Iron proved that?”

“Iron, eh? That damned traitor...”

“He basically killed Mr. Kalium.”

“That’s right. And there’s something else about this that doesn’t add up: why is it that out of everyone in Mithril, only the West Pacific Battle Group had such strong suspicions about that ship? Even Mithril’s intelligence division, led by General Amit, judged the Pacific Chrysalis a safe haven. Yet the Tuatha de Danaan managed to gain confirmation through their own solo investigation—with sufficient confidence to get them to greenlight a plan as bold as this. How did this happen? The most plausible explanation would be that someone leaked the information directly to them.”

One of them clicked his tongue. “Iron, I bet. Sounds like something he’d do.”

“He did try to burn down Hong Kong for the fun of it,” someone agreed.

The executives all shifted restlessly in their seats, perhaps imagining the thin, mocking smile of the dead man, Gauron. In retrospect, his Amalgam executive codename had taken on a bitterly ironic twist. Iron couldn’t mix with mercury—in other words, it couldn’t be part of an amalgam.

“So? What do we do now? Those Mithril bandits are going to get away with every scrap of information on that ship.”

“True. The facility doesn’t have much value to us anymore, but... I don’t like the idea of just letting them have their way.”

“You make it sound like you’ve already taken measures.”

“I’ve dispatched three flying craft to the area. Each has a Leviathan inside. They should arrive soon.”

“Going to sink the ship?”

“Of course.”

“What about Chidori Kaname? It’s all for nothing if she dies,” one said, and then they heard a chuckle. The hologram executives that ringed the round table all turned to look at one seat. All the seat contained were white letters that read “audio only.”

“What’s so funny, Mr. Silver?”

“She won’t die,” came the cool, elegant voice of a young man.

“How can you be so sure? Because she’s a Whispered, like you?”

“I’m afraid that’s not one of our powers, no. Let’s just call it... yes, a gut feeling,” Mr. Silver replied.

“Hmm...”

“Still... we do have those machines stored away in the ship’s pantry. Letting Harris activate them will make his job much easier.”

“The anti-personnel autonomous weapons?”

“Yes, twelve Alastors. They’ve been programmed to find, protect, and escape with Chidori Kaname.”

“You think those killer dolls are capable of such high-level judgments?”

“I wouldn’t call it high-level,” Mr. Silver denied. “Their ROEs are excessively simple.”

“What are their ROEs?”

“Why don’t you ask Mr. Gold?” The young man’s voice had a teasing tone, though there was a sliver of ice behind it.

The group turned back to Mr. Gold, who responded, indifferently, “‘Eliminate all obstacles. Kill anyone who gets in your way.’ That’s all.”

24 December, 2136 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Pacific Chrysalis, Sea near Izu Archipelago

By the time Tessa had regained consciousness, the shooting had stopped. They must have completely shaken them off. She felt a little woozy from the blow to the head, but insisted she could walk on her own, and continued on, pulled along by the 'rogue element.' Unfortunately, she seemed to have dropped her radio in the earlier tumult.

While stumbling along, she managed to inquire as to the man's identity. His name was Sailor, he was an American, and he had come here with one of his subordinates for Christmas break.

"So, honey, what's *your* name?" Sailor asked, looking both ways cautiously before turning a dark corner.

"Er... Mantissa. Teletha Mantissa," she said, giving him a fake name she used from time to time.

"I see. Well, honey, stay close behind me. Don't worry, I'm a veteran. Those terrorists don't— hey, where are you going?" Tessa had begun striding in the other direction, but Sailor grabbed her by the back of the collar.

"W-Well, we had made our introductions, so I thought we might part ways here..." Tessa found it impossible to pry the large man off of her. She thought about calling out, but for some reason, this was one time when there were no allied footsteps drawing near. What she needed to do was get away and report the man's location to their teams.

"Don't be stupid!" Sailor growled at her. "Now, come on."

"Ahh, but... but I don't think we should go that way..." Tessa protested. Sailor was heading for the shipboard shopping center; it was the block they'd designated as being the most difficult to secure in their pre-mission discussion. The shopping center was large, with a complicated layout that compromised visibility. It had a lot of exits, too, so it would be easy to escape from, and it was loaded with resources that could be used to make traps.

"Why don't we go that way instead? I think it would be better for both of us..." She pointed towards the gym one deck up. That one was a dead end; her

allies would be able to corral Sailor and capture him quickly.

“That’s a dead end,” he told her. “We’d be trapped like rats.”

“Ohh... I see. Then why don’t you simply throw down your weapon and surrender? I don’t think they’re as villainous as you think they are, Sailor-san,” Tessa suggested.

Sailor’s response was a condescending snort. “You’re naive. They’re like the Devil himself, same as all terrorists. Some civilian maid couldn’t understand. Or what? Have you fought terrorists before?”

“Yes, I’m afraid I have. More times than I’d like to— ow!” Tessa let out a small cry as he bopped her on the head. “What are you doing?!” she challenged him, tears in her eyes.

“Don’t make fun of me, stupid!”

“I’m not!”

“I can tell you’re out of your depth, so just shut up and follow me,” Sailor told her. “Got that?! If you try to run, I’ll shoot you!”

“This is absurd...” Tessa grumbled, while considering her options. Perhaps, at this stage, it would be wiser to stay with him and try to keep the situation under control. She couldn’t get in touch with her allies just yet, but she might still get a chance to use a shipboard telephone.

From what she’d seen, the ground teams had been caught off-guard by the amateur’s rampage. But they weren’t incompetent, and they wouldn’t keep losing forever. Besides, they probably weren’t particularly worried about her, anyway...

“Ah, very well,” Tessa capitulated. “Let’s hide somewhere and wait for our chance.”

“Good, glad you see things my way. Now, let’s go.” Sailor started moving, finally, dragging the stalling Tessa along.

Once he had the despondent Yang and Wu in front of him, Lieutenant Clouseau found he’d lost the will to yell.

“There’s no excuse for how badly we’ve failed...”

“We’ll take any punishment you dish out...”

They were still in the place where the ambush had happened, a corridor in the crew block. Despite standing at full attention like proper soldiers, they seemed terrifyingly deflated.

“Your punishment can wait until after this is over. Go run security on the cargo hold.” At Clouseau’s order, Yang and Wu offered a salute, then ran off.

“He might not be cut out for it after all,” First Lieutenant Castello, who’d accompanied Clouseau, said after they were gone. He was the PRT’s commander, and had the call sign Uruz-3. He was in his mid-30s, of Latin descent, and lanky, with a goatee.

“Yang, you mean?” Clouseau clarified.

“Yeah. Any other SRT member would’ve neutralized that guy, even at the risk of killing him. But he couldn’t do it. It’s more than just a matter of being caught off-guard.”

“I did forbid them from causing casualties,” Clouseau said. “Maybe that’s why.”

“That’s no excuse,” Castello scoffed. “Being part of the SRT means ignoring orders if necessary, even if that gets you a reprimand. Though obviously, we can’t just tell them that...”

Clouseau said nothing in response.

“Yang has skill and experience, but he lacks the mindset needed,” Costello continued to argue. “We should drop him back to the PRT.”

“We’ll need Major Kalinin’s input to decide,” Clouseau told him. “When this operation is over—” Just then, he received a transmission. It was from Sousuke’s team, which was searching for the rogue element.

“Uruz-7 here. Sorry I’m late. Someone’s emptied out a lifeboat. They took a satellite transceiver. Be careful.” The line was staticky, due to an allied helicopter jamming satellite transmissions above.

“Uruz-1, roger. The de Danaan intercepted their message, and we’ve got a

Pave Mare jamming appropriate frequencies now. Don't worry about communications; expand the dragnet and get searching."

"Roger."

After Sousuke signed off, Clouseau clicked his tongue. "That's not good. In hide-and-seek, Harris has the advantage."

If this had been a normal ship, they'd probably be able to find Harris without much effort. But the Pacific Chrysalis was extremely large; it was effectively a floating city. They didn't have enough people to cover it all. And until the ship was secured, they'd need to spare most of their forces monitoring "hostages."

"Don't panic. From what I can see, the aggressor is a total amateur. He can't cause too much trouble," Castello was saying, but just then, they got a call from Mao.

"Uruz-2 here. More trouble. We've lost Ansuz. We found her things left in the crew kitchen. I think that wannabe John McClane took her."

Mao was referencing the protagonist of the movie *Die Hard*, which had been a big hit a while back. It was about a one-man army who fought his way through a building occupied by terrorists.

"We already know she's with the McClane-wannabe," Clouseau retorted sharply. "That's part of our trouble. Why did you let her out of your sight, anyway?"

"Well... ah, I screwed up!" Mao admitted. "The vault was giving me more trouble than I'd anticipated, and I got so tied up working on it..."

This reminder of their other problem prompted Clouseau to ask, "How much longer will it take?"

"I don't know," she said. "It might all go as scheduled, or we might be three hours late."

"Fantastic," Clouseau grumbled. "By that time, the Japanese Coast Guard will have us surrounded."

"I told you, I'm hurrying. I'm worried about Tessa, though... She really is clumsy and useless on land. Find her quick, okay?" Mao was apparently still

working on the vault as they spoke. Her words were brisk... but she also seemed distracted. She probably wanted to join the search herself.

“I know,” Clouseau told her. “Don’t worry about the colonel. Leave it to me and focus.”

“Thank you.”

With the transmission over, Clouseau groaned. His stomach was churning. This had never happened before. “If it’s not one thing, it’s another...”

“That’s just how things are.” Castello shrugged. “I’ve never seen an operation go entirely according to plan.”

Then Clouseau got another call. This time, it was from Kurz Weber. “Uruz-6 here. We’ve got trouble!”

“What is it now?” Clouseau demanded.

“The kids polished off all the food,” Kurz reported. “They’re demanding more to eat. Can I let the cooks into the kitchen?”

“I don’t care, you idiot!” Clouseau shouted, then turned off the radio.

After they entered the shopping center, Sailor made a beeline for the indulgence item section.

“Er, Sailor-san. What are you looking for?” Tessa asked.

The response was immediate. “Booze,” he told her. “Vodka, if they’ve got it.”

“You can’t mean—”

“Yeah, I’m making Molotovs. I’m way under-armed, here.”

“Don’t do that!” Tessa protested. “You could really hurt someone!”

“You bet your ass,” Sailor told her. “I’m fighting bad guys, remember? Terrorists screaming and burning and falling into the ocean... yeah, it’ll be a beautiful sight. You get searching too! Go on!”

They ended up finding about ten bottles of Spyritus, a rectified spirit that was about 96% alcohol. They could stick a rag in, light it, and throw it, and end up with a Molotov cocktail.

Sailor got some handkerchiefs and towels from other stalls and started about his work. Tessa didn't like it, but she eventually decided to help him out.

After finishing three Molotovs, Sailor cursed. "Dammit. I can't open the stopper. Hand keeps slipping..."

Curious, Tessa peered at the man's hand in the darkness and was surprised by what she saw; Sailor's right hand was covered in blood. "That's awful!" she said. "When did you hurt yourself?"

"During the fight," he admitted. "Guess I just caught it on something..."

"Why didn't you say something earlier?!" Tessa scolded. "We need to get you to the infirmary!"

"Are you nuts?" Sailor asked incredulously. "They've got a dragnet out! Besides, this is nothing!"

"Then take your jacket off," she demanded. "I want to see the wound." Tessa had some basic knowledge of first aid, and she'd even sat in on some surgeries to try to build up her nerve.

"It's none of your business," Sailor told her. "Besides, you're a maid, not a nurse. So be a maid, shut up and make Molotov cocktails!"

"That doesn't even make sense," Tessa argued back. "Just let me see it!"

"H-Hey!"

Tessa forced Sailor's suit jacket off, then grabbed his burly right arm in her hands. The inside of his dress shirt—mainly the lower half, up to his elbow—was wet with blood. There were about five or six other interlocking cuts there.

"Do you know the place to press to stop the bleeding?" Tessa lectured at him. "It's here. Press down on it, hard."

"R-Right..." Sailor agreed uneasily.

"Harder," she ordered. "Until you feel the bone."

When Tessa touched the inside of his upper arm, Sailor looked slightly distressed. "I... I know that!"

"For heaven's sake... I don't know how you managed to run around bellowing

with a wound like that...” Was he stubborn, or just slow on the uptake? Tessa sighed as she tore up a nearby towel.

“How do you think?” Sailor replied stiffly. “I’m a Navy man, remember? I can’t cry over one little cut.”

“The Navy? Are you with the United States military?”

“That’s right. I’m on leave. In fact, I’m— gwah!” Sailor screamed as she pressed a vodka-soaked rag to the wound.

Tessa giggled. “I thought a true sea dog never cried.”

“Why, you little—”

So he was with the US Navy. Judging by his behavior, he had to be an NCO, perhaps around warrant officer level—an old man barking orders at sailors in an old-fashioned vessel, or in the base, managing shipments... something like that. Though, he didn’t seem quite tan enough for that...

Is he a desk jockey? Tessa wondered as she tore a towel into strips to serve as bandages.

“I can’t figure you out,” Sailor said suspiciously. “You’re more clear-headed than I’d expect from a maid.”

“Am I?” she wondered.

“Most people would be scared shitless by all this. But here you are, barely batting an eye... You remind me of one of my men,” Sailor told her.

“He must be a very fine man,” Tessa said, and Sailor scowled.

“Yeah, right. He’s awful.”

“Oh?”

“He argues with me about every little decision,” Sailor grumbled. “He doesn’t respect me as his superior. It’s unspeakable! He doesn’t pay me one mite of respect.”

“I see. Even without knowing all the details, I think I understand how you feel.” Tessa let out a deep sigh.

“Ohh, I see. You understand?”

“Yes,” Tessa admitted. “It’s awful when your underlings don’t respect you.”

“No kidding,” Sailor agreed forcefully. “It’s horrible, and Takenaka just doesn’t understand!”

It was just around the same time that the XO of the US Navy nuclear attack submarine Pasadena, Lieutenant Marcy Takenaka, was enjoying a pleasant chat with a beautiful woman across a dinner table. “You know,” he said, “this is a lot more laid-back than I would have expected from a seajacking.”

“Yes, I agree,” the woman nodded. She was dressed in a black evening gown and wearing fashionable glasses. “The terrorists have been so accommodating,” she went on. “‘Let us know if you get bored,’ and such. It’s such a relief... although I’m still going to file a massive complaint with the operations division when it’s all over.” That last sentence was muttered, barely audible. A vein in her forehead twitched slightly as she said it.

“Huh?”

“Oh, nothing. By the way, where is the man you were with earlier, Takenaka-san?”

“I couldn’t say,” Takenaka said, as he savored another bite of thick, juicy steak. “He’s probably in one of the phone corners, sorting out finances with the wife who ran off on him.”

“Oh, the poor thing.”

But Takenaka wagged his finger at the woman’s show of sympathy. “Oh, no, he completely deserves it. He’s a stubborn ass who never listens to anyone. I’m sure she was just at her wits’ end.”

“Really?”

“Really. It’s hard enough working with the man. I can’t imagine being married to him.”

“Oh, dear...” the woman said.

“He’s my superior, but he finds fault with every single thing I do,” Takenaka went on. “He treats his subordinates like we’re incompetent. It’s horrible. We

don’t get any respect.”

“That certainly does sound hard...” she said cautiously.

“Tell me about it. It’s awful! But he doesn’t understand that.” Takenaka stopped himself and shook his head. “Anyway, enough of that. Let’s enjoy our dinner.”

“Good idea. It seems that contrary to expectations, I’m not going to have anything to do tonight, so I might as well take it easy,” the woman agreed.

“Huh?”

“Oh, nothing. Now, do tell me more, Takenaka-san,” the woman said with an enchanting smile.

“The truth is, I face a similar matter in my own workplace,” Tessa admitted, after listening to Sailor’s story.

“Oh?” he questioned.

“As you can see, I’m quite young, and my elders frequently treat me like an incompetent. I believe they consider me unsuited to my position...”

“Huh. The maid business is more complicated than I thought.”

“I’m perpetually unappreciated, no matter how many times I prove myself,” Tessa continued. “I’m treated as a nuisance in all situations. It’s truly frustrating to me...”

Sailor nodded in hearty agreement. “Ah, I hear you,” he said sagely. “I worked my way up from seaman, too. It was a hell of a fight to get where I am today. The Annapolis guys under my command treat me like some know-nothing novice.”

“Er?” Tessa’s jaw dropped as she heard Sailor’s words. “Y-You’re an officer?”

“That’s right. Surprise, I’m a commander. And this might not mean anything to a civvie like you, but... I’m captain of one of those upgraded Los Angeles-class nuclear subs.”

“What?!” Tessa asked. *He serves on a submarine... and he’s its captain?* But it

was Sailor's next words that really threw Tessa for a loop:

"By the way, the sub's name is the Pasadena," he nattered on. "It's part of SUBPAC..." He stopped, noticing her reaction. "What's with you? Did your whole face just have a spasm? And you're looking queasy, too..." Sailor peered at Tessa with a scowl. She was pale and sweating.

How can this man be captain of the Pasadena? Tessa wondered. *The United States nuclear submarine that tried to sink us during the Perio incident in August...* "Y-You mean, you're..." she began to ask.

"Am I what?"

"You're... the captain?" she managed, and Sailor took offense.

"Oh, what, you don't believe me?" he demanded. "As a matter of fact, I'm one of a damn few submarine captains with live combat experience! Just a few months ago, I wound up in an engagement with this dirty, cheating hulk of an enemy sub. I sent that sucker in a rout and saved one of our boys above! Got me a Silver Star for that one. Really something, eh?" He stopped himself. "Ah, crap. Forget I told you that. It's supposed to be classified."

Now it was Tessa's turn to take offense. "Wait a minute. What do you mean, 'dirty, cheating' sub? And you did not *rout* me! I dodged both of your torpedoes! How dare you trivialize my skills! Besides, there were other factors at play at the time!"

Sailor just looked confused. "What the hell are you talking about?" He seemed baffled by her interruption.

Tessa snapped out of her indignation and stammered, "Oh. Er. Well..."

"Well?" he pushed.

"Er, that's classified," Tessa apologized. "Please forget I said it."

Sailor just shook his head. "Okay, whatever you say." He didn't really seem like the detail-oriented type; Tessa wondered how a man like him had ever made it to command.

Well, life was complicated, of course. Despite its overwhelming presence on the world stage, the US military could be surprisingly inefficient and

bureaucratic. Not everything it did was necessarily logical, and perhaps certain fates had conspired to allow a short-fused man like him rise up in the ranks. Still, there was one thing that didn't quite add up.

"But Sailor-san," Tessa asked. "What is an American like you doing on this cruise? Wouldn't it have been easier and safer for you to take a trip around the Caribbean than to come all the way to Japan?"

Tessa's question brought a scowl to Sailor's face. "Hmm... well, there's a few reasons for that," he admitted reluctantly.

"What kind of reasons?"

"Well, back in the day, I was stationed at Yokosuka," Sailor reminisced.

"Ahh."

"It was years ago, now, but the first sight I ever officially saw through a periscope as a captain was Hachijojima in the distance," he continued. "The weather was shit, and there wasn't much to see... but it really got to me. Made me realize how far all my hard work had brought me. I can still remember that sight; those flickering lights from the civilian houses."

Tessa could imagine how he felt: looking through a control room periscope wasn't something just anyone was allowed to do. For someone who had clawed his way up from seaman to command, it must have been an unspeakably moving sight.

"I wanted my wife to see what I'd seen," Sailor told her. "It's a common tale for submariners, but I'm on the verge of divorce. It's been a real deep freeze for a while now, and for lack of any better ideas, I thought I could maybe give her a sense of how important my work was to me. That must sound like something a dumb kid would do, I guess."

It was indeed a childish thought. But if she were in his place, Tessa thought, she might have done something similar. "Then, your wife is on board with you?" she asked.

"No..." Sailor let out a small sigh. "I got back from work the morning we were supposed to head out, and found her bedroom cleaned out."

Tessa fell silent.

“Looking back now, I can see that she was never gonna come along at all. I tried to call her earlier, but... all we did was scream at each other. Don’t know why I bothered; I know she’s got another guy.” His words were hollow and desolate. Sailor’s expression, previously so animated, had seemed to age decades in a matter of minutes. “Just your nice, basic landlubber. Sets my teeth on edge, but there’s nothing to be done.”

“Nothing at all?” Tessa asked, breathlessly.

“Yeah,” Sailor sighed. “Fighting it’s no good.”

For some reason, a song began playing in Tessa’s mind. It was a sad blues melody she’d heard a long time ago—*Sho Nuf I Do,* by Elmore James.

I love her even if she doesn’t love me. Even if it’s hopeless, I still love her. That was what the lyrics meant. Remembering that tune, so out-of-place on Christmas, she turned her eyes downward.

