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7
FULL METAL PANIC!
CONTINUING ON MY OWN


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"Chidori, let's hold hands." Kaname felt her ears flush red at the sudden proposal.


Danger followed danger.
The Behemoth spat out three missiles.
Jolts rocked through Mao's machine.


“Say it. Who am I? My rank and title.”
Her tone was as gentle as always, yet there was a strange weight behind her words.

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Prologue

The sky was leaden gray. Waves crashed in the distance. Unadorned crosses stood in rows in a graveyard on the shore near Portsmouth.

Teletha Testarossa was there, alone among the silent dead. She held two bouquets of red flowers in her arms, and the North Atlantic winds of January stung her cheeks as she walked. She knew just where she was going. *I'm almost there* , she thought. *See?*

Tessa's final destination was a pair of crosses that stood side by side, intimate in their proximity. Inscribed on them were the names and dates of death of each of her parents. She stopped there, knelt, and laid a bouquet on each grave.

They'd been gone six years to the day, now. It felt like forever, and like no time at all. So much had happened since then, and so many things had changed. There was no more happy family time now. No one with whom she could casually share the incredible things she had learned. And the townspeople who had once greeted her every day, full of smiles... she would probably never see them again, either.

Yes, there was no going back. She was no longer the little girl who would cling to her twin brother and cry. She had no one left to turn to now. The gears of history, once thrown off their tracks, could never be restored.

With power came responsibility. That was why she had chosen to fight... even though she still didn't know if she could really save anything.

She heard a soft voice behind her. "What a surprise." A young man was standing among the graves. He had wavy gray hair and quiet eyes the color of a mountain spring. The man—Leonard Testarossa—was also carrying a pair of bouquets. "You really did come."



“I’m surprised to see you here, as well,” Tessa responded, though her face showed no real sign of surprise. “I didn’t think you even remembered our parents.”

“But of course I do. That’s just the problem.” Leonard smiled innocently. “You’ve grown, Teletha. You’ve become much stronger and even more beautiful. I suppose the time you’ve spent with your little toy submarine has been good for you.”

“Yes, very.” Tessa turned her eyes away, and smiled. “I’ve lost many good men and women. I would be dishonoring their memories if I didn’t even try to learn from it.”

“The dead don’t care if you honor them.”

“If that’s true,” she asked, “then why did you come here?”

“I wanted to talk to you,” Leonard admitted. “And... I thought it would be my best chance to take you back with me.”

“That won’t happen. Because...” The silver-haired girl put a hand to the scarf around her neck and slowly unwound it. The wind caught its tail, causing it to flutter. “You’re now my enemy, Big Brother.”

An instant later, the air behind her began to waver. Points of pale blue light sprang into being, hovered and danced. From thin air, a white AS seemed to spill into existence: the ARX-7 Arbalest. The machine, having disengaged its ECS, remained kneeling, and pointed its shotcannon muzzle straight at Leonard.

But in that same second, Leonard elegantly moved his right hand, looking like a conductor leading a waltz. The exact same phenomenon played out behind him; wreathed in sparks of electricity, a red AS appeared out of nowhere: a Venom.

It was as if they’d each pulled a gun on the other. The wind blew cold around them: the two siblings, each with a giant at their service.

Eventually, Leonard chuckled. “I see, you came prepared. Then... let’s call it off for today. I wouldn’t want to taint your precious respect for the dead.” The Venom kept its gun carefully leveled as it proffered its open hand to Leonard.

Leonard stepped into it, and sat down in the AS's hand with a practiced motion. "Farewell, Teletha. And Teletha's friend."

The Venom rose to its feet.

Tessa shouted into the swirling wind. "This is my last warning! Stop helping them!"

"Teletha," he replied. "You're the one who should abandon that motley crew of yours."

"I'll never let you have your way," she retorted.

"I'm leaving my bouquets. Place them, if you would." As the Venom withdrew, it activated its ECS. There was a rush of wind and dust, followed by a flash and a jolt. The enemy was gone. She could hear its drive system fading into the distance.

Tessa and the Arbalest were alone in the graveyard.

"Colonel, ma'am. Were you injured?" At last, the monotone voice of the white AS's operator, Sagara Sousuke, rang out from its external speakers.

Grave markers had been strewn about and toppled. Tessa picked up the two bouquets that Leonard had intentionally dropped nearby and whispered listlessly, "No... I'm fine. Let's withdraw. Call the helicopter."

1: Prophecy and Visit

[#990129_2342 IP:xx.xxx.xxx.115]

[#title/PaChry + Certain Tokyo High School]

[#name/none]

[#So, do users here think the Pacific Chrysalis seajacking last month on the 24th is connected to the hijacking in Sunan? Didn't see much reporting on it since Bush's son got blown up the same day. Just seems suspicious that it happened to be the same high school...]

[#more conspiracies? so sick of this crap. knock it off]

[#gtfo]

[#So weird to see a serious post here... Two terrorist attacks on the same school in eight months... okay, that's bizarre... but I doubt there's anything behind it...]

[#Guys, this is an obvious plot by Dear Leader. They kidnap high school girls from our country to serve as comfort women (etc)]

[#details on last girl saved at Sunan plz]

[#shes fuggo dont bother]

[#You think? The pic they ran in the weeklies wasn't great, but I thought she looked cute]

[#All I know is that she has big tits. My heart tells me so.]

[#Be careful, guys. ECHELON is watching.]

[#yeah think echalon added TITS to their watchwords.]

[#whats an echelon]

[#^search engines exist dude]

[#You think that girl might be the cause of it? Heard she was the daughter of a UN high commissioner.]

[#Probably High Commissioner for Environment Chidori. But that's a pretty low-ranked position as commissioners go. Their office budget isn't anywhere near what the UNHCR gets. You see those guys on the news all the time. The environment agency is new and small. There are way more valuable hostage targets out there.]

[# +no connection btwn PaChry & DPRK.]

[#Can we all agree Chidori-tan is a hottie with big tits???]

[#pics plz]

[#Hey, first post on this thread. A guy I knew in high school is a reporter for one of those newspapers. We got together for drinks to catch up the other day, and he had a LOT to say about this!! He said his bosses warned them not to investigate the school "to protect the victims' rights." But

one of his coworkers tried to investigate anyway and got transferred to Tajikistan! Something's going on at that school!!]

[#will lol if this is real]

[#I told you! Dear Leader wants high school girls! Anyone who opposes them will get Taepodongs (etc)]

[#gtfo]

[#I'm more interested in that picture of an M9 one of the Sunan students took. That's the latest AS model, right?]

[#That was a total shop. M9s are still in the testing phase in the US military, and they wouldn't drag them out for a delicate operation like that. Plus that one's monomolecular cutter was too big, and the head sensors and blade antenna looked totally different from the M9s currently in testing.]

[#But it's pretty similar to the commander unit prototype we saw in the original M9 blueprints, right?]

[#Here. This is a picture of the 1/48 Italeri kit from the time, now OOP. You'll notice it's called the XM9. It was based on the DoD's published blueprints at the time, but it had crap rounded edges so no one liked it lol. The best replica right now is the Tamiya kit.]

[#Huh, reminds me of the F-19...]

[#f***ing military otaku plz go]

[#My niece is a student at Jindai High, and she says it's really strange. She's a third year so she wasn't actually there, but apparently there's a lot of strange things going on at that school. Just outbreaks of violence and little fights and stuff. And it's all accepted without question.]

[#Important question for your niece: Does the girl have big tits???]

[#PLEASE SHUT UP.]

[#Serious reply here. HC Chidori is investigating the illegal dumping of medical waste. Apparently they're finding tons of biohazard bags filled with needles and stuff in the mountains in the Philippines. They said Japanese companies and government agencies hire these organizations to dump their waste in Southeast Asia. HC Chidori made a lot of enemies in his NGO days, so it could be that some other force is trying to threaten him.]

[#So they hijacked a plane his daughter was on? Seems like a reach.]

[#She's an alien. She's receiving signals from Vega and passing their forbidden technology to Earth. Arm slaves, stealth bombers... it's all Vegan technology.]

[#tinfoil hat brigade plz go]

[#Either way, there's something more to her.]

●

It was sixth period, and they were in the gymnasium. Candidates stood on stage, passionately declaring their ambitions in front of a mostly unenthused

student body.

"...In addition! I declare that the secretive manner with which the current student council conducts itself only serves to protect a handful of clubs and committees! If I'm elected, I'll guarantee a more open student council, and a better school life for all. Please vote Yamada Taro!"

Scattered applause. The second-year student, who had glasses and a bowl cut, bowed to everyone, shoulders heaving, then walked briskly off the stage.

"Thank you. Sugiyama Ryoichi from class 2-5 will now give his campaign speech," the girl who served as the student council secretary, standing in the wings, said placidly into the microphone. A member of the light music club, with an acoustic guitar slung over his shoulder, walked past her to the stage. It was the same boy who had made the bet with Sousuke about the clubs' girl-recruiting competition.

"Hey," he said. "I'm Sugiyama and I'm running for class president. If you elect me, I'll hold concerts in the gym on the first of every month."

"Awesome!" a few shouted out, half in jest.

"Okay, so. I wrote a song for you all, so listen up." The candidate began to strum, and then launched into a passionate song.

The teachers scowled, but couldn't interrupt. They had made an agreement with the current student council president that, out of respect for democratic elections, they wouldn't comment on the contents of candidate speeches.

While the boy belted out with an amateur's confidence, backstage, Chidori Kaname let out a small sigh. "This is less like a campaign event, and more like a recital for show-offs."

"You think so?" Sagara Sousuke was standing close by, scanning the auditorium carefully. After his disinterested reply, he whispered urgently into the walkie-talkie in his hand. "HQ to Alpha One. Is everything well?"

"Alpha One here. Everything's well. I think..." replied the voice of a first-year stagehand.

"Don't say 'I think,'" Sousuke lectured sternly. "Make your reports clear."

“Roger.”

“Continue to keep a close watch. HQ out.” He turned off the walkie-talkie.

Kaname gave him the side-eye as the communication ended. “What’s all this sneaking around about?”

“Security. It’s a presidential election, after all. One of the candidates could send an assassin against one of their opponents.” Sousuke had been granted the odd title of ‘Head of School Security and Aide to the Student Council President.’ That meant he was nominally in charge of matters relating to security, but in practice, what he did was mostly busywork. Still, any time there was an event like this, Sousuke always poured an absurd amount of effort into seeing his duty through.

“Normally, I’d run all students through a metal detector and perform a bag check,” he went on. “But...”

“Oh, give me a break!” Kaname hissed. “No one’s going to assassinate anyone, okay? And stuff like that would make it take hours to get everyone into the gym.”

“That’s why I refrained.”

“I guess that’s progress... sort of,” she said grudgingly. Still, she had to admit that over the nine months since he’d first transferred to their school, Sousuke had been causing less and less trouble.

“It’s our final job for the current student council administration,” he insisted. “I wanted to do it right.”

“Our final job, huh? Well, one less annoying responsibility on our plates.” Kaname spoke the words with forced indifference, as if to wipe her mind of its irritation.

She currently served as student council vice president, but she wasn’t running in the current election. She would be a third-year soon, and that meant she’d have entrance exams to study for; it was the reason most student council officers tended to take office in the third term of their first year and only serve for the majority of their second. The current president was a third-year student, and about to graduate, but he was an unusual case.

The song continued. It was just reaching the climax. The melody was kind of a ripoff of Ozaki Yutaka, with some Japanese rapping mixed in. The lyrics stank of amateurishness: Our days together have been shining Just like the sun we watched together Just like the smiles we shared together But time moves on and we can't turn it back All our sadness and anger and love...

It was winter, and the gym was freezing. And even though they were only a few hundred meters from hundreds of fired-up students, for some reason, it seemed especially cold backstage.

"An awful song," Sousuke whispered abruptly.

Kaname was surprised; it was unusual to hear him say things like that. "Huh. You think?"

"Yes. I find it unpleasant."

"Really? It seems pretty typical... like, *really* typical, to me."

"Still, I don't like it."

"I see..." *Is he in a bad mood?* Kaname thought, and took a subtle half-step backwards.

In reply, Sousuke whispered, "It's only my opinion. Don't let it bother you."

"Right," she agreed.

The performance ended. The musician left the stage to applause.

"How many more?"

"Four, I think. We're running a bit behind, but I think we can make it."

Another announcement played over the speakers, while the next candidate, a girl, prepared to come out on-stage. She was a first-year who had been helping with student council work for a while, a member of the swimming club.

I guess she's going for sex appeal, Kaname thought. *But... a competitive swimsuit in this cold?* The girl's slender shoulders were trembling. Her toned bottom was freezing. It looked like her lips were turning blue. "Um... are you okay?" she asked.

"Of course I'm okay, Chidori-senpai!" The girl clenched her fists and smiled

confidently in return. A fire of some kind seemed to burn behind her bright, round eyes.

“You look like you’re trembling to me,” Kaname pointed out.

“Trembling with anticipation! Because I will soon be entrusted with the future of the student council! I’ll do whatever it takes to get elected!”

“R-Right. Well, good luck.”

“Sure thing! Just watch me! I’m gonna win this! Yeah!” She slapped herself on the cheeks to rev herself up, then ran up onto the stage. “Hello, there! Um, I’m Morikawa Yui, and I’m running for student council president! I’m in the swimming club, so I’ve decided to represent, even though it’s a little embarrassing!” Her proclamation was met immediately with cheers.

Kaname looked on with another sigh, but Sousuke muttered, “Reminds me of a certain someone at the school festival.” She had to admit, it was certainly reminiscent of her own performance during the Miss Jindai High contest at the school festival.

“What are you trying to say?” she asked pointedly.

“Er, nothing...” Sousuke reached for his walkie-talkie, looking abashed.

The vote counting was to be done that same day, and they had the results by six o’clock. It was already dark outside the student council room. The senior members of the student council, Kaname and the others included, were watching, with their advisor present, as the second-year election official read out the results.

“—Takasaki Kaoru-san, 157 votes. Sugiyama Ryoichi-kun, 219 votes. Um... Morikawa Yui-san, 249 votes. 128 ballots disqualified.” The election official stopped. “That is all. Our 54th student council president is Morikawa Yui-san of class 1-3. That means vice president is first-year Sasaki Hiromi-kun, secretary is first-year Soga Takashi-kun, treasurer is first-year Kurata Hiroshi-kun, timekeeper is second-year Miki Hararen-san...”

“Ohh.”

“Great job.”

“Nice work, everyone.”

Everyone offered up a polite round of applause. The newly-elected officials were all regulars to the student council room, but since they were candidates, they weren’t actually present.

“Okay, good,” their advisor, Kagurazaka Eri, said leisurely. Then she turned her eyes to the student council president, who was sitting in an office chair. “Did it all go as you planned it, Hayashimizu-kun?”

The student—Hayashimizu Atsunobu, the 53rd student council president—closed his eyes and shrugged lightly. He was a young man with a clever appearance: tall and pale, with almond-shaped eyes behind expensive glasses, and a long and straight nose. “I can’t control how the students vote, ma’am,” he said calmly. “This was a democratic election.”

He had better negotiation and manipulation skills than most politicians, and everyone knew he’d been pushing for Morikawa Yui to be the next student council president. Her swimsuit sex appeal pitch had been effective, of course, but the truth was that most of the students were really just voting for a continuation of Hayashimizu’s regime.

The reason for this had nothing to do with complicated topics like policy and budget management; it was just that pretty much everyone viewed Hayashimizu’s two years as president in a positive light. In that time, he had improved the supplies and facilities for each club; overseen first-place awards in baseball tournaments, track meets, and art competitions; and allowed for more freedom on culture festival projects. Fashion and music magazines had been added to the library, he’d increased the diversity of baked goods available in the dining hall, and he’d allowed student access to the roof. He’d also opened up the gym, athletics field, and pool on days off. Additionally, starting next year, the students would have much more say in the destinations of their class trips. He was very well-liked for all of those improvements.

“But I’ll admit, I feel like... I can graduate in peace now,” he admitted modestly.

Kagurazaka Eri smiled in amusement. “You really are something. Can I expect to hear about you again someday, as one of the great politicians of our time?”

“You flatter me. If that does happen, I’ll be sure to drop your name in my later-years autobiography, as a teacher who inspired me,” Hayashimizu said, in a way that made it hard to tell if he was joking or serious.

“Thanks. But don’t underestimate the wider world, all right?”

“I won’t.”

“Well, I’m going to post the election results on the bulletin board. Good job today, everyone,” Eri said with a sense of finality, before leaving the student council room. The elections official and others began filing out, too.

Kaname also began her preparations to leave. “Whew, guess it’s all over,” she said to Hayashimizu.

“You did a wonderful job, Chidori-kun,” he complimented her.

“No, it was all you,” said Kaname, smiling brightly.

Hayashimizu had been president already when she had arrived at the school, during the first term of her first year. He’d cajoled her into helping out with student council work, and in the end, had encouraged her to become vice president. It had been quite an adventure, and after this week, it would all be at an end. They’d known each other for almost a year and a half. It really was a powerful moment.

“Sagara-kun,” said Hayashimizu, turning to face Sousuke next. “I’m grateful to you, too.”

“Not at all, Mr. President.” Sousuke straightened up.

“Mr. President, eh? But what will you start calling me next week? I’ll just be an unremarkable third-year.”

Sousuke responded immediately. “Mr. Former President, of course.”

Hayashimizu smiled ruefully. “I’ll attempt to continue to live a life worthy of that title. Though personally, I hope you’ll just call me Senpai.”

“Roger.”

Kaname always felt a slight sense of alienation when these two talked. Their relationship wasn’t like that of ordinary friends, or of leader and subordinate:

the word “compatible” seemed to be the closest way to describe them. Their upbringings and personalities were completely different, but there was something fundamentally similar about them... the scale on which they approached things, perhaps, or their value systems. They seemed to share something on a primordial level—beyond a mere emotional connection—that inspired a mutual respect. If either of them did something to become unworthy of that respect, their relationship would likely dissolve immediately.

Sousuke’s relationship with Hayashimizu was fundamentally the same as his relationships with Kurz Weber, Melissa Mao, Andrey Kalinin, and the others from Mithril. At the same time, it was fundamentally unlike his relationships with his classmates Kazama Shinji, Onodera Kotaro, Tokiwa Kyoko, or his homeroom teacher, Kagurazaka Eri. That wasn’t to say that Sousuke looked down on or shunned his classmates; he trusted them, certainly, but he didn’t rely on them. If push came to shove, Shinji, Kyoko, and the others weren’t the people he would turn to for help.

Hayashimizu, though, Sousuke saw as a comrade; perhaps even a confidante. The other man seemed to feel likewise. Kaname had come to realize this well, throughout the various bits of chaos that had kept their school life interesting for these past nine months. In that regard, Hayashimizu Atsunobu was exceptional—not just at the school, but in society as a whole.

Like equals in strength, she found herself thinking. *But what does that make me?*

“Chidori?”

“Huh?” The prompt snapped Kaname back to reality.

“What’s the matter?”

“Oh, nothing. By the way, Hayashimizu-senpai. About what Ms. Kagurazaka said before... Are you really gonna be a politician?”

“Ahh... No way.” Hayashimizu shook his head in self-reproach. “A thousand constituents is one thing, but a million? There was a time, back in middle school, when I thought about it... but I’ve had experiences since then that have changed the way I think.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve acquired an interest in people,” he admitted. “In a different way than what politicians deal in.”

Kaname fell silent. She was remembering the picture he’d showed her of his old girlfriend, whom he’d said had died.