“I’m in a similar situation,” she found herself saying again. *I’m just like Commander Sailor. We’re both haunted by the same demons...*

Sailor cast a glance at Tessa. “Got a guy you like, huh?”

“Yes. But he...” It had fallen out of her mind in all the chaos, but now Tessa remembered. After they’d parted ways at the vault, she’d followed after Kaname, hoping to chat with her. As a result, she’d overheard their conversation in front of the elevator.

That awkward conversation between Sousuke and Kaname... Even the world’s most oblivious person would have been able to pick up the special vibe between them, and it had driven home to Tessa that she had no place there.

He really doesn’t see me at all, she’d realized. *He only sees her...* That was right. “I think I’ve lost him entirely,” she lamented.

“Ah. Well... if it’s your gut telling you that, it means you probably have,” Sailor agreed sadly.

“Yes...”

Sailor thumbed subtly at the tears forming in his eyes, then hesitated a

moment, and said, “I’m not exactly Mr. Romantic Experience here, but... you’re young, and you’re really nice. You’ll find a better guy in no time.” It was the most heartfelt thing he’d said yet.

“Do you really think so?” Tessa asked quietly.

“Yeah. Just make sure he’s a proper sea dog,” Sailor advised. “Landlubbers can’t be trusted.”

Tessa giggled, and smiled teasingly, at last. “Perhaps I’ll consider you, then, Sailor-san.”

But Sailor just waved dismissively. “Not gonna happen. One, I don’t go for kids. Two, I like brunettes with big tits.” He cackled.

Tessa scowled at him. “Are you *completely* unaware of social graces?” she grumbled, but Sailor just kept laughing.

One of the cooks in the back of the kitchen called out, “Hey, you, guitar-playing terrorist guy. Yeah, you. I need some cans of whole tomatoes. Can you bring me as many as you can find in the back?”

“Sure. Whole tomatoes, huh?” Kurz, still wearing his mask and his rifle on a strap over his shoulder while he packed in some leftover canapes, clapped his hands together, then went searching around the kitchen shelves. “Huh... I only see two left.”

The cook, standing in front of the bubbling, steaming pot, let out a moan. “Are you kidding me? Ugh, dammit. That’s right. It’s not our usual crowd. Can’t believe how fast those high school kids can pack it in, though...”

“That’s puberty for you,” Kurz said sympathetically.

“Sorry, but could you fetch some from the hold below?” the cook begged. “I need about two boxes’ worth. This stew’s no good without tomatoes.”

“You got it,” Kurz promised. “Whereabouts would I find them?”

“It should be obvious enough once you’re down there,” the cook told him. “They’ve got signs posted around with dates and contents.”

“Roger that.” Kurz asked the PRT soldier in the kitchen with him to hold down

the fort, then headed for the cargo hold alone. He passed through a dim passage, then down some stairs. He'd heard about the attack on Yang and Wu, so he had to stay vigilant.

The ship was full of storage rooms. The one right below the kitchen was filled with shelf-safe ingredients for the grand ballroom, furniture of various sizes, and stage equipment. He expected Yang and Wu would be on patrol in the area right about now.

Kurz turned his radio on. "Uruz-6 to Uruz-9. I'm heading your way. Don't shoot me by accident." There was no response.

"Yang-kun," he tried again. "Where's that reply? Teacher's gonna mark you absent..." No response. It was strange. Normally, Yang'd have responded 'Uruz-9, roger' immediately.

"Uruz-9, respond. Uruz-9." Kurz decided to stop playing around and call him one more time, but there was still no response. He had no more luck with attempts to contact Wu, who should have been with him.

He then called in to operations HQ on the bridge. "Uruz-6 to HQ. Code 11. Area C3. Tighten the ring."

"HQ, roger. Be careful," Clouseau responded.

Did that amateur get you again? C'mon, guys... Tightening his hold on his rifle's grip, Kurz approached the hold. The gun's long barrel made the corridor feel especially narrow.

Tonight, Kurz's weapon of choice was an assault rifle with an automatic function; a German-made one with a 7.62mm barrel. It had been modified to increase its accuracy, but it wasn't a sniper rifle—long-range guns were useless in an enclosed space like this.

He approached the door to the cargo hold and listened. He could hear a low whirring sound—almost, but not quite, like the buzz of fluorescent lights—and the faint splash of footsteps in water.

No... whatever that was, it was more viscous than water. There was something almost sticky about it. He couldn't explain why, but the presence didn't feel human. Strange. *Well, wondering about it won't do any good,* he told

himself. Kurz took in a deep breath, opened the door wide, and stepped into the hold.

The cargo hold, illuminated dimly, was larger than he'd expected. It was a high-ceilinged room, full of neat lines of small cargo containers, palettes stacked high with cardboard boxes, and furniture, some with glass and mirrors.

Too many blind spots... Kurz moved further into the hold, readying his rifle carefully.

One of the containers on his left side was open. He looked over, curiously. No, it wasn't simply open—the door was bent and twisted, as if it had been torn off of its hinges. Something inside the container had forced its way out. Something terribly strong.

He had a bad feeling about this. It was a sensation one couldn't acquire through training alone. It wasn't a sense of the civilian, Harris, hiding somewhere and watching him. It was something much worse.

Kurz made it to the back of the hold, where the dim light picked up something glimmering on the floor. Some kind of viscous red fluid had been scattered forcefully across several meters. It hung on the walls, the girders, and even the containers across from him.

Is that... blood? Intestines...? Then, even further in, behind a crushed cardboard box, he could see the leg of someone standing there. Was that what had made the squishing sound before? "...Yang?"

It was almost as if a person had exploded—

Suddenly, Kurz found himself leaping to the side. A high-caliber bullet tore through the place he'd been standing a moment before, and hit the floor. It kicked up a cloud of dust as the low, muffled gunshot reached his ears.

He came out of a roll, then pointed his rifle in the direction of the shot. The mysterious attacker leaped at him immediately and swiped his gun aside. The power on display was incredible—it bent Kurz's rifle in the middle and sent it flying into the wall. Kurz's hand was stinging, with a dull pain running down his index finger.

He caught a glimpse of the attacker, a large man in a coat. Was this the

passenger Yang had mentioned? No... this wasn't a passenger. It wasn't even human!

Kurz let out a grunt as he dodged. The fist scraped by him and hit the container beyond with an ear-rending screech. The burly figure's blows had the power of a sledgehammer. There was nowhere left to run, and the man's other hand seized Kurz by the neck.

"Gn..." Kurz gurgled. The man then began to lift, and Kurz's feet left the floor. The stranger's strength was overpowering, unrelenting and brutal. Kurz's vision clouded. His struggles were in vain. He couldn't breathe, and he could feel his spine creaking.

All Kurz could see in his blurring vision was the face of his enemy. It was a simple, blank mask, with a horizontal slit glowing red where the eyes should be. No mouth, no nose. Expressionless. Completely expressionless.

It could kill him and not feel a thing.

4: The Executors

24 December, 2250 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Shopping Center, Pacific Chrysalis

"...So I feel like I've established a greater relationship of trust with my subordinates than I had before," Tessa whispered, holding her knees in the darkness. "But because of that, lately, I feel like it's compromising our work relationship. Before, everyone was very proper in calling me 'Colonel' and 'Captain' and such. But lately, it's more like "Colone~l" and "Capta~in." Can you imagine? It feels wrong."

"Hmm. I don't know who'd want to give nicknames like 'Colonel' and 'Captain' to a kid maid like you, but that does sound pretty rough," Sailor threw back as he rooted through the indulgence item counters.

"Excuse me. Sailor-san? I hope you'll forget what I said about the rank names, but I am *still* talking to you seriously," Tessa pointed out. "I'm attempting to open my heart to you, as a kindred spirit."

"Yeah. I get it, I get it."

"Are you *sure*?" Tessa wasn't talking like this simply because she wanted a sounding board for her complaints. There was intent behind it. Talking to Sailor might help her to buy time, which would allow Clouseau and the others to locate and surround them. And finding out more about the kind of man he was would help her to better influence his behavior. Of course, the content of their conversation had ended up deviating significantly from those strategic objectives...

"Hey! There we go!" Sailor proclaimed as he picked a small box from a kiosk shelf, and held it up to the minimal light he had available.

"What is it?" Tessa asked. "Are you going to craft more dangerous weapons?"

“They’re cigars, dummy,” Sailor scoffed. “Whoa, Cohiba Lanceros?! These are Cuban! They sell these here? I had this pegged as a shitty-ass ship with crap security, but I guess it ain’t all bad!” He swiftly broke the wrapping, pulled out a cigar, bit off the end, and spat it out on the floor. It was hideously uncouth.

“Excuse me, but you can’t really intend to smoke here, can you?” Tessa demanded politely. “I would appreciate it if you’d consider my health...”

“Shut up! It helps me think. Smoke ’em if you got ’em!” Sailor lit the cigar with a lighter, then let out a blissful plume of smoke. “Mm... Whew.”

Tessa turned away and started coughing, but she came to a sudden stop, and looked back curiously. A strange feeling began to come over her as she sniffed at the air. There was a slightly floral scent to the smoke from Sailor’s cigar. It was like when you pulled the stopper out of a bottle of potpourri... Something about it seemed to take her back to childhood. She wasn’t sure why.

“Well? Not bad, eh?” Sailor declared proudly. “That bastard Castro aside, there’s two things I’ll give Cuba—baseball players and cigars. Even Kennedy was all-in on importing Cuban cigars.”

“Ah-hah...”

“A superior I really admired once said: ‘Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee, for those in peril on the sea... and give us fine cigars!’ Now there was a man who loved a good smoke,” Sailor declared in a sonorous voice. Tiny sparks popped out from the cigar in the darkness.

“Is that a parody of the Navy Hymn?” Tessa wanted to know.

“Yeah... but hey, how’d you know that?!” Sailor demanded suspiciously. “Are you really just a maid?”

“Oh, of course... Anyway, could you tell me the name of that superior officer you—” Tessa’s request was interrupted by a tremor in the distance.

Exactly one hundred seconds earlier...

Even as he felt his neck muscles and bones reach their breaking point, Kurz reached a hand under his vest. His neck was going to snap. It would happen any

second now...

“Ngh... hng...” he wheezed, pulling his automatic pistol from its holster. It was an FN Browning Hi-Power. *Why did I have to pack a single action?* he lamented. The act of cocking it seemed to take forever.

Eventually, Kurz managed to press the muzzle of the gun against the wrist of the hand around his neck, and pull the trigger. Then he fired a second and third time. Instead of a blood spurt, shards of plastic and metal scraped his cheek.

The enemy’s hand relaxed immediately, with the suddenness of a rubber band snapping. Kurz didn’t have time to feel relief; he stuck the muzzle into the enemy’s glowing red eye-slit and let fire with a series of 9mm rounds. Sparks flew, a burning smell filled the air, and the enemy reeled back a bit.

Kurz kicked it as hard as he could. It was like kicking a 100 kilogram sandbag, and while he managed to force the enemy away, it didn’t seem shaken in the slightest. Mercilessly, determinedly, and with pure intent to kill, it charged him again.

Kurz lost his balance and fell to his knees, gasping for breath. He needed oxygen. The enemy’s right arm swung down at him, rattling uncertainly on its cracked wrist. *An artificial hand? No...* Kurz wondered. *Just who the hell is this—*

“Kurz!!” Someone came leaping out of nowhere to smack the back of the attacker’s head with a pipe. It was Yang. He was dripping with blood, coated with it head to toe, but he was still alive.

Kurz didn’t even have time to thank his lucky stars, as the large man, unfazed by Yang’s attack, swung out almost automatically with his right hand. Yang blocked with the pipe, but the force of the blow bent it in half, and sent the man flying into a nearby container.

Whatever this thing is, it’s not human, Kurz realized. In addition, blows to the head and the torso seemed useless. Kurz leaped out to grab one of the enemy’s legs, then pointed his gun at the back of its right knee. He took aim for the part that his experience and instincts as an AS pilot told him would be the least armored, and let off three shots. Gelatinous liquid and solid polymer scraps went flying. The enemy lost balance and crashed to the floor.

“Why... you...” Before it could even struggle, he unloaded two shots into its right shoulder, two into its left armpit, and two into the inner thigh where the leg joined to the hip—he would have done more, but at last, the pistol’s slide stopped in its rear-cocked position. He was out of ammo.

Even with most of its limb connectors destroyed, the enemy continued to struggle with what remained, searching for its enemies with its cracked head sensor.

“K-Kurz? You okay?” Yang asked haltingly, leaning against the container.

Kurz, panting for breath himself, swapped his gun’s magazine skillfully. “Yeah. Son of a bitch... What about you? You’re covered in blood...”

“Actually, that thing ended up firing through a stack of canned tomatoes over there... I think it just knocked me out cold,” Yang admitted.

“Oh, is that the gag?” Kurz asked. Now that he had a minute to think about it, it was clear that the room didn’t smell like blood at all. Still, he found a new worry entering his mind. *I’m doomed,* he thought woefully. *All the tomatoes are gone... I’m gonna have survived all that, only for the cook to murder me.* He decided to move the conversation along. “So, where’s Wu?”

“Dunno,” Yang mumbled. “He was right beside me, but...”

“Sorry, Sergeant, Corporal...” Wu popped out from a large wooden crate far behind Yang, also looking perfectly sound. “I decided to hide and play possum. That thing looked dangerous as hell.”

“You could’ve given me a little warning, dammit!” Kurz exploded.

“I’ll certainly do that next time.” Wu laughed awkwardly and rubbed the back of his head.

“Still, what the hell is this thing?” Kurz mused, his neck still aching. From what he could see, their assailant had lost most of its mobility. It had a human’s silhouette, but it was a machine, almost like a 3rd generation AS shrunk down to human size. *Are these those human-sized Amalgam ASes that Kaname mentioned running into in Shibuya?* he wondered. *If she hadn’t told me about that, it would’ve taken me a lot longer to realize I should target the joints...*

“Don’t ask me. It just burst out of the container and—” Yang suddenly stopped in mid-sentence, seemingly realizing the same thing as Kurz.

Would an enemy that’s given Mithril so much trouble in the past really hand over a machine like this so easily? he pondered. *Wouldn’t they have thought up a way to dispose of its remains if it were ever immobilized?*

The robot stopped struggling. In that exact moment, Yang took two or three steps back, and whispered, “K-Kurz. It’s...”

“...I know,” Kurz agreed quickly. “Run!” They all took off at almost the exact same time. A second later, the robot exploded, sending a fireball, shockwave, and anti-personnel ball bearings bursting through the hold.

Kurz threw himself to the floor. White smoke and dust hung thick around him, as he was peppered by fragments and debris. *About on par with a Claymore mine,* Kurz estimated of the blast, even while grimacing from the ringing in his ears.

“Hey, Kurz. Still alive over there?” Yang asked leisurely. It seemed like the other two had survived.

“Sorry to disappoint, but yeah,” Kurz replied, pushing aside the charred wood that had fallen on top of him with a curse. “Damn, what a mess...” The area around the explosion was a miserable sight of bent steel and torn-open containers, their contents scattered and burning. The sprinklers activated next, showering the hold with water.

Yang said, “We need to report this to the lieutenant. I don’t know what that robot really was, but it’s clearly a trap.”

“Got it,” Kurz agreed. “Uruz-6 to HQ! You read me?” He called into his radio.

Back at headquarters, Clouseau responded immediately. “HQ here. Was that an explosion in Area C32?”

“Affirmative!” Kurz replied. “One of those robots Angel told us about. We managed to take it out, but it exploded on us.”

“Robots?” Clouseau asked in surprise. “Those Alastor things, eh? Any damages?”

“Zero deaths, three light injuries! No one out of action,” Kurz reported. “The tomatoes got the worst of it.”

“Was it just the one?”

“Of course! If we’d had to fight even two or three of those things—” Kurz was cut off, this time by a loud bang that echoed through the hold. Further in from where they were standing, the door of a comparatively unscathed container had been blasted open from the inside. Something had *kicked its way out*.

“Hey...” Heavy footsteps rang out. Stepping on the door ripped from its hinges, a large black-clad man emerged from the container. It was identical to the enemy they had just fought, from its build, to its clothing, to its expressionless face. Its drive system let out a low hum, and its head sensor glowed in a single, horizontal red line.

“There’s more...” Kurz trailed off. It was the worst-case scenario; that single robot hadn’t been the end of it. They could hear more containers breaking open, one after another, all throughout the hold. More and more copies of the robot emerged, and began to slowly look around. *Or... scan for hostiles, maybe?* Kurz told himself. *Eight of them... no, probably more.*



“Uruz-6,” Clouseau demanded. “What’s wrong? Report, Uruz-6!”

“We... We just got about a dozen—” Kurz began to report.

“What? Say that one more—”

“Guys, break for it! This isn’t g—” Kurz turned to warn Yang and Wu, and found them already dashing headlong for the exit. *Those jerks...* He didn’t even have time to yell at them for their cruel abandonment. Darting around a grasping enemy hand, Kurz hurried to join them.

“Uruz-1 to all units. Code-13, top priority. A dozen or more of those ultra-mini ASes have appeared in the C32 cargo hold. Their abilities are likely as previously reported. If you disable them, they’ll explode with shrapnel. Be careful. Follow standard response procedures, with priority to the evacuation of hostages. Team Delta to C28. Team Echo to corridor C35. Hold the enemy at bay. AP shells permitted. If you can’t hold them back, at least slow them as much as possible.”

At times like these, Clouseau didn’t get angry, nor did he raise his voice. He doled out orders to each team with utmost calm. This precision of his did a better job than anything of communicating the urgency of the situation to the men. There was a faint smell of tension, different than before, as each team radioed acknowledgment.

What the hell are they after? Clouseau asked himself. *What do the robots want? Are they here to kill everyone in Mithril and take control of the ship?* No, from what Chidori Kaname had said, the robots’ programming wasn’t that sophisticated; their mission must be something simpler. *Protect the secret of the vault, then? Kill everyone on the ship and sink it?* No, they wouldn’t need robots for that... a high explosive of equivalent size would do the job just as well.

What did they want? How much of their plan had the enemy foreseen? There were too many things he didn’t know. The one thing he did know was that a powerful enemy had appeared on the ship, and that they couldn’t be intimidated or negotiated with.

A member of the PRT spoke up. “Lieutenant, what are they after?”

“We don’t know yet,” Clouseau answered tersely. “This whole thing could have been a setup, or maybe this deployment is a last resort option... Either way, they’ve gotten serious.” He then used his radio to call Mao by the vault. “Uruz-2. Progress report.”

“Not much to say,” she replied swiftly. “Could be as much as three hours, as little as thirty minutes. Something like that.” Clouseau could hear a drill whirring in the background.

“When you have a better idea, let me know,” he told her. “If it’s going to take a while, we’ll give up and withdraw.”

“Got it,” Mao agreed. “Going fast as I can. Out.”

Clouseau yanked away a PC a nearby sergeant was using, knocking a cup and a battery case off the table. “I’m going to have a look around the scene myself. You stay here. Monitor and direct the movement of all teams and hostages. Understand?” He scanned the map of the ship displayed on the 20-inch retractable screen. Then he grabbed a magic marker that had fallen nearby and drew on the screen—a thick line cutting off the back quarter of the ship.

“Ah—” the sergeant began.

“This will be our last line of defense,” Clouseau announced, cutting him off. “Get the hostages behind it, and hold the enemy in front of it. Understand?”

“Y-Yes sir—”

Grabbing a submachine gun loaded not with rubber bullets, but with special armor-piercing rounds, Clouseau flew out of the bridge. He was worried about the status of the hostage evacuation; the cargo hold where the enemy had appeared was close to the ballroom where the students were being held. He didn’t know what the robots were programmed to do. *What if they’re programmed to kill indiscriminately?* he wondered. *What if a killing machine like that just bursts out into the midst of hundreds of students?*

Naturally, the nearby explosion had put an end to the carousing of the students of Jindai High. Most of them were now craning their necks around suspiciously and wondering about the sound. The students around Kaname,

Kyoko included, were no exception. They halted their game of Scotland Yard (a board game that Kurz had brought from the shopping area, along with a mess of other toys and games to 'pass the time'), and looked over at their masked supervisor.

He was talking to someone on his radio. After an unusually long silence, the man waded through the crowd, ran up to the stage, and spoke into the microphone. "Um, hey... sorry to interrupt the fun, guys, but there's a small fire in the hold below us. That explosion you heard earlier was just some cans bursting—" The students erupted into concerned whispers.