“I’ll try out a few things in college,” Hayashimizu went on. “There’s a public school I can get into by referral, but there’s also an assistant professor who wrote a book I like, and I’m thinking of taking exams for the university he’s in. I took their mock exam out of curiosity, and I don’t think it will present a problem... as long as I don’t get hit by a car on the day of the test.” If Hayashimizu was that confident, then he would almost certainly pass.

“Boy, I wish I could be that confident,” Kaname said ruefully. “I’ll be spending the whole year with my nose buried in books.”

“Will you? I think that when it comes to science, at least, you can get in wherever you want.”

“Um...” For a second, Kaname was at a loss for words.

“I’ve heard about your rankings on the standardized tests,” Hayashimizu told her. “I also read through the second-year questions. Even setting aside the more malicious trick questions... I don’t think even I could have gotten a perfect score the way you did.”

Kaname fell silent. There was no jealousy or sarcasm in Hayashimizu’s tone; she knew he was above that sort of pettiness. It sounded more like he was feeling her out, in the name of curiosity and personal interest, to see how she would react.

“Ah, excuse me.” He must have noticed the sudden seriousness in her eyes, and the slight tension in Sousuke’s. He lowered his eyes regretfully, and shook his head. “The point is, you should respect your own abilities.”

“Ah... right. Of course. Ahahaha,” Kaname laughed, rubbing the back of her head. “Anyway, I think we’d better get going. Sousuke?”

“Good idea,” he agreed. “Let’s go.”

“Wait—Sagara-kun. I need to talk to you for a bit.” Sousuke was about to turn and go, but Hayashimizu stopped him gently.

“What is it?”

“It’s nothing serious. Just stick around, all right?” He looked out over Kaname, the treasurer, and the other members of the election committee. Everyone except Kaname looked at each other, whispered, “See you tomorrow,” and left the student council room. Hayashimizu’s gaze focused on Kaname, who had remained where she was.

I guess I’m a third wheel, huh? “Yeah, yeah. Boy talk, right? Well, Sousuke, I’ll be waiting at the entrance,” Kaname shrugged, but her voice was not unkind.

“Roger.”

“Sorry, Chidori-kun.”

Kaname left the student council room, leaving Sousuke and Hayashimizu behind.

Hayashimizu waited a little while after she was gone, and then said, “Is anyone listening?”

“No,” Sousuke said after a moment of close attention.

“But just to be sure, let’s go to the roof.” Hayashimizu stood up and took the ring of keys that hung in a corner of the student council room.

Sousuke watched him questioningly.

The two left the student council room. The vote counting had taken so long that the school was now dark and empty, and the corridors were freezing cold. They walked silently through the halls, climbed the stairs, and came out onto the roof of the south school building. The door’s lock clacked open with a sound that seemed deafeningly loud in the silence.

The sky was cold and glittering with stars. Night had fallen. They could hear the muffled sounds of car engines coming and going down the nearby road.

Hayashimizu took a spot next to one of the thrumming air conditioning units. “Sagara-kun,” he said, his hair rustling in the light breeze of the compressor. “I’m aware that what I’m about to say might be out of line. I don’t know the full

situation, so consider this innocent advice from a friend."

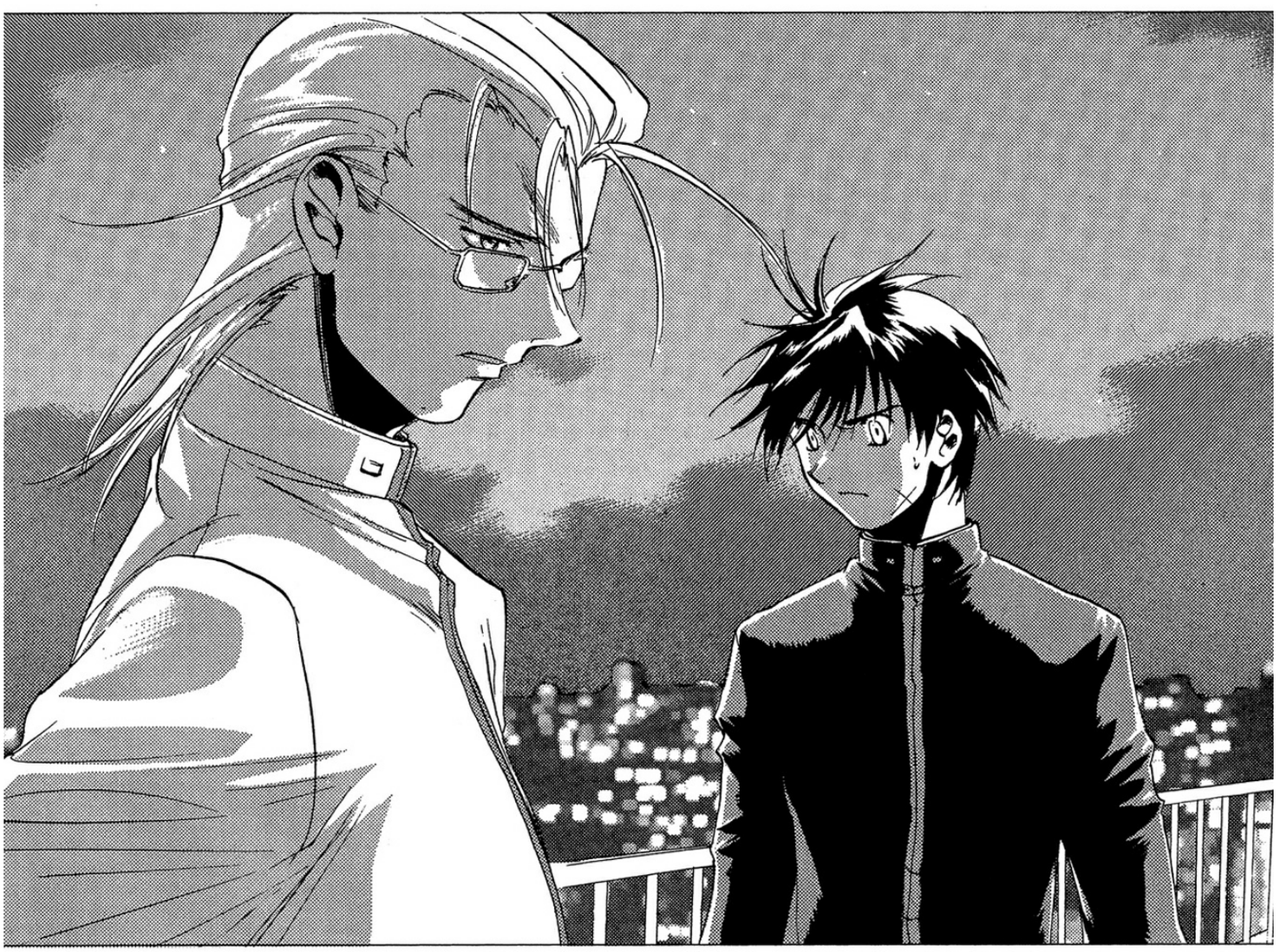
Sousuke waited a long moment before he responded. "Right."

After five or six seconds of silence, the soon-to-be-former president began again. "You can't keep this up anymore." His words sounded heavy, and pained.

They were exactly the words Sousuke was expecting, and they were like a knife in his heart. Of course, he'd never told Hayashimizu about Mithril, about himself, or the truth about Kaname. They'd never had one conversation about that; he'd always skirted the subject. But... that didn't mean that a bright young man like Hayashimizu wouldn't have questions. He'd have been foolish *not* to catch on.

Sousuke remained silent.

"It's not a problem with you. With a little more time, you could probably become a normal man. You're learning the compromises you have to make to exist in our society. Before long, you'd probably settle into 'just a little eccentric' levels... I've been watching the effort you've been putting in, so I know. But..." Hayashimizu turned his attention to the entrance, where Kaname was expected to be waiting.



“The problem is her,” he whispered, and a kind of gloom fell over the man’s face that Sousuke had never seen before. “I don’t know what’s going on with her. Anything I might propose would be pure conjecture. But it’s not hard to get a vague idea of why you’re here, and what’s behind the various disasters that the school has been subject to. It’s her, isn’t it? She’s at the center of all of it. And not just the hijacking and the seajacking—she’s at the center of something much more serious.”

It would have been easy for Hayashimizu to figure out, with a little investigation, and talking to a few other students. Yes... he’d have been foolish *not* to catch on.

“At first, I assumed it was because of her father’s position,” he continued, “but that wouldn’t be enough to explain it. And there are two more elements that every incident she’s involved in have in common—your absence, and the presence of an armed organization of unknown affiliation.”

Sousuke said nothing.

“That’s all that I know. I’ve tried to avoid prying unnecessarily, but if even someone like me can pick up on that much, it’s only a matter of time before others start raising suspicions. And a week from now, I’ll just be a normal student. In a month, I’ll be gone,” Hayashimizu pointed out. “You won’t have anyone smoothing things over for you. Morikawa-kun and the other incumbents won’t have the power. She’s not up to the task, and it’s possible she might even turn on you. You’ll be expelled from the paradise I’ve arranged for you. Do you understand why?”

“Because... the school would be a lot safer if Chidori and I were gone,” Sousuke said with grave hesitation.

“I’m afraid so,” Hayashimizu sighed. “I doubt you’re to blame, but when I heard about the Christmas incident, I started to feel genuine regrets about covering for you in the past. What if one of the students had been hurt? Or killed? I...”

Sousuke’s face tensed up. “It... that operation was supposed to be safe.” He couldn’t stay silent any longer. He couldn’t help but attempt to vindicate himself, at least to this one person. He didn’t care that it was classified. He

continued talking, unprompted, hoping it might bury the agitation growing inside him. “I need... I needed a clue about the people who were after her. That was what it was for. We’ve always been stuck reacting in the past... and I wanted to take back the initiative. I thought if we could crush their headquarters or cut off their funding, we could get them to leave us alone. We could make it work out. She’d be safe. The intelligence and research divisions are running analyses now. They’re almost there. My squad can get it done. We just need time...”

“I told you. Your time is running out.” Sousuke had never heard Hayashimizu’s tone so grave before.

“I...”

“I won’t tell you to leave. As I said at the start, this is merely advice. But... it’s easy for me to imagine, even without knowing the exact situation, that this is all going to come to a bad end. Now that I have my successor, you and she are the last things I’m worried about. I just wanted to let you know where things stand. The rest, you should discuss with her yourself.” Hayashimizu, leaning against the fence, gazed into the distance with melancholy eyes, and spoke with the gravity of a prophet. “If you don’t, you’re going to end up regretting it very soon.”

Sousuke swallowed hard. “I... like being here.”

“So do I. Everyone here is wonderful. They’re so naive and virtuous... but they’re also normal people. They have their fears and anxieties. And...” Hayashimizu’s sigh came out in a white puff, “...they can be cruel.”

A terrifying image flashed into Sousuke’s mind: hostility. Glares of hostility from the class, the student council, and others. Reproach mixed with fear, untempered by sympathy. Malice, resentment, hatred, and blame. And on the receiving end of all of it... her. Just imagining it made his blood run cold.

Hayashimizu must have read the agony on Sousuke’s face, because he shrugged a little. Then, returning to his typically casual demeanor, he said, “But I don’t think this is worth torturing yourself over. At the end of the day, it’s just a school. Just a waypoint.”

“A waypoint?” Sousuke questioned.

“It’s easy to forget, I know, but when this is all over, life will go on. You’ll have decades to go after this. Now...” Hayashimizu handed the keys to Sousuke. For some reason, they felt like lead in his hand. “I’m going to go. It seems I’ve left someone waiting. Return the key, would you?”

Hayashimizu began to walk for the door to the roof, where the class secretary stood. She didn’t seem to have overheard their conversation. “Sorry to leave you waiting,” he apologized.

“Not at all, Senpai.”

“I’m impressed that you found me. You must have looked everywhere.”

“Well, maybe a little...” The raven-haired girl giggled and smiled gently. She gave Sousuke a slight nod from a distance, then left the roof, following Hayashimizu.

Sousuke remained almost completely silent on the way home. Kaname made small talk, and he responded with disinterested pleasantries.

What did he and Senpai talk about? Kaname wondered, but she found herself deciding not to question him. Something about the way he was acting made it feel inappropriate. “...So, Shiori’s boyfriend, right?” she said instead. “Apparently he said he wanted to break up out of nowhere.”

“Oh?” Sousuke questioned absently.

“Crazy, huh? They’d been head-over-heels up to that point. I met him a few times too, and he seemed like a pretty decent guy, you know? Shiori was losing her mind about it,” Kaname chatted. “She didn’t know what to do. She called me up at three o’clock last night.”

“Ahh.”

“So I decided I’d get to the bottom of it, and I called the guy to ask him what the deal was. And you know? It was the funniest thing. Apparently it was all a big misunderstanding, and it was just he saw her with Ono-D when we went to that movie recently...”

“I see.”

“Oh, come on...” Kaname grumbled.

After getting off the train, which was packed for rush hour, Kaname stopped suddenly and groaned in annoyance. “What’s with you? You’re acting weird. I mean, weirder than usual...”

Seeing Kaname lose her patience and storm up to him, Sousuke blinked rapidly, as if hearing her voice for the first time. “Sorry,” he apologized.

“Hmm. Don’t tell me you’re sad your student council duties are over,” she suggested.

“No, not especially. I was just thinking.”

“About what?”

Sousuke’s mouth drew into a line, and he seemed about to speak... but then shook his head. “Nothing.”

“It’s *so* not nothing,” Kaname said accusingly.

“I’ll tell you soon.”

“Huh? Okay, but this is really weird...”

The two resumed walking. It was night, and the shopping street was cold. The people heading home around them inevitably found their pace quickening.

How long had it been since they’d started walking home side-by-side like this? At first, Sousuke had always followed her from a distance. That distance had grown shorter—day-by-day, little-by-little—until at some point, it had seemed natural that they should walk side-by-side.

And then, how long had it been since their arms had begun to randomly brush against one another like this?

Sousuke suddenly spoke. “Chidori.”

“What now?”

“Let’s hold hands.”

It was so out of nowhere that, at first, Kaname couldn’t believe her ears. “What... hold up, what? What did you say?”

“I said ‘Let’s hold hands.’”

What's up with him? She wondered. *This makes no sense. One minute he's completely silent, and the next minute... this? It's totally bizarre. And besides—*

"You don't want to?"

"N-No..." she denied hastily. "I wouldn't say that."

"Then let's do it." Sousuke held out his right hand and gently took her left—at first timidly, then firmly. He'd taken her hand before during emergencies, but this was their first time doing it like this.

Kaname held her breath. Her ears felt hot. She buried her face in her scarf self-consciously. "I... I don't get it. Where did that come from?"

"I don't know," Sousuke said as he pulled her along, walking somewhat awkwardly.

"You're seriously acting weird..."

"Am I? I see. Perhaps I am."

That was the last thing either of them said.

On the outskirts of the shopping district stood a small yakitori bar. They could hear an enka song playing as they passed: *Yagiri no Watashi.* The tenor of the song wasn't quite right for their situation, but it still struck her for reasons Kaname couldn't quite explain.

A sense of calm was washing over her. His hand felt large and warm... but at the same time, there was something fearful about it. It seemed to be clinging to hers for comfort, though she didn't know why.

Time passed in the blink of an eye.

They left the shopping street behind and arrived in their residential area. As always, their apartment buildings were facing each other across the road. But even this familiar view seemed somehow changed to her. Normally, this would be where they parted ways, each heading back to their own dwelling... but she couldn't quite bring herself to let go just yet.

"Hey... you want something to eat?" she found herself asking, and was surprised by the words coming out of her own mouth. It felt like a risky thing to say, given the vibe between them at the moment.

Sousuke seemed surprised by it as well. “Are you sure?”

“Um... well, I guess,” Kaname said. “We could have, like... a little wrap party.”

“A wrap party?”

“Yeah. It... might be nice.”

Sousuke gave a small nod, tightening his hold on her hand, and headed for Kaname’s apartment. They remained silent for the entire elevator ride.

What’s going to happen? Kaname wondered. *It’s kind of scary, but exciting...* She felt dizzy and distracted. Her heart was pounding in her chest. She could feel sweat forming on his palm, too. They walked down the communal hall, and made it to her apartment door. She tried to pull out her key, but the fact that she was still holding his hand caused her to fumble it a little bit. “S-Sorry...”

“Ah. Should I let go for a minute?” Sousuke asked.

“Y-Yeah.” She stuck the key in the door and opened it.

They entered. After a dawdling removal of shoes, they took hands again, and then headed toward the living room, side by side.

Sousuke sprang into action immediately. He yanked Kaname toward him, threw himself in front of her, and drew the pistol from the small of his back in one fluid motion. He’d seemed tense before, but now he emanated a completely different kind of tension.

“What...” Kaname began, and then fell silent. It took her a minute to realize it: A young man was sitting on her sofa in the dark. He was dressed in a dark suit and had wavy silver hair.

The young man—Leonard Testarossa—stretched, as if he’d been kept waiting a long time. “Welcome home, Chidori Kaname-san.”

I’ve been lax —that was the only thought on Sousuke’s mind.

This silver-haired man, sitting placidly in Kaname’s living room... how had he gotten inside? He’d set up numerous alarm systems and traps to detect and repel anyone trying to break in. Had this man worked his way through them, then?

No...

There was nothing about this man that suggested the slightest hint of “work.” He was so at ease, it was more like they’d left the door unlocked and he’d simply let himself in. Sousuke was stunned by the skill it must have taken.

He knew this man, too.

He had seen him before.

This was Leonard Testarossa, the brother of his commanding officer, Teletha Testarossa. They’d run into him recently during a visit to her parents’ graves. On the way back, Tessa had explained that he was a member of Amalgam, and likely the designer of the Codarl series that had given Sousuke and his allies so much trouble in the past.

How did he get here? And why had he come? *That’s right* , Sousuke realized. *I have no idea.* And... why come to Kaname’s apartment, of all places?

With anxiety frothing in his chest, Sousuke pointed his gun at Leonard. He activated his laser sight and fixed it right on the man’s chest. “Don’t move. Put your hands up slowly and get to your feet. If you don’t do as I say—”

“You’ll shoot me?” Leonard shook his head mockingly. “The same old ‘diplomacy.’ Can’t we just skip the pleasantries? I’d rather not have to run through that entire script again.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“This.”

Sousuke’s senses of smell and hearing, in addition to his soldier’s sixth sense, all picked up on it—a slight movement on the balcony, at the back of the living room. There were two figures there. They had been lurking there in perfect silence, but now, they slowly adjusted position. Their presence was so faint that most people probably wouldn’t even pick up on it. They were big, and they weren’t human; pure threat, untainted by emotion—machines.

He brought those robots for an ambush? Sousuke hadn’t forgotten them for a moment. These were Alastors, super-miniaturized ASes; the battle robots they had fought on the Pacific Chrysalis. Leonard had probably instigated their slight

movement as a way to make his point.

And now, having informed Sousuke of their presence, he spoke. “Do you still think you can land a shot between my eyes before my ‘escort’ makes its move?” It was as if he’d read Sousuke’s mind.

Sousuke made no reply.

“It’s not possible, Sagara Sousuke-kun,” Leonard said, gently correcting his opponent. “As excellent a killer as you may be—”

Before the man could say another word, Sousuke had pulled the trigger. The fact that he was Tessa’s brother didn’t enter his mind for a second. Sousuke was indeed an “excellent killer,” and he wasn’t going to just sit there and let his enemy talk.

The moment he fired, a shadow flitted in front of Leonard, and the bullet aimed squarely at his forehead fell away with a spark. The black coat he was wearing had moved sharply, whip-like, to deflect Sousuke’s shot.