"Ah, but don't worry!" he insisted. "Everything's fine! It's just a lot of smoke, but to be safe, we should evacuate to the hall in the ship's aft. Understand? Watch my finger." The man pointed first to the ceiling, then towards the tail end of the ship. "That's the way you want to go. Please proceed slowly in that direction. Don't rush; be quiet and calm. We don't want a panic, okay? Just walk at your usual pace. We'll start with those closest to the exits—"

Just then, there was a crash and a commotion from the kitchen: angry shouting, and the overturning of pots and dishes. Then the cooks came bursting into the ballroom in a panic, followed by Kurz. He must have been in such a fright that he'd forgotten to put his mask back on.

"Ah, Sergea— I mean, er, wait, everyone! Look at me! It's all right. Please evacuate slowly—"

"No, no, no, no, no!" Kurz shouted, interrupting the man. "No time to lose! Run! Now! Crawl over each other if you have to! You're all gonna die! Don't waste time! Run, right now!" He shoved the male student standing next to him, then began firing his pistol into the air. The hundreds of students that had been standing there staring let out a collective scream, and began flooding towards the doors. The principal and the others who normally would have scolded them were so caught off guard that they simply stood in place, shocked.

"K-Kana-chan!" Kyoko was getting carried away from Kaname, caught up in the wave of students.

"It's okay! We'll meet up later!" Kaname just managed to shout, but Kyoko was already gone. Kaname fought back against the tide, heading for Kurz in the

middle of the chaos. “Hey, Kurz-kun! What the heck is going on? Are you crazy?”

“We got a visit from those robots you told us about!” He said, shouting to be heard over the din. “And not just one, but a whole dozen of ’em! They nearly killed me in the hold, and now they’re on their way here. So get evacuated already!”

“What?” Kaname blinked in surprise. *Those Alastor machines? But why? Is Leonard involved in this, too?* Dismissing these questions as a distraction, Kaname continued to lay into Kurz. “S-Still, this is crazy! You’re going to get the students hurt!”

“Better hurt than dead. Hey, you!” Kurz turned around and shouted at his comrade. “Give me your P90 and AP rounds! Then round up the stragglers and evacuate to the aft! You’re Team Golf’s backup, got it?!”

“Y-Yes, Sergeant,” the man agreed shakily.

“Hostage safety is our number one priority,” Kurz instructed. “Move as carefully and calmly as you can. Now go!”

The Mithril man threw a Belgian-made next-generation submachine gun and a magazine of armor-piercing rounds at Kurz, then turned to go. He hurried along a handful of teachers and students still wandering aimlessly around in the ballroom, and also helped up a girl who had fallen.

As Kurz checked the clip with practiced hands and flicked the gun’s selector switch, he shouted into his radio, “Uruz-9, how are things where you are? ...Okay, hold that corridor for three minutes. ...Like I care! Figure it out!” He shut off the radio and barked at Kaname. “What are you doing? Get going already!”

“A-Are you sure?” she asked. “Those robots are super strong, and pretty agile, too...”

Kurz shot her a cynical smile. “I’ve faced them before. Your intel saved my butt, by the way. Now go.”

“Um... fine. Just don’t push it, okay?” Kaname didn’t hesitate a minute longer. She whipped around and ran in the other direction from the kitchen, towards

the ballroom exit.

It happened very suddenly. Without any forewarning, the ceiling above her collapsed with a roar. Splinters and dust rained down as a huge object fell—no, *landed*—in the ballroom. One of the students who hadn't made it out yet let out a high-pitched scream.

"What the..." Kaname wondered.

The thing straightened swiftly from where it had collapsed the floor beneath, then turned its red head-mounted sensor to scrutinize the face of a nearby girl. Kaname flashed back to that night in the rainy hotel district two months ago, and the scene played in her mind like it was yesterday: the sight of a robot, identical to this one, finishing off the assassin. It could snap a girl like that in half.

"Run! Hurry!" Kaname shouted as she took off in a dash, but the girl didn't move, most likely paralyzed from shock and fear. She was a girl from the next class over, but Kaname couldn't remember her name.

The Alastor was heading straight for her. At the same time, it didn't seem overtly hostile. It looked the girl up and down as she crouched in fear—she was about the same height and build as Kaname—and peered into her face.

Kaname didn't have time to interrogate the situation. Heedless of the danger, she rushed past the Alastor to knock the girl aside.

"Eek!" the girl squealed.

"I said, 'run!'" Kaname yelled at her.

The enemy's black coat rustled as it rotated its upper torso to face her. She could hear the servos buzzing behind its red sensor, suggesting a shift of focus. It was indeed the same kind of robot she had met before... but it looked much bigger now: the thick chest; the burly arms. It made the pro-wrestlers she'd seen up close in arenas look like children.

Intimidated, she took a shaky step back. The robot continued to approach, until its expressionless mask became all she could see. Behind her, Kaname could hear Kurz shouting something. He sounded about twenty meters away, and it occurred to her only a few seconds later that she was standing between

him and the enemy. Her body was in the way.

“Kaname, don’t move!” Immediately, she heard a gunshot behind her, and felt a faint breeze pass between her thighs. The Alastor took three or four shots to the right leg and lost its balance. A moment later, she felt her skirt rustle.

Kaname went agape as she realized that Kurz had fired a shot *between her legs*. She was at once impressed by his aim and mortified by his choice. She wanted to turn around and scream at him, but there was no time for that—though less steady on its feet now, the Alastor was already reaching for her again. The shots to its leg didn’t seem to have done much damage.

She gasped as it grabbed the ribbon on her chest, realizing that it was going to pull her in. Kaname felt all the air wrest from her lungs in the form of a desperate scream.

“Chidori!!” Another gunshot; this time, the bullet hit the Alastor’s left side. She was released from its glare as its head turned sharply to the right.

The shot had come from Sousuke. He had run in from the bow-side entrance, trailed by two allies in fatigues. He fired again and again, one after another, and the bullets continued to hit the Alastor’s left side. Shredded fabric went flying as plastic fragments sparked off of it.

While Kaname yelped at the sight of the bullets hitting so nearby, the robot cast her aside and pointed its left arm straight at Sousuke. Then, it fired its internal rifle—the bullet missed and hit the pillar behind him. The shots it had taken seemed to have affected its targeting sensors, but no more.

The Alastor hunched over and began to move in a zig-zag fashion. Its movements were faster than its massive body seemed capable of.

“Sousuke?!” Kaname cried from where she’d fallen on her backside.

The Alastor closed in on Sousuke, and sliced its hand through the air in a powerful chop. While dodging the blow by a hair, Sousuke readied his gun at hip-level and let loose, at close range, on full automatic. The shots barked out, and the robot’s upper half trembled.

It wasn’t working. The Alastor’s movements were crude, yet nimble, and it was terrifyingly bulletproof. It took a light step with its right foot and then

whipped around, causing its coat to unfurl like a whirling umbrella as it threw a back kick like a freight train at Sousuke.

Sousuke immediately brought up his gun to block, but the impact still sent him flying. Kurz charged on past him, unleashing more fury with his submachine gun. The shots hit their mark, but the Alastor rocketed off the floor, jumping higher than any human was capable of. It was almost like a third-generation AS—no, not almost: these things were miniature ASes in every respect. Their maneuverability and power simply weren't subject to human limitations.

In standard AS terms, the power balance here was like fighting an M9 with four Rk-92 Savages. It would be hard to put it down without suffering heavy losses.

The enemy fired its internal gun. The shot rang out, and one of Sousuke's allies fell back, having taken the blow square in the chest. He didn't even manage a scream.

"Don't rest! Keep firing!" Sousuke cried, casting aside his broken submachine gun and pulling out a pistol. Kurz and the others didn't hesitate to bathe the Alastor in bullets. Fragments went flying as the bullets plinked off of it, the ricochets shattering tableware all around. Yet, the enemy kept moving, making it impossible to precision-target its joints.

"Dammit!" Sousuke went down on one knee and fired desperately with his pistol. Kurz swapped his submachine gun's clip and kept shooting. Dodge the opponent's charge, then strike it from close range—they were like bullfighters, patient and persistent.

Kaname could only hide behind a toppled table, cradling her head.

After taking at least a hundred rounds, at last, the Alastor finally began to slow. Then, a hard shot to a knee joint forced it to the floor. Sousuke and the others fanned out and began to unload mercilessly into their enemy, as if they were putting down a wild beast.

Kaname had seen her share of gunfights in the past, and this one was anything but elegant. The brute force at play here, the way they just soaked it in firepower—it was unsightly. But it wasn't a sign of weakness, not by any means; the enemy was just so powerful that this was what it took to put it down.

Once the robot had finally stopped moving, Kaname was able to think again, and it was then that she realized that the ballroom had emptied. The students must have all evacuated, including the girl she'd shoved away before. She relaxed in relief—but she was the only one doing so.

"Get away!" Kurz shouted. "It's going to explode!"

"E-Explode...?" she questioned nervously.

"Chidori! Why are you still here? Run!" Kaname was trying to stand up when Sousuke grabbed her hand and took off, his manner shockingly rough. Kurz and another soldier got on either side of the comrade who'd been shot earlier, helped him to his feet and took off in a panic.

"Get down!" Kurz screamed, and Sousuke pulled Kaname to the ground and covered her. A moment later, the Alastor exploded. Shrapnel blasted holes in the walls, the ceiling, and the light fixtures, and Kaname felt a dull pain in her eardrums as the shockwave slammed through her skull. Smoke hung in the air afterwards; the sprinkler system activated and began to rain down on them.

"Were you hurt, Chidori?" Sousuke asked her anxiously.

"Mm," she managed at last. "You're crushing me."

"Sorry." Sousuke pulled himself off of Kaname and helped her into a sitting position. Water dripped from her bangs as the sprinklers showered down. "Can you stand?"

"Yeah... thanks," Kaname affirmed. She made an attempt, but it was hard, with her knees trembling like this. As Sousuke silently helped her, she could smell his sweat. "Is Kurz okay?!"

"Yeah," he told her. "Howard is alive, too. The body armor stopped the shot... though he might have some cracked ribs."

"I... I'm fine, Sergeant," said the ally who took the shot before. Beyond the clearing smoke, she could see someone standing up and coughing. From the kitchen came a sound of dishes crashing to the floor. It was followed by the faint stomp of heavy footsteps. Multiple sets of them. Two people, maybe three —

“Reinforcements, huh?” Kurz commented.

“No need to have a shootout in a wide-open space like this,” Sousuke urged. “Let’s get out of here. Contact the lieutenant. Chidori, can you run?”

“Y-Yeah...”

The group ran from the ballroom in a hurry, tearing down the corridor that led to the aft. There was no sign of enemy pursuit, but Sousuke and the others stayed alert in every direction—even up. The enemy could appear from literally anywhere.

They could hear the sound of continued gunfire in the distance; the other teams must be fighting. “They’re tough,” Sousuke said, continuing to walk swiftly.

“Right? Good thing I had a Hi-Power on me. My lucky day, I guess,” Kurz put in.

“You said there were about a dozen left, right? That’s trouble,” Sousuke said with a frown. “We can beat them, theoretically, but we don’t have the firepower available here. Our ammunition is lacking as well. Fighting them head-on will just get our men killed, and make it difficult to protect the hostages.”

“Ahh, dammit,” Kurz sighed. “So what’s their plan? Just to kill everyone?”

“I don’t think so,” Kaname said. “That’s not what those robots were after. It’s something else.”

“How do you know?” he replied. “The first one definitely didn’t think twice before it jumped me in the hold.”

“Well...” Kaname’s vague suspicion from earlier was starting to take a clearer form: the robot’s odd movements; the similarities and differences. What was everyone on the ship after from the start? The vault, of course—No, it wasn’t that. She stopped and looked up at a corner of the hall. “They’re looking for a certain physique,” she concluded.

Kurz watched her questioningly.

“They won’t attack girls around 165 centimeters tall, weighing about 50

kilograms," Kaname observed. "If they find a girl who fits that category, the next thing they'll do is scan her face—not just reading her external appearance, but patterns in bone structure, membranes, and blood vessels. If it matches the data they have for me on file, they'll move to the next routine, which will be either to protect me and escape... or to kill everyone except for me."

The out-of-her-depth high school girl from moments ago was gone without a trace. Sousuke, Kurz, and the others couldn't help but be shocked by the sight of her explaining things so logically and coherently, even after everything she'd been through.

"You shot him after he grabbed me, right, Sousuke?" she asked. "Didn't you think it was strange then?"

Sousuke, who had been distracted by the sudden change in Kaname's demeanor, snapped back to reality and nodded his agreement. "It threw you out of the way, even though the standard tactic would be to use you as a shield."

"Hey, hang on," Kurz interrupted. "Are you saying they're after Kaname-chan?"

"I think so... no, I'm sure of it," Kaname told him. "That captain was after me from the start, remember?"

"Okay. So if that's true, what do we do? Charge those dumb robots with you in the lead?"

Sousuke glared at Kurz. "We are not using Chidori as a shield."

"I know, it was a joke," Kurz protested. "Anyway, we can't just stand here. For now, we just need to get away from them."

"Wait." Kurz and the others were about to hurry forward, but Kaname stopped them in their tracks. "You can't use me as a shield, but I *can* act as a decoy," she observed thoughtfully. "In fact, it might be our only way out of this."

Sousuke's brow wrinkled in response. "It's too dangerous," he protested. "Even if they won't actually attack you, you might still be hit by stray fire, or a ricochet."

“I don’t care if it’s dangerous!” Kaname shouted back. “I’m not the only one in trouble, remember?!”

She was right: it was a bad situation. There were still any number of those dangerous enemy robots on the ship, and while their schoolmates seemed to have gotten to safety for now, they were still on board. Without decisive action, sooner or later, a tragedy was going to take place. People were going to be hurt and killed, and it would be all her fault. Kaname couldn’t let that slide; she had to stop it, somehow.

“Please,” she begged. “If anything happens to my classmates, I could never show my face again. Is what I’m proposing really that unreasonable?”

Sousuke didn’t say anything at first, glaring hard at Kaname’s desperate expression. He really didn’t want to put her in danger, it seemed. He vacillated for a time, indecisive and questioning—and then, as if to clear it of all doubts, he at last shook his head and sighed. “Very well,” he conceded. “I’ll consult with the lieutenant. But for now, we need to get our distance.” Sousuke pressed the button of his radio.

Clouseau had just reached the starboard corridor on the second deck when the sound of unrelenting gunfire reached his ears. Team Echo, led by Sergeant Roger Sandraptor, was trading fire with the enemy. “Roger! What’s your status?” he called to the large Native American, who was kneeling behind a bend in the corridor and changing his clip.

“Two enemies. Two injured. Zero dead. Concentrated fire succeeds in holding it back, but we’ll be out of ammunition shortly,” Roger reported, sounding almost like an M9’s AI. The narrow, straight hallway appeared to be helping them to keep the things at bay; they were forced to take cover in a passenger cabin. If one peeked its head out even slightly, the soldiers would bathe it in fire.

“Lieutenant, these things are tough,” Roger continued. “They’re as aggressive as a pair of raging buffalo, but they’re smart enough to dodge bullets.”

“Can you beat them?” Clouseau wanted to know.

“If it’s just the two of them, probably. But we’re running low on ammo.”

Clouseau knew that this wasn't sustainable. If someone as reliably objective as Roger was predicting doom, then it had to be so. They weren't equipped to fight these things, and the ace in the hole he was keeping on standby in case of emergencies wasn't compatible with the situation as it stood. *We could lead the crew and passengers to the lifeboats, maybe?* He pondered. *But the front half of the ship is a danger zone...* It would be difficult now to get everyone off safely.

To make matters worse, he had no idea where Colonel Testarossa was. If she was in the fore, she was in danger. And there were so many things he wanted to discuss with her right now... Clouseau caught himself looking for a way to defer responsibility, and shook his head. *Stop it,* he lectured himself. *You're the one in charge right now. It's your job to be strong for the men.*

"Buy us time," he told Roger. "Pull back slowly."

"Roger that."

Just then, Clouseau got a transmission. It was from Sousuke. "What is it?"

"I have a proposal." Sousuke explained Kaname's idea in brief, and offered up a few plans.

"Make her a decoy? It's risky," Clouseau said with a frown. "And they're scattered all over the ship. How are you going to round them all up?"

"She says it's likely that they have a data link function," Sousuke told him. "If we bait them carefully enough, the enemy machines will all contact each other and gather in the same area."

"The girl said that?" Clouseau blinked in surprise.

"You might only know her from my reports, but she's extremely reliable at times like these," Sousuke replied. "Please consider—" His plea was interrupted.

"What's taking so long?!" came the voice of a young woman. It was Clouseau's first time hearing the voice of Chidori Kaname, who must have snatched Sousuke's radio away from him. "Grant permission or give an order or whatever! Right now! If something happens to anyone from my school, you'll pay for it, you balding old jerk!"

What is she talking about? She can't even see me... Clouseau wondered. Then he said, placatingly, "Okay, I'll do it. Put him back on."

"Are you *sure* you'll do it?" Kaname demanded to know. "You better not be lying!"

"Just do it!" Clouseau bellowed back at her.

Sousuke returned. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant. It's one of her worst faults—"

"I don't care. I shouldn't have let my conscience distract me. We'll do it her way," Clouseau acknowledged, with a faint sense that he was grasping at straws. He and Sousuke shouted over the sounds of gunfire to work out the details of their plan.

Once the discussion was over and the transceiver was off, Clouseau whispered, too low to be heard, "Ugh. 'Angel,' my ass."

24 December, 2324 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

One kilometer south of Pacific Chrysalis, Tuatha de Danaan

"Con, sonar. Towed array's got a new contact on bearing 0-8-3," Sergeant Dejirani said to Lieutenant Colonel Richard Mardukas from the sonar shack. "Ah, spherical array's got it, too. Designate contact number Mike-13. Distance... what? Oh, huh, weird..."

Mardukas was in the control room, dishing out commands from a standing position next to the empty captain's chair. He was worried about the cruise ship enough as it was. He'd been told that the captain had gone missing, that a mysterious enemy had attacked, and that things were looking grim. He was further concerned about a set of Japanese patrol boats passing just four miles away. And now, here was the sonar technician with more bad news.

"Make your reports clear and concise," Mardukas ordered with a frown. "You—"

"Quiet! You're distracting me!" Dejirani snapped. "There's more than one. Underwater, over the thermal layer. And... moving fast. Over 50 knots?!"

“A torpedo?” Mardukas said with alarm. “Battle stations!” A shot of fear ran through the control room. The officer of the deck hit the alarm, and the order was broadcast shipwide. A yellow marker displaying the contact appeared on the nautical map on the front screen.

“No! I’d have noticed a torpedo way sooner! The shape’s all wrong!” Dejirani objected. “They’re submarines! Damn, now two more! Designate Mike-14 and Mike-15! All about ten miles away and closing!”

Impossible, Mardukas thought. The de Danaan was the only submarine in the world capable of speeds faster than 50 knots. But he’d never known Dejirani’s analyses to be wrong, and so he believed it. *Enemies?* he wondered. *A foolish question; of course they’re enemies.*

Mardukas took a deep breath. “Contact the ground team,” he ordered. “Sever the communications cable. Helm, course 1-0-5, speed to 30 knots! Twenty degrees down bubble; make your depth 300! Prepare for anti-submarine warfare!”

24 December, 2325 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Underwater, 16 Kilometers East of Tuatha de Danaan

The sound of superconductive drives and rushing water rang out as three Leviathans cruised forward, piercing through the black ocean. Their speed was far beyond what any conventional vessel could hope to match.

“Shark-1 to all. The TDD seems to have noticed us. It’s stopped running parallel with the Pacific Chrysalis and changed to course 1-0-5,” announced the pilot of one of the Leviathans, Shark-1.

Most submarines, when moving at top speed, would find it impossible to scan for enemies due to the noise they were producing themselves, but their machines were different. They were pulling information from the sonobuoys they’d dispersed in advance, which could tell them precisely where the enemy was, regardless of their own speeds.

“Shark-2, roger. Textbook navigation there, eh?”

“Shark-3, roger. What a mediocre captain. They don’t seem to realize how outmatched they are.”

The responses came from Shark-1’s “wingmen” as they trailed a few hundred yards behind. Their machines, revolutionized takes on the concept of the submarine, used fighter pilot jargon to describe their maneuvers. In fact, the concept of “Plan 0601,” the Leviathan, was that of “undersea fighter jet.”

With a crew of two each, these brand new weapons platforms made use of arm slave control technology, which allowed them to approach a target swiftly and execute strikes that couldn’t be dodged. They were capable of close-combat tactics, too, and their general purpose was to use their exceptional maneuverability to quickly dispose of slow-moving vessels carrying crews of several hundred.

Their bodies were streamlined, like throwing knives, and somewhat resembled scaled-down Tuatha de Danaans. Each was affixed with a pair of arms for close-range combat, which enabled the Leviathans to grapple a target and breach its hull with their monomolecular cutters.