Sousuke’s mouth fell open. *Some kind of memory polymer?* he wondered. *An “active” bulletproof cloth capable of identifying and reacting instantaneously to hostile movement?* If so, how much firepower could it deflect? Could it work on shrapnel from hand grenades? Fire? Impact? Rifle shots—

“Sousuke?!” Kaname screamed, sounding furious about his indiscriminate fire. Her reaction shocked him even more than the appearance of the mysterious bulletproof cloth.

“See? Even *she* wants to see you exercise a modicum of civility,” Leonard said with a smile.

The smell of gunsmoke tickled his nose. The hairs on the back of his neck pricked up. The man was mocking their relationship.

“I don’t know what you came here for, but you can get out of my apartment right now,” Kaname said.

Leonard looked terribly hurt by her hostility. “I’ll do so shortly, but I came tonight to talk. Would you mind calling your guard dog off for a minute?”

“I’ll show you who’s a guard dog...” Sousuke’s hand tightened on the gun grip.

Now that he knew about the bulletproof coat, he had already formulated multiple backup plans.

“Stop it, Sousuke.”

“This man is our enemy.”

“He’s Tessa’s big brother, too.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Sousuke!”

Why is she so angry? Sousuke’s antsiness only grew.

“No need to hold back on account of my sister,” Leonard said invitingly. “But are you sure it’s a good idea to spill blood in this apartment?”

Sousuke gritted his teeth.

“You can hold onto your gun, if you like,” Leonard continued. “But I wish you’d hear me out.”

After a brief silence, Sousuke said, “Talk.”

“Thank you. Let’s see... Sergeant Sagara, was it? I am Leonard Testarossa.”

“I know.”

“Ah, do you? Well, then... Chidori Kaname-san. What I want from you is simple: gather up your belongings and come with me.”

It took a moment before Kaname could even speak. “What did you say?”

“Leave your current life behind and come with me. There’s no need to worry,” Leonard told her earnestly. “I can guarantee you’ll be treated well, permitted a certain degree of freedom and comfort. I’ve prepared a facility to satisfy your intellectual curiosities, and most importantly, you’ll be perfectly safe.”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about,” Kaname replied slowly.

“You don’t? I think I’ve been quite clear.”

“Do you think I’m stupid or something?”

“Then let me explain a little bit more,” Leonard said, and let out a little sigh. He swung his crossed leg idly as his gaze turned out the window and into the

distance. “My organization is getting serious now.” Something about his words had the same ring to them that Hayashimizu’s had earlier—his statement of ‘You can’t keep this up anymore’—and it filled the pit of Sousuke’s stomach with the same sense of foreboding.

“What are you talking about?” Kaname asked, pushing for more information.

“Mithril has overreached,” Leonard explained. “The West Pacific Battle Group, in particular. Shall I list off the machines of ours that you’ve destroyed so far? Seven Codarls, one Behemoth, thirteen Alastors, and twelve stolen Mistral IIs. It’s really quite amazing when you list it all out like that. You’ve really had us on the ropes.”

Sousuke listened silently.

“Then, the Pacific Chrysalis... That was a *very* bad look. The ship itself wasn’t worth much anymore... but the information you stole was significant,” Leonard continued. “In time, you’ll uncover nations, corporations, terrorist organizations, and more: all affiliated with Amalgam. That’s going to be quite a nuisance to us.”

“It certainly is,” Sousuke retorted. “And I’ll see to it that it’s more than just ‘a nuisance.’”

“That’s what I mean when I say you’ve overreached,” Leonard told him. “Prior to this, Amalgam has never taken Mithril all that seriously. We’ve been aware of your existence since your founding, but we had a good idea of what you could and couldn’t do. We thought that if your power ever grew too great, we’d just do a little pruning.”

“Is that why you set that trap on Perio?” Sousuke wanted to know.

“Yes,” Leonard confirmed. “Your submarine, the Tuatha de Danaan, is a very fine weapons platform. It wouldn’t mean much in a national military... but it’s absolutely ideal for Mithril’s purposes. And that white AS... hmm, that would be the ARX-7, wouldn’t it?”

“I don’t need to tell you anything,” Sousuke said.

“It’s just the *name* . Honestly. But it has a nickname, doesn’t it? Another medieval weapon, I’m sure. The worthless Six was the Halberd.”

Sousuke remained silent, refusing to concede.

“A shame,” Leonard mused. “I suppose we’ll never get along...”

“If this is all you want to talk about,” Sousuke told him stonily, “then the conversation is over.”

Leonard just shrugged in disappointment. “If you insist. Anyway, those are the basics. The power you brought to bear in both Sunan and Ariake exceeded our expectations, so our intention was simply to take you off the board. We thought we could accomplish that at Perio, but you wriggled your way out of that situation.

“And then, one of our own executives turned on us. Mr. Iron—Gauron—went rogue to start that chaos in Hong Kong. It sent the whole organization in quite a state of panic, it seems. It also lost us six Codarl-type ASes. He certainly liked to rock the boat, even to the very end.”

“You knew him?” Sousuke asked suspiciously.

“A bit. I believe he truly loved you. He was so happy about your reunion in Sunan.”

“Shut up.”

“It’s true, though.” Leonard smiled. There was something beautiful, almost girlish, in the gesture.

Sousuke just managed to stop himself from clicking his tongue scornfully. This man seemed to enjoy riling him. The way he’d pretended that he’d only just remembered his name, too—it was another way of mocking him. If he knew about Gauron, there was no way he didn’t remember Sousuke.

“Well, no matter,” Leonard conceded. “Then, the cruise ship incident occurred. You genuinely got the better of Amalgam that time. You passed the threshold where you could conceivably be taken off the board or restrained. That left the organization with only one course of action: destroy you, and take Job back with us.”

“Job?”

“Oh, just her codename. Don’t worry about it.”

“Wait a minute,” Kaname said. “Are you saying... they want to destroy Mithril and kidnap me?”

“That seems to be the track they’ve moved to,” Leonard agreed. “In the past, we’d decided to sit back and watch you, more or less... but we can’t do that any longer. The organization has already decided to resort to any means necessary, even extreme ones, to acquire you. I think you know what ‘extreme’ means in this context, don’t you?” He didn’t have to explain it. Rather than their roundabout means of the past, Amalgam would be more direct now, even spilling blood if necessary. “I think that’s more than enough explanation as to why I came here to get you, isn’t it?”

“To convince me to join you before they make their move?” Kaname clarified.

“Yes. Because I love you.” This time, Leonard offered her a beatific smile.

The way he smiled, as if Sousuke wasn’t even there, reminded Sousuke of his earlier urge to fill him full of lead. “How dare you...”

“Wait, Sousuke.”

“Why?”

“Just wait!” At her warning, his finger on the trigger stopped. Kaname gently pushed Sousuke’s gun down and addressed Leonard in a calm voice. “I hear you, and I appreciate your consideration. But I have school, and I like my life here. And most of all, there’s no way I’m going with you. Because, as I’ve told you time and time again, *I absolutely loathe you* .”

“Chidori...?” Sousuke asked uncertainly.

“Now, get out of my apartment right now!” she said, ignoring Sousuke’s question.

Leonard sat there for a time, expressionless, then at last, shrugged and stood up slowly. “So cold.”

“What did you expect?” Kaname demanded.

“Are you still angry about *that* ?”

“Ngh...”

“You said you’d forgive me,” Leonard said accusingly.

“Did you not hear me? Go away!” Kaname shouted, her face going red.

Their exchange confused Sousuke in a new way. *Angry about what?* he wondered. *Forgive him, why? What are they talking about?*

“I’ll say it one more time.” Leonard turned his back on them. He made a slight motion with his right hand, and the Alastors hiding on the balcony slowly straightened up. “Why don’t you accept it already? You are one of the chosen, with intelligence that far surpasses mere everyday genius. All those around us can ever think of is finding ways of cajoling us into serving their ends. Do you want to be at their beck and call forever?”

“Stop it,” Kaname demanded.

“You must have realized it by now: everyone around you is stupid and incompetent.”

“Get out.”

“It annoys you how dimwitted they all are, doesn’t it?”

“Get out!!” Kaname shouted, with so much force that tears appeared in her eyes.

“Very well. I’ve passed on my warning; whatever happens next, it’s out of my hands... Ah, right. Also, Sagara-kun.” Leonard opened the glass door to the balcony, and turned back around. “Earlier, when I was waiting for you, I was watching the news to pass the time. They just caught a mass murderer in England. They say that he killed thirty-five people.”

“So what?”

“I ran a simple investigation. You’ve killed over three times that many,” Leonard said.

Kaname’s eyes went wide. She held her breath, and a tremble ran through her.

“I wonder why it is that people still like you, despite that? She does, too—a man who’s killed over a hundred people. I wonder if they’d all stick with you the same if they knew that. It doesn’t seem fair.” With that cruel joke—or perhaps,

with a more complicated sentiment—Leonard left the apartment behind.

The two of them stood stock-still in the dark living room for some time. Kaname continued trembling. Unable to stand seeing her look so vulnerable, Sousuke tried to put an arm around her. “Chidori...”

Kaname lurched away reflexively. For a moment, she gazed at Sousuke like he was a monster... and then she shook her head slightly and pasted a smile on her face. “Ah... sorry. It’s... it’s okay. Don’t worry about what he said, okay?”

“Right...” That was all Sousuke could say for now.

Major Andrey Kalinin, upon receiving Sousuke’s message at the command center in Merida Island Base, responded thusly: “Understood. Try to hole up until tomorrow morning. We’ll get a transport helicopter to you by then.”

The conclusion of Sousuke’s report was that Kaname would be safer at Merida Island than in Tokyo. Apparently, she’d been reluctant, but eventually agreed to join them there.

“Tomorrow morning?” He could sense a slight fear in Sousuke’s voice on the other end of the radio line. “You should be able to pick us up faster than that, using the established routes. The fact that Leonard managed to break through my alarm systems—”

“That’s all the more reason, Sergeant, that we shouldn’t use Mithril’s standard escape plans. We should be prepared for the possibility that they know them all.”

“Ahh...”

“You’re a member of the SRT. You’ve been preparing for this, haven’t you?” Kalinin asked. “Use what you have.”

Sousuke hadn’t been sitting by idly all these months he’d spent in Tokyo. He’d set up various routes of his own, completely independent from Mithril. Along these routes were multiple cars, disguised weapons storehouses, safehouses, and stocks of fake licenses and ID cards. Any mercenary worthy of being chosen for the SRT was expected to handle this kind of thing; he’d never asked them about it, but Kurz and Mao had likely done the same.

Self-preservation was of paramount importance; the organization was just a tool to facilitate that. Loyalty mattered, but you couldn't rely on it.

"Roger," Sousuke replied shortly. "I'll do my best."

"I think you know this, but watch out for anyone tailing you," Kalinin cautioned. "I'll consult with the colonel about what we'll do with the girl when you return."

"Sir."

"Keep future communications to a minimum. That is all." Kalinin signed off.

Teletha Testarossa, who had previously been listening to the conversation in silence, let out a small sigh. As usual, she was dressed in her uniform, her ash blonde hair done up in a braid. There was a furrow of worry on her brow. "I knew something like this might happen someday, but... it's not quite what I expected, even so."

Kalinin nodded. "Yes, ma'am. But you took the measures you did with this in mind, I'm sure."

"True," she admitted. "Because I wanted to respect her wishes."

Kalinin said nothing.

"Still... I cannot imagine what my brother is thinking." She had been quite surprised to hear that her twin brother had visited Kaname's apartment, and on top of that, that he had asked her to come with him. Why would he do something so brazen? It was possible that there was disagreement in their ranks, but Leonard might also be setting some kind of trap.

"No... That can't be it," Tessa told herself. *The truth is, he's just trying to get her for himself. Not just her body, but her mind.* Such a motive wouldn't be out of the question for him; he'd genuinely think that he could achieve it, too. To Tessa's eyes, it was the height of foolishness, but Leonard was unlikely to agree. She had done her own meddling in their relationship—her own little playing at romance—but what Leonard was doing seemed far darker and more serious than that.

Was sending a transport helicopter enough? She knew her brother. He

couldn’t possibly intend to let Mithril just pick the two up and escape that easily, could he? Even if he personally had no inclination to stop them, he must know what Mithril would do, and he could very well have tipped off other branches of his organization.

“Send the Arbalest with it,” Tessa said.

Kalinin scowled. “Why? If this is supposed to be a discreet pickup—”

“Just in case it’s not enough.”

Kalinin fell silent.

“If something does happen, it would be safer to have an AS to secure the landing zone, wouldn’t it? The enemy might send those robots... the Alastors, after all.”

“Wouldn’t an M9 be enough, then?” Kalinin argued.

“The enemy might be expecting that, and have Codarls prepared.”

“Within a city?”

“ECS-equipped ASes can be anywhere, can’t they? Either way, without Sergeant Sagara, the Arbalest is no different than a normal M9. There’s no point in keeping it locked up inside.”

Kalinin showed a moment’s hesitation, but then nodded. “Understood. We’ll need a mid-air refueling craft, too. Permission to dispatch?”

“Of course. Do hurry.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Tessa gave the needed orders as fast as she could to various command center personnel. When that was all done, she whispered, “Sagara-san said that the enemy was about to seriously take us on. Do you think we can assume they feel threatened?”

“I don’t know,” Kalinin answered. “But there’s a basis upon which to think so. We’ve done more than enough to agitate them.”

“You’re right. But...” Tessa grabbed the end of her braid, and tickled her nose with it. “I don’t think this enemy will leave it at that.”

2: Heat

Sydney was especially hot that morning.

Admiral Jerome Borda, head of Mithril's operations division, was dressed in his usual suit as he left his home to get into the sedan. It was being driven by a special escort dispatched from headquarters, and for security purposes, they randomly changed their departure time and route every day. The sedan was equipped with the latest bulletproofing, yet it was made to withstand even a blast from an anti-tank rocket. On the way, he had to ask the driver to turn up the air conditioning.

While he looked over his usual reports in the car, Admiral Borda's sedan entered one of the buildings in the central metropolis. Publicly, it was the headquarters of a security company called Argyros, but it was in fact Mithril's operations headquarters. It housed all the communication and information-gathering facilities they required to properly manage and support their battle groups all over the world.

Of course, that meant security was appropriately tight. If anyone got it into their head to try and storm the building—even with a full company of infantry—they'd have to endure over thirty minutes of being held up in front of the gate, exposed to high-caliber rifle fire, anti-personnel mines, and various other countermeasures.

Once it had completed the laborious process of entry into the garage, Borda exited the car. There, he ran into one of Mithril's executives, Colonel Wagner, who had also just arrived.

"Good morning, sir," the colonel greeted him politely. He was an American just under fifty with an eyepatch like a pirate captain's, and had a distinct way of walking, dragging his right leg. Borda had heard he'd lost both in his military days.

"Morning, Colonel," Borda returned. "Hot enough for you?"

"Sir," Wagner replied with a salute. "I'll run a thorough inspection of the air conditioning."

“I was just making small talk. By the way... how’s Jackson?”

“We submitted the results of the interrogation three weeks ago.”

“I mean, how is he *personally* ?”

“He’ll need more time in the hospital yet. They apparently used cruel and unusual methods.”

Wagner and Borda got into the elevator and rode it to the top floor. Once they were alone together, Borda whispered, “We got most of the information we needed. I can’t be sure yet, but... Geotron might be compromised, too.”



“Ahh...” Wagner must have caught his meaning, because a slight tension ran through his body.

“Amit’s acting strangely, too. Just something to keep in mind when you’re reading intelligence division reports.”

“You don’t think the general—”

“I don’t know,” Borda said, cutting Wagner off. “Lord Mallory is acting the same as ever, and we might have to relocate soon as well. But things should be fine for now. There’s a reason we run ourselves through that security wringer every day, after all.”

“Yes, sir. There’s no way they can touch us, short of sending a bomber.”

The elevator arrived on the 26th floor.

A dozen or so people were already at work in the command center, which took up two floors on its own. The space was dimly lit and windowless, with the only real light coming from the twinkling glow of a massive display. It was like a blown-up version of the combat information center on an Aegis ship.

“We’re about to be very busy, Colonel,” Borda said to Wagner, returning each subordinate’s salute as he walked past them. “The enemy’s chain of command is different from anything we’ve ever seen. If it wasn’t, they wouldn’t have had us on the ropes for so long. Standard information networks and weapons systems are powerless against them. Or perhaps, as Teletha said—”

His statement was interrupted by a jolt through the room.

Some kind of explosion had occurred. The wall blasted inward, screens and machinery were shredded, flames spread, familiar subordinates were torn to pieces before his eyes—the wave of death bore down on him in an instant.

That was all Jerome Borda knew about the situation.

Morning came, but he hadn’t slept a wink. Sousuke sat huddled in the driver’s seat of his van, his faithful submachine gun clutched to his chest. They were in a parking lot next to a large botanical garden on the north side of Chofu. It was deserted, except for a smattering of parked cars. The engine was off, so it was very cold inside the vehicle.

After having allowed an intruder into the apartment last night, Sousuke didn't have the nerve to remain there. Kalinin was right in that Sousuke had, on his own time, come up with various preparations of his own in case of emergency. After his communique to Merida Island, he'd gathered up a few things, gotten into a car he'd prepared in advance, and driven Kaname far away. They'd used the Shuto Expressway and others to eliminate any chance of pursuit, and changed vehicles twice.

We should be safe for now , he thought.

They hadn't been able to get in touch with Kaname's other bodyguard from Mithril's intelligence division—codename Wraith—since last night. There was no way Wraith wouldn't know about Leonard's ingress... but it was possible he'd been "neutralized" in advance. Not that Sousuke had any intention of relying on the agent; the last few months, when he'd had to leave Tokyo for extended periods, he'd always had a member of the Tuatha de Danaan squad's PRT take his place instead.

"Mm..." He sensed Kaname stirring. She was in the back seat, curled up in an outdoor blanket. "What time is it?"

"Just before eight," he answered. "Did you get any sleep?"

"Yeah..." Kaname rubbed her eyes groggily and sat up. She was still in her school uniform. "Wish I could get a bath, though..."

"You can't."

"What's for breakfast?"

"This." Sousuke pulled a CalorieMate out of his pocket and tossed it to her unceremoniously.

"Hey..." she protested.

"I left you a milk and a vegetable juice, too. Drink it. You may need your stamina very shortly."

"I thought there was a helicopter coming to get us," Kaname grumbled.

"There is," he told her. "But... just in case."

The transport helicopter Mithril had sent was supposed to land directly in this

parking lot. They'd decided to avoid using their usual rendezvous points, such as the Chofu Airfield, various schoolyards, or the bank of the Tama River.

He'd gotten a transmission several hours ago that said the Arbalest would be on board the helicopter; Tessa had arranged for it. He was assured that it was just in case of a worst-case scenario, and that they probably wouldn't have to use it. He certainly hoped they wouldn't.

"Hey... I'm gonna get changed," Kaname announced. "Eyes forward, okay?"

"Understood," Sousuke said, twisting the rear view mirror away. He could hear the rustling of cloth behind him.

"It's kind of a problem, though. I didn't bring too many changes of clothes. I don't know who's going to feed my hamster... and I can't remember if I turned the heat off." She was talking as if this were one of their usual expeditions, and they'd be back in a few days.

Sousuke said nothing.

"We are coming back, right?" Kaname asked, Sousuke's silence prompting her to worry.

"Well..."

"What?"

"Er..." He didn't have the courage to tell her the truth, thinking back on his conversation with Hayashimizu Atsunobu yesterday. Sousuke was well aware that the status quo was unsustainable.

Over these last nine months, Mithril had bent over backwards to preserve Kaname's standing in society. Using careful information control, bribes, and exploitation of the press's self-restraint on matters of ethics, they'd managed to keep the media quiet. The same went for the local government.