These machines, which applied the versatility of ASes to undersea combat, were untouchable by all conventional ships. They’d already had live combat tests sinking Russian and Indian naval submarines, as well as several commercial vessels. All were written off as accidents, and the crews that had died at their hands probably didn’t even know what had hit them.

The Shark team that operated the Leviathans had found these early targets pathetically easy to dispose of, and this went doubly so for the captain of the Shark-1; he had once been an elite submariner in the British Navy, but the whims of a tyrannical superior had sealed him off from a path to captaincy. Yet now here he was, master of the world’s greatest underwater vessel—and he was deeply grateful to Amalgam, who had given him this chance.

The Tuatha de Danaan would be the ultimate prey. According to reports, its formidable female captain was not currently aboard, so the hunt wouldn’t even prove especially difficult. The vessel was probably currently under command of that man—that incompetent, neurotic officer who had ruined his life. It was finally time for revenge.

“I’ll teach you a lesson...” In the stuffy cockpit, he smiled cruelly to himself. “As usual, we’ll attack from three directions. Break!”

The three machines, sailing in a reverse V-formation through the dark water, split apart at his word, each going in a different direction. They turned with the precise ferocity of a raptor in flight; by comparison, their prey seemed especially slow and pathetic.

24 December, 2327 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Casino, Pacific Chrysalis

“Not yet?” Sousuke whispered into the radio from a corner of the casino, as he readied his Belgian-made submachine gun. The sprinklers were still raining down on them.

“Not yet,” the soaked Kaname responded in a trembling voice, standing next to the roulette table a few dozen meters away. An Alastor was standing right in front of her, close enough to grab her with just one leap. “Keep holding,” she told him. “Once it realizes that I’m the one it’s after, it definitely won’t hurt me. Don’t worry.”

“But what if you’re wrong?” Sousuke fretted. “You’ve done enough, haven’t you? Get away from it, Chidori.”

“I haven’t done enough!” Kaname’s voice cracked. Sousuke, who had his sight trained on the Alastor from afar, could hear her even without the radio.

The robot approached her, slowly. As it stared straight at Kaname, the robot’s hooded sensor glowed. With one or two more steps, it would be close enough to tear her in half with one swing of its arm.

Sousuke had plenty of experience with decoy plans, but he’d never had to fight so hard against the urge to pull the trigger. *I feel like a new recruit...* he thought. *What if that metal mountain just swats off her head? What if it shoots through her with its arm rifle? What if it grabs her throat with its hand, and twists...* He was shocked by where his own imagination was taking him.

How many times has Kaname faced an imminent threat like this now?

Sousuke wondered. *Why do I always get this way? I lose all my cool the minute she's in danger. My emotions race and my blood runs hot. I don't feel this way about my other comrades... Why is that?*

He narrowed his eyes. Kaname held stock-still before the Alastor, wreathed in light mist from the pouring rain. She was standing in the one faint beam of light in the room, which illuminated her droplet-covered face and her trembling shoulders. As she stood there, almost symbolically, he finally understood. The understanding was sudden, and inappropriate, and unforeseen. There was no logic to it at all. She was just special.

She's strong. She's beautiful. I want to protect her. Comfort, hope, inspiration—she is the symbol of all those things, Sousuke realized. *I want her all to myself. I can't stand the idea of anyone having her; especially not an enemy. That's how I feel right now. Knowing that is all I need. I finally understand—*

But as he was about to come upon the final answer, Sousuke's ruminations were interrupted by the sound of Kaname's voice. "Ah... wait. Er... Tessa? I'm a little occupied right now..."

"What is it, Chidori?" he asked, staring at her in confusion.

Kaname's tone abruptly changed, and her voice came through the radio in a whisper. "I'm sorry, Kaname-san. This situation is... oh, my goodness. Very dangerous. But ah... I see. I'll leave it to you..."

What is she talking about? Sousuke wondered. It was bizarre, just like that day in the depths of the de Danaan, in the Lady Chapel. She'd been talking to someone, as if she was a different person—specifically, as if she was Tessa.

But Sousuke didn't have any more time to think it over, because Kaname was herself again, and shouting, "All right... do it!" In his sight, he could see the robot reaching for Kaname, and he opened fire without hesitation.

The stricken enemy turned to face him as Kurz bathed it in fire from the other direction. "Run!" Sousuke cried, pulling the safety off of a flash grenade.

Clouseau was at all ends trying to deal with everything at once: getting hostages to safety; organizing his subordinates; fighting off the encroaching

enemy; the condition of the mothership they were no longer in touch with; the progress of the safecracking. *It never rains, but it pours...* he thought gloomily.

"Team Golf, move back from E13 to E15," he ordered. "As slowly as you can. Don't let them through to E14. Gebo-9, how's Santa Claus coming? Kaun-6, prioritize the hostages—" Clouseau continued to shoot while dishing out his orders. Empty shell casings littered the floor around him, and the smell of smoke filled the hallway. On the other side of the corridor, a dark silhouette flew back and hid around the bend. *Dammit...* The stupid robot. Was it intentionally making him waste ammunition?

It was learning.

Just then, he got the call he'd been waiting for. It was Tessa; she was calling from the phone in the women's bathroom, routed through the radio on the bridge. "Uruz-1, Ansuz here. Status?"

"Colonel?" Clouseau responded. "Where are you? Is that passenger—"

Tessa interrupted him in a whisper. "I'm still with him. I managed to sneak away to speak with you. He hasn't done anything to me. But it sounds like those robots have appeared?"

"Yes. About a dozen, I think."

"Follow Angel's plan," Tessa ordered.

How does she know about that? She should have only just now gotten in contact with us... But Clouseau didn't have time to think about it any longer.

"Have Team Golf on standby in G10, as well," Tessa continued. "That will be the one gap in the net, and Corporal Yang is better cut out for that. And I'm sure the robots are craftier than you were expecting."

Hearing Tessa sounding clear and confident for the first time that day, Clouseau decided to set all questions aside. He could think about all of that later; she was his commanding officer, and worth trusting in situations like these.

Tessa launched into a series of rapid-fire questions next: "How's the hostage evacuation?"

“Almost completely finished,” he told her.

“Captain Harris?”

“Haven’t found him yet.”

“The vault?”

“Not through yet.”

“The de Danaan?”

Clouseau hesitated for a second. That was right—that was the next most urgent matter after the robots. “‘Three high-tech submarines approaching at fifty knots. They probably mean to sink us. Taking countermeasures now,’ they said. The XO is still in command.”

Like most of the members of the ground team, Clouseau didn’t know much about submarine combat, but it was obvious that the de Danaan was in danger. Besides that, it was three-on-one—this might be the greatest threat the mighty sub had ever faced. And in the past, the one who’d always gotten them out of trouble was the wunderkind, Teletha Testarossa. But she wasn’t aboard right now. She couldn’t issue orders or give advice.

It’s probably hopeless... Clouseau didn’t want to admit it, but with that unimpressive-looking XO in command, there was no way—

“We’ll just have to leave it to him,” Tessa said, with utmost calm.

“Yes, ma’am. But Colonel—”

“Clouseau-san,” she said, cutting him off. “Do you know what Lieutenant Colonel Mardukas was known as in his Royal Navy days?”

“No...”

“‘The Duke.’ His navigation was serene. His strategies were clear-headed. He’s a top-notch submariner and an unbeatable chess player. He was awarded countless medals for top-secret live combat missions,” Tessa told him. “There is no one in the field of underwater combat who doesn’t know the name ‘the Duke.’”

“Him?” Clouseau questioned incredulously. “The lieutenant colonel?”

“Did you think he was merely a fussy technician?” Tessa asked, her voice betraying some amusement despite the seriousness of their situation. “When he’s about to show his true skill, ‘the Duke’ has a certain habit... I’m afraid I’ve never witnessed it myself, but our crew might be seeing it at this very moment.”



Same Timeframe, Tuatha de Danaan

Richard Mardukas was indeed displaying his “habit” for the first time in six years. He pinched his hat brim with the fingers of his right hand and put his left hand on the back of his head. Then he slowly reversed the positions of his hands, rotating the cap 180 degrees.

He pressed a button. “Gentlemen. We are entering battle,” Richard Mardukas said, running his narrowed eyes over the screen. “The enemy believes that they are hunting us. We may be large and slow, indeed, but we will show them that it is *they* who are the prey. Our lady’s vessel is the true queen of death, and she reigns over these seas.” He paused a moment, and then called out, “FCO, report.”

“FCO! Loading of first and second ADSLMMs complete!”

“Load MAGROCs onto all MVLSes.”

“Aye, sir. Loading MAGROCs onto all MVLSes.”

“Maneuvering. New course, 2-0-5.”

“Aye, sir. Coming to course 2-0-5.”

“FCO. On my signal, open tubes one and two.”

“Aye, sir. Ready.”

“Maneuvering. Halt EMFC and reduce forward speed. Sonar, tell me when we’re cavitating.”

“Aye, sir.”

It felt like an esoteric chant that only they knew; a pre-battle ritual, performed by ancient priests. With their words, the sleeping giant around them began to hum with power.

A report came in from the sonar shack. “Con, sonar. I’ve got it. Estimating five seconds. Two, one... cavitating!”

“Open one and two.”

“Aye. Opening one and two.”

“XO. We’ll be in plain sight,” said the officer of the deck, Captain Goddard, nervously.

“We already were,” Mardukas told him dismissively. “Swim out one and two.”

“Aye. ADSLMM, fire one. Fire two.”

Mobile mines spat out from the de Danaan’s torpedo tubes. These were weapons designed to sail silently to pre-input coordinates and wait for the enemy there... but their speed was only twenty knots, one-third the speed of the enemy.

It was a good thing that the noise of the de Danaan’s high-speed cruising, caused by the stoppage of its electromagnetic flow control function, covered the sound of the smart mines’ launch... but their effective range was in the opposite direction of the route the enemies were taking.

“Hold course. In twenty seconds, activate the EMFC on Captain Dinh’s mark. Then decrease to one-third speed. Slow to twenty knots.”

“XO. But then the enemy could attack—” the navigation officer said.

“Hurry, Captain Dinh,” said Mardukas, cutting his subordinate off.

“Ah... aye, sir. EMFC, on my mark. 5, 4, 3... contact.”

“Contact. EMFC, activate,” the AMC officer replied. The electromagnetic flow control silenced the noise generated by the massive submarine’s passage through the water.

“Well done,” Mardukas commended him. “But the enemy can still see us. Sonar, keep an ear out.”

“Aye, sir.”

“New course 2-9-5. Make your depth 120. Twenty degrees up bubble.”

“Aye, sir. Course now 2-9-5. Make my depth 120. Twenty degrees up bubble.”

Mardukas gave orders, and his subordinates repeated them.

As he listened to the reports coming in, Mardukas spoke quietly, without so much as a smile. “Excellent. Gentlemen, don’t be overwhelmed by the enemy’s

speed. Impatience leads to unforced errors. Enjoy this moment.”

Pacific Chrysalis

Tessa finished her instructions to Clouseau and came out of the girls’ bathroom, when she found Sailor standing right there.

“Took you a while,” he said. She had expected him to lay into her, but his manner was strangely subdued.

They were currently on the lower deck in the ship’s fore, so there was no one else around. Ever since that first explosion, she’d been hearing the sound of intense gunfire in the distance. Sailor had gotten excited by the noise. “The Navy SEALS are here!” he’d exulted.

“But it’s too early,” he’d concluded directly afterwards. “We’re still only sixty minutes into a two-hour movie. They’re gonna get wiped out. I have to save them!”

It would be too dangerous to let this stubborn soldier throw himself into the danger zone, which was why Tessa was finding every excuse she could to buy time. She could sense his irritation rising every time she did so, but... “S-Sorry for the wait. Shall we, then?” Tessa asked as if nothing had happened, but Sailor’s response surprised her.

“We can go later.”

“Er? Is there some problem?” Tessa asked.

He’d been raring to go just minutes ago, but now Sailor’s manner was entirely subdued. His square jaw was twisted in a scowl, and he stared carefully at Tessa. “You might not think it from looking at me, but I’ve got pretty good hearing. I couldn’t make out everything, but I heard a lot. Who were you talking to?”

Tessa gasped.

Sailor, holding his submachine gun in one hand, walked swiftly up to her. “I heard you say something about ‘the Duke.’ You knew his real name, too. How does a maid like you know Mr. Mardukas?”

“Ah, er—”

“When I was an officer of the deck, he saved the ship I was serving on. And me,” Sailor admitted. “We were on maneuvers in the Barents Sea, and started taking on water from an accident and Soviet attacks. It was the British nuclear sub, the Turbulent, that saved us; the Duke was its captain. After things quieted down, my captain—Commander Testarossa—partly out of gratitude, partly out of respect, and partly as a joke, sent him an American-style Turbulent cap.”

Tessa was so shocked by his words that she forgot everything else about their current situation. *Sailor used to serve under my late father?* she wondered. *And Mardukas and my father were friends?* Mardukas had never mentioned that in the past...

“I heard that after Mr. Mardukas retired, he joined some civilian shipping company... What’s this all about?” Sailor demanded to know. “Is he on board here? I don’t get it. Are you hiding things from me?!”

“W-well, all girls have to have their share of secrets... ah, please don’t lean in so close. You smell like cigars...” Tessa turned away, wincing, as the angry Sailor bore down on her.

“Don’t change the subject!” he bellowed, sounding absolutely serious. “Who the hell are you?! If you don’t tell me right now, I’ll tie you up and throw you into the boys’ latrine!”

Tessa didn’t even have time to be shaken by the strange coincidence. It was time, she decided, to explain her position and the situation as simply as possible, and try to earn his cooperation. She couldn’t be stuck here, playing some comedy of errors with some old man, while everyone else was out there, struggling. It was completely unbecoming of a commander-in-chief.

Even so... “I don’t think you’d believe me if I told you,” she told him reluctantly.

“I’ll be the judge of that!” Sailor declared. “Now, tell me everything. As fast as you can!”

“Er... the truth is, I’m a captain, like you,” Tessa admitted.

“I’m being serious!”

“See?” she complained. “I knew you wouldn’t believe me...”

“Of course not! Are you a spy with the CIA or something? Trying to steal my glory before I—” Sailor was interrupted midway.

In the dim light of the corridor stood a large man. He was wearing a hooded coat, and a faint light shone from a horizontal slit on his face.

Tessa gasped as the figure began to approach them, silently, step by step. She immediately recognized it as being one of the robot attackers. Had it slipped through Clouseau’s line of defense and made it this far?

“The hell is your problem?” Sailor asked it quizzically. “What’s with the mask? Hey, stay back! I’ve got a gun, see?!” Sailor pointed his submachine gun at it, still unaware that it was loaded with rubber bullets.

“That won’t work! Throw it away!” Tessa screamed, leaping for the gun... but it was too late. Reacting immediately to Sailor’s aggression, the robot stooped over and took aim with its arm-mounted rifle. “Ah—”

It fired. Sailor was lucky that Tessa’s leap had thrown him off-balance, because the three-round burst just missed his head to spark against the wall behind him. “Huh?!” he exclaimed, sounding perplexed. Meanwhile, the enemy’s drive system hummed to life as it stopped firing and charged, its coat billowing behind it.

Tessa interposed herself between Sailor and the enemy. She was betting, based off of the inferences she’d inherited during her resonance with Kaname, that the robot wouldn’t target her.

“Run—” she began to say.

But the Alastor didn’t hesitate to swing its right arm at Tessa, sending her small body flying into the wall. Maybe this was its version of “going easy on her”... but it was still a painful and disabling blow. The impact forced the air out of her lungs. The world around her went black, and she lost all feeling in her body.

She could hear Sailor shouting and firing his gun recklessly. The rubber bullets bounced off the wall and rained down on her where she lay on the floor. “Urgh...” Shaking her swimming head, Tessa sat up, and saw the hand at the end of the enemy’s thick arm holding Sailor by the throat.

“Sailor-san?! Stop! Please, stop!” Tessa stood up and grabbed the robot’s arm, but all she could do was dangle helplessly. No matter how the two of them punched and scratched, their enemy remained unfazed.

“Going to... die...” Sailor wheezed.

“Stop it, please!” she cried again, and it was in that exact moment that the robot relaxed its grip.

“Urgh... guh.” Sailor thrust himself away desperately from the robot’s chest. He and Tessa both swayed and fell on their backsides, but the enemy didn’t attack again.

“What...?” she breathed, while Sailor coughed and retched.

Seemingly to have lost all interest in both of them, the Alastor slowly turned around and tilted its faceplate upwards. It was looking toward the upper decks of the ship’s fore. The next instant, the robot whipped around, leaped, and crashed through the deck above. Fragments of plaster and pipe rained down, and when the dust settled, they could see a perfect hole torn in the ceiling.

The robot was gone.

Could it be that its designer had programmed it to listen to her pleas? No, not possible; he wasn’t that kind of person anymore. Which meant... the diversion had worked.

Kaname-san, Sagara-san... be well... Tessa prayed to herself.

Meanwhile, Sailor stopped coughing long enough to curse. “Ugh... the hell is going on here? How was that thing so strong? Guh...”

“Are you all right, Sailor-san?”

“I’m fine! But I want to know what’s happening on this ship!” he demanded. “Who the hell was that? And who the hell are you?!”

“Well...” Tessa began, and trailed off while considering her next move. Sailor was in so deep at this point, that it occurred to her she might as well come clean with him—but just as she made up her mind to do so, she heard another voice.

“That girl is the captain of the Toy Box, sir. And the leader of the terrorists.” She turned to see Captain Harris standing there, holding a German-made automatic pistol.

Tessa froze up, and Sailor looked suspicious. “Captain,” he said. “Where have you been hiding? And... what’d you just say? The Toy Box? Captain? Leader? *Her*? Don’t give me that crap—”

“I don’t have time to explain. I need you out of the picture right now.” Then, without warning, Harris shot him. The sound echoed through the room, and Sailor dropped like a sack of potatoes.

A bloodstain spread out across the floor as the big man let out a moan. “Run... strange maid.”

“Sailor-san?!” Tessa gasped. “No! You have to hold on!”

“I don’t know what’s going on, but... please run,” Sailor told her weakly.

“No! You need treatment—”

“He doesn’t need treatment.” Harris calmly pointed his gun at Tessa as she clung to Sailor’s body. “They’re going to sink the ship soon enough. At least, that’s what I’d do, if I were an Amalgam executive. Even with treatment, he won’t last long in the open ocean at this time of year.”

Tessa glared at him. “How could you? He saved you when you were a prisoner, out of the goodness of his heart!”

But Harris just shrugged. “Yeah, right. I think he was just trying to play hero.

He’s a stupid man. And let’s not forget... the one who got him, the crew and passengers all mixed up in this, was you—Mithril.”

Tessa had no response for this.

“We don’t have any time left,” Harris announced abruptly. “I’ve given up on catching Chidori Kaname, and I’ll be taking you with me instead. The organization has to forgive me if I bring them the captain of the Tuatha de Danaan.”

He’s going to take me and escape, Tessa realized. *The captain is going to abandon his ship, its passengers and its crew, and run away.* “You coward. You’re unworthy to captain a ship!” she shouted angrily. “Captain Sailor isn’t the stupid one. You are!”

Harris’s response was simply to sidle up to her with a grin. “I certainly am,” he agreed. “There I was, scolding you on the observation deck, and I didn’t even recognize you. It never occurred to me that the much-rumored Miss Testarossa could be such a beautiful, frail... easily wrangled little girl.” His hand reached for the back of her neck.

Kaname was running up the stairs. She took them three at a time, grabbing the railing—which was white, with anti-corrosion paint—for support. *How long until the rooftop deck?* She wondered. She knew the ship couldn’t really be a hundred stories tall... but right now, it certainly felt like it was.

“Don’t stop! Keep running!” Sousuke shouted from behind her, before turning to unload briefly on their pursuer. The ear-splitting gunshots made it almost impossible to hear his rebuke.

Kaname panted as she kept running. “Sheesh!” she wheezed. “Who thought up this plan?!”

“*You* did, remember?” Kurz said, injecting some of his reliable snark as he took his turn against their pursuers with his submachine gun. The two men were alternating regularly in firing back at the Alastors chasing Kaname.

“Uruz-7 to all! We’re about to reach the jogging track! Don’t shoot us, okay? We have three enemies in sight right now... no, now four! Team Echo, come

from the starboard side—" Sousuke spoke into the radio, swiftly updating his comrades.

Struggling for breath, Kaname mounted the top stair and slammed the door open before exclaiming in shock. She had made it to the highest deck at last—but now, there was Alastor standing right in front of her eyes.

Did one get ahead of me? she wondered. *No*— Just as the Alastor began to reach for her, a hail of bullets assailed it from the side. Squeals rang out from the bulletproof metal, and sparks from ricochets showered down on her.

"Team Golf here! I think we made it in time. Get Angel to shelter—You hear that, Kaname? Run, run, run!" Just five meters to her right, around the corner of a hallway leading to the fitness center, stood an armed Mithril crewman who was shouting at her. She remembered that his name was Yang.

"Ah..."

"Hurry!"

Sousuke grabbed Kaname and ran in the opposite direction from Yang and the others. The Alastor in front of them was about to fire back, but Kurz unleashed a burst to distract it.

They never had a chance to catch their breath. Just as they thought they'd evaded the enemy, another Alastor would appear from the darkness and charge at them. Enemy after enemy came out of the woodwork, then pursued, hot on their heels. Just how many were there?

At last, they made it out into the vast open space on the roof of the ship. Seeing that it contained both a tennis and a basketball court filled Kaname with a renewed sense of disgust at the ship's sheer size.

"Run! Hurry—" She turned back for a second, and gasped as she saw not one, but three Alastors advancing on Yang and the others, raining down gunfire and forcing the team into retreat. Kurz was under fire, as well; he'd just barely managed to dive behind a bench and run off into the darkness, herded by the shots coming down all around him.

"Don't stop!" Sousuke called out urgently. "Go, go!"

Kaname ran with all of her might. Even when she wrenched her ankle and stumbled, Sousuke just grabbed her arm and kept running, pulling her mercilessly along with him. He didn't even acknowledge her protests of pain and exhaustion.

"Eyes up, comrade! Our goal is near!" Sousuke said, trying to encourage her.

Comrade. It was a plain, vulgar word, and the opposite of romantic. Despite that, Kaname found herself reluctantly accepting it. Maybe this suited their relationship better than a pet name like "honey" or "darling." But how did they keep getting into these situations?

"Some Christmas, huh?!" Kaname howled up to the sky, over all the gunfire and shouting. *Okay, maybe it's time to accept it*, she told herself. *I'm in love with him. I don't know why these are the only times I can admit it to myself. Maybe it's the sense of trust. Maybe it's the touch-and-go nature of a firefight making it impossible to deny...*

Tonight is Christmas. Normal couples all over Japan are whispering sweet nothings to each other, gazing out over beautiful nightscapes and listening to romantic music. Delicious dinners and intimate conversations; the kind of things Yamashita Tatsuro would sing about. There was a time when I thought that was what I wanted. But when I'm with him...!

Chased around by creepy robots, flinching from close-range ricochets, running for our lives, out of breath and soaked to the bone... Whoever heard of a couple like us?! "It's got to be karma!" she yelled. "One of us was a real scumbag in a past life!!"

"I don't quite follow, but I'm sure it's not an issue!" Sousuke bellowed back.

"It so *is*!" Kaname wailed. "You've ruined my youth, and my 17-year-old Christmas Eve!"

"Really? This seems like an appropriate sort of night for you!"

"I hate it!"

"Then why are you laughing?" Sousuke wanted to know.

"This is crying!" she retorted.

Just then, their flight came to a stop; they'd hit a wall. A smoke stack, otherwise known as a 'funnel,' towered in front of them, while behind them was the wide-open tennis court. Panting for breath, they turned around and saw that roughly eleven Alastors had fanned out to surround them.

Clouseau spoke over the radio, "Uruz-1 to Uruz-7. Nearly all teams are out of ammo. There's nothing more we can do for you. Good luck."

"Uruz-7," Sousuke briefly acknowledged. "Roger."

Slowly, the eleven Alastors began to approach. They were crouched over, and ready to charge at any time. Their arm-loaded machine guns were exposed, their aim fixed on Sousuke and Kaname.

"We're cornered," Kaname announced with resignation.

"That's right," Sousuke agreed. "It's all going just as planned."

A faint metal scraping sound came from somewhere above them, but Kaname could barely hear it. She just clung to Sousuke's arm as she looked out over the field of executioners. "They're going to kill us," she muttered.

"You're the one who assured us they wouldn't."

"Well, I'm a little less certain now! And they might not kill *me*, but what about *you*?!"

Instead of responding to Kaname's panicked concerns, Sousuke whispered into his radio. "Uruz-7, here. Have you arrived?"

The response came a minute later. It was an electronic voice, low and male. "Affirmative. I am in position. And here I thought I would never get my time to shine..."

"I've told you to stop using human turns of phrase," Sousuke scolded back.

"And I have informed you that dangerous situations like these require jokes."

Sousuke seethed. "If we make it out of this alive, I'm disassembling you."

"I fear that you lack that authority, Sergeant."

The Alastors prepared, and their attack would come at any moment. Sousuke clucked his tongue and said to the one on the radio, "They're coming. I give you

permission to fire at the targets. Fire, fire, fire!”

“Roger. Fire at will!”

“Do you even have will?” Sousuke muttered, but Kaname almost didn’t hear it as a new roar ripped out, louder than anything she’d heard that night.

Suddenly, a hail of 12.7mm shots came streaking down from the funnel above; each packing far more power than the rounds from the rifles and submachine guns the others had been using. This wasn’t fire meant for infantry, but for military LAVs. Any one hit could easily tear through an engine block, and they were coming at a rate of thirty per second.

The incredible curtain of fire did a full sweep: right to left across the line, then back again. It ripped the robots crowding around them to pieces. Several of the robots’ auto-destruct sequences seemed to have engaged, but Kaname and Sousuke took cover in a gutter at the end of the tennis court, so most of what hit them were wood splinters. Nevertheless, Sousuke threw himself over Kaname to protect her as tiny particles showered down on them.

Even with all of that, one Alastor seemed to have avoided fatal damage. Kaname was still its target, and it used what remained of its arms and legs to approach her. Sousuke dove in front of her, protectively...

And then suddenly, the Alastor flattened out, as if crushed from above by an invisible hammer. The air rippled faintly above it, like a heat haze.

“All targets destroyed. Orders, sir?” prompted the voice over the radio.

“Hold your fire. Stand by on Master Mode 4.”

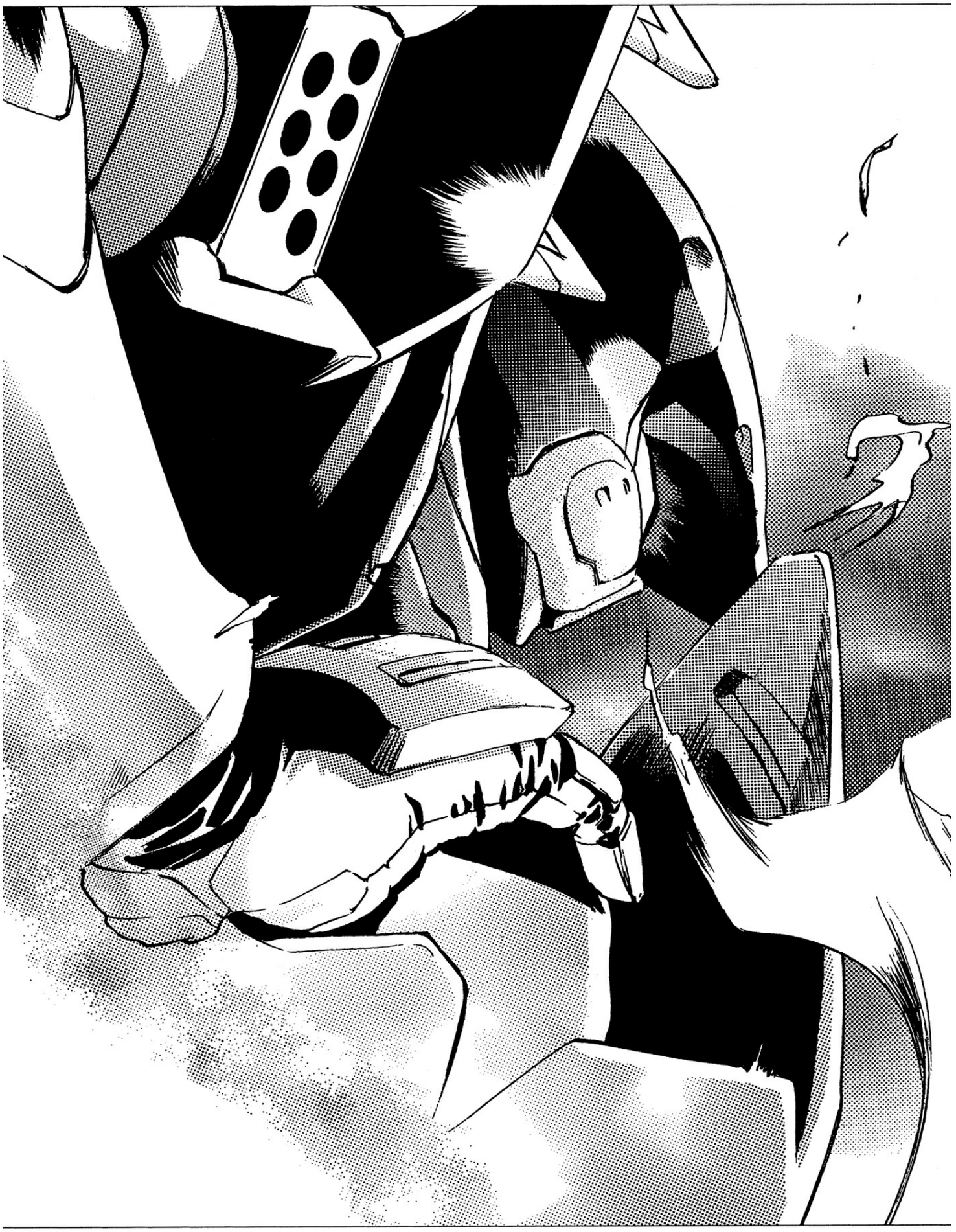
“Roger. Holding fire. Mode 4: Stay alert, ready.”

“Disengage ECS.”

“Roger. ECS off.”

Above the machine, mercilessly crushed without a trace... a faint light appeared and began to pool out, like ink. The ‘spill’ in space slowly began to take shape, until at last it defined itself as the form of an AS.

It was the ARX-7 Arbalest. It was kneeling on the tennis court, smoke billowing around it, with the final Alastor crushed beneath its weight.



“Wow...” Kaname found herself breathing, even as she winced from the ringing in her ears. When she’d explained her plan to lure the robots out to the only wide-open part of the ship and finish them all at once, Sousuke and the others had said they would ‘use the AS loaded in the helicopter above.’ But even knowing that it was coming, she couldn’t help but be taken aback by the sight of the AS’s power in action.

After all the trouble the Alastors had given the flesh-and-blood humans, it had taken just a few rounds from the Arbalest’s head-mounted 12.7mm machine guns to polish them off—and those were its lower-powered integral weapons, barely useful in battle against other ASes. Imagining the destructive power of its more high-powered “optional” equipment—the 40mm rifle and 57mm shotcannon—was enough to make her dizzy. The maneuverability, the firepower... ASes were often called the ultimate land weapon, and it was clear that this was no exaggeration.

“Is it over?” she asked quietly.

“Yeah. Things are looking up,” Sousuke whispered back, hands on his hips as he stood up in the smoke. “Though I’d feel better if the view wasn’t the back of an awful AS.”

“Ah...” Kaname breathed vacantly, in a combination of relief and surprise.

The Arbalest responded over the radio. “Sergeant. Are you referring to me as ‘an awful AS’?”

“Guess,” Sousuke said shortly.

“Guessing complete. Do you wish to hear my conclusion?”

“No.”

“Roger. Please provide a rating of this machine’s autonomous battle function.”

“Well done. That is all.”

“Learning message: explain the meaning of ‘well done,’” the Arbalest requested.

“Figure it out,” Sousuke barked back. “And shut up until I give further orders.”

“Roger. Though I would prefer not to.”

“I told you to shut up.”

“Roger.” With that final rejoinder, the Arbalest’s AI fell silent.

Kaname, who was quietly listening to the exchange, found herself thinking what a strange operator—AS combination they were. It vaguely reminded her of the way conversations between her and Sousuke typically went. And with that realization, it all made sense.

The lambda driver-mounted AS was designed to shadow its operator as closely as possible. It could intuit the operator’s psychology and emotional state, and synchronize with them, not by copying, but by complementing. The further that process progressed, the more efficient the machine’s dynamic response rate with the omnisphere would become. This meant that while their enemies could only execute what was programmed into them from the start, the ARX-7’s potential was nearly limitless.

The one who made the machine—Tessa said his name was Bani—he must have been very talented, with a real romantic spirit... Kaname could tell that he’d loved Tessa, as well.

“Chidori?” Sousuke’s voice snapped her out of her reverie. The train of thought disappeared in a flash.

“Huh?” she said.

“How are you? Were you hurt?”

“Ah... no. I’m okay,” she told him. “But where’s everyone from school? And we need to get Tessa—” Suddenly, a new train of thought jolted through her, stopping her mid-speech.

Kaname-san. I’m sorry to interrupt again. I see it went well... I’m glad. But I’m afraid something awful has happened. Please send medics to Area H21 in the starboard corridor. There’s a man there, Sailor-san. He’s injured, and he will require a significant blood transfusion. He will die if nothing is done.

“Tessa...?” she asked uncertainly.

I’d ask you to send my men to the C16 observation deck, as well... but I know

that it won't be in time. Harris is finalizing his preparations to escape with me. This might be the last time we speak.

"Tessa?" Kaname tried again, through a rising sense of alarm.

I hate how powerless I am. If only I had your strength... Please, be of use to everyone. You're the only one who can replace me. And regarding your relationship with Sagara-san... ah... it's fading...

"Tessa?!" Kaname yelled, but that was the end of their resonance. A stinging in her right cheek, the pain of handcuffs on her wrists, and an afterimage of that captain's sinister grin were all that remained with her.

5: Sleepless Christmas Eve

24 December, 2335 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Shark-1, Near Izu Islands

Shark-1, having collected information about the enemy from the sonobuoys he'd dispersed in advance, observed the pathetic attempts at evasive maneuvers being taken by the Tuatha de Danaan. They'd probably be changing heading and speed frequently to try to scramble their target motion analysis.

Stupid, he scoffed to himself. *Do they really think those textbook submarine tactics will work against Leviathans?*

Shark-1 opened his encrypted channel for shallow depths and issued orders to his wingmen: "B240, D300, Code 13. Heading 240. Navigate to depth 300 and attack target from three directions. You have permission to use ultrafast torpedoes." Ten seconds later, he received a signal of acknowledgment from both machines, and the 'first officer' sitting behind him activated their fire control system.

The Leviathan's arsenal included Soviet-made ultrafast torpedoes known as Buryas. Their top speed was 120 knots, over twice the speed of the standard torpedoes used in the West. They were effectively missiles, and not even the Tuatha de Danaan could shake them off.

His AI revealed via on-screen display that the enemy had entered firing range. His two comrades were almost there, too. The de Danaan might be agile for a submarine, but it would still be helpless against attacks from multiple Buryas, coming from three directions at once.

Shark-1 removed the final safety and pulled the trigger. He felt a jolt as the ultrafast torpedo took off out of the firing tube in the Leviathan's belly, on a collision course with the de Danaan. *Easy. It's too easy...* he thought with a thin smile.

Next, he started preparing another weapon for the area the Pacific Chrysalis was in; a standard torpedo would be more than enough for that one. He had no idea who was on board that ship, and he didn't especially care. He'd been ordered to destroy it, so he would.

Tuatha de Danaan

The de Danaan's officer of the deck, Captain Goddard, could feel his heart pounding in his chest, even as he remained superficially calm. He couldn't stop feeling that they were facing hopeless odds. Just minutes ago, he'd been sure that nothing in the ocean could tangle with this vessel when it was in top condition. And yet, now...!

The enemies were running at over fifty knots, and it was three against one. Their top speed was probably greater than the Tuatha de Danaan's. And worst of all, they were flaunting the ironclad law of combat. He'd never expected them to sneak up in secret and attack them from behind.

They want to take us down fast, huh? he thought with resignation. To approach at unthinkable speeds, slam them with all the power they had, then rush away from the area of engagement, all in mere minutes... This enemy could do things that normal submarines couldn't. Goddard would find it implausible, if he hadn't experienced the capabilities of the de Danaan first-hand.

Any way you looked at it, they were at an overwhelming disadvantage. Against small boats with the maneuverability of torpedoes, the de Danaan felt impossibly large and unwieldy. If this situation was presented as a training exercise, everyone would agree it was a no-win scenario. It was utterly unprecedented.

Goddard peered over at his XO, Lieutenant Colonel Mardukas. The other man stood ramrod straight at the center of the control room, silent, with a melancholic expression. He was probably using the data they'd acquired to extrapolate the capabilities of the enemy vessels.

That grave expression of his was making Goddard feel more and more anxious. *What's going on here?* he wondered. The enemy's movements were

straightforward, boasting absolute confidence in their victory. How could they be so haughty? Did the weapons they carried also defy common sense?

The sonar tech spoke, as if to respond to Goddard's unasked question. "Con, sonar! Torpedo in the water! Bearing 0-4-9! From Mike-13!"

"Can you give me the type? And the speed?" Mardukas prompted, seemingly unfazed by the threat of enemy attack.

"Wait a minute... no way! It's too fast! Over 100 knots?! This torpedo is impossible! What in the world..."

"A Burya," Mardukas decided.

"Burya?" Goddard questioned, and scowled at the XO's words.

"An ultrafast torpedo made in the USSR," Mardukas clarified. "It creates a bubble of gas around itself and is propelled with a rocket motor. It's likely wire-guided. I suppose the intelligence division does their jobs right from time to time."

"B-But XO, even if we know what it is, we can't shake it off at that speed."

"It would be stranger if we *could* shake off a torpedo. It's nothing to worry about."

"But...!"

Mardukas glared at Goddard. "Calm down, Captain. Your panic is annoying me, and if I get annoyed, we all go down. I'm afraid I don't have time to explain every element of my plan, so stop thinking and follow my commands, quickly and to the letter."

"Y-Yes sir," Goddard responded.

"Good. Now, make our course 1-3-6, and gradually increase to sixty knots. Don't worry about cavitation. Open the door for the third torpedo tube and release all safeties."

"Ah... Aye, sir." Each position repeated the orders.

《Estimated sixty seconds to impact.》 The Mother AI, undergoing complicated TMA calculations, began the countdown to their doom.

As if to punctuate her words, the sonar tech screamed, “More torpedoes! One each from Mike-14 and Mike-15! They’re both ultrafast as well! Bearings 0-6-8 and 0-8-9!”

The enemy torpedoes currently bearing down on the de Danaan were on another level from the ones that the US Navy submarine had fired at them near the Perio Islands. It would be hard enough to dodge just one... and now they had three incoming from all different directions.

Time was short. They had only about fifty seconds left. But as far as Goddard could see, Mardukas wasn’t panicked in the slightest. He just glared at the multipurpose screen, like a cryptologist deciphering a line of code. All the data available suggested no way out. *But,* Goddard thought, *is the XO seeing something we aren’t?*

“Up to fifty knots.”

“What’s the course of the torpedo from Mike-13?” Mardukas wanted to know.

“2-2-1.”

Right now, the de Danaan was running perpendicular to the enemy torpedo. The enemy weapon was gradually adjusting its course to better home in on them.

“Forty seconds left!”

Then Mardukas said, with the nonchalance of someone ordering off a restaurant lunch menu, “It’s time. All stop. Left full rudder, course 0-4-5.”

“Aye, sir! All stop! Left full rudder! Course 0-4-5! ...Wait, what?!”

Despite following the orders to the letter, nearly everyone in the control room went pale at the command. Mardukas had turned them on a course straight at the oncoming torpedo. “Fire control,” he continued calmly. “When we reach 0-4-5, fire torpedo three.”

“But at this range, the safeties—”

“Five degrees more.”

“Aye, sir! Fire three!”

The torpedo launched from the tube, and Mardukas continued to give orders out swiftly. “All start, full reverse. Activate EMFC.”

“Full reverse!”

“EMFC, contact!”

The large vessel abruptly slowed. As the torpedo they’d shot screamed away from it, the submarine stopped, and began to move backwards. But the enemy’s ultrafast torpedo was already on their doorstep.

Is he trying to shoot down an ultrafast torpedo? Goddard turned pale at that thought. It was impossible to use one torpedo to intercept another one moving that quickly. Water pressure limited the radius wherein a torpedo’s explosion was effective, so while fragments and shockwaves could make anti-air missiles effective over several meters, a torpedo had to score a direct hit to do any damage at all. It was like a batter trying to hit a 150 kilometer-per-hour fastball, blindfolded, using sound alone. *The XO must know that. But then, why—*

“All hands, brace for impact,” Mardukas said calmly over the ship phone, and then gripped the armrest of the captain’s chair beside him. Goddard quickly did the same.

On the front screen, the marks showing the approaching enemy torpedo and the one they had just launched closed distance. They were now just a few seconds apart.

“FCO. Are you calm?” Mardukas asked.

“Y-Yes sir!” the fire control officer replied in falsetto.