Mithril's AI system continued to spread false information on the internet as well. If anyone, based on the facts, showed signs of suspecting a conspiracy, it would call them, "the tinfoil hat brigade;" then, through a different sockpuppet, it would forward an even more radical viewpoint. Through this combination of exhausting arguments and slander, it could confuse real points of interest and

debate. Some people would never lose sight of the real issue regardless, but these were one in a hundred. If that intelligent someone continued to express suspicions, the AI would repeat its tactics in a subtly different pattern. A human might get tired, but an AI wouldn't.

Then, with the commenters unable to reach any particular conclusion, the girl in question would fade away behind a veil of vague speculation. Most people's conception of the incidents would remain on the level of, "Oh, I think I heard about that somewhere."

This was a method of information warfare used not just by Mithril, but by intelligence agencies and mega-corporations all around the world. It wasn't hard to do, provided you had the cash to get the right people and equipment.

Still, even that had its limits. Kaname could certainly remain anonymous in society as a whole. But in the 1,200-person microcosm of a school, even pressure, bribes, and information manipulation couldn't be reliably effective. Hayashimizu was right that they were depending on the students' inherent naivete. His diagnosis was formed by the instinct of someone who'd been watching the people of the school for a long time.

Was there any way to turn Kaname back into the person she'd been before, someone without any value to the enemy? That was the only way Sousuke could imagine ever sending her back to her life after this. He had been thinking it over for a while.

For instance...

After the Hong Kong incident, Sousuke had proposed an idea to Tessa. What if they collected everything Kaname knew in a report and published it, anonymously, all over the world? After all, it wasn't she herself they wanted, but the technological information she possessed.

In response, she'd given him a very sad, but enigmatic smile. Then she'd said, "Sagara-san, do you think no one's ever tried that?" Tessa didn't explain how she knew, but she could tell him with certainty that it wouldn't work. If people were crowding around a gold mine, and you gathered up a few nuggets, offered them up, and said, "That's all there is," they wouldn't just pack up their shovels and go.

And the Whispered weren't the lucky people who found the mine. They were essentially the mine itself.

It wasn't a gift. It was a curse. There was no way to escape their fate.

How in the world could Sousuke tell Kaname that terrible truth? He felt his hands tense on the steering wheel. "Chidori..." He struggled to tell her the words he'd failed to say yesterday, just before he'd offered to hold hands on the way home: *Let's throw it all away and run away together.*

I don't care about anything anymore. Let's go somewhere nobody knows us, change our names and live in secret. I don't care if we're poor. We don't need money. We can steal food when we get hungry. Let's shut our eyes and ears to what's going on in the world and live on. Maybe someday, things really will calm down. Then you and I can live in peace... together...

Just then, Leonard's words played back in his mind: *You've killed over three times that many... A man who's killed over a hundred people... It doesn't seem fair...* And worse, he was right.

Not everyone Sousuke had killed had been on the battlefield. He'd shot weeping, fleeing enemies in the back, blown up trucks full of nervous new recruits. To cover their group's tracks, he'd even shot hostages begging for their lives. He hadn't done any of it because he enjoyed it. He'd just seen it as necessary. But still, it was the truth.

Not everything he'd experienced in Tokyo during these last nine months had been positive. He'd also been forced to confront how blood-soaked and dirty his life had once been. *Can anyone really love me?* Sousuke found himself wondering. *Do I even have the right to run away with her? Do I deserve to be at peace? She really must think of me as a monster.*

"What is it?" Kaname asked.

"Nothing," Sousuke replied and, in the end, didn't say anything. He felt a chasm between them, deep and wide. Nothing had changed since then. They were still where they had been nine months ago, wandering lost in the darkness and rain of the North Korean mountains.

"All right..." Kaname finished changing. She gave permission, and he righted

the rear-view mirror. She was now dressed in her street clothes, turning the vegetable juice bottle over in her hands. “It’s too quiet... can we put on the radio?”

“Good idea.” He turned the FM on, with the volume low. A sad and lonely duet was playing. She didn’t ask him to change the station, but just silently chewed on her CalorieMate until the song ended.

“There we are. Wasn’t that nice? That was Peter Gabriel’s *Mercy Street* ,” said the male DJ’s soothing voice. “We were going to play you another song, but we’ve just received an urgent bulletin. We’re going live to Miss Kobayashi in the broadcast center.”

A female newscaster took over. “Kobayashi here. We’ve just received word of a massive explosion in metropolitan Sydney, Australia. According to the AP report, at 7:30 Japan Time today, a blast was heard in downtown Sydney, with flames sighted somewhere near a building’s 25th floor. We have no information about possible casualties. The building in question was... ah, it says it was the headquarters of a security company called Argyros. We don’t yet know if it was an accident or an act of terrorism. We also have no information about whether any Japanese citizens were on the company payroll—”

The Argyros Building... Mithril’s operations headquarters? Sousuke quickly pulled out his pocket terminal and called up the screen for the terrestrial TV line.

The image showed an office quarter in the early morning light. The feed seemed to be taken from the roof of a building, showing smoke pouring out of one of the buildings nearby. At a glance, he could tell that it had been hit by an explosive from the outside—probably a bomb in the 1000-pound class. In fact, it had been hit with several of them.

No matter how good their security systems were, the operations headquarters hadn’t stood a chance. Had they managed to drop a GPS-guided bomb from extremely long range?

“What happened?” Kaname’s voice was trembling as she leaned over his shoulder to peer at the screen.

Sousuke used his satellite transceiver to contact the Merida Island base.

“What’s your status?” he asked.

The response came from a female NCO in the command center. “I don’t know,” she told him, sounding nervous. “All we know is that operations HQ was bombed, and we haven’t heard from them since.” They must have already heard about Sydney. “But there’s more,” she went on. “We can’t reach the Mediterranean or South Atlantic Battle Groups... and the Indian Ocean Battle Group just sent us a warning. Five minutes ago, several cruise missiles were spotted approaching their base, and—”

Static washed over the transmission for a second, but it recovered immediately. “...spond. Uruz-7... Ah, it’s back. They seem to be jamming us somehow. E and D channels... Ah, what’s going on?”

“Are you all right?” Sousuke asked. “Shinohara?”

“I’m sorry,” Shinohara replied. “The major and colonel are too busy to talk. I’ll give you Captain Clouseau.”

He heard another rush of static, and then a man’s voice came on. “I’m on. It’s me, Sergeant.” This was the SRT’s commander, Ben Clouseau.

“Captain,” Sousuke acknowledged succinctly.

“We still don’t know the full situation,” Clouseau told him. “The other battle groups’ bases appear to be under attack. Merida Island is on high alert. It’s hard to imagine, but this is an all-out offensive. Anything could happen now.”

“An all-out offensive?” Sousuke replied, sounding shocked.

“I know, it looks bad. But we’ll stop them. Meet up with Gebo-9 as scheduled, then return here swiftly. No...” Clouseau stopped on the other side of the line. “Cancel that order. You won’t make it in time. Stand by. After your RV with the helicopter, head to Romeo-13 and wait for my contact.”

They wouldn’t make it in time. Right now, events were being measured in minutes, and even at top speed, their trip would take six hours. There was no point in trying. It would be smarter to secure the Arbalest and Sagara Sousuke at the midpoint, Romeo-13—a small private island in the Ogasawara Islands—to be used as necessary at a later time.

“Got that, Sergeant?” Clouseau demanded. “Keep the Arbalest safe. Angel, too.”

“Roger that,” said Sousuke. “And Captain... I told Major Kalinin last night, they’re getting serious. Be careful.”

The static grew louder. “You told the major what?”

“They’re—”

“Can’t hear you, Uruz-7! Repeat—” The static grew louder and louder, until the line went dead.

Quiet reigned in the van, and Sousuke fell silent. Kaname watched nervously as the scowl deepened on his face.

An all-out offensive? he wondered. *Are they mad?* Then it wasn’t just the operations division HQ in the city; they were attacking the other Mithril bases, too? Those impregnable fortresses? A few bombs wouldn’t make a dent in them—assuming a bomber could even get within range. In addition, the bases had military force, equipment, training, and radar. Taking Merida Island would require manpower on the scale of an entire marine regiment. And if they had mobilized a force of that size, Mithril would surely know about it already.

Although... With enough lambda driver-mounted ASes, and advanced enough technology... *Think about it* , Sousuke told himself. *The enemy is even jamming Mithril’s communications, right? Do they really have the power for that?*

“What happened?” Kaname asked hesitantly. Her tone was deeply cautious.

“We’re not going to Merida Island,” he told her.

“What?”

“We don’t know what could happen there. It’s too dangerous.”

“Dangerous... Why?”

Sousuke didn’t have time to answer Kaname’s question, as another call came through on his other FM transceiver. It was from the West Pacific Battle Group’s utility helicopter, the MH-67 Pave Mare, call sign Gebo-9. It was here to pick them up.

The signal was digital, so it came through clearly, though it was quite weak. No... that wasn't it. The image on the TV was scrambled, as well. There was static everywhere. *Is someone jamming all radio waves locally* , Sousuke wondered, *or is there wider-scale EM interference going on?*

"Uruz-7 here," he told the Pave Mare. "The LZ is secured."

"Uruz-7. Gebo-9 here. We just passed the outskirts of Atsugi. ETA, five minutes. Please continue to secure the LZ," said a woman's voice through the static. It was First Lieutenant Eva Santos, of their aerial unit. He couldn't count the number of times she'd saved them. Her voice was like the song of angels to 'passengers' like him and Kaname.

"Uruz-7, roger. Sitrep at the LZ is—" He stopped. A chill ran up his spine. "Sitrep is—" He cast a cautious glance out his window, and tightened his grip on his machine gun. Using his left hand, which was still clutching the radio, Sousuke gestured for Kaname to get down.

"What is it, Uruz-7?" Lieutenant Santos asked.

"Gebo-9," he responded. "We're currently surrounded. There's at least five of those Alastor-types, plus infantry armed with assault rifles. Four... five... six... No, eight at least. They're about eighty meters away, hiding in the brush to the northeast."

"You've gotta be kidding me," Santos replied incredulously. "They're not just after Merida Island?"

"Hurry," he said. "Please."

"Gebo-9, roger. Hang in there, Sousuke!"

"I'll try." As the call ended, he removed his submachine gun's safety. It would be one-on-thirteen, at the very least. Tactical fundamentals demanded that he assume there were more.

Can I do this? he asked himself. The odds of winning were impossible, but he didn't have any choice but to try.

"Sousuke?" Kaname asked.

"Sorry, Chidori," he whispered. "It's going to be a long five minutes."

In the parking lot, enemies were moving to surround the vehicle. He could identify at least thirteen, and about half of them were those robots. Based on the last time he'd tangled with them, Sousuke knew that he didn't have the firepower to face that many Alastor-types.

"Lie down in the backseat. Do not sit up for any reason," Sousuke said to Kaname.

She looked back at him nervously. "What are you—"

"Weren't you listening?" he demanded. "The enemy is here. We need to escape."

The second he turned the key in the engine, Sousuke threw himself down into the passenger seat. The shot landed a second later. Cracks webbed across the van's windshield as a bullet tore through the reinforced glass with the pop. It tore off the headrest; moments later and it would have been Sousuke's head. It was a move he'd expected. The enemy wasn't stupid, so of course they'd have a sniper with eyes on the driver's seat.

Kaname let out a short cry as the backseat where she lay was bathed in a mess of padding and synthetic leather.

"Stay down!" Sousuke slammed his foot down on the accelerator, still ducking his head, and the van took off at full throttle. The tires smoked and skidded a little on the pavement, but he'd been warming up the engine every hour or so overnight, so it wasn't that hard to get going.

A few more shots came from a different direction, peppering the driver's side door and the hood. Again and again, their vehicle was assaulted by metal scraping sounds. Sousuke sat up, gave the steering wheel a turn, and took them away from the parking lot's exit—he knew there would be an ambush set up there—heading for the opposite end of the lot, instead.

A round of machine gun fire riddled the van's right side, focused on the undercarriage. From the sound alone, he could tell that they were 5.56mm shots from a German-made machine gun. *No matter, then,* Sousuke decided. *My bulletproof tires can resist shots of that caliber.* He kept accelerating, and then slammed into the chain link fence on the parking lot's far side.

Three shadows appeared ahead of him, hulking figures in black trench coats, pointing their arm-mounted rifles at him. *Alastors* , he registered grimly.

Sousuke switched to his high beams, and kept plowing forward. The enemy didn't flinch—their behavior wasn't human. Their precisely-aimed shots pounded the driver's side again and again, leaving the windshield white with cracks.

In response, Sousuke ducked to avoid the shots and stepped harder on the gas, rushing straight for the three robotic enemies. A crash. Kaname shrieked and bounced in the backseat behind him. He'd knocked one of the Alastors to the side, but the other two had latched on to the van, clinging to it with monstrous endurance. One was on the hood and the other on the passenger-side door—in other words, right in front of him.

Sousuke couldn't afford to stop. If he stopped, even for an instant, he'd be dead. The wheel tried to spin out of control, but he held it tightly, letting momentum carry him into the fence. There was an ear-piercing screech and a shower of sparks as the van rocked wildly up and down. The Alastors held on. The van skidded sideways, dragging broken fencing along in its wake.

Without even time to breathe, Sousuke drove straight down the city road he'd come out onto. His vehicle began to pick up speed again, and the Alastor on the passenger side showered the bulletproof glass with close-range rifle fire. Fragments flew, and the glass grew more and more pulverized. The enemy on the hood pulled back its fist, then slammed it down into the windshield with incredible power. Once it broke through, the next thing it hit would be the driver.

Sousuke, still accelerating, jerked the wheel to the left to slam the van into the block wall of a civilian residence. This ground the Alastor on the passenger side against the concrete. Yet the enemy held tight to the window frame, refusing to let go. Cold and emotionless, it reached out to attack Sousuke again.

Sousuke wrenched the van away from the wall, then slammed against it once more, harder this time. The Alastor fell to the pavement at last, its grip popping free like a snapped rubber band.

"Sousuke, ahead of you!!"

He didn't have time for a sigh of relief. Kaname's cry pulled his attention forward in time to see the remaining Alastor break through the windshield and reach out for his collar. *No* , he realized. It wasn't trying to grab him—it was pointing its arm-mounted rifle at his head.

Sousuke gritted his teeth and slammed the brakes as hard as he could. The van pitched forward, which threw the enemy's aim off. The muzzle flash was blinding, and the bullet just missed his head.

He'd managed to close his eyes, but his proximity to the shot meant the sound hit him like a shockwave, rendering his right ear useless. All Sousuke could hear from it now was a loud ringing sound, and his sense of balance became hazy. There was also smoke in his eyes, and for a second, he couldn't see. His head was swimming.

"It's still there!" Kaname's voice was all he had to rely on. He groped around, found the submachine gun in the passenger seat, and unloaded in the enemy's direction on full automatic. The Alastor jerked back again, but didn't let go. Sousuke aimed for where he thought the enemy's wrist was, and emptied his clip.

Some kind of shrapnel pinged around the van's interior, and he felt a pain run up his own left arm as the enemy's wrist snapped. Wiping at his tearing eyes, Sousuke turned his gaze forward, and saw that the Alastor was still hanging to the van's hood by a thread. He jerked the steering wheel, first to the right, then to the left. At last, unable to keep its balance any longer, the robot tumbled off onto the street.

Sousuke accelerated immediately. The vehicle's suspension and transmission let out dual whines of protest. He tried to check behind him, but the rear-view mirror was gone.

"Chidori, were you hurt?!" Sousuke screamed, trying to be heard over the rushing wind. He could barely hear anything in his right ear.

"I'm... okay," she answered cautiously.

There was a black sedan after them now, so he didn't have time to check on her. As he tried to turn right at an intersection, Sousuke's hand slipped on the wheel, which had become slick with something. *Blood,* he realized. *My blood.* A

piece of shrapnel the size of a postage stamp had embedded itself in his arm, which was now soaked from the elbow down. He felt no shock at the realization. His experience told him, coldly, that he could still function. There would be time to treat his arm later.

Sousuke swapped the clip in his submachine gun and plowed through a red light, and in doing so, just managed to avoid killing an office worker on her way to work.

“Sousuke?!” Kaname cried out in alarm.

“They’ll kill us if we stop!”

“But—”

“Didn’t you hear me?” he yelled. “Stay down!”

Another shot hit them. This one came from the pursuing car, whose drivers didn’t seem to care at all about the fact that they were in an urban area.

“C-Can I try shooting?” Kaname asked.

“No,” Sousuke denied flatly. “Don’t.”

“But... why—”

“Don’t touch the gun!” He couldn’t count on someone untrained to provide cover fire. And... besides that, she shouldn’t be holding a gun. He simply couldn’t allow it.

Communications to the Indian Ocean Battle Group had been completely cut off. The officer in charge had tried various methods; she even tried using civilian telephone lines as an intermediary, but none of it had worked.

“This isn’t just jamming. Even the commercial satellite channels are down... what’s going on?” Tessa whispered to herself. She was currently seated in the commander’s chair in the command center of Merida Island Base. She hadn’t changed since the night before, having remained on standby the entire time, aside from brief naps here and there. As a result, though she was dressed in her usual trim uniform, she looked a little more rumpled than usual.

She was worried about Admiral Borda, whom she thought of as an uncle. She was worried for Sousuke and Kaname, too. But she couldn’t afford to voice

these fears.

“It’s a global phenomenon, Colonel,” communications officer Shinohara said, tapping busily at her panel. “Our spy satellites are down, too... including Sting. And it isn’t just ours. Commercial satellites, plus American military satellites like Navstar, Comstar, and the Keyhole series, all seem to be in even worse shape than ours. The updates we were getting from various departments about Sydney have also dried up.”

Tessa gritted her teeth. “A solar wind. An incredibly massive instance.” Solar winds were electromagnetic storms that originated from the Sun. During sunspot-active periods, they would shower Earth with intense electromagnetic activity from time to time. Nowadays, authorities could predict high and low sunspot periods, and put out daily risk reports. Defensive measures had gotten rather good as well, so most of the time, they pulled through high-risk periods with only minor interference in satellites and delicate terrestrial electronics.

Solar winds were sort of like earthquakes; most of them were minor, but occasionally, a major one occurred. These “major earthquakes” were impossible to predict with any degree of certainty. Even if you’d identified the possibility and worked to mitigate risk, you never knew exactly when they might happen. It was like a stock market crash, or a pandemic.

If a powerful solar wind like that hit Earth, the damage would be on the scale of an EMP from a nuclear bomb. Even if the impact to humans themselves was minor, the event would do serious damage to electronics—including, of course, wired communications. Of course, it could be restored; the interference and breakdowns would recover in a very short time.

But it would still take time.

“At present, long-range communication methods that rely on satellite channels or ionosphere reflection are unusable, whether military or commercial,” Shinohara reported. “VHF and ELF are working, but... Also, Internet servers everywhere are down, and we’re in a vicious cycle of panic and overloads. There’s massive air traffic control confusion in both commercial and military sectors in the area ranging from the American West Coast to the Indian Ocean. They’ll probably get back up eventually, but with unprecedented solar

activity like this—”

“The problem isn’t the solar winds themselves,” said Tessa’s executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Richard Mardukas. He’d always been a moody man, but now he seemed even more tense than usual. “I’ve experienced similar issues in the past. During disasters like these, typically, both sides call a truce. But in this case, the enemy has decided to *exploit* it. That’s the issue.”

Somehow, the enemy had timed their all-out offensive on Mithril’s bases to correspond with an unpredictable “electromagnetic earthquake.”

“Even if the enemy did have some idea it was coming... it seems like the odds of successful coordination would be poor. What do you think, Major?” Mardukas asked Major Kalinin, who was currently discussing the base’s security measures with Captain Clouseau of the SRT.