“Good. Detonate torpedo three,” Mardukas ordered. “Now.”

“Aye, sir!”

Their torpedo detonated right in front of the enemy’s... and right in front of their own vessel, causing the explosion’s roar and shockwave to rip through the Danaan. It bucked as if taking a few hundred jabs from a boxer, jostling the already tensed crew. Goddard felt his heart nearly leap from his chest. As he gripped his own chair tightly, his eyes flicked searchingly around the front screen.

The counterattack had failed. It hadn't reached the enemy torpedo when it exploded. White noise from the foam created by the explosion meant they couldn't confirm its presence, but it had to be out there, and still speeding towards their ship...

By their calculations, one second left—

"Next, halt reverse course. Forward, two-thirds speed. Course 0-6-7. Move to periscope depth," Mardukas said through the commotion, as if he'd already moved on to the next phase of combat.

"What?" The whole crew, including Goddard, couldn't believe their eyes. The ultrafast torpedo was gone; all the data on hand made that clear. Their torpedo hadn't hit it, and yet...

"We've cleared the first. The second and third are still coming. We'll deal with them in the same manner," Mardukas instructed. "Then, just as you counter, fire MAGROCs to the surface from all MVLSes. Set the coordinates just as I tell you. Understand?"

Shark-1

Shark-1's captain was shocked. An explosion from an enemy torpedo had caused the Burya he'd launched to self-destruct. "Impossible... they knew about *that*?" he asked incredulously.

It was one of the Burya's few weaknesses: to move a torpedo at such tremendous speeds, it needed to negate drag from the water around it. This was accomplished through supercavitation—wreathing itself in a membrane of foam. The result was a delicate balance; at certain distances, the impulse currents from an explosion could throw it off course and render it unable to fly straight, like a plane going into a tailspin.

Once that balance was lost, the Burya would lose its resistance to water pressure, and its own speed would break it in half. And the commander of the Tuatha de Danaan had known...

Before Shark-1 could even react, the enemy vessel moved, and took out their other two Buryas the same way. He could hear the explosions play out from

afar, like a deafening underwater capriccio. The discord of millions and millions of bubbles made it impossible to hear anything the de Danaan was doing.

Not good... They were basically blind. First, they had to slow down to eliminate their own noise generation, then listen carefully. Shark-1 called for an all stop. Once the noise from the currents had faded, and everything returned to silent darkness around them, he could resume gathering data from the sonobuoys.

He didn't know exactly where it was, but he knew the de Danaan must still be out there. It had to be hiding somewhere near where the explosions had occurred. But the minute it attacked, they'd know where it was.

"Be careful. If we find them first, we win." The ocean, echoing with cacophony just seconds ago, was a dark, silent void once more. His two wingmen slowed down with him and switched to silent running.

"The foam around the enemy ship has cleared. Let's turn the sonobuoys to active and find their location," his first officer suggested from behind.

"Right," Shark-1 agreed. "It's not as if they can hurt us. Hunt them calmly." They'd gotten past the Buryas commendably, but the same trick wouldn't work twice. If the enemy tried to attack, that would give away their location, and this time, they'd fire a shot they couldn't dodge. They could even fight them in melee range, if they had to. Either way, the enemy boat would end up as sea scrap.

"Wasting our time... heh." Shark-1 let out a brief chuckle, then picked up a new sound. It was five loud splashes, coming from all around his two allies, Shark-2 and Shark-3.

Something was descending from above.

"MAGROCs?! When did they—"

MAGROCs were anti-submarine missiles. They could be fired from beneath the water like Tomahawks or Harpoon missiles, and after flying swiftly out of the sea, they'd plunge back into it, activate sonar, and track and destroy enemy submarines.

The de Danaan must have fired a large number of MAGROCs at some point.

Normally, they'd have been able to pick up on the sound of the enemy firing a flurry of missiles like that out of the water—the sound would be deafening, after all—and they'd be able to wait and easily dodge them before they hit, forcing the enemy into a stalemate.

But Shark-1 hadn't detected the sound of the de Danaan firing the missiles. The enemy must have masked it behind the explosion of the Buryas. They'd used those few seconds when the shockwave was still rocketing outward and the sea was filled with chaotic noise—

"Impossible..." A shiver went through Shark-1's captain as he realized the cool-headed audacity of the enemy commander. His allies, caught unawares, never stood a chance. The torpedoes caught them in a net. The targeting, landing just a few meters away, had an almost godlike precision to it.

Shark-2 and Shark-3 didn't even get to make use of their prodigious maneuverability as the de Danaan's MAGROCs blew them to pieces. That much was clear from the merciless sounds of explosions and noise echoing from behind him.

"A-All ahead full. Course 2-7-5. If we stay here, the MAGROCs will hit us, too!" he declared to the first officer behind him. He had to force his mind to a different topic, so as not to be distracted by his frustration.

It was fine either way, he decided. He'd already launched an ADCAP at the cruise ship. It was a normal torpedo and not a Burya, but it would be enough for a civilian passenger vessel. That would have less than five minutes until impact, and his primary mission was as good as achieved. The Pacific Chrysalis would sink, taking its hundreds of passengers with it.

So will the de Danaan, he promised himself. *I'll have my revenge.*

"We'll approach from the north and hit it with our remaining torpedo," Shark-1 suggested. "If it dodges that, we'll close in at high speed and seal the deal with the melee arms."

"Got it," his first officer agreed. "Let's teach them a lesson."

"The enemy's out of cards. Let's do it!"

That was an unexpected setback, but I'll show you. One Leviathan is still

enough to destroy de Danaan...

Tuatha de Danaan

"Mike-13, contact reacquired! Bearing 0-3-1! Acceleration started on course 2-0-5!" the sonar tech reported, unable to hide his agitation.

"The... the final enemy is approaching from the north, XO. The MAGROCs won't work again," Captain Goddard, still recovering from the first near-death experience, said to Mardukas as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

Despite having seen the heroic way he'd dealt with the enemy torpedoes seconds before they hit, Goddard really thought they were done for this time.

"Course 2-0-5, you said?" But Mardukas remained calm.

"Affirmative!"

"Speed?"

"Estimated 50 knots!"

"Hmm..." A corner of Mardukas's mouth quirked up a bit at that. It was the smile of a professor getting the answer he wanted from a promising student. "That's right, Mike-13. If you wanted to keep up the fight, that's the only course you could take. Sad to say..."

"XO? What..."

"Captain," Mardukas asked patiently. "Why do you think I had you send out those ADSLMMs in advance?"

"Ah...!" Goddard remembered the locations of the ADSLMMs—the autonomous mines he'd had them secretly fire earlier—and slapped his own forehead. The final enemy was heading right for the mines.

Shark-1

Shark-1, burning with vengeance, hadn't expected the path to the enemy to be blocked by smart mines. If he'd been thinking calmly and clearly, he might have realized that the enemy could have fired one while they were running loud

earlier. If he'd been thinking, maybe he could have avoided his fate.

But he hadn't. Back in his Royal Navy days, it had been his domestic violence issues that had kept him out of his superiors' good graces. To the very end, he had never come to terms with that brutal, impulsive aspect of his character.

Suddenly, two automatic mines appeared in his path, heading straight for him. "What the—" Shark-1 started to say. Even with the Leviathan's maneuverability, he wouldn't be able to change course in time. Mere seconds remained. He tried firing his decoy, but it was useless this close. The crewman behind him screamed.

With alarms blaring in the cockpit, Shark-1 swore, spitting out a curse to his former superior. "Mardukas, you son of a—"

Those were his last words. The de Danaan's smart mine detonated at close range and tore the Shark-1 to pieces.

Tuatha de Danaan

"Contact, ADSLMM explosion. Mike-13 is down!" The sonar tech's report inspired a sigh of relief among the crew. They were too deflated to let out a cheer of the kind typically seen in the movies.

Goddard himself could hardly believe it. A strained smile appeared on his face, and he peered over at Mardukas. "XO... s-sir..."

"The enemy should have known," Mardukas opined coldly. "Sending three mere 'underwater fighters' to defeat a vessel I command is like sending three infantrymen against a fortress."

From the very start, he had known just how the battle would go, and just what the enemy would do. It was almost like a chess game. The boldness, the calm of it... This realization of his superior's true abilities had Goddard at a loss for words.

"If the captain had been here, we'd have likely seen the same outcome. And perhaps if she'd been giving the orders, you wouldn't have been so terrified, Goddard," Mardukas said with his usual biting sarcasm.

“Oh, well... forgive me, sir.”

“Hmm. You are forgiven. More importantly...” The Duke turned his hat back to its original position. The commanding officer, who had shown a presence to rival Major Kalinin or the other impressive members of the ground forces, now resumed his usual appearance as a slightly world-weary middle-aged man. “That’s the match. Open a channel to the ground forces immediately; they’re in more danger than we are. A torpedo is headed for the cruise ship.”

Pacific Chrysalis

Disasters tend to come in waves. Not minutes after Sousuke and the other ground force members had finished off the Alastor horde, they received word from the de Danaan of another incoming threat:

Enemy high-speed torpedo approaching. Estimated arrival, less than one minute. Evasive maneuvers and evacuation recommended.

“You could at least try to sound freaked out about this!” Kurz shouted to the heavens as the word came down, but it was drowned out by the evacuation alarm blaring throughout the ship.

《*All passengers and crew evacuate to the starboard side. Repeat, evacuate to the starboard side. We apologize for the inconvenience on this fine Christmas Eve, but just in case, please head for the starboard—*》

“Drop the damned apologies! Just repeat the order!” Clouseau shouted over the radio to his subordinate on the bridge.

《But Lieutenant Clouseau. We *are* the ones who started this trouble, so I think we owe them— ah, damn. The speaker button...》

“Incompetent!!” Clouseau shouted as he heard his real name broadcast ship-wide. He clenched a fist as a vein throbbed on his forehead.

“Ah, hey, Lieutenant... I know you’re in a tough position, but we should probably evacuate. If that torpedo hits us, this whole area goes up in smoke,” Kurz said, coaxing him from behind, and Clouseau clicked his tongue.

Per Mardukas's instruction, the de Danaan had all its helicopters on standby for the rescue. Another transport helicopter, which had taken off before this all started, was spreading countermeasures across the sea surface to interfere with the torpedo's targeting, trying to protect the passengers in any way they could.

Still, it was almost impossible for a cruise ship of this size to avoid a torpedo.

"Everyone evacuate," Clouseau finally sighed. "We're out of options."

"No, we're not," Sousuke said over the external speakers and radio at once. Clouseau turned to see the Arbalest, positioned in the middle of the tennis court, begin to rise to its feet, now occupied by its operator.

"What are you doing, Sousuke? Hey!" Kurz called, as Sousuke walked the Arbalest to the ship's port side and stared down at the black water that the torpedo would soon be tearing through.

Sousuke pressed the voice order switch in his cockpit, and said, "Al. Set all your sensors to maximum. Search the area. Find heat sources located up to thirty feet under the surface."

《Roger. The torpedo?》 responded the machine's AI, Al.

"Yes."

《Located. Designating target Alpha-12. Eleven o'clock, range 1000. Estimated speed: Ninety kilometers per hour. Approaching. Collision in thirty seconds.》

"Precision fire mode. We're going to hit it with all we've got. Variable adjustments?"

《I have no reliable targeting adjustment data for underwater objects.》

"No choice. Concentrate."

《Roger. Precision fire mode.》

Surrounded by the green water of his night vision screen, Sousuke could see the heat source, shimmering white, as it approached. The thought of sparing ammunition didn't enter his mind; the moment it was in the crosshairs, he pulled both triggers. Sprays from both his 40mm rifle and 12.7mm head-mounted chain guns hit the water with a roar. At his feet, Kurz and the others

covered their ears and retreated to the ship's starboard side.

Chain guns were originally 30mm machine guns developed for use by combat helicopters. The Arbalest and M9s came with a modified version of them, smaller but with greater firing speed, mounted on their heads. It was these chain guns—firing at a rate of 1800 shots per minute, or thirty high-caliber shots per second—that he had just used to clear up the Alastor horde. These chain guns joined the Arbalest's 1200-shot-per-minute 40mm rifle in raining fire down on the ocean.

But even all of this failed to stop the torpedo. None of the shots even landed; the minute the bullets hit the water, they went wildly off course, and they only maintained momentum for a couple of meters, anyway.

The high-speed torpedo continued towards the Pacific Chrysalis.

《Torpedo interception failed. Evasive maneuvers recommended,》 urged his machine, likely thinking of its own safety.

But Sousuke, still scowling at the target on his screen, was working his rarely-employed imagination. *There are no options left. The ship is going to sink. My comrades, my schoolmates, Chidori... they'll all be blown away. Cast into the cold winter sea. I won't let it happen!*

That determination, combined with unshakable confidence, proved to be the perfect formula to activate the system sleeping inside his machine.

《We have it. It will work. Orders, Sarge,》 Al said briefly, as if to encourage him.

"Jump in!"

《Roger.》

Sousuke and Al threw themselves from the cruise ship's deck into the ocean. A feeling of weightlessness lasted for just a second, before the impact came. Bubbles foamed up around him and then promptly burst into nothing as he sank through the water's surface. After shooting a line into the ship from his wire gun to anchor him, Sousuke fought against the currents created by the ship to carefully fine-tune his position.

《Torpedo incoming. Okay, hold position. Ready? Count five. Three... two...》 Reading Sousuke's rhythm and mood perfectly, Al began the countdown at just the right moment. It was the kind of thing that a normal AI wouldn't be capable of. He could see the torpedo approaching, right at the center of his night-vision screen. 《Now!》

Sousuke gripped the stick and wrenched the right master arm back. Mimicking his movements perfectly, the machine thrust an unwavering fist at the torpedo that had come to encompass his vision.

The ocean frothed and the air warped. The Arbalest's lambda driver activated, and an invisible force field slammed the torpedo from the front. The target shattered and exploded on impact, and the entirety of the torpedo's explosive energy was channeled out behind it. A geyser of water burst out of the sea, and rocked the ship with its force. The Arbalest was sent tumbling, clinging desperately to the wire extending from its left arm, and Sousuke let out a noise of strain.

《Success,》 Al reported. 《The lambda driver has activated. Enemy torpedo eliminated. Let's rev ourselves up again quickly, in case another one appears. Get revved up. The revving up is important.》

"I know! Shut up!" Sousuke shouted, struggling to regain his machine's balance as raging waves buffeted him from all sides. He had to be careful: if the wire gun's anchor came loose, he'd end up spinning free of the ship. But soon enough, the turbulence from the explosion died down, and the threat of a follow-up torpedo seemed nil. Sousuke let out a sigh of relief, carefully retracted the wire, and managed to crawl back onto the deck.

But their troubles weren't over.

While the Arbalest was off stopping the torpedo, Kaname was running toward the starboard side of the deck with Yang and a few other Mithril soldiers. After hearing Tessa's voice in her mind, she had called out to a few nearby men, and they'd rushed together to the corner where the lifeboats were located.

Suddenly, they were hit by a roar and an impact. The ship lurched hard to the right. Kaname almost went tumbling, but she clung to the wall desperately and

shouted, “What was that?!”

“I guess the torpedo hit us. It’s strange, though. It didn’t feel as bad as all that...”

Did Sousuke and the Arbalest stop the torpedo? Kaname wondered as she picked herself up. “We’re probably okay. Hurry!”

Yang looked at her quizzically, but responded, “R-Right...” and they started running again. “But are you sure the colonel was kidnap—”

“I’m sure. The captain here was gonna take her in a lifeboat— There!” Kaname pointed beyond the part of the deck used for a jogging track, to the broadside that housed the lifeboats.

Yang got ahead of her and readied his gun. “Keep back,” he ordered. “Stay behind me. The enemy could still be hiding out here.” According to the nearby diagram, there should be five boats hanging off the side of the ship. But as Kaname and Yang ran up, they found only four.

“One’s missing,” Kaname whispered. “Tessa...”

“Dammit,” a soldier shouted. “One o’clock, 500 meters out!” In the vague illumination provided by the cruise’s ship’s lighting, Kaname could see a boat speeding away.

“We’re too late,” Yang growled.

“Don’t give up!” Kaname cried out. “There has to be a—”

“I know. Uruz-9 to Gebo 9, do you read me?” Yang called into his radio, to the helicopter flying nearby.

The transport helicopter, Gebo-9, replied immediately. “Gebo-9, I read you.”

“You see the lifeboat that just left the cruise ship? 800 meters north-northeast from here. It’s got Ansuz on it! Stop them!” Even as he spoke, the boat carrying Tessa continued to move further and further away, until it was fully swallowed up by the darkness.

Call Sign Gebo-9, MH-67 Utility Helicopter “Pave Mare”

“Stop them? How?” shouted First Lieutenant Eva Santos. She was the pilot of a Mithril utility helicopter, a MH-67 Pave Mare, which was currently circling from a position four kilometers south of the Pacific Chrysalis. “Tessa’s on board, right? We can’t fire on them. What if we hit her?”

“Can’t you target the engine or something?!” Yang shouted over the radio.

“Oh, as easy as that, huh? I’ll try, but... dammit, have you got them yet?!” Santos shouted to the electronic warfare technician in the back seat, who was scanning the area with their infrared sensors.

“Hang on... just got them. Bearing 3-4-0, distance 4000. Speed, thirty knots.”

“Okay, circle around to their port side and approach.” Lieutenant Santos tilted the stick forward to speed them after the boat. The engine’s turbines roared, and the Pave Mare approached its target. Since they had previously been carrying the enormous payload of the Arbalest, the chopper now felt as agile as a fighter jet.

In less than a minute, the escaping boat came into view of her night vision goggles. “Got it in sight. Minigun two on standby. Don’t hit the cabin by mistake.”

“Roger, Captain!” the gunner responded enthusiastically.

Once they were about 200 meters from the left side of the speeding boat, Santos gave the order. “Fire!”

The 7.62mm machine gun attached to the Pave Mare’s starboard side fired. A rain of a hundred bullets per second grazed the back of the boat, sending up pillars of water. Unfortunately, none hit their target.

“Get your aim right!”

“The waves are rocking it all over the place!” the gunner protested. “Dammit, the thing’s too fast; we’ll hit the colonel. I can’t pinpoint-target the engine. Can’t we get closer?!”

“I’ll try—” Santos was just about to pitch them forward again when something strange happened. From an empty patch of sea, a few hundred meters ahead of the lifeboat’s current course, came a peal of light.

“Anti-air missile!” someone shouted. It had appeared abruptly from the sea surface and was tearing through the air straight at Santos’s helicopter.

“Ngh!” She moved the stick and cyclic violently, ejected decoy flares and chaff into the air around them, and sent the Pave Mare into a spin. It was an extreme maneuver, practically diving them right for the ocean.

It was going to be close. Two seconds left—

The missile exploded at close range, and a hard jolt from the side sent them pitching to the right. Lieutenant Santos’s instruments went haywire, and strange metallic squeals erupted from the engine and drive shaft. Alarms rang out all around them. She could hear her copilot and the electronic warfare tech shouting:

“Fire in the second engine! Output down! Losing fuel pressure!”

“Port-side ECS damaged! We lost our left stub wing!”

Though dizzy from banging her head on the seat, Santos calmly checked the stick’s responsiveness. “Stay calm,” she ordered. “Shut off the second engine. Switch to auxiliary power and fuel lines. Fuel supply, too. We’ve still got the tail rotor, right? Do you have visual?”

“Affirmative!” the crew member in the cargo room responded.

“And the automatic fire suppression systems?”

“Working.”

Great, Lieutenant Santos thought. *We can still fly.* If she’d acted even a few seconds later, they’d all have been blown to kingdom come. It had been a very close call. While dishing out precise directions on how to minimize the damage, she used her active ECCS to search the area the missile had come from for ECS activity.

“Dammit...” she swore as she found what she was looking for. There was a large aircraft floating on the water, camouflaged with ECS, and an infantryman had shot the anti-air missile from one of the wings. It must be an Amalgam ship that had slunk into the area to serve as backup at some point.

If a second shot came, they wouldn’t be able to avoid it. Santos desperately

wanted to save Tessa, but she knew that getting herself shot down wouldn't help anyone. Gritting her teeth, Santos ordered, "W-Withdraw..." and turned the helicopter back in the direction they'd come from. All she could do now was to make a frustrated report to her colleagues.

As the boat continued racing through the night, Tessa sat in its cabin, handcuffed and powerless. She could only watch silently as the allied helicopter pursuing them took a hit from a missile and withdrew. It was probably Lieutenant Santos's Gebo-9—She just hoped nobody had been injured.

"Hmhmhm, hmmhmhmm, hmm, hmm, hmm..." Harris sat in the boat's driver seat, humming Beethoven's 9th against the salt air. "It's Christmas. Enjoy it!" the man proclaimed joyously as he spun to face her. "The truth is, you're a much more valuable VIP than Chidori Kaname. Normally, you stay hidden and unreachable under the sea. I consider myself truly lucky. If I still had access to my ship's facility, I could have pried into every part of your mind... but I guess we can't have everything."

Tessa just glared death at him.

"Ooh, scary," Harris said, taunting her with a shrug. "Sad to say, I'll probably be denied the chance to investigate you directly. I wanted to strip your mind naked and prod its deepest depths. I wanted to see that proud, beautiful face of yours twisted, and screaming in humiliation. Exposing all your ugliest hatreds and fears, your most obscene desires... I wanted to watch your dull eyes fill with tears as drool dripped down your chin."

Tessa met his lecherous gaze with steel. "The facility that investigated Kaname-san in Sunan was on that ship?"

"That's right," Harris confirmed. "It's a cruise ship that travels around the world, you see. Very convenient for abducting 'candidates'—identified in the usual way—from various countries, and smuggling them past national borders."

"Very inefficient," Tessa said with a frown. "I would never—"

"You would never do things that way, right?" Harris asked, cutting her off. "But that's the key; it's exactly why you never suspected. Cruises may be more for the masses than ever before, but they're still associated with the elite. Local

customs, governments, and intelligence agencies all relax their standards for them. They think the very *idea* is absurd. And I know why you finally caught on, too—Mr. Iron ratted us out, didn't he?"

Tessa made no reply, and the boat's motor fell silent.

"Here we are," he announced. "A luxurious flight awaits." Through the cabin window, she could see the wing of a large aircraft, visible now that it had disengaged its ECS. Their boat slowly turned and docked on its starboard side.

"Get up." Harris forced Tessa to her feet.

The craft they'd transferred to was the size of a jumbo jet, and large enough for several 50-ton tanks. It was far larger than the C-17 Globemaster II transports used by Mithril.

"Eyes forward! Walk!" A member of the aircraft's armed crew prodded Tessa forward.

Soviet-made... Tessa realized. She'd seen a report about this from the intelligence division recently. It was the best plane in the world at water landings and takeoffs. A glimpse around the equipment loaded in the cargo room made it clear that it was designed for transporting smaller seacraft, too.

Once boarding was complete, the aircraft immediately picked up speed. It rocked as the waves licked the base of its hull.

The large aircraft lifted off from the ocean's surface and rose into the night sky. There was nobody to stop them.

Pacific Chrysalis

"They got away," Clouseau said gloomily after he turned off the radio. "The enemy... took the colonel."

"Hey, there's gotta be something we can do!" Kurz began, agitated. "It's still *there*, right? Just use an anti-air missile, or—"

Clouseau cut him off. "You want me to shoot them? With her on board?"

"Ugh..." Kurz hesitated.

The enemy craft was already airborne. It would be easy for the de Danaan's anti-air missiles to shoot it down, but then Tessa would die as well.

Their failure was in not noticing the aircraft parked in the water close to the Pacific Chrysalis. But what else could they have done? The de Danaan had been engaged with the enemy submarines, and Lieutenant Santos's helicopter had been focused on the support and transport of the Arbalest. No soldier, no matter how elite, could have spotted the lurking ECS-equipped craft any earlier.

Sousuke had taken out the robots and the torpedoes; Mao nearly had the safe open. Mardukas had neutralized the undersea threat. Santos's helicopter had apparently survived the hit, and the hostage group was nearly unharmed. The worst off among them was the American that had kidnapped Tessa... but according to the medic who'd been sent to treat him, he would pull through as well.

They'd worked their tails off, and they'd be able to withdraw safely soon. Yet Tessa was still out there, their mission's sole casualty.

"Dammit!" one of the soldiers cursed. "How could this happen? And on her birthday, too..."

"She never mentioned that to me," Sousuke said through the Arbalest's external speakers, as Clouseau and the others stood by helplessly, in the tennis court, among the remains of the Alastors. "So it's her birthday..." he mused. "There's a lot going on today. A lot..."

"Um, Sousuke?" Kaname, who was slumping despondently with the rest of the group, looked up. "I mean... understatement, much? They took Tessa! How can you act like—"

"Oh, I recognize the seriousness of the situation," he reassured her. "But I've heard it said that Christmas is a night when anything can happen."

"Huh?" The group scowled at him, and the Arbalest's AI spoke in Sousuke's place.

《He is correct. My comrades, today is Christmas. According to information I have been receiving via radio broadcasts for the last few days, it is indeed a night in which anything can happen. Dedication is the key. Let us sing lovely

songs. Let us celebrate God's blessings—》

"How many dozen times do I have to tell you?!" Sousuke hissed at Al. "Shut up!"

《I beg your pardon. Please explain our proposal, Sarge.》

Sousuke clicked his tongue disapprovingly at Al's casual tone. Then he cleared his throat and addressed the group. "Lieutenant Clouseau. Contact the de Danaan. Tell it to surface and sortie the FAV-8s. Have them buy us time. Then prepare the equipment I'm about to list off. It's important that the maintenance crew be on top of their game. First..."

Clouseau's eyes went wide as Sousuke listed off the equipment. "Are you mad?"

"No," Sousuke denied. "Al ran the calculations and said that it was possible. The only question is if we can pull it off in time."

"It's dangerous," Clouseau pointed out, one hand on his jaw as he weighed their chances.

"Agreed."

"All right," Clouseau finally said, looking up at the Arbalest. We'll try it." He switched on his radio, opening a channel to the de Danaan—which was already nearby and heading their way—to explain the plan in detail.

Kaname, who was quietly listening in from nearby, looked up nervously at Sousuke. "Are... Are you sure you'll be okay?"

"I don't know," he answered honestly.

"But then...!"

"There's something I want to talk to you about."

"What—"

"I only realized it tonight. Don't worry. It's good news, I think. But I don't want to say it while she's still trapped out there." The Arbalest's eyes looked down on her. The machine's right hand made a gesture; a thumbs up. "When I return, please hear me out."

25 December, 0013 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Over Pacific Ocean

She could see the moon from her window seat. Their plane seemed to be turning to the southwest... but confined as she was, Tessa could infer no more than that. What was their precise course? How fast were they going? What was their destination? She had no idea. Were her vessel and the cruise ship safe? Was the stubborn, yet kind-hearted, Sailor receiving first aid? Were Mao and the others making progress on the safe? Her mind swarmed with questions, and her own fate was the least among them.

After the plane had left the ground, Tessa had tried to resonate with Kaname again, but found that she couldn't. For some reason, it wouldn't work if they were too far away. Perhaps there were some kind of "mind waves" that grew weaker and more distorted as they traveled through air?

"Something to drink, honey?" Apparently having finished his conversation with the pilot, Harris returned to the cabin. "I'm sorry, we're out of champagne... but we do have ginger ale. I don't suppose you'd toast to our departure, would you?"

"Why don't you toast with yourself?" Tessa suggested bitterly.

"Be nice," Harris chided her. "I'm the reason you won't be going down with that ship. You could show a little gratitude."

Just then, the whole plane rocked. The roaring of turbines pierced the walls, and the ceiling of the cabin trembled.

"What?" Harris cried out, clinging to his seat.

"Mithril STOVLs in pursuit!" the captain shouted over the intercom. Tessa looked out the window and saw an FAV-8 Super Harrier, one of the fighters stocked by the de Danaan, flying startlingly close.

Harris went pale. "Impossible. The girl is on board. They would never try to—"

Outside the window, she could see the red glow of a tracer round. It was a warning shot; this one also grazed the plane's primary wing.

Harris cringed in his seat, and Tessa shot him a cold smile. “It’s only natural,” she said. “I possess a great deal of confidential Mithril information. They knew you might try to administer truth serum, so they’ve made the smart decision—to blow up the plane, and me with it.”

25 December, 0020 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Flight Deck, Tuatha de Danaan

Sitting in the cockpit of the Arbalest, Sousuke adjusted his oxygen mask. Status reports from the submarine’s air traffic control officer flowed in. The large transport that took Tessa was flying at 350 knots, on course 1-9-6. Their FAV-8s’ threat had achieved the desired effect, causing it to drop altitude and speed.

“Still in range. But this is crazy, Sergeant Sagara. Just because it’s theoretically possible—”

“Not an issue,” said Sousuke, interrupting the officer. “Just support me.”

“All right. I’ll get you there safe and sound.”

“Thank you.” After having made that short response, Sousuke ran his eyes over the screen display, which was in shooting mode. He checked the rocket motors on each flight control surface. Fuel, check. Fuel pressure, check. The data link between his robot and the sub was working fine.

《Final checks complete,》 Al announced. 《Awaiting control room directives.》

The Arbalest was currently being fitted into a steam catapult on the de Danaan’s flight deck. An emergency deployment booster known as the XL-2 was strapped to its back; it was the same kind Mao and the other M9s had used during the Sunan rescue operation.

ASes were typically ground weapons, but these huge wings propelled them through the air on rockets, to send them to distant battlefields in relatively short periods of time. You were supposed to decouple before you reached your destination, so it was a one-way trip: you returned on foot, or by transport helicopter.

The roar from the booster grew louder, and pale flame began to stream from the nozzles. Superheated exhaust escaped upwards, directed by the large blast deflector behind it.

“Air traffic control room. Preparations complete.”

“Roger. Initiate final procedure. Uruz-7, you have permission to launch. Good luck.”

“Uruz-7, roger,” Sousuke responded.

《Sergeant. Final departure authorization received. Beginning countdown. Five...》 said Al’s voice, resounding through the cockpit as it shuddered with the booster’s power. 《Four. Three. Two—》

The nozzles contracted and roared with flame, and the AS began to pitch forward.

《Go.》

The locks came free. The catapult, which possessed enough power to throw a one-ton truck more than a kilometer, accelerated the Arbalest instantaneously. Powerful G-forces, ear-rending roars; Sousuke could feel his body sinking into the seat behind him as the edge of the flight deck rushed closer. The firing blocks released the Arbalest automatically, and he leaped.

The liftoff was successful. The digital altimeter’s numbers grew higher and higher. The de Danaan, seen on the Arbalest’s rear sensors, became a distant dot in the blink of an eye as he ascended to five thousand feet. In a normal firing sequence, this would be where the machine’s ascent would cease, and it would begin to cruise towards its target destination.

Yet the Arbalest’s ascent continued, higher and higher: its altitude reached seven thousand; eight thousand. The machine’s vibrating continued. The booster wings, generally meant for fine-tuning one’s course on lower altitude flights, began to feel unstable. The altimeter showed ascent, yet Sousuke felt like he was sinking. If not for the rockets running at maximum output, he would likely enter a tailspin and plummet.

Alarms and Al’s warnings blared around him.

《Boosters running abnormally hot due to prolonged max output,》 Al warned.

“Pray, then,” Sousuke said. “You knew this was a gamble.”

《I interpret that order to be a joke. But jokes are not useful at this time. What is the purpose—》

“Are you saying it’s nonsense?”

《Affirmative.》

“There’s something I’ve come to realize of late...” Sousuke whispered, nearly biting his tongue from the vibrations around him. “Jokes should only be said when they’re not useful at all.”

《A profound concept, worthy of consideration.》

“Save that for later,” Sousuke lectured sternly. “Focus on control.”

《Roger.》

Sousuke felt cold. The cockpit wasn’t pressurized for things like this. He’d done drop missions from high altitudes many times before, so he knew what his body was like in low pressure, but...

Eighteen thousand. Nineteen thousand.

Elevation: twenty thousand feet.

《Designated altitude achieved. Adjusting course based on air traffic control guidance.》 The Arbalest’s ascent stopped, and it began flying straight for its target. A few seconds later, Al announced, 《Target acquired!》

Sousuke’s night vision display showed him the exhaust heat from three aircraft: two were Mithril’s super harriers, and the other was his target. About the size of a jumbo jet, it could easily hold six M9-style ASes.

Tessa’s in there, Sousuke reminded himself. What he was about to do was exceedingly dangerous, and yet, he felt strangely confident. *Not an issue,* he thought again. *I’ll finish this off and return straight home.*

《Fuel reserves are low,》 Al reminded him.

“I know. Lower speed as we approach. From their six, altitude 15,000 feet.”

《Roger.》

The large craft drew closer and closer in his vision, as the turbulence from its wake began to rock the Arbalest violently. He wasn't getting any closer; the wings of the emergency deployment booster weren't designed for this.

But then, he wasn't in a fighter jet anyway. Sousuke was in a humanoid weapon, an arm slave, and its uses were limited only by imagination. There was no need to get hung up on standard procedure.

"Let's go!" he yelled.

《Roger.》 As they closed to a mere 50 meters behind the craft, the Arbalest thrust its arms forward.

"What are you doing?! Shake them off. Their cruising range is only—" Just as Harris ran into the cockpit, something happened; a metal scraping sound screamed out from the back of the plane. The craft bucked hard, and Harris nearly went toppling.

Alarms began blaring in the cockpit, announcing a rapid depressurization. Red lights flashed, and the pilot and copilot screamed at each other. "What happened?!" Harris cried.

"We seem to have taken several hits. Cabin pressure is dropping fast. We need to drop altitude before things get worse."

"You've got to be kidding! Just shake them off!" He grabbed the captain's shoulder, but the man knocked his hand away.

"That's ridiculous!" the captain objected vehemently. "Get them to call off their attacks, then!"

"Just ignore them and keep flying," Harris insisted. "You think they really have the guts to shoot us down?" *That's right,* he thought. *It's all a bluff. If they wanted to shoot us down, they would have fired a missile much earlier. They just want to force us into a water landing.*

By the same token, that means they can't do much as long as we're in the air. Plus, the enemy STOVLs have a short cruising range; if we just keep going a little

while longer, they'll have to give up the chase.

"Mr. Harris," the captain said. "Bring the girl here. I'll play her tortured screams over the radio; that'll make them think twice about firing again."

"But she's— No, you're right," Harris decided. "That's for the best. Maybe I'll take a finger off of her." On the pilot's instructions, he attempted to return to the cabin to find Tessa, but...

This time, they were rocked by the biggest jolt yet. The craft plunged several meters, as if something had pushed down on it from above. Harris's body rocketed into the air, slamming first against the cockpit ceiling, and then against the floor. Banishing all thought about the tremendous pain in his shoulders and back, he sat up. "Wh-What now?!"

But the captain didn't even hear Harris's question. His eyes were locked on the multifunctional display in the corner of the cockpit as he turned pale and moaned, "What... in the name of God... are they doing?"

The display showed a video feed from the camera affixed to the top of the plane's tail. It looked down from its high vantage point, across the main fuselage and the wings.

There was someone standing there, on the roof just behind the wings.

No, not someone. Something. It was much larger than a person—a humanoid machine.

It's an AS, Harris realized. *A white AS.*

The hostile white AS was clinging to the back of the plane. It fired off its wire gun, used it to draw closer, then stabbed its monomolecular cutter down into the roof.

"Shake it off!"

"Are you stupid?! I'd snap our wings off!" the pilot shouted, and then gasped. While the two of them were panicking, struggling to figure out what the enemy was after, the AS did something even more unbelievable: it opened its cockpit hatch.

The operator emerged, wearing a helmet and oxygen mask, and jumped from

the back of the white AS onto the roof of the plane. There was a wire attached to his hips, likely anchored to the cockpit, to keep him from being blown away by the incredible air currents.

Though the AS was largely shielding him from the wind, it still seemed as though he could lose his balance and be swept off of the roof at any time. Yet the AS pilot dexterously leaped back ten meters, as if rappelling down the wall of a building, and brought something to hand.

“What is that?” The pilot asked. “What’s he planning to do?”

“That’s... a directed explosive,” Harris answered. All the color drained from his face, and he ran out towards the plane’s rear cabin. Was the AS pilot planning to blow a hole in the roof and come inside?!

Sousuke got a few meters from the directed explosive and pressed the trigger, buffeted all the while by powerful winds. A sharp ripping sound met his ears. Fragments went flying, but were gone in an instant. Mist streamed out of the one-meter hole. He adjusted his grip on his wire and kicked lightly off the roof, letting gravity drop him into the newly-made opening. The brittle interior wall broke below his feet, and he dropped straight into the cabin.

Sousuke released the wire holding him to the Arbalest, and then took the submachine gun hanging off of his shoulder in hand. The sudden depressurization of the cabin was producing a white mist, which was being sucked out of the hole that Sousuke had just made.

“It’s just one guy! Kill him!” someone screamed from the tornado of cloth and paper scraps that flew wildly around the cabin. He saw two men with guns pointed at him, their intent to kill. Sousuke fixed his own aim, fired, and then fired again; both of the men collapsed in an instant.

Ignoring both the plane’s shaking and the wind whipping around the cabin, Sousuke made his way to the front in a run. He passed through several doors and passages, and met several more enemies on the way. Bullets rained down; gunshots assaulted his ears. Sousuke would dip down to dodge or fly behind something before immediately returning fire.

Bullets ricocheted with sparks and roars as his enemies fell, one after another.

After having to deal with the Alastors on the cruise ship, it all felt incredibly easy. Unlike robots, human opponents could succumb to intimidation, panic, and rage. Of course, that came with its own problems; their reckless fire was putting holes in the cabin walls, blasting away important cables, fuel pressure tubes, and circuit boards. It was like they'd forgotten that they were in an airplane.

That's not good... he thought uneasily as the plane began to violently rock in mid-air. The lights flickered, and fires burst into being here and there. He could hear a strange tone coming from the engine, too.

Their altitude continued to drop.

After felling the last man in the cabin, Sousuke looked around him. Tessa was nowhere in sight, and the cockpit was the last place ahead of him. *Did they take her to the cargo hold below?* he wondered. *Or...*

A shot hit Sousuke in the back. He gasped from the sudden shock, but could tell that his bulletproof vest had stopped it. He turned around unsteadily, and pointed his gun at the person who had fired at him.

"Whoa, there! Hold your fire, soldier!" Harris was standing at the cabin's entrance, a high-caliber pistol in one hand. He had Tessa in an arm lock, and was using her skillfully as a shield.

"Sagara-san?!" She looked more surprised than relieved. She must have never expected that he would burst into a plane in flight like this.

"Colonel. I've come to get you," Sousuke said, pointing his gun straight at her. Turbulent winds swirled the open flames in the cabin. The noise and vibrations were getting worse. He could see fire burning outside the windows, too; the engine must have broken down and ignited.

"It's over," he said. "Give her to me. The plane is going down; we still have time to evacuate."

"No." Harris grinned, beads of sweat forming on his haggard face. "I'm finished either way, so I might as well take her with me."

"Have you completely lost your mind?"

“I’m perfectly rational!” the man shouted hysterically. “If I return empty-handed, the organization will kill me. If you take me hostage, I’ll end up the same way. You’ll pump me for information, then throw me out, and *then* the organization will kill me.”

Sousuke scowled, saying nothing.

“But I can at least deny you what you want,” Harris went on. “I can still kill both of you. I just have to run out the clock.”

A bead of sweat rolled down Sousuke’s forehead. This man was serious; he’d made his peace with dying here. Furthermore, the rocking of the plane and the whipping of the wind all around them made it hard to get a clean line on Harris as he used Tessa as a shield.

“Ironic, isn’t it? A sea captain like me, about to die in the air...” There was a hint of black humor in Harris’s tone, behind the anger and despair. “Your Mithril may think they’ve regained the momentum, but that’s all about to end. Amalgam is large and decentralized. They can’t be crushed with force alone. And even in terms of force, they’ve just finished a radical expansion.”

“What did you say?” Sousuke asked.

“Professionals, Sagara Sousuke; not those well-armed small-timers you’ve been facing so far,” Harris taunted. “Amalgam hires mercenaries, too. If not for Mr. Iron’s—Gauron’s—cancer, he would have been their leader. His substitute, Mr. Kalium, was distinctly inferior in ability... but for better or worse, you killed him back in Hong Kong.”

Gauron had cancer? Though surprised by the revelation, Sousuke remained keenly aware of the time. He could hear the tense voice of the de Danaan’s flight control officer in his earpiece:

No time left. This is your last chance. Escape.

“They’re calm and cunning,” Harris said. “They’ll stamp out every one of you. Why don’t you join me in the next world early, so we can watch it play out together?”

“You’re lying,” Sousuke said scornfully.

“Going to shoot me, then?! You might hit her!” Harris continued to mock Sousuke, who was focused on his aim. “You won’t fire because of the fear of what might happen. That’s who you people are—just a sad bunch of wannabe superheroes. You’ve got that annoying air about you.

“But reality is harsh, and the world is cruel. The people on that ship will learn that, too, some day. To reverse fate, to conquer it, you need to take that cruelty for yourself. It’s my organization that can do that! Only Amalgam can end everything!” Harris shouted, spurred on by madness. The fuselage of the plane was starting to make a strange creaking noise. There was a movement in Harris’s right hand. The pistol was pointed at Tessa’s neck.