“Ah...” Kalinin turned back, fell silent for a moment, and then shook his head blankly. “Right now... all we can do is be on our guard.”

“I am aware of that,” Mardukas said tartly. “What is your *opinion* ?”

“I don’t know. I—”

Tessa scowled at his indecision, which was unusual for him. “Major?”

“Well... if the enemy does come, it will be soon,” Kalinin finally said. “I’ve put out an order for all usable utility helicopters to go on patrol. We’ll need anti-air defenses, too. Five FAV-8s, equipped with AMRAAMs...”

Just then, the officer in charge of the anti-air alert system screamed, “They’re here! Ultrafast cruise missiles. Eight of them. Area D4. Distance, seventy miles. Speed, Mach 6.3. Time to impact—”

“—Sixty-five seconds. Intercept. Red alert. Evacuate all staff stationed at above-ground observation posts,” Tessa ordered immediately. The air raid sirens, which they’d never used outside of drills, began to ring with a chilling sound. The command center’s lighting changed to red, and the words “RED ALERT 1” began to scroll across the screen. “Air traffic control. Have Gebo-6 on the runway leave their helicopter and evacuate. Same to all nearby ground personnel.”

“R-Roger. Should Gebo-5 on the runway—”

“Emergency takeoff,” Tessa said. “Have them get as high as they can.”

“Roger.” As Tessa gave the orders, points of light on the screen—the missiles—were inching closer to Merida Island. These were cutting-edge Fast Hawks, the next generation in the family of subsonic Tomahawks, approaching from high altitude at ultrafast speeds—speeds that would make them hard to intercept. The base’s anti-ballistic missiles probably couldn’t stop them. If their warning radar hadn’t been functioning at less than half capability, maybe they could have done something, but...

Tessa’s shock at learning that the enemy had such equipment at their disposal was so great that she didn’t even have time to complain about their handicap. Her only options now were to save as many people and prevent as much damage as possible.

《—Alert. Multiple ultrafast missiles currently approaching base. All ground personnel, cease working and evacuate underground. This is not a drill. Repeat, this is not a drill—》 the AI’s voice announced unconcernedly. Most Merida Island facilities, including the command center, were underground. It was a structure similar to the Gremikha Naval Base on the Kola Peninsula, where the Soviets moored their Typhoon-class submarines.

While Tessa gave specific orders, Merida Island’s anti-air missiles activated and moved to intercept the incoming hostiles. There was no video, no sound—just green points of light on a screen that approached the enemy missiles at admirable speed.

The communications officer gave her reports with impressive calm. “Interception successful on No. 3. The rest are approaching unimpeded.”

Another officer chimed in. “Second enemy wave detected. Area E4. Between nine and twelve missiles. Distance 85—”

“Send all missiles to intercept.”

“Roger. Firing six through nine with BOL.” The island’s various missile launchers fired the last of their remaining payloads. There was no point in holding back now; most, if not all, of their above-ground anti-air systems were

likely to be destroyed when the first wave hit.

“F-First wave... five seconds to impact.”

“Remain calm.”

They’d done everything they could.

Tessa leaned back in her chair and let out a soft sigh, emanating a dignity that would escape even the most veteran of commanders. “If they’re nuclear,” she said simply, “we’ll be dead in an instant.”

The points of light on the screen reached Merida Island.

For the first time... For the very first time, the command center felt the impact of combat.

The black sedan pulled up beside Kaname and Sousuke’s van, and rammed them so hard they nearly went into a spin. Sousuke clamped down on the rebelling steering wheel with one hand, then thrust his submachine gun out the window and fired.

The armor-piercing rounds rained into the driver’s side of the pursuers’ car and filled the bulletproof glass with holes. The enemy fired back. Sousuke dodged the attack with a sudden brake, then unloaded the rest of his clip at them.

A blood splatter popped inside the enemy car—the driver. The sedan veered away, receding in his vision. But just before hitting the shoulder, the vehicle squealed back in the other direction and slammed into them again. This time, it hit them from behind and to the right. Their van’s rear bumper lifted into the air, throwing it completely off-balance.

Kaname screamed at the top of her lungs. Sousuke calmly tried a countersteer in an attempt to regain control of the vehicle, but it failed. It had been like a hit from a sledgehammer, and this time, they went completely out of control. There was a truck driving along at normal speed right ahead of them, and there was no way for Sousuke to avoid it.

The view of the early-morning highway outside the windows began to tilt in his vision, and at some point, everything turned upside-down. The roof of their

van hit the asphalt, then went screaming along the pavement. The van's slide continued into the road and, eventually, it came to a stop in the center of the intersection.

Sousuke felt a stinging pain in his head and his shoulder. The smell of burning metal stung his nostrils. "Chidori?" he croaked out, but Kaname didn't respond. "Chidori?!"

The driver's side door had collapsed and wouldn't open. After gathering up all the equipment he could find, Sousuke crawled out of the window. The pursuer's car was also on its side, about sixty meters behind them, and spitting steam from its rear. Beyond it was the truck he'd hit.

"H-Hey... are you okay?!" The driver of a car that had stopped nearby asked, approaching with a concerned expression. Then he noticed Sousuke—battered, bloody, and carrying a submachine gun—and the van full of bullet holes, and the man's jaw dropped in shock.

"Out of the way," Sousuke ordered, pushing past the man with his submachine gun in both hands. He let out a series of three-round bursts at his enemy, who was crawling out of the pursuing car. The enemy fell, and lay motionless.

The onlooker gasped, his knees buckling in shock. Rubberneckers watching from afar began to scream and run. Ignoring the chaos his rampage had inspired, Sousuke knelt down and peeked into the back seat of his van, where Kaname was lying on the now upside-down roof. She had no injuries that he could see.

"Chido—" He was about to shout her name, but stopped himself. The man behind him might hear. He knew that preserving her anonymity wouldn't help her return to her normal life now, but... Sousuke still found himself pointlessly concerned about it.

He thrust his upper torso through the broken window and dragged Kaname out. "Hang in there," he told her urgently.

"How many times is this now?" she breathed back wearily. "I'm never getting... in a car with you again..."

“Sorry,” he apologized, “but you’ll need to do it many more times if I’m going to protect you.” There was a squeal of tires in the distance, as two more vans approached the site of the accident. “Can you get up?” he asked her.

“I think so...”

“Can you run?” he asked next.

“Guess I’d better, huh?”

“Affirmative.” Sousuke shouldered Kaname’s bag, grabbed her arm, and took off. She followed after him shakily, her slender legs seemingly about to give out at any moment.

They entered an alley and headed west. Sousuke knew they would try to surround him, so they had to move westward as quickly as possible. Just a little more running would bring them to a large nature park; the helicopter would be able to land there.

Sousuke worked his radio as he ran, and finally got in touch with Lieutenant Santos. “Uruz-7 to Gebo-9. Can you read me?”

“Gebo-9 here,” Lieutenant Santos radioed back immediately. “You’re breaking up. Report your present location. Repeat, report your present—”

“Change of LZ. Pick me up in the park three kilometers west. I repeat, pick me up in—” There was a hiss of static, a beep, and then silence. It was no use. Sousuke wasn’t sure why—maybe shrapnel, or trauma from the crash—but his transceiver was no longer working. Its screen was a mess of meaningless code.

“Dammit,” Sousuke cursed, and tossed the transceiver away. He didn’t even have time to worry about protecting its encrypted data.

They’d reached a set of intertwining residential streets, but kept on running. He could hear a dog barking nearby. A local housewife turning a corner screamed and dropped her trash bags.

“Wait... my ankle!” Kaname stumbled, and let out a pitiful cry.

“No stopping,” he yelled back.

“It hurts!”

“Endure it.” Sousuke continued to yank her along by the wrist, his gun pointed behind him.

An Alastor appeared, silently vaulting a private fence. He shot at its head, and while it was crossing its arms to protect its sensors, Sousuke pulled out a hand grenade and yanked the pin with his mouth. He tossed it, underhand, at the robot, then spun around and pulled Kaname away. They hid behind a nearby electric pole as the grenade rolled under the Alastor’s feet and exploded with a blast and a shockwave.

Shrapnel from the bursting grenade ricocheted off the electric pole and block fence, and Sousuke hissed quietly. The street was a mess of billowing smoke. Without time to check the enemy’s status, he just dashed out immediately, dragging Kaname in his wake. Even if the blast had hit, he knew that it wouldn’t do much more than slow the Alastor down.

“Ahhh! Wahhh!” On the street, a boy of elementary school age was clutching his right leg and wailing. He’d been on his way to school when shrapnel from the distant blast had hit him. Sousuke felt bad for him, but he didn’t have time to help. He pulled Kaname past the boy, whose hands were stained red.

“What are you doing?!” Kaname’s voice was aghast. “Didn’t you see that you hurt that kid?!”

“Would you rather have died back there?!” Sousuke demanded.

“I—”

“Don’t think, just run!” Ignoring her pale face and trembling hands, Sousuke picked up the pace. The enemy’s encirclement was nearly complete, he knew, and they could be attacked from any direction now. Their enemy wasn’t stupid—the next time they came at him, he’d be finished. West was the only way out, and even that window was gradually closing.

He could hear the wail of an ambulance in the distance as they shot out from the residential district and cut across the street, jumping over the azalea bushes to enter the nature park. Branches of cherry trees hung bare beneath the cold winter sky.

From above, Sousuke could hear the sound of a helicopter’s rotors. *Our*

helicopter , he realized with relief. It was the Pave Mare, being piloted by Lieutenant Santos. It sounded like the beating of an angel's wings. *She managed to track us down after all.*

But the Alastor he'd hit with a grenade earlier was still chasing them, its movements awkward. Behind him, at 7 o'clock, was a human pursuer holding a rifle. "Great," he muttered.

"I can't do it," Kaname said, gasping for breath. "I can't run anymore."

"Help is on the way," he urged her, lending her a shoulder. "Hang in there." He began to dish out cover fire as they ran. The enemy fired back. Bullets peppered the area around them, sending fragments flying from nearby trees and branches.

Sousuke felt a strange sense of déjà vu: the pain of his wounds and the feel of her weight; the pounding of his heart and his struggle for breath. The drifting of the scenery slowed around him. He'd been through this scenario before, many times, with someone else leaning on him. Someone, in some jungle—some despairing ruin, far away. But right now, he was in Tokyo, the place he'd known for nine months.

No, it wasn't—this was his world now, the battlefield.

Through a gap in the trees he could see a bleak clearing, and they cut across a tree-lined path. Sousuke threw a smoke bomb toward the center of the space to let their allies know where they were. Yellow smoke billowed out of the canister. He immediately spun around and used a large tree as a shield to return fire.

A shot hit nearby. It came from his right.

Sousuke pulled Kaname to the ground and returned fire. Their attacker fell, holding his side, crying and screaming. A shot to the head finished him off. Without missing a beat, Sousuke started firing at enemies in the other direction, swapping out his magazine with a bloodstained hand.

Above them, about a hundred meters away, he could see pale blue electric sparks dancing against the sky. A helicopter shutting off its ECS—a Mithril MH-67 Pave Mare—appeared, and began to circle heavily above.

The helicopter turned its starboard side to the enemy, and a machine gun with a revolving barrel opened fire on their pursuers. It was a weapon known as a minigun, and bullets rained down on the enemy at a rate of six thousand shots per minute—in other words, a hundred shots per second.

“Great,” Sousuke sighed in relief. Indeed, the cavalry had arrived.

The powerful support fire from the skies above tore the Alastor to pieces. Several human infantry, too, were reduced to red mist by the rain of bullets. Fragments of human bodies, which had been shredded along with their equipment, were scattered across the dawn-drenched park.

Kaname averted her eyes from the tragedy with a moan, shaking her head as if to wake herself from a nightmare. She was as white as a sheet, and trembling so hard that it looked physically painful.

Santos’s voice came back out over the external speakers. “Get around to the north side! We’ll take you on in the back!” The Pave Mare was descending into the smoke bomb’s location. The gale kicked up by the rotors caused the undergrowth in the park to sway and the remaining smoke to swirl and spiral as it rose. Through it all, the allied machine gun continued to rain down fire.

“Get up,” said Sousuke, tugging on Kaname’s arm.

Just then, he saw an orange flash in the corner of his vision. He knew immediately that it was a high-caliber shoulder-fired missile; an enemy. It wasn’t aimed at them, but at the descending helicopter, which it hit right in its center mass. Sousuke felt the shockwave pass through his body, just before he saw the explosion.

There was a white flash followed by red flame as the Pave Mare, which had been hovering thirty meters above, pitched over and hit the ground back-first. The tail smashed inward. The body buckled. The rotors went flying in random directions, like massive throwing knives. One stuck into the ground, one went flying into the distance, one cut a nearby tree in half...

Sousuke sucked in a breath. Its tank of jet fuel had caught fire, and flames consumed the Pave Mare. Burning parts of all sizes drew trails of smoke from the body of the helicopter as they scattered across the area. It had all happened too fast, but he had to accept it: Santos and the others must have died on

impact.

He remembered the casual conversations he'd exchanged with the crew of the Gebo-9. Their confident smiles flashed through the back of his mind. The family photos, treasured by one member of the crew. The scene at the party where Santos had teased Tessa...

All of them, in an instant...

With a single rocket strike...

Kaname let out a groan of despair, but Sousuke didn't have time to stare numbly at the sight. The one who'd fired the missile, launcher still on his shoulder, was trying to retreat behind the underbrush.

Sousuke took aim. He fired. Instant kill.

Where's the next one? Where's my next enemy? Turning his back on the helicopter's burning wreckage, Sousuke continued firing his machine gun.

"No!" Kaname shrieked. "Stop it!"

"Get down!!" he yelled back.

"No!"

Forcing the frantically screaming and weeping Kaname down to the ground, Sousuke continued to fire at his enemies.

His ammo was running low. He had no grenades, and there was no backup coming. Nowhere left to run. Game over.

No—

《Activating emergency evacuation mode based on special order contained in File X1-01. Executing override on lock of external speaker voice.》

The voice was coming from somewhere nearby. No, it was coming from the burning wreckage behind him. It was a low voice: calm, male, and synthetic.

《This is serial number C-002, ARX-7. Codename: Arbalest. If anyone associated with this machine is within a radius of one hundred meters, please provide oral confirmation.》

"Al," Sousuke yelled back. "Are you alive?"

《Checking. Sergeant Sagara Sousuke confirmed. Affirmative, Uruz-7.》 The arm slave stored in the Pave Mare's cargo hold, the Arbalest, had survived. 《I am being exposed to temperatures that exceed what this machine can endure. Permission to evacuate?》

"Granted. Come here right now."

《Roger.》

The ugly wreckage of the cargo hold burst open from the inside, and a dark silhouette rose to its feet. Parting the superheated metal and flame around it, the eight-meter-tall form began to emerge from the Pave Mare's wreckage.

Fortunately, the strikes hadn't been nuclear. But their aim had been extremely precise.

A third wave of enemy missiles had come as well, and in total, the base had probably taken eighteen hits of 500-pound explosives. The anti-air radar system, the communications system, the anti-ballistics systems, the runways, watch towers, and multiple ammunition storage facilities—all had been destroyed. The damage had also extended underground in significant ways. The work of putting out fires had only begun, and there was no knowing how long it would take—or if it would ultimately even matter.

Tessa looked silently at the now-worthless data on the screen, and said, "Personnel losses?"

"Twenty-eight lightly injured, eleven heavily injured..." After a pause, the security officer said, "Five dead. The crew of the second observation post didn't get out in time."

"I see," she acknowledged, as calmly as if he'd given her the weather report. She knew the names and faces of those who had died. She even knew their favorite musical genres.

"Captain..."

"This is only the start," Tessa said, stopping Mardukas before he could offer words of comfort. In what was a surprise even to herself, the trembling in her hands was mild. "The enemy will send more bombs," she continued. "Ground troops, too, most likely. They'll use aircraft, this time... Air traffic control.

What's the status of our runways?"

"They're in bad shape." The air traffic control officer projected the structural damage onto their screen. "So are the elevators and the dome. Minimum of six hours to get airborne."

"We won't make it in time," Tessa said. The base had lost nearly all of its anti-air capabilities. The only way to drive back the enemy planes approaching Merida Island now would be to deploy Super Harriers equipped with the latest mid-range missiles, but even the massive elevator used to convey those craft from the hangar to the surface had been destroyed. Just cleaning up all the rubble would take longer than a day. The air traffic control officer's ETA was based on the assumption that the ASes could help.

"Message from Gebo-5. Ten large aircraft approaching from Sector F8. Transports and bombers." With the base's radar destroyed, they had to rely on that of the helicopter squadron that had taken off earlier.

"They really are serious..." Tessa realized.

"Indeed," Mardukas agreed.

The enemy was serious about taking the island. Was it possible to oppose them? Or should they simply run? *No... we don't even have that choice.* Tessa knew that very well.

The de Danaan was undergoing maintenance. They'd been hurrying the work along since yesterday, but it still wasn't something they could rush to instant completion. In other words, the enemy had sealed all routes off the island—both by sky and by sea—for at least a few hours.

It was a brilliant ambush, she had to admit. Exploiting the confusion in their communications and radar networks, then stealing their eyes and legs away from them. Now they were free to pound on them at will.

But Tessa wasn't about to simply let the enemy have their way with her. *If they want a fight, I'll give them one,* she decided. *Let's give them a bloody nose —*

"Major Kalinin," Tessa ordered crisply, "get all ASes warmed up. Equip them all with Loadout A, including the training M6s. Have six of them out on the

north shore.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Colonel. Report from Gebo-3 on patrol!” one of the officers said nervously. “Sector G2. Approaching... ships? Not sure what they are exactly, but they’re coming in over the ocean. Infrared’s picking up three of them.”

“Clarify, please. What are they sending at us?”

“Sorry. They don’t fit into known designation categories... Gebo-3 is having trouble describing them, too. No, wait, we have video. Sending it to you now.”

“Hurry,” Tessa told him.

The command center’s map of the grounds minimized, to be replaced by a feed from Gebo-3’s optical sensors, being taken at extremely high magnification.

Sector G2 was a section of ocean thirty miles to the northwest of Merida Island. It was home to a coral reef that had sunk decades ago, so the area was very shallow. Three “somethings” were there, moving southeast through the green sea. At first, it just looked like three fat men striding solemnly through the waves, up to their waists in the seawater, and holding what looked like long clothes-hanger poles in their hands.

But that wasn’t what they were. The three “men” were huge—towering would be an appropriate term—and they were dressed in clunky blue armor. Their chests were like inverted triangles covered in old-fashioned plates, with enormous shoulders the size of gas holders.

“Behemoths?!” Tessa exclaimed. It was those massive ASes—Behemoths—the same model as the one that had wreaked havoc six months ago in Ariake. Now there were three of them, and they were heading for Merida Island. They appeared to be moving slowly, but that was a matter of scale; in fact, they must have been traveling at over thirty knots. In other words, they’d reach the base in an hour.

Three Behemoths: superweapons mounted with lambda drivers that could repel any and all enemy shots. What looked like clothes-hanger poles were actually massive rifles, cannons of such tremendous caliber that they looked like

they could take out a fortress in one hit. Terrifying enemies that could only be opposed by the Arbalest—that was what was currently approaching the base.

Sousuke had boarded the Arbalest and was carrying Kaname out of the nature park, an act which only took two or three jumps for the third-generation AS. He'd had no choice but to abandon the remains of the crashed Pave Mare.

Next, he called up his digital map.

It was rush hour, so the north—south highway was jammed with traffic. Sousuke used this as a cover to take his machine north, using his ECS where necessary; activating invisibility mode made it even harder for the enemy to track them. Normally, the sight of his machine would cause spectators' hearts to leap into their throats, but with invisibility mode engaged, they only looked around suspiciously at the nearby sound of an engine and the smell of ozone.