“Stop—”

That fraction of a second felt like an eternity. Still, the targeting was difficult. The shaking of the plane threw his aim off. And yet, Sousuke fired. With exceeding calm, he fired. The shot hit the wall, sparking as it broke through. Harris, shot in the chest through the wall, pulled the trigger even as he stumbled. Tessa toppled forward. Sousuke couldn’t see from his position if she’d been hit or not.

“Tessa?!” he shouted.

“I... I’m fine!” Tessa’s voice was more vibrant than he expected. She was safe, it seemed. Harris was lying face-down, and completely still.

There was no time left. Sousuke ran up to her, took her by the arm, and hurried immediately to the closest hatch. He turned the emergency lever and yanked it open. Tessa’s hair and skirt went flapping in the wind. “Sagara-san, the parachutes—”

“Don’t have any,” he said, cutting her off. “Sorry.” It would have been impossible for him to jump into the cabin and have a firefight with a heavy parachute on. His options had been to steal one from the plane, or retrace his steps and return to the Arbalest—he’d intended to decide what to do based on the situation. But they didn’t have time for either option now, and the plane would probably break to pieces before it hit the water.

“Do you mean we’re finished?” Tessa wanted to know.

“I have one last card to play,” Sousuke told her. “Listen, hold tight to—”

Just then, the plane’s wing snapped in half. The plane began to roll, and seconds later, it was in pieces. Sousuke and Tessa were blown out the open hatch, into the void. Tessa tried to hold tight to his arm, but the buffeting winds and centripetal force proved too much for her, and she ended up letting go.

“Tessa!!” The sound of the explosion and the roaring wind consumed even Sousuke’s own cry. Her small body, batted around by the air currents, grew further and further away in his vision.

The shattered fuselage, the snapped wings. Tessa was falling amidst the fragments. Things were burning all around her, but the wind remained terribly cold. The faint light of the moon illuminated the place where the ocean met the horizon in the darkness. How long would it be until she hit the water? Her consciousness grew hazy as gravity pulled her relentlessly downward. Yet, she was able to notice a figure approaching; he was gliding through the night air, carefully manipulating the wind with his limbs.

It was a skydiving technique.

Sagara Sousuke’s body slammed into Tessa’s. The two tumbled through open space, clinging to each other. It surely didn’t change the fact that they were doomed, but he seemed determined to struggle to the end. He moved his mouth close to her ear, and screamed something to her. The touch of his lips against her earlobe... it was a sweet sensation. Yet the words themselves were anything but: “Hold on to me, tightly!” he yelled. “Don’t let go!”

“What?” Tessa cried back.

“Brace for impact!” Sousuke told her.

It was then that she noticed the form of the white AS approaching, consuming her vision to the right. The Arbalest, having detached its wing pack and gone into freefall, was slowly growing closer. Just as she grabbed Sousuke’s chest, they slammed into the giant’s hands. The AS had caught up with them and scooped them up from the side.

The impact forced the air from Tessa’s lungs in a groan. Her head was

swimming, and she couldn't tell which way was up.

Sousuke shouted again. "Open!"

There was one final jolt. With Tessa and Sousuke held tight in its hands, the Arbalest deployed the parachute sack on its back. As she watched a parachute many times larger than a human-sized one unfurl into the sky, Tessa reflected that it was a miracle she hadn't bit her tongue.

The wind died down instantly, and the area around them grew silent. The wreckage of the burning plane had passed over them, to plunge into the sea hundreds of meters away. The Arbalest, holding them both in its hands, slowly descended.

《It's a night of close shaves,》 the AS remarked through external speakers. 《I performed a few rough calculations, and the chance of success for your nonsense mission was one in 256. Even with the Christmas miracle effect on our side—》

"Shut up," Sousuke demanded curtly.

《Roger.》 The AI fell silent again, and the only sound became an intermittent flapping noise as their parachute fluttered in the wind.

"Colonel. Were you hurt?" Sousuke asked Tessa eventually.

She had been staring into space, but the words broke her out of her trance. "What? Ah... a few bruises, most likely... but I think I'm all right."

"Good," Sousuke said with a sigh of relief. "The squad would kill me if anything happened to you."

"I wonder about that..." Tessa said, a bit sulky now that the initial relief had passed. "I'm sure they'll act very concerned, but they don't really care about what happens to a useless half-wit like me."

"Colonel..."

"Yes, yes. I know. I don't really mean it. I just..." Tessa swallowed her words. She felt two inches tall. *Why is it always Sousuke who comes to save me like this?* she wondered. *If it were anyone else—Clouseau, or Mao—I wouldn't have to feel this way...*

Is it really all right for you to put yourself in danger for someone like me? Do I really have that much value to you? I can't, can I? Because you wouldn't do anything that would make her sad... Is it comradeship? Duty? Confidence that you'll return alive? It was probably a combination of all of them, but that fact just made her even more depressed. He wasn't here for the reasons she wanted him to be: out of an earnest love for her.

When Harris had taken her hostage, in the end, he'd taken the shot. If it had been Kaname instead of her there, he probably wouldn't have been able to, even if it meant that she died as a result. There was a difference at play here. A definitive one.

There's nothing to be done, Tessa thought, remembering Captain Sailor's words. *He's right; the longing is entirely on my end, not his. It's not me who has an instinctive grip on his heart, but her. The world she's a part of. I understand, because I find that world dazzling and alluring, as well...*

Can what I feel truly be called love? Can anyone testify that I'm not simply looking for somebody to escape into? Can anyone testify that I truly love this man, right here, right now? Unable to bear the silence any longer, she asked him, "Sagara-san."

"Yes?"

"Do you love Kaname-san?"

After a pause, he said, "I think so."

"More than me?" she specified.

Sousuke's face tensed. But after some consideration, he answered clearly: "Yes."

Tessa had known it was coming, but his words still hit her like a physical blow. It was perfectly natural that he would say so, though. Sagara Sousuke wasn't the kind of man to dissemble when the truth was clear. That was part of his appeal; it was a cruel fact of the world.

Tessa turned her eyes down and whispered, "You said it so easily."

"I'm sorry," Sousuke simply told her.

She'd had a silly fantasy she'd been clinging to these past few days. She'd dreamed that they'd have the party with everyone at the base, and after the feast was over, she'd find a way to be alone with him. He'd say, "Happy birthday, Tessa," and then...

She tried hard not to cry, but she couldn't help it, and the tears flowed from her eyes. She wanted to run away, but she couldn't. Not while she was in the hands of the descending AS.

"I'm sorry. I'm... fine. I just... I'm a bit disappointed, I suppose," she said, forcing a smile onto her face. Seeing Sousuke so tortured by her reactions just tightened the icy grip on her heart. "Ahh, this was supposed to be an easy mission, and I let it go completely off the rails. I was useless from start to finish... What an awful birthday."

Sousuke didn't say anything, likely forcing back an instinct to make excuses or offer words of encouragement.

He's faithful. Truly faithful. That's why I love him, of course... It's why I want to be with him. But I suppose wanting something to be so doesn't mean that God will listen, even on Christmas Eve...

Fate. Harris's final words lingered in her mind. *Perhaps this is fate, and my attempts to reject that are what's throwing everything off inside of me.* She felt like she understood, for the first time, the feelings of the people they'd been conveniently dismissing under the label of "terrorists" for so long.

The Arbalest carrying them both neared the ocean surface. They could see the faint lights of an allied helicopter arriving to save them.

Pacific Chrysalis

"Uruz-1 to Uruz-2. How are things going? Any progress?"

Mao wasn't sure how many times Clouseau had asked her that now. A dozen, for sure, at least. *I'm working my ass off, you know,* she thought resentfully. *If I screw up with the vault lock, I could trigger an internal detonator and ruin everything. I need to be careful, but fast. Why can't he understand how hard this is?*

“Dammit. I’m starting to feel like a writer with a looming deadline...” she whispered, then wiped some sweat from her forehead, and resumed tapping on the keyboard.

“What was that?” Clouseau asked.

“Nothing,” she said innocently. “Just executing a virtual protocol QRD. Almost there.”

“You’ve said ‘almost there’ a dozen times tonight,” Clouseau accused her. “The Japanese Coast Guard and SDF have caught on that something’s wrong. We’re out of time. I need precise figures, not ‘almost there’—”

“When I say almost, that’s what I mean!” said Mao, finally losing her temper. “Ten seconds at best! A hundred minutes at worst! Stop jabbering on and buy me time, dammit! You’ve become a real wet blanket since you got your commission, you know!”

“Who wouldn’t, with people so irresponsible serving under them?! I pity Colonel Mardukas and Major Kalinin. And you just—”

“Finally!” Mao proclaimed as something on the display suddenly caught her attention. It was asking whether to send the final signal to disarm the lock, with a “Yes/No/Cancel” prompt. After a moment’s consideration, she selected “Yes” and pressed the enter key.

With a muffled sound, the tightly locked vault door ahead of her slid open, as if it had never been locked at all.

“What is it?” Clouseau wanted to know.

“It’s open.”

There was a moment of silence before he responded, “Understood. I’ll buy you fifteen minutes, so get documenting already.”

Just then, Mao remembered the other person who was supposed to be with them. “How’s Tessa?” she asked. “Is she safe?”

“Sagara got it done,” he responded briefly. “Now hurry.”

“Roger. Out. Okay, you heard the man! It’s a fire sale! Get going!” Mao shouted to the PRT soldiers waiting nearby, before running into the vault

herself. She ignored the works of art and jewels housed there and made a beeline straight to the back. In the middle of an otherwise unextraordinary wall, there sat a door; the room they were after lay beyond it. Fortunately, her work on the main door had disarmed the lock here, too.

Mao stepped into the room behind the vault. The space there was as large as a school classroom, full of electronics and medical equipment; examination tables the size of large coffins, with a multitude of sensors surrounding them. Mao knew a lot about electronics herself, but even she couldn't tell what it was all for. *How am I supposed to investigate this?* Mao wondered. *If Tessa were here, she'd probably be doling out orders by now...*

"Lieutenant. Where should we start?" one of the soldiers asked.

After struggling for an answer, Mao just shook her head, and said, "Anywhere! Take as many pictures as you can and carry out everything that's not nailed down. No need to be gentle. Hack into the casing and yank out the hard drives!"

Even so, she reflected, this was clearly a major score. They could investigate later at their leisure, and what they found should tell them a little about what the enemy was doing... and why they were so determined to find people like Kaname.

After all... Mao thought. Tessa's birthday was December 24th. Kaname's birthday was also December 24th. Nationality, history, personality, physical attributes... The two were polar opposites in every respect, yet they had this one thing in common. Was it truly a coincidence that these two people, both possessing powers that defied human knowledge, should be born on the same day?

25 December, 0130 Hours (Local Time)

Sydney, Australia

The bar was packed with Christmas revelers. Run-DMC's *Christmas in Hollis* was playing, and drunk men and women sang, drank, and shouted. A man was

sitting in the darkness near the back of the bar, illuminated only by a faint blue light. He was young and attractive, with ash blond hair and bluish gray eyes.

He was listening to a report about the operation in the Sea of Japan through his earpiece receiver. After brushing off a drunk woman's attempt at making a pass, he took a drink from his glass, and then a large man in a suit sat down across the table from him. The man had long gray hair tied back in a tail, and a quiet way about him. He was said to be in his mid-forties, but he seemed to have prematurely aged, perhaps due to the harsh life he had lived.



“Did you wait long?” the man asked.

“Not especially,” the younger man replied. “What happened?”

“Admiral Borda’s secretary, Jackson—Mr. Zinc, as your people call him—has been captured. I didn’t tell him what my squad was doing, so he got sloppy.”

“Excellent work.”

“Was it? You could have helped him escape, if you had wanted to.”

“If I had, we’d be trying to kill each other right now,” the young man said jokingly, then sipped from his glass. “Still, I am tremendously honored that you agreed to meet me, Major Andrey Kalinin.”

“Leonard Testarossa-kun,” Kalinin observed thoughtfully, “I’ve heard all about you.”

The waiter brought vodka, and the two men raised a ceremonial glass.

Epilogue

The withdrawal went smoothly. Mao's team hauled out the machinery hidden in the vault's back room, carried it onto the helicopter, and then took off. Clouseau's team apologized profusely to the crew and passengers, then quickly left the ship. They'd thought about taking a few of Harris's co-conspirators from the security team with them, but decided against it; these men didn't know much about Amalgam.

The Pacific Chrysalis was taken in by the coast guard in the wee hours of the 25th, and then entered the Port of Yokohama early that morning. When the press rushed them with cameras flashing, the students of Jindai High shamelessly flashed peace signs, earning scowls from those with better sense.

The only person with serious injuries, Commander Killy B. Sailor, was saved "thanks to swift first aid by the terrorists," and quickly became a media darling. He asserted, "It wasn't the terrorists; it was the captain who shot me!" and cruise line representatives struggled for an explanation before eventually sweeping it under the rug as being an 'accidental discharge.'

An outraged Commander Sailor wanted to tell reporters about the mysterious girl he'd met and everything else, but the Navy brass stopped him: *Don't think about it. Just tell them "I did my best" and accept your hero title.* Sailor tried to refuse, but they threatened to 'promote' him from his beloved captain's chair to a desk job at the Pentagon, so he'd had no choice but to stay silent. The incident left a bad taste in his mouth.

Captain Harris, still missing, was savaged by the press. It was decided that, shaken by his "accidental discharge," he'd taken a boat and tried to escape on his own, before going down somewhere in the middle of the ocean.

Sousuke and Tessa were taken right to the Tuatha de Danaan after the helicopter picked them up. He didn't have time to return to the cruise ship and talk to Kaname.

Two days later, the squad held a late Christmas party on Merida Island, and

celebrated Tessa's birthday at the same time. She was genuinely surprised by the surprise party.

Mardukas, stoic in his party hat and Groucho glasses, handed her a bouquet. Kalinin, who arrived late from Sydney, gave her a red brooch, saying it was from an 'acquaintance.' Mao gave her Dior lipstick and said, "You're becoming a beautiful woman. Cheer up."

Tessa was delighted by her subordinates' plan... but a part of her remained melancholy.

After finishing his debriefing, writing his report and participating in the party, Sousuke finally returned to Tokyo three days after Christmas. They were called to school on the morning of the 28th, and naturally, the seajacking was all anyone could talk about. A good portion of the class hadn't taken part in the trip, so those who wanted to share their experiences didn't lack for a willing audience.

Perhaps because there were no casualties, the newspaper coverage had been relatively restrained. Apparently, that same night, a member of the US cabinet had been assassinated with a bomb, so that was taking the lion's share of the media attention. The students of Jindai High found that very upsetting.

Their homeroom teacher, Kagurazaka Eri, announced to the classroom, "Excuse me! Through some strange twist of fate, we ended up in another awful situation, but I'm glad you're all fine! If, knock on wood, this happens a third time, I urge you to refrain from flashing peace signs to the media! Is that understood?!"

"Yes ma'am," the students replied obediently enough.

"Fine. Have a happy New Year, then!"

The homeroom session lasted a little over ten minutes. "Why would you call us out here for that?" the students grumbled, and began noisily preparing to head home.

Kaname rushed out of the classroom to see to an errand, then returned ten minutes later to find everyone already gone—everyone except for Sousuke. He

was leaning against the wall by the window, as if he'd been waiting for her return. "Did you finish what you needed to do?" Sousuke asked, with a strange stiffness in his voice.

"Yeah," she said. "What about you?"

"I'm free at the moment. But... do you remember what I said on the ship?"

"Er... y-yeah..." she stammered. This was their first time seeing each other since the cruise. He'd said 'I want to talk to you when this is over,' and that was that. Kaname suddenly felt nervous all over. "So... what did you want to talk about?"

"Ah. Well..." Sousuke hesitated. "It's just... what I wanted to talk to you about is... well..." He looked around nervously, head bowed, then wiped at his forehead and let out a big sigh. There was a faint flush in his cheeks. "Damn. A day really does sap the determination..." he whispered as if to himself.

"So, what is it?" she asked insistently.

"Ah, sorry... The thing is, I know I caused a lot of trouble for you the other day. I know it's not the right time, but... this is for you." As if to force a change in subject, Sousuke reached into his collar pocket and produced an unset stone. It was a round, smooth oval, reminiscent of the sea with its deep blue color. A striking spiral of black ran through it, as if it had the sea currents themselves sealed inside.

"What is it?" Kaname wanted to know.

"A lapis lazuli," Sousuke said. "I got it when I was in Afghanistan. I want you to have it... if you'd like that," he said haltingly.

"Th-Thanks. But... you already gave me a Christmas present—"

"Actually... it's a birthday present," he clarified.

"Huh?"

"This was supposed to be the main event," Sousuke explained. "I've thought... for a long time... that it would suit you, I suppose." It had probably taken all of his courage to say that. Trepidatiously, he took her hand and placed the stone inside it. "I'm sorry it's late, but happy birthday." The cold of the stone and the

warmth of his hand made a wonderful contrast. “And... merry Christmas.”

“Uh-huh...” She couldn’t help but find his efforts terribly funny. “Thanks, though it is a little late. And a very merry Christmas to you!”

The End

Afterword

Sorry about all that. It's been two years, but this has been the latest *FMP!* novel, *Dancing Very Merry Christmas*.

I said this would feature some lighter content, but... the main characters didn't exactly get to have a merry Christmas at all, did they? I can't apologize enough. Well... I don't know if anyone wants to see Sousuke bouncing between multiple heroines like the protagonist of a typical love comedy, though I've thought about that.

To prepare for this story, I researched one of those luxury liners. I had to pay out of pocket, so it was the cheapest cruise available, a one-night one. It came with a suite, and it was chock full of luxurious food and concerts. I didn't go drinking in the lounge, but I took some digital camera photos as references for Shiki-san.

But more than the luxurious stuff they showed the passengers, I wanted to see the machinery room and crew blocks. I asked the person at the front desk (though I know that's not quite the right term) if I could check them out, but they refused me with a customer service smile, and said: "For week-long cruises, we offer a tour of such facilities, so you'll have to sign up for one of them." In other words, "Not this time."

But a one-night cruise already cost 40,000 yen, so there was no way I could afford a seven-night one. Left with no other choice, I took matters into my own hands. Late at night, I slipped into the crew block unannounced. It was like a solo stealth mission; I was wearing a suit with a mini-camera in one hand, and felt just like James Bond.

Then, while I was sneaking to take pictures of the machinery room, I heard crew footsteps approaching around the corner. That had me sweating.

Oh no, I'll be caught. What to do? Should I run? No, I should ambush them, break their neck, steal their clothes and ID cards? Those thoughts flashed in my mind for a second.

In actuality, I was discovered, scolded, and kicked out. Sadly, they didn't grab me and strap me to some weird torture device, or throw me into a pool with killer sharks.

Setting all that aside...

The series is now entering its second half. I'm thinking I might end it in three or four books, but I'm not sure. Part of me thinks I should speed things up (though I always think that)...

I do suspect this will be the last of the "episodic" volumes. The reason I haven't written side-stories about some great post-January events, like Valentine's Day or the cherry blossoms, is not unrelated to the structure of the novels.

See, when I talk about future volumes, I end up setting myself out to dry, like I did this time. I hope it turns out okay. Hmm.

Now, other *FMP!*-related stuff...

Thanks to everyone's support, the *FMP!* anime was a roaring success. (Much thanks to Chigira-san and everyone else who was involved.) We already have the next anime series in mind. This one will be a peppy comedy based on the short stories. The director is an up-and-comer, Takemoto Yasuhiro-san. He's a nice guy who really knows his craft. I've humbly accepted their offer to work on the scripts. Hooray!

Around the time of this book's publication, we'll hit volume 5 of the comic version, Nagai Tomohiro's *Full Metal Panic! Overload*. It's a hilarious series. There are a surprising number of readers who haven't read that, so I'm going to make a hard sell for it.

I think the collection for Retsu Tateo's *Full Metal Panic!* manga adaptation will be out soon, too. This one's also very fun, of course. They're popular enough that they're getting a Korean and Taiwanese release, too.

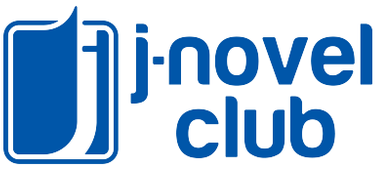
ORG-san's TCG "Full Metal Panic! Card Mission" is also popular enough to get booster packs. Even if you're not into the game, they have a lot of Shikidouji art you've never seen before. It's just packed.

Too much advertising, you say? I guess it is. As always, when it gets to the

afterword, I don’t know what to write. Ah, well.

Anyway, thanks again for all the support. I can’t thank you enough for your patience in sticking around with my talentless self. Thank you so much.

See you next time for another round of Sousuke in hell.



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