Still, the city was in chaos as sirens blared, and police helicopters roamed the skies.

He cut through Mitaka into Kichijoji, where the roads were packed with cars. Sousuke began to leap from building to building. The Arbalest vaulted a JR track and landed on top of a tenement, all while remaining totally invisible.

Sousuke set Kaname down on the roof and opened the hatch. "Mode 4, alert standby," he said to his AI. "Don't use active sensor, no matter what."

《Learning message: Please explain meaning of, 'No matter what.'》 Sousuke opened his mouth to yell, and, as if realizing it was coming, the Arbalest's AI, Al, continued,《Just joking. Did that help to calm your nerves?》

"You saved our lives today, so I'm going to pretend this never happened."

《Thank you, Sergeant.》

Sousuke slid out of the cockpit, climbed down the arm and then ran up to Kaname. The Arbalest's use of its ECS meant the air around them was crackling with electricity. As long as they were inside the invisibility field, none of them could be seen from the outside; not even her, sitting slumped in the machine's hand.

Kaname spoke up, sounding completely exhausted. "Can we... rest now?"

“Yes,” Sousuke told her. “For a while, at least.”

“Okay...”

“Feeling better?”

“Superficially,” Kaname sighed. Her voice was gloomy. She rubbed her injured ankle, then placed a hand on the Arbalest’s finger. “It’s always there when we need it, huh?”

《Are you praising my specs, Ms. Chidori?》 Al’s words brought an awkward smile to Kaname’s face.

“Maybe. But...” She hesitated. “Santos-san was in that helicopter, wasn’t she?” Kaname knew Santos, too. They’d met several times since last autumn.

“Yes,” Sousuke said shortly.

“She... didn’t make it, did she?”

“No... I’m afraid not.”

Kaname clenched her hands into fists. “She died trying to save me, didn’t she?”

“No. It was for her mission.”

“But that’s what it comes down to, right?”

Sousuke fell silent.

“I’ve gotten so many people hurt...” Kaname hugged herself and looked down at her knees. “I haven’t even done anything... I’m sorry. But I... don’t think I can keep pretending to be strong.” Her voice was trembling. So was she.

“Chidori...”

“I’m scared,” said Kaname, cutting him off. “Of myself. Of them. And... I’m really sorry, but...” Her bangs had fallen to obscure her eyes, but he could see the tears dripping down her cheeks. “I’m scared of you, too.”

Sousuke had nothing to say to that.

“I don’t understand anything anymore,” she continued. “I want to be with you, but I’m scared. I want to be with you so much I can barely stand it, but I’m

scared. I’m freaking out so much, I don’t know what to do...”

It was his first time ever hearing her voice so timid, but it all made sense. *How stubborn has she made herself act, through all this* , he wondered. *How mature? How bold, how daring?* But at the end of the day, Kaname was still a seventeen-year-old girl. No human being could keep calm forever in the face of such unthinkable violence.

Just then, she heard an electronic chirp from her jacket pocket. It was from her PHS; she’d gotten an email. Questioningly, eyes still pointed down, she pulled out her phone. He forced himself not to think about the fact that answering it would give their location away to the enemy.

After reading the email, Kaname cried as if she’d been struck. “No... no!”

“What is it?” Sousuke demanded to know.

“Kyoko’s... everyone’s...!” Kaname held up her PHS. The email had an image attached. It was of a roof—the roof of Jindai High School. The picture showed a female student—their classmate, Tokiwa Kyoko—with her hands tied behind her back. A brick of C4 explosive had been strapped to her body, and she looked as white as a sheet. She didn’t seem to understand what was happening to her.

The email read: “We’ve placed similar bombs throughout the school. If you want to save your friends, abandon your AS and come here. If you refuse, we’ll detonate them all.”

3: Damage Control

Sergeant Kurz Weber was running through Corridor No. 0, which passed straight through Merida Island Base, helping with fire suppression.

The raid had hit while he was on his morning jog, so he was still dressed in his sweats. He'd put on one of the regularly posted oxygen masks, used a hatchet to get past obstacles, and pulled an injured man out from under a steel girder. He'd taken a blast of seawater from a fireman's hose, which meant he'd done the whole thing while soaked from head to toe.

Bellows and rebukes flew back and forth around him. The lights had gone out, so the corridor was dark. Steam was billowing everywhere. Water was raining down from above. Kurz could barely see five meters ahead of him as he carried the injured man to safety, then passed him off to the medical staff. "Second degree burns on his right arm! No smoke inhalation, and he's conscious! He said his right ankle hurts!"

"Thanks, Sarge!" The injured man was carried off on a stretcher.

Kurz removed his mask. He took in a deep breath, and coughed a few times. "Dammit," he grumbled. "Hell of a way to wake up in the morning..."

Then he tried using his base-internal portable phone. Fortunately, the channels were still online. He called the SRT's commander, Clouseau, and found the line busy. Then he tried their sub-commander, Lieutenant Melissa Mao; this time, he got through.

"You're all right?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"There are three Behemoths out there. Third hangar, ASAP."

"Roger," he replied, hanging up.

Mao wanted the crew assembled as soon as possible in the third hangar, which held their main ASes, the M9 Gernsbacks. She and Kurz were both professionals; they didn't need to check up on each other, or share expressions of joy at the other's safety. He could get an in-depth explanation later, too.

But...

“Did she say Behemoths?” he wondered out loud. Then he thought, *Three of those freaking huge ASes? How the hell are we going to deal with that? Not even missiles or 76mm rounds work on those brutes...*

Kurz flashed back to the scene in Ariake, Tokyo, six months ago. The ASes of the JSDF had been helpless before the Behemoth. The only reason they’d been able to stop it was because of Sousuke’s lambda driver-mounted AS, but even then, it had been a tough fight.

And they didn’t have Sousuke or the Arbalest on hand, at the moment.

When Kurz arrived in the third hangar, he found it already in a flurry of activity with preparations for the upcoming battle. First Lieutenant Sachs, head of the maintenance division, was shouting at his subordinates. Though the hangar had avoided taking damage from the air raid, it had switched to emergency lighting like the rest of the base. In the dim red glow, the M9 Gernsbacks, still connected to their power cables, released a low mechanical hum.

“Have you finished the parts swap on No. 3?!” Sachs yelled.

“Not yet!”

“The minute it’s done, move to prep! Skip everything up to Procedure C if you have to!”

“Roger!”

“You idiot! There!” Sachs barked, turning on someone else. “The 40mm rounds go that way!”

“What? But—”

“Ah, dammit, didn’t you hear me?! GECs should all be loaded in spot two!”

The AS operators had assembled in a corner of the hangar. There were eighteen of them in total, including operators for the old-model M6s. They were standing in front of a whiteboard, which was dotted with old ink marks.

“Sorry I’m late!” Kurz said to the others. Like him, they’d all come dressed in whatever they’d been wearing when they’d gotten the call. Clad in her officer’s

uniform, Melissa Mao was no exception—she was wearing the same khaki skirt as Tessa, with a blouse—and looking troubled. These weren't her usual fatigues, so she'd probably been preparing to do some desk work. Since her promotion to lieutenant, she'd been more frequently seen in the female officers' uniform, the same one that Tessa wore.

"Everyone here?! Atten-SHUN!" Mao shouted, though she looked far from commanding at the moment.

Then Captain Clouseau, wearing beat-up fatigues that made it look as if he'd just pulled an all-nighter, stepped out in front of the dingy whiteboard. "We're well past speculation at this point," the African-Canadian captain said. "Amalgam is mounting an all-out offensive, and their power is greater than we imagined. They have three Behemoths, all approaching from Sector G2. They'll enter firing range of our base in forty minutes."

Kurz just refrained from clicking his tongue. *Forty minutes? That's no time at all* , he thought. *How'd we not see them until they got this close?*

"As you know, the Behemoth was designed as an anti-AS gunboat," Clouseau continued. "They're probably here to wipe out our ASes, which comprise the last of our primary force. We won't have CAS, but we're still going to fight back."

"Hey, hang on a minute," Kurz said, raising his hand. "Those hulks have lambda drivers, right? There's no way we could fight *one* , let alone three!"

"And yet we will," Clouseau said quietly. "This base was designed to take a beating from above, but even that has its limits. If those Behemoths make landfall, they'll destroy everything—including the de Danaan, which is currently undergoing maintenance in the dock."

"But—"

"That's our only way out of here," Clouseau pointed out.

Kurz fell silent.

"This is an isolated island," the captain continued. "No aid is coming, and I doubt our enemies are in the mood to take hostages. If we lose the de Danaan, the only option left will be death in this foxhole, along with everyone else in the

battle group. Defeating the Behemoths is the only way to survive."

A bitter silence consumed the hangar. The AS operators had all heard about the battle with the Behemoth in Ariake; they'd read the in-depth reports written by Sousuke, Kurz, and Tessa. They all knew there was no way to win. Clouseau and Mao did, too.

"Or, how about this?" It was Corporal Speck of the SRT who broke the silence. He was an American in his mid-20s, who had come out of the Navy SEALs. "We skip the suicide mission. We grab whatever rifles are handy and storm the command center."

Mao, realizing what Speck was getting at, spoke up in a hiss. "Stop it, Speck."

He ignored her and continued. "If we offer them Tessa and the de Danaan without a fight, they might let us go. They know Combat 101, right? They know that a losing force will fight tooth and nail in the clutch. They know they'll suffer some pretty serious losses if they press this. A negotiated outcome benefits everyone."

"Not one more word. This is desertion under fire and insubordination," Clouseau said.

"Oh c'mon, man, we're mercenaries," Speck scoffed. "Operations HQ is up in flames, remember? Who's even paying us now, Captain? You?"

"You son of a—"

"What, I'm supposed to just smile and die for the squad? This isn't some schlocky Hollywood war flick, and I'm not some simpleminded do-gooder. Why the hell should I stay here and die like a dog?" Anger was coming out in his voice. If he'd thought there was any chance at all for them to survive, Speck wouldn't be saying this. He'd never acted this way before.

But this situation was different. Their handicaps were too severe.

Speck wasn't a bad person. He loved Tessa, and he'd said a few times over drinks at the pub before that he'd do anything for her. That just didn't include dying for nothing, apparently—and Speck didn't seem to be the only one who felt that way.

The atmosphere was stretched razor-thin, and tension ran through every person there.

That was when a new voice broke in.

“Sell me out, hmm? It’s not a bad plan.” It was Tessa. She was walking in from the hangar entrance, flanked by two PRT soldiers with automatic rifles slung over their shoulders.

“Colonel...”

“I thought this might happen,” she continued, “so I came to check on you.”

“You heard that?” Speck whispered dejectedly.

“Yes. At least part of it.”

“It’s nothing personal, I swear. I’m a businessman, okay?”

“I see.” Tessa nodded, then said to one of the soldiers by her side, “Let me borrow your pistol.”

The soldier hesitated for a moment before pulling the Swiss-made automatic pistol from his hip holster and handing it to Tessa.

“Thank you,” she said politely, while removing the gun’s safety and cocking the hammer. Her movements were slow but deliberate; the calm girl and the shining black gun. The muzzle remained pointed at the floor, but that action alone was enough to bring even more tension to the room.

“Some others here may feel the same way Speck-san does. But I cannot allow that. If I find anyone here plotting insurrection, I will shoot you to death, right here, right now.” With those words, a mechanical smile appeared on Tessa’s face.

Speck stared at her in disbelief for a second, and then he let out a small sigh and slumped his shoulders. “Look, don’t be crazy. I think you’re a nice girl—”

The shot resounded through the hangar. She’d fired without warning at Speck’s feet, and the ricochet scraped the concrete and embedded itself in the wall a long ways behind them.

“Remember your place, *Corporal* ,” Tessa said, looking straight at Speck, who

was understandably cowed. “Did you think I walked all the way here to weep and beg you to help me? That I would rely solely on your better nature, and request your loyalty based on *pity* ?”

Speck held his breath.

“You’re here because you chose the path of a soldier,” Tessa reminded them ruthlessly. “It was your own decisions that led you into this predicament. Am I wrong?”

“Well—”

“Did you think I was nothing but a figurehead princess?”

Speck didn’t answer.

“Say it,” Tessa told him. “Who am I? My rank and title.” Her tone was gentle, as always. There was no threat in her quiet words, yet there was a strange weight behind them.

Speck remained silent for a while, then gulped, and said, “Colonel Teletha Testarossa. Commander-in-chief of the Tuatha de Danaan.”

“Correct,” she said. “Now, take back what you said and apologize. Immediately.”

He spoke, hesitantly. “I take it back. It was a joke that went too far. I’m sorry, ma’am.”

“You’re forgiven.” Tessa lowered the gun’s hammer and returned the weapon to her bodyguard’s hand. “I’m afraid that our enemies’ current intent is to wipe Mithril from the map. Negotiations based on logic are unlikely to work.”

Speck fell silent.

“Corporal Speck, the squad requires your skill. If we all survive this, I’ll wipe your attempted treason from the books. That will be your payment.” With that, their commander turned on her heel and began to walk away. The sound of her shoes clicking on the floor seemed somehow amplified.

Speck, eyes turned down, squeezed out a whisper. “But how can we hope to survive this?”

“If no hope exists, create it. That’s our only option.” Tessa stopped. “Read my report one more time. Use your heads and work something out. If you have any questions, ask Lemming, or me, for help. Or are you all too stupid for that?”

Speck didn’t respond.

“You appear to be under a misapprehension. I never once ordered you to die for me. I never have, and I *never will* .” In that instant, Tessa’s voice seemed to radiate indomitable strength and decisiveness—a decisiveness that could bend anyone to her will. The one person who hadn’t given up, the one person determined to get her people out of this at any cost—that person was a seventeen-year- old girl.

Oh, God , Kurz thought. In this place, where even veteran soldiers had been brought to their knees, the little girl who had said those words seemed to tower over them all.

Everyone snapped back to attention, including Clouseau, Mao, and Speck, and all the other officers. Even Kurz found himself going ramrod-straight.

Tessa turned back one last time and said, “Survive. That’s an order.”

They all responded in chorus, “Yes, ma’am!!”

“Good luck.” She gave them another smile, this one from the bottom of her heart. Even the clamor of the maintenance crew had died down as she left the hangar behind.

The remaining soldiers looked over at Speck.

“Ah, fine.” He looked annoyed at first... and then, as if to get it all out, said, “I’m sorry, dammit. It got on my nerves, is all. But you were all thinking the same thing, right? Don’t look at me like that.” Speck was probably right; most of the others smiled in self-reproach.

Then they looked at Clouseau, who returned their smiles, his tension relaxing, “Dammit,” he said, “she showed us. She’s absolutely right. Let’s stop wallowing in our tragedy, and use our brains a little. We’ll say our payment for this mission is our lives.”

“I can think of worse paychecks.”

“Besides, it might still work out.”

“Ah, I can’t stand it. I wanna marry her so bad.”

That last line came from Speck, and Clouseau shrugged in response. “Sorry, but there’s a queue for that.”

This time, the whole group laughed. The most important resource in a dire situation, the one thing you couldn’t go without in tough times—humor—had returned to them. Laughter could make your thoughts more flexible, broaden your horizons, and stimulate your creativity. That was where they’d find their “in.”

“Now... let’s get back to talking countermeasures,” Clouseau was saying. “Who was it that had the most experience fighting Behemoths, again?” Then everyone, including Clouseau, turned their eyes to Kurz.

“Huh? Me?” he asked, pointing at himself in disbelief.

After she’d received the PHS message, they’d had to move on from Kichijoji to Ogikubo to avoid being traced.

They arrived on the roof of a tenement building not yet open for the day. Sousuke put his machine in standby mode and disembarked once again. He had been using invisibility mode to leap the Arbalest from building to building, and Kaname, sitting in the machine’s hands, had been unresponsive the entire time. She still was.

“Chidori,” he said.

Kaname didn’t respond. She just sat there, leaning against the AS’s finger, gazing limply into space. She didn’t even bother fixing her long, rumpled hair.

“I understand that you’re in shock,” he tried again. “But—”

“I knew it. I really did,” she whispered. “I knew I couldn’t live this way forever. I knew the enemy would come, and ruin everything, and take me away.”

“Chidori...”

“I knew it all six months ago,” she went on. “I knew that I wouldn’t be able to stay. But I pretended that I didn’t, and... this is my punishment. Her eyes were pointed down, her shoulders trembling. “It’s just like he... like Tessa’s brother

said. I should have just gone with him. And because I got stubborn, lots of people are going to be hurt. It's all my fault. I caused all of this."

"You didn't," Sousuke argued back. "It's the enemy that—"

"If I'd gone with him yesterday, this wouldn't have happened, would it? But I thought, 'Things will work out, because they always do. I'll be back in just a few days.' And because of that, Kyoko's... everyone's going to..."

"They're still all right. Don't lose your head."

"But there's no way to save them!" she yelled.

"We don't know that for sure."

Kaname glared right at him with bloodshot eyes. He'd never seen her look at him so reproachfully before. "We don't?" she asked incredulously. "Are you stupid? They have everyone at our school as a hostage, remember? It's not just Kyoko; there's bombs everywhere. You know how hard it is to locate bombs disguised by professionals, don't you?"

"If we use the Arbalest's electronics to track sources of radio waves—"

"You can't," she told him. "They have equipment powerful enough to code-protect their signals. And they'll have eyes on the building from all directions, too. Just getting an AS close will be next to impossible."

"You know why they were able to take the helicopter down, right?" she continued. "Did you forget that it was using ECS, too? It's because they have miniaturized, portable guided missiles that use ultra-wideband radar. They probably have wide-view molecular spectrum sensors and interference-triangulating microphones and high-sensitivity electromagnetic sensors, too.

"Get it? So even if your AS could locate the explosives, you couldn't disable them," Kaname finished explaining. "You couldn't even get inside to check. They could set as many traps triggered by nuclear magnetic resonance as they wanted. Can't you even recognize something that simple?"

For a while, Sousuke was too stunned to speak. He could only understand about half of the words that the girl in front of him rattled off so easily.

"I guess you can't, huh?"

“I...”

“Of course you can’t. You’re just like the rest of them,” Kaname spat, growling with annoyance.

“Chidori...” Sousuke said soothingly, even as he felt like a drop of ice water had just gone down his back.

“Why are you looking at me that way?” she demanded aggressively. “You think I’ve gone crazy?”

“I didn’t say that,” he protested. “But you—”

“Yeah, I know. He was right. It annoys me,” Kaname grumbled. “When you look at me with your jaw hanging open, it makes me feel like I’m being mocked. Why can’t any of you understand these simple concepts? Are you just stupid or something?”

“Chidori. That perception is an optical illusion, based on your own superlative intelligence. You shouldn’t look down on others,” he reminded her. “Acknowledge your own condition. Remember how you always—”

“See what I mean? You think acting all worried about me will give you the moral high ground.” She sighed. “You think you can undermine me with the fake concern act? Simpleton.”

“Chidori!” Sousuke grabbed her slender wrist and pulled her toward him. He was too strong for her to resist, and she was pulled into his arms. “You told me earlier that you were scared of me. That you want to be with me, but that you were scared.” They were gazing at each other, close enough that she could probably feel his breath.



“I feel the same way,” he went on. “I want to be with you, but I’m scared. I don’t understand you, but I’m drawn to you. It’s always one, then the other, since the day we first met. I’ve never felt anything like this before. You’ve changed my entire world.”

Kaname stayed silent.

“Until this morning, I was thinking... maybe we could just forget school, forget Mithril, forget everything,” he found himself admitting. “Maybe I could take you and run away, just you and me. But something stopped me. I didn’t have the courage, for one, but that wasn’t the only reason—I knew that it wouldn’t mean anything if it was just you and me. Tokiwa, everyone at school, Mithril... I need to see you as a part of a group, laughing and losing your temper. That’s why I—”

Although surprised by his own sudden loquaciousness, Sousuke forced himself to continue. “That’s why I will protect it all. Not just you. I will protect the world you belong to. All of it. If I can’t do that, my mission will never be complete. Don’t give in to despair. We can save Tokiwa, and everyone at your school, *and you* . So please, come back to your senses. I know I may seem like a simpleton to you... but I do know how to fight. I’ve done a lot of it, remember? I just need a hint.

“Don’t give up,” he pleaded. “Help me.”

She gazed at him for a while, expressionless. There wasn’t so much as a glint of emotion in her eyes. “You really think you can save it all?”

“Affirmative,” he said. “As long as we’re together.”

There was a long silence. But at last, Kaname chose to speak. “If this were some cheap paperback, this is where we’d have an emotional kiss. But...” Speaking in a voice like that of a ragged old woman, she pulled away from his arms. “I still think it’s impossible. The best strategy would still be to turn ourselves in...”

The base was rocked by another round of explosions as the M6s, loaded with anti-air missiles, scattered into the jungle. They’d managed to shoot down half of the enemy bombers, but the remaining ones continued to rain bunker busters and fuel-air explosives down on the base.

“Uruz-2 to HQ. Damage report.” The M9s had already deployed from the base, where they stood on the outer edges of the practice grounds, hidden in the jungle on the north side of Merida Island. Mao was among them, watching the smoke rise from the base.

“HQ here. They’re beating the crap out of us. The upper floors of the base are all but disabled, but the de Danaan’s dock is unharmed. We managed to evacuate those floors, so casualties are light. The main large elevator was destroyed, so when withdrawing, use undamaged Corridor No. 3.” Corridor No. 3 was a tunnel, currently under construction, that led from the practice grounds on the surface to the base underground. The enemy didn’t seem to know it existed.

“Gebo-3 to all units. The Behemoths are splitting up. Behemoth A, heading to Sector E1. Behemoth B, heading to Sector H1. Behemoth C, holding at Sector G1. They’re probably going to surround the island. I’ll send you the data.” The helicopter, still bravely scanning the skies above, was compressing the latest information on the enemies in the area and sending it to allies on close-range frequencies.

“Uruz-1 here. Thanks, Gebo-3. You’ve done enough. Withdraw.”

“Gebo-3, roger. Behemoth C just fired. Moving to Sector X0 for standb—”

Static washed over the connection, and Mao heard an explosion from the south.

“Gebo-3 here. Our engine’s taken a hit. I’m going to try an emergency landing. I repeat. Going to try an emergency landing. The enemy’s fired anti-air missiles —” The helicopter’s transmission cut off there. Mao had no way of knowing if the crew was safe or not. But given their skill, they’d be fine—she hoped.

“Uruz-1 to Kaun-13. Head for the crash site.”

“Kaun-13, roger.”

“Everyone else, stand by. Did you get the data? Behemoth B is your target. Ignore A and C. Uruz-1 and 2 will handle each of them. Uruz-2, your opponent is A. I’ll play with C.”

“Uruz-2, roger. Hell of an ugly dance partner, though.”

Clouseau snorted at her through the radio. “I feel the same way. Uruz-2, you have permission for limitless ITCC-5.”

“Uruz-2, roger that. I’ll do the best I can.”

Now, then...

Sitting in her machine with ECS fully activated, Mao took in a deep breath. She already had her opponent, Behemoth A, in her sights. It was about four miles from the island’s north shore: right on top of them. The Behemoth was up to its waist in the water, its massive cannon pointed right at her.

She was about to go mano-a-mano with that hulking brute. She had no intention of being shot down. She had to use every trick in the book, and buy as much time as she could—that was all.

Similarly, Clouseau would be handling Behemoth C. Mao’s and Clouseau’s M9s, unlike the other machines, came mounted with an ITCC-5—an integrated tactical communication control system. It was a powerful datalink device that came mounted on front-line command machines. It collected and sorted through all kinds of battlefield data, and let them instantly give orders to various allied machines. Not just ASes, either; it could control any weapon with an ITCC-5-compatible control system.

A tank, for instance. Or a SPAAG.

Or... an AS.

“Okay,” Mao announced, “let’s do this. Friday!”

《Yes, Lieutenant?》

“Switch my controls to XA-1. We’re taking on Behemoth A.”

《Roger. Switching controls to XA-1. Designate priority target: Behemoth A.》

Mao clicked the final confirmation button on the screen. The word “Executing” appeared, and she prepared to take remote control of the XA-1. This was an uninhabited AS, an M6 Bushnell, standing by in the underbrush 800 meters away from her M9.

The M6 fired anti-tank missiles from its shoulder-mounted launchers at the Behemoth, then immediately began to move. Two minimum-signature rocket

motors fired, carrying the missiles toward the enemy.

The Behemoth, detecting the source of the missiles, immediately turned its cannon toward the uninhabited M6 and fired without hesitation.

There was a massive muzzle flash.

The machine guns on its head also spat flame, showering the M6 in 30mm rounds. The M6 was slower than the M9, and it couldn't take evasive maneuvers well. So after being knocked around by the nearby shell impact and the 30mm bullet spray, the second cannon shot blew it to smithereens.

"Okay..." The first-person view on her display made it look as if her own machine had been destroyed, but Mao herself was unharmed. The signal dropped, and the control system switched back to her own machine.

The missiles the M6 had fired were approaching the enemy.

"Detonate XM-3," she ordered.

《Roger.》

A second later, a geyser erupted near the Behemoth's right leg. She had detonated one of the autonomous mines they'd rigged up near the base, and the unexpected attack caused the giant to stagger, just a tiny bit. Then the anti-tank missiles hit: one blast to the right shoulder, another to the waist.

"Now, how about that?" While keeping her own machine concealed, Mao zoomed in with the optical sensors of another unmanned M6, the XA-2. The ITCC-5 let her control other machines as if they were her own, to a certain degree.

"Dammit..." She carefully examined the Behemoth's right shoulder where the first shot had landed, only to find that it was completely unharmed. The lambda driver, which could be used for both offense and defense, must have activated.

They really are invincible , Mao realized, and a numbing sense of powerlessness filled her body. But as she was about to report her findings to her allied machines, she realized something—there was a small plume of white smoke rising from the Behemoth's right leg, where the mine had hit it. The armor was slightly warped, and some paint was scraped off.

“Did it... work?” Mao wondered. She thought back to Ariake, six months ago. Kurz’s puny rifle had dealt damage to that machine... *That’s right* , she realized. *If you can catch it unawares... If you can strike it in a moment it’s not expecting a hit...*

They still had a chance.

It’s too early to despair!

“Uruz-2 to all units! It was only a scratch, but I managed to damage that giant AS!” Mao said, trying not to get ahead of herself. “We can do this. Just be careful; they’ve got a hell of a lot of firepower.”

She heard a “roger” from each machine. They sounded excited. There was an electricity in the air, and it told Mao that her report had been just what her allies were hoping for.

Just then, she got a message from Kalinin, who was in the command center. “Perth-1 here,” he said. “Sorry to give bad news on the heels of the good, but there’s an enemy drop team approaching from the southeast. Likely to be multiple ASes and infantry squads. They’re going to try to take the base.”

Here they come. Sons of bitches... Mao cursed inwardly, while fiddling with her electronic equipment.

“We’ll likely enter hand-to-hand combat within fifteen minutes. Clear up as many Behemoths as you can before then. If you don’t—” Kalinin hesitated a moment, “—this battle group will be wiped out. The de Danaan won’t be able to leave port; they’ll snipe it on its way out of the underwater dock.”

His words were perfectly reasonable, yet Mao still found herself annoyed. *Just ten minutes to take out three Behemoths?* she thought incredulously. *This is ridiculous* . “But we just have to do it, right?” she asked out loud.

“Affirmative,” Kalinin answered.

She sighed. “You make it sound so easy...”

Just then, Behemoth A turned its head toward her; it had probably detected Mao’s machine via ECCS, and now pointed its cannon in her direction. She switched her machine to Master Mode, shut off her ECS and sat up, switching to

combat maneuvers.

Mao jumped in the wake of the enemy's fire, which shook her M9 with its shockwave and roar. The resulting explosion could have easily come from the main gun of a battleship. "Gonna be a rough fifteen minutes..." she whispered. Then she twisted her machine in midair, fixing her eyes on the landing point on her screen.

The Behemoths were armed with more than just the high-caliber cannons—the "clothes-hanger poles" that recon had spotted earlier—and they peppered Merida Island from afar with napalm from their shoulder-mounted launchers. The saturation attacks from these multi-purpose missiles inevitably took out several M6s. One explosion hit Twin Rock—a unique rock formation, frequently used as a landmark during training—and rendered it unrecognizable. The above-ground facilities had also been blasted beyond recognition. The tropical forest was a charred mess, welling with black smoke that smothered the sky above. Someone far across the sea who looked in the island's direction might think they were watching a sinking battleship bathed in flames.

Then, after dropping this storm of destruction, the Behemoths began making landfall from three directions.

"Not holding back, are they?" Kurz muttered to himself. "Dammit..." While powerful blasts from their cannons exploded all around him, his M9 waited patiently in a trench on the base's south side. He could feel the periodic rumbles in his cockpit, but all he could see on his screen was the darkness of the trench, with the occasional stream of dust dancing in the dim light available.

《Behemoth B entering Sector H0. Estimated 60 seconds to C-Line—》

The enemy machine closest to the base was entering firing range. Clouseau's and Mao's machines were employing distraction tactics on the other two—buying time was the order of the day, and they were using their powerful datalink functions to control the base's spare ASes remotely, and to trigger autonomous mines. Meanwhile, the remaining M9s of the Tuatha de Danaan continued to lie in wait for the single Behemoth B.

"Let's see..." Kurz whispered to himself.

Two M9s, one operated by Corporal Speck and the other by another SRT

member, were hidden under the water to the south of Merida Island. M9s had independent amphibious capabilities, so they could move without support in up to thirty meters of water.

From what they could see on the video Gebo-3 had taken from a distance, these Behemoths didn't have much in the way of anti-underwater combat gear. Lieutenant Sachs of the maintenance team, and Lieutenant Viran of the research division, had agreed with that opinion.

During the planning meeting, the large bearded Sachs had commented with a scowl, "We can assume they have lots of ground-to-ground equipment, but no capacity to drop depth charges. They do have a spherical passive sonar array in their chests, though, and given their size, they probably have towed sonar arrays, too." He was talking about sensors typically found in attack submarines. "But once they're in the shallows, they won't be able to use those, because their top half will be out of the water.

"So... if I were the designer, I'd have an HF sonar for close-range detection attached to the knees or the shins. If amphibious combat is their main function, they wouldn't want undersea terrain slowing them down, after all. They'd want a compact high-frequency sonar to map out the terrain of the seafloor and scan for mines."

"How sensitive do you think the high-frequency sonar is?" Clouseau asked.

Sachs shrugged. "Don't know. But I doubt we're dealing with superlative tech in that respect. Those clothes-hanger poles, for instance—it's not like they're railguns or anything. They're adaptations of the big guns you see on battleships like the Missouri. If they had time to waste developing new ones, it would've been better spent equipping them with ultrafast kinetic energy missiles... and even testing something like that would require one hell of a target range. I doubt they could scare up the space, even from behind the Iron Curtain, without Mithril catching wind of it. So I doubt they bothered."

"And you think that applies to the giants' sonar, too?"

"I can't be sure," Sachs replied, "but the shins are probably about the size of a sail on an 8000-ton submarine. Considering the effort it would take to develop a new sonar, if it were me, I'd just jury-rig an existing model to fit onto it. Nothing

beats reliability, you know?”

“Okay, so... assuming the enemy is using cutting-edge high- frequency sonar, do you think autonomous mines and M9s can hide from it?” Clouseau asked, hazarding a guess.

“Not sure,” Sachs told him. “The colonel would probably know more than I would.”

At the time, Mao was already conversing with Tessa in the command center about something via her portable phone. Tessa was likely giving brief responses while working in other areas at incredible speed, because her exchanges with Mao sounded extremely concise. “Just asked her,” she said after a momentary pause. “She says, ‘They can. I’ll send Sergeant Dejirani, so confer with him.’”

“Okay. Now, assuming we can set up a perfect ambush in the water, do we have a way to deal a meaningful blow to that giant?” The whole group frowned at Clouseau’s words. If size was all the enemy had going for them, the Tuatha de Danaan squad might be able to find a way through. But that wasn’t the case with the Behemoths. They also had lambda drivers, which would shield them from most forms of attack.

“I’ve said this before, but the lambda driver isn’t invincible.” This time it was Second Lieutenant Viran who spoke. Blonde hair, intelligent brown eyes, mid-twenties; as a transfer from the research division, she was the most knowledgeable person on staff when it came to the lambda driver. “First, you’ll see limits in barrier execution based on the operator’s ability to concentrate,” she predicted. “And the degree of focus can affect the barrier’s strength, as well. It’s possible to deal damage if you can catch them off guard. Sergeant Weber proved that for us.”

During Kurz’s fight with the Behemoth in Ariake, he’d successfully dealt damage with one shot from a sniper rifle. He’d managed that because the operator had let his guard down. If they could just create a similar opportunity...

“Well, it’s true that it worked then, but...” Kurz agreed reluctantly. “There’s no way you could do enough damage to completely disable it that way. You’d probably only get one chance. If you need to finish it in one hit... well, it had

better be a blow to the cockpit.”

“What about hitting the slit in the back, like Sagara did?” Speck asked.

Mao hummed in response. “It’s possible. But that’s only assuming the enemy didn’t learn from the failure at Ariake and didn’t alter the construction at all.”

“Yeah, that seems unlikely.”

“Let’s assume the enemy has accounted for that.”

“So it’s gotta be a cockpit shot,” Speck said.

“It’s an easy target, in a way... The giant’s cockpit is in the head,” Kurz put in. “But it’s got serious armor protection. Dual-layer composite armor, plus the pilot is a few meters down. There’s no artillery or missile that could break through in one hit.”

But one hit was all they’d get. And on top of that, they had to do it three times.

“Still, we can make it happen somehow,” Clouseau insisted. “All we need to do is buy time for an evacuation. Just taking three down to two would give us hope. And while it might be hard, if we can get two down to one... that would dramatically increase our chances.”

“That’s asking a little much,” Kurz argued. “But still, we might be able to get rid of one. If I can thread the needle, at least.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“Yeah.”

“Hit us with it.”

And so Kurz had explained...

The underwater alarm net and few remaining base sensors conveyed information to Kurz’s M9: Behemoth B had crossed the designated line. “Activate ECS invisibility mode,” he ordered.

《Yes, Sergeant. ECS on.》

His machine’s ECS activated. Multiple laser beams created phase-shifting holograms that cloaked his machine from the visible light spectrum, rendering it

invisible. With careful movements, Kurz's M9 climbed out of the bomb shelter trench it was hiding in.

The bombing had turned their training area into a wasteland. Buildings and trees had been flattened, and black smoke hung in the air all around him. Still, the most important thing now was caution. The M9 crept forward, holding its sniper cannon, to avoid enemy detection. Kurz moved slowly and carefully to a low hill about 200 meters away. Skillfully using the terrain hollowed out by the blasts, he got himself a good sniping spot.

"Uruz-6 here," he said. "I'm in position. Status, Team Red?"

"Uruz-5. Ready any time," said Sandraptor.

"Uruz-10. Twenty seconds," said Mandela.

One by one, his allies responded. Effectively, Kurz was in command of the current operation: the attack on Behemoth B.

"Uruz-8, ready to go?" Kurz asked Speck.

"Uruz-8. Guess I'd better be," he joked. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Okay... In that case, let's sock a giant in the nose."

"Try to be more professional, Sergeant," Speck chided. "You're supposed to be our leader."

"Let's stick to things that are possible for now," Kurz joked back, and then turned his sniper cannon toward the enemy machine. Beyond the drifting black smoke, even beyond the island's shores, he could see the Behemoth. "Activate fairy eye," he instructed.

《Roger. Activating fairy eye.》

The new sensor installed on Kurz's machine activated. The Behemoth was suddenly covered in a green projection, similar to the view through a night vision scope. It was showing the effective area covered by the enemy's lambda driver. The new device had been invented in December, and he didn't know who'd developed it, but it was what had let Kurz see the lambda driver activate in Sousuke's Arbalest during the mission with the pirates on Badam Island.

He could see the giant's "barrier" projected thinly all over its body. The

richness of the green on the display would tell him how strong the barrier was in various locations. Right now, it was clear that, although it was on guard, the enemy was very confident and ready to move on to the final landfall stage.

Kurz switched his view to optical sensors and saw the Behemoth slowly moving through the sunlight-sparkling ocean surface.

Distance: 2500 meters.

Wind: West-southwest at about twelve meters per second.

Temperature: 22 degrees Celsius.

Humidity: 83 percent.

This and various other data flashed onto the bottom right corner of his targeting mode screen. Kurz flicked his communicator switch off for just a second to click his tongue. “Dammit...”

Visibility was bad. There was too much light behind the thing. Then there was the wind, the flow of the air—they’d be completely different over the sea. If he fired from here, the trajectory would be off. The enemy was moving, too—left, then right, in an unpredictable rhythm. Too unpredictable.

Change fire control mode. Move to fully manual aim. Bilateral angle to minimum. The only way to do this was through instinct, with his own hands.

Dammit... dammit, dammit! The shot was too hard. No one could make it. At this distance and under these conditions, to hit the target about to appear... the task outstripped his talents, but he still had to do it.

“What’s wrong, Kurz?” Speck asked in a mocking tone. His M9 was closer to the Behemoth, hiding under the ocean’s surface. “Don’t tell me you’re chickening out.”

“Pfft,” Kurz scoffed. “Whatever.”

“If you make this work, I’ll cut you in on a big deal later.”

“More stock?”

“Yeah. This whole thing gave me some inspiration earlier,” Speck told him. “Starting next week, the potato market’s gonna soar. If we put five grand in, I

can pay you back times twenty."

At a time like this? Kurz thought incredulously. *The freaking idiot...* "What the hell does fighting these hulks have to do with potatoes?" he wanted to know.

"No time to explain now," Speck told him. "Gotta fuck this guy up first."

"Yeah, yeah..."

"Counting on you, okay? There's a payday on the line. Remember what I told you before? Florida. It's the land of luxury mansions, Lotuses, and bikini babes."

"I'm not into Lotuses," Kurz snarked.

"Ferraris, then."

"Sold."

The enemy had almost reached the designated line, but Speck's nonsense had helped Kurz to calm his frazzled nerves. He took in a slow, deep breath. "Uruz-6 to Team Red members," he said. "The enemy has crossed Line D. Everybody ready?"

The unanimous response was, "Ready any time."

"Count five." He looked at the Behemoth on the screen again. It was larger than before. "Four... three..." He relaxed his shoulders, and moved the control stick with great care. *Gently, gently... like stroking a baby's cheek.* "Two... one..." A short whisper. "Alpha, go!"

Speck's M9, hidden in the sea near the Behemoth, moved first. It activated the jets on its underwater pack to first jump out of the water, then skip like a stone toward the Behemoth. The giant reacted immediately, turning its upper half down to face Speck's machine.

"Let's go," Kurz ordered.

Even as it danced along the ocean surface, Speck's M9 fired a cluster of rockets from its shoulder launchers. One after another, the rushing arrows of flame slammed into the Behemoth— no, they exploded just before impact, releasing a shower of pale blue sparks.

The lambda driver... it really had blocked them. But then again, they were

expecting that. The fairy eye's imaging, too, made it very clear; the lambda driver's force field was "strong" in Speck's direction.

"Beta, go!" Kurz ordered again.

"Beta, roger," said the team member in control of the autonomous mines. At almost the same time, a geyser exploded from the water on the side of the Behemoth opposite Speck.

It was an autonomous mine attack. Mao had done the same thing before with a certain degree of success, but Kurz knew this wouldn't be a fatal blow. It had force fields activated at crucial points around its legs. Even if there was some slight damage, it would be only a scratch to the Behemoth.

But the image captured by Kurz's fairy eye told him just where the force fields —in other words, the enemy pilot's attention—were directed. It had been attacking Speck's machine when the mine had caught it from behind unawares. That meant the enemy was now entirely focused on its lower half, concentrating its defenses around the water line. The greens on Kurz's display turned deeper around the giant's lower half, and lighter around its upper one.

And around its head— *I can do this.* Kurz instantly switched to optical targeting mode, and shouted, "Gamma, go!"

At his signal, three allied M9s hiding around points on Merida Island's south side fired their Javelin missile launchers.

This was the main offensive.

An infrared guidance laser sight was projected from Kurz's M9's head onto the Behemoth. The three missiles bore down on its location, right on the side of Behemoth B's head. These weren't old-fashioned missiles flying at subsonic speeds, but large missiles that would hit the enemy with ultrafast kinetic energy.

That tenth of a second felt like eternity.

At last, the three missiles slammed the Behemoth's head, all hitting simultaneously. Fragments of armor went flying, releasing white smoke and a shockwave. The giant staggered a little bit. It was so far away that the sound of the explosion hadn't reached him yet.

No... by the time the sound reached him, it would be too late. These milliseconds were all the time Kurz had. With his target masked behind walls of smoke, he'd be forced to guess how far the shots had penetrated. The angle and location, too. Gut instinct was all he had to go on.

Nevertheless, Kurz pulled the trigger.

Silently, almost automatically, at the spot the three missiles had hit... aiming for a hole a few dozen centimeters wide, 2500 meters away, through the smoke and the wind...

He fired.

The hunkered-down M9's sniper rifle fired a dart-shaped piercing round. The muzzle flash exploded before his eyes, and the black smoke hovering around him burst outward in swirls. The sound of the distant missile strike reached him that same instant.

The sniper cannon's shot made contact, and he could see the Behemoth on his screen tremble once more. But he couldn't tell if it had hit what he'd been aiming for.

"Did we do it...?" The Behemoth remained still for some time, white smoke trailing from its head. It didn't move. Its body slowly began to tilt... but didn't fall. The Behemoth was still active. Its head, half slag now, twisted. It turned its glinting black cannon to Kurz. It fired.

"Dammit!" he cursed, scrambling to his feet with a jump. They'd failed. They'd done serious damage to the Behemoth's head, but it hadn't been enough to kill the pilot. A split-second later, a huge explosion burst out at the feet of Kurz's M9, sending it tumbling, end-over-end.

The monster's shoulder-mounted missile launchers opened next, ejecting a barrage of anti-ground missiles at his other allies. Sandraptor and the others tried to use their M9s to intercept and dodge. Explosion after explosion erupted on the south beach. Kurz didn't know what had happened to his allies—maybe half of them had been destroyed.

Kurz's machine managed to get its balance and land, just before another enemy attack hit him. There was a massive muzzle flash in the distance. A shell

was flying towards him. This one, too, he managed to dodge—just barely. The impact from the explosion rattled his brain in his skull. A normal operator would have lost consciousness.

We're all dead. The words floated up into the back of his mind. Had their struggles been pointless after all? Would they all be completely overwhelmed by the enemy's firepower? The enemy fixed its cannon on Kurz's machine a third time. He fell to his knees, trembling, amidst the dust cloud raised around his M9. *It's no good,* he realized. *I can't dodge it...*

"Uruz-6, you're not done yet! Hang in there!" barked the voice of Speck through his radio receiver. His screen showed the Behemoth in the ocean—and right next to it, Speck's M9, darting around over the water, kicking up sea spray.

You idiot, Kurz thought. *Why don't you dive already? You're gonna be fodder for those 30mm cannons...*

Speck's M9 discharged the last of its rockets. The Behemoth turned its focus away from Kurz, back to Speck's machine. It raised its barrier, and the entire barrage exploded fruitlessly against it.

Yet Speck—who must have known that this would happen—didn't let it stop him. He continued his charge against the giant. He ejected his M9's underwater unit. His machine rode on the inertia, hung in the air for a second, then grabbed the left leg of the Behemoth that was five times larger than it.

Kurz couldn't hear the sound. It was too far away. And right now, his ears were still ringing from that second cannon shot.

"I'm gonna make you an opening," Speck told him. "Try it one more time." Then his machine drew its close-combat monomolecular cutter, stuck it into the enemy armor, and scurried up the machine in a flash. It was an act that took amazing skill; only a handful of AS pilots in the world could do the same.

"Stop it, Speck," Kurz said urgently.

Once he'd latched onto the Behemoth's shoulder, Speck readied his short-barreled carbine rifle, then unloaded on full automatic at the side of the enemy's head—where the four consecutive hits from before had damaged it. Each and every shot was deflected by the lambda driver's barrier. The pale blue

light and red sparks raced, casting the machine's shadow strongly against the Behemoth's right shoulder.

"I'm not cut out for this kinda thing," Speck joked. "I know, but..."

"You've done enough!" Kurz yelled back. "Get out of there!"

The Behemoth roared. It was the first time Kurz had seen something like emotion from it—it felt almost like rage.

"Apologize to the colonel for me," Speck said. "I wasn't serious about—"

In the image captured by the fairy eye, the enemy's barrier shone brightly. No, it wasn't a barrier—it was a burst of directed pressure that smashed into Speck's stubbornly dug-in M9.

"Speck!!"

Speck's machine flew away from the Behemoth's shoulder. Its arms lost, its legs broken, its torso fractured—the shot had smashed it, literally, to pieces. The detritus slowly scattered as it fell into the sea. The pilot had died on impact: that much was crystal clear.

The Behemoth began to unload its still-working head-mounted 30mm machine gun into the ocean where the parts had fallen. *Foolish insect. Know your place,* the giant seemed to spit, derisively.

And then, for just a second...

In the fairy eye's view, Kurz could see that the enemy's attention was completely focused on the remains of Speck's machine. The barrier was gone around the head—around the side of the head. Kurz's mind parsed the screen's targeting data in an instant. The wind, the light, the heat, the humidity: they were all giving him the go-ahead for the kill.

He fired. This time, his shot caught the Behemoth in the head. The piercing round tore through the hole in the armor, and went deeper—down into the faceless, anonymous operator in the cockpit.

The Behemoth stopped. White smoke rose up. Then at last, just as Kurz had seen in Ariake once before, its massive form began to tremble. Its arms snapped down, and its enormous cannon plunged into the water below. Pieces

of its armor began to plummet from its body. As if dragged down by its own weight, its entire structure began to warp, then buckle.

One target destroyed.

Still, they had suffered severe losses getting there. Two of the machines that had launched missiles from the ground had suffered serious damage in the counterattack. Sandraptor was badly injured. And also...

“Speck. You damned idiot...” It took Kurz all of his strength just to whisper that. *If my first shot had hit. If I hadn’t screwed up* ... But he didn’t have time now, even for self-loathing. He received a transmission from Mao.

“Uruz-2 here,” she said. “Took a hit to my right leg. I can still dodge, but I won’t last much longer. I’m gonna try to stop it somehow.”

“Big Sis!” At the same time, he received a report from his machine’s AI.

The enemy drop squad was on their doorstep.

If he thought about it rationally, Chidori Kaname was right. Completely right. Refusing to surrender, while also saving Tokiwa Kyoko and everyone else at the school, went beyond the level of simply being “difficult.” It was practically impossible.

The chances of success in this foolish gamble were insanely low. In a Hollywood movie, this would be when the cavalry showed up unexpectedly to lend a hand, and they’d make that one percent a possibility... Miracles like that were guaranteed to movie heroes. It was what let them make utterly unreasonable yet “beautiful” decisions.

Sousuke was different. As an assassin, as a guerrilla, and as a mercenary, he’d been raised to know that you couldn’t count on such things. For instance, which of the two was the more logical choice: A ninety-nine percent chance of sacrificing one person to save ninety-nine, or a one percent chance of saving the one and the ninety-nine together?

Which was wiser? There was no question.

Kaname was right. Completely right.

But that wasn’t the only problem Sousuke faced. What if the value of the one

to be sacrificed far outstripped the value of the other ninety-nine? What if he'd rather let the whole world burn than give that one person up? In that case, what should he do?

Of course, the ninety-nine mattered. They were irreplaceable.

But so was that one.

Think it over, he told himself. *Do I wave the white flag and give her to them? I can't do it. I don't have the courage. If you can even call such a thing courage...* It was a problem that math couldn't solve, a calculation that the man he used to be wouldn't have given a second thought. But now, the dilemma consumed him.

Let's bet on that 1% chance.

It was a terrifying temptation. How could anyone resist it? The old him would have scoffed at the idea, but he couldn't just write it off now. It occurred to Sousuke, vaguely in that moment, that this was what it meant to love something. All of the seemingly stupid, illogical actions he'd witnessed from others up until now... he now understood exactly how those people felt.

The girls who went so mad with jealousy that they wrote smear notes on the bathroom walls. The basketball players who sent threatening faxes out of fear of losing a match. The teachers who cared so much about their colleagues that they engaged in unbecoming behavior.

Who could blame me?

That was how people acted when they loved something. When they were afraid.

Yes. Who could blame me?

At that time, Sousuke didn't realize that the behavior he was engaging in was known as "self-justification." And as a result, he gave in to the temptation. He decided to bet on the 1% chance.

"We don't have much time. Let's go," Kaname whispered limply, then began heading towards the area the enemy had designated. Sousuke caught up to her from behind, and pulled out his stun gun. Holding her from behind, he pressed

the taser's prongs to her stomach, and turned it on.

An electric current. A light numbness.

Kaname immediately fell still.

Sousuke held her in his arms, and then carefully laid her down. He chose a tranquilizer from his medical kit and injected it into her; it would keep her out for several hours. He carried her to the top of the tenant building's water tower, and lay his uniform jacket, stained in blood and dirt, on top of her. He searched through her pockets and pulled out her PHS.

Resisting the urge to stroke her pale cheek, he stood up, and turned away. "Let's go, Al."

《Roger,》 Al responded from the Arbalest, which was kneeling beside him on standby. Sousuke climbed swiftly up its armor plates, then slid into the cockpit.

《Sergeant. A question.》

"Yes?"

《Are we leaving Ms. Chidori here?》

"Yes. Forget her," Sousuke said coldly. "We're heading to Jindai High School. We're going to find and disarm all the bombs inside."

《I do not know all of the terms of your plan, but your decision is incorrect.》

"Maybe."

《It is clearly irrational. Some might call it shoddy. I suggest you reconsider.》

"Suggestion denied."

《Even if you do disable the explosives, they will reuse the same strategy as many times as is needed.》

"And I'll stop them every time."

《Impossible.》

"I'll make it possible."

《Impossible.》

Impossible. Irrational. Pointless. A shoddy decision. *Will she ever forgive me*

for this? Sousuke wondered. *Probably not. Even so...* "What choice do I have?" he asked grimly, grabbing the Arbalest's control stick and bringing the machine to its feet. It took a starting run through the empty parking lot and leaped, leaving the sleeping Kaname behind.

Sousuke moved through the city with the same method he'd used before, and after getting his machine a few kilometers away, he stopped and opened the cockpit just halfway. Then he manipulated Kaname's PHS with his now-free arm. He was unaccustomed to sending emails with such a small number of keys, and he struggled a little.

Your threat worked on Chidori Kaname, but it's meaningless to me. No matter how many people you kill at Jindai High School, it won't disrupt my mission. There are no terms under which I will agree to hand over a top-secret AS.

Additionally, I was ordered to kill Chidori Kaname if I determined it likely she would fall into enemy hands. Call this phone. If you do not call within three minutes, I will carry out that order.

Send.

Now all he could do was wait. In less than a minute, the PHS chimed with an incoming call.

"What are your terms?" It was an electronically altered voice. Male.

"I want a guarantee of my own life, plus an escape route. I can't ensure my safety under a time and place you designate."

"You don't seem to understand your situation," the enemy's voice mused. "Maybe I'll detonate one of the bombs in the school."

Sousuke felt a chill run up his spine. It took him superhuman self-restraint, but he managed to keep his tone indifferent when he replied, "Then negotiations are over. Do as you will." Then he casually hung up the phone.

He waited, gazing at the LCD screen. If the enemy were acting in good faith, they'd be willing to negotiate. He wasn't the only one at the end of his rope. The enemy, too... they were clearly deeply fearful that Sousuke and Kaname might just run off somewhere. Taking Tokiwa Kyoko and the school hostage was an act of desperation.

It was a seemingly endless ten-seconds-and-change before the phone rang again. Resisting the urge to push the button immediately, Sousuke gave it a few

rings before answering.

“All we want is Chidori Kaname,” the enemy said immediately.

“That’s what I thought.”

“We have no interest in the AS,” his opponent went on, “but it is a threat. If you can guarantee that your AS will be temporarily disabled, we can guarantee your safety.”

“Very well,” Sousuke agreed. “Then I’ll move my AS to the old factory in the second district in Sengawa at 1100 hours. I’ll be waiting there, then, hatch open. Send one of your allies to monitor me, if you wish. I’ll send Chidori Kaname alone to Sengawa Station, two kilometers away. When the exchange is complete, I’ll disappear.”

A short silence followed. After carefully considering these conditions, the enemy replied, “Very well. But if anything goes less than completely according to plan, I detonate all the bombs in the school.”

“As I’ve said many times,” Sousuke rebutted coldly, “I don’t consider that a threat.”

“We’ll see.” The man on the phone chuckled deeply. “You’ve killed close to ten of our own. We’re all professionals, of course, but it still makes me want to see you suffer, badly.”

“I don’t care,” Sousuke said calmly, even as the sweat rose on his back.

“Mr. Iron was right. You’re an interesting kid.”

“If you’re just going to prolong the conversation,” Sousuke said, “then I’m hanging up.” He turned the PHS off. The enemy already knew where he was, and were probably speeding their forces his way. “Let’s move, Al.”

《Roger.》

Sousuke closed the hatch and re-engaged operator mode, then sent the invisible Arbalest running through the dull, gray town. He’d regained some degree of the initiative, even if it was all based on a bluff. But now, the gamble was about to get real. The enemy hadn’t been bluffing when they said that they would kill Kyoko and the others; that threat was serious.

He had to do something.

All by himself.

4: Damage Report

Noises blared through the violently shaking cockpit: Mao's voice, the voice of the AI, and alarms of all kinds.

《Damage report. Class B damage to right thigh block. Automatic damage control and activity motion limiter systems activated.》

"Cancel AML," she ordered.

《Roger. AML off. No mitigation measures will be applied to damaged portion.》

"How long will it hold out?"

《Inquiry. Specify location—》

"The damaged portion."

《Estimate: 45 to 160 seconds. Temporary cessation of combat maneuvers recommended.》

"We don't have time for that."

A 30mm round had hit Mao's right leg, where it dealt damage to the thigh muscle package and part of the shock absorption system. As the name suggested, the muscle packages comprised the AS's muscular system. Formed from a conductive shaped memory polymer, these bundles of thin fibers could expand and contract to move the machine's joints just like a human body.

Damage and stress had torn through part of these "muscles" in the right leg, which meant the remaining delicate fibers were going to start fraying, one by one, until their connections were completely severed. Once that happened, the machine wouldn't even be able to walk. With the enemy still attacking, that gradually thinning bundle in the thigh was literally Mao's lifeline.

The AI had recommended maneuvers that would preserve the damaged portion, but Mao had rejected that plan. There was no way to avoid the enemy's attacks without abusing her rapidly disintegrating right thigh.

《Immediate withdrawal from combat zone recommended.》

“Run?!” she exclaimed. “But where—”

《Missile alert. Three shots, four o’clock, distance four.》

An even louder alarm rang out. Behemoth A, which was now nearing the shore, had fired three smokeless missiles at her.

“Urk!!” Mao choked, slamming the brakes on her barreling machine by planting the M9’s left leg onto the scorched ground. Kicking up dirt and dust, the move sent a powerful shockwave slamming through Mao’s organs; she felt as though her guts were going to blow out of her body.

The missiles’ course changed slightly. Mao turned her face toward them, and fired her head-mounted machine guns on full automatic. It was a force-feeder rig, so it ejected no shell casings as she fired off a wall of depleted uranium rounds. One of the missiles, hit by the shots, popped and scattered. Another lost its guidance function when its seeker portion was blown away.

The last one was right under her nose, and Mao’s only option was to dodge. She took a sharp step to the right, then leaped in the other direction as hard as she could. Her damaged right leg screamed under the stress, but the missile narrowly missed her and slammed into the ground.

Mao’s M9 didn’t get much hangtime as it arced through the smoke towards the burning jungle beyond. She wanted to land feet-first, but she was worried about the damage, so she twisted her machine to land arm-first in a roll. The ten-ton machine tumbled end-over-end, tearing down trees in its wake, and Mao was left lightheaded from the merciless jolting and g-forces.

But she didn’t have time to collect her bearings before the alarm was blaring in her ears again: 《Missile alert. Eleven o’clock. Distance: two. Number: three.》

Behemoth A had sent another three missiles her way, while unleashing its machine cannons to boot. It wasn’t going to give her time to stop and return fire. Mao rolled along the ground, sprang up, and then launched back into a dash, all while knowing that the “muscles” of her right thigh could snap any second. She opted for a direct showdown with the enemy’s predictive programming, letting her computer carry her machine in a chaotically randomized series of maneuvers. Shot and shell landed and exploded around her, upping the pressure on the fleeing M9.

Another three missiles were on their way. Mao decided not to stop as she countered this time; this fouled her aim, and she just barely managed to take one of them out. Jumping back, Mao cranked her ECS to full output. A veil of pale blue light trailed her machine as the electromagnetic camouflage system put it into stealth mode, causing the two remaining missiles to miss their target.

The missiles exploded. She'd managed to avoid a direct hit, but the force still blew her M9 flat onto the ground. "Ngh..." she moaned.

She wasn't out of danger yet. Behemoth A was still after her. It would fill her with holes if she didn't move fast. Mao tried to right herself with a jackknife maneuver, then jump again—

She couldn't do it. Her machine was out of power.

The ECS consumed massive amounts of electricity, and using it in tandem with violent combat maneuvers had resulted in a near-instant drain on her capacitor, which would need ten seconds to charge up again. Furthermore, the muscle package in her right thigh had snapped through. She couldn't even stand up now. Mao's M9, pushed to its limit, could do nothing but back away, face-up, through the mud.

Dammit, she spat, knowing that she was out of options. She'd used up all of the ITCC-5's remote controllable weapons. The automatic mines couldn't help her now that the Behemoth was making landfall. The explosives buried on the beach had all been detonated in the original bombing.

Mao turned her one remaining weapon, the 40mm rifle in her right hand, to full automatic, and fired at the Behemoth's head. It didn't work; no effect at all. Every single shot was deflected effortlessly.

The mountain-like bulk of the Behemoth approached. It was like a force of nature, blocking her view of the sky as ocean water came sheeting off of it in waterfalls. It briefly pointed its huge cannon at Mao, then seemed to realize that she was a waste of ammunition. It just stepped forward at a leisurely pace instead, then raised its right foot high over the struggling M9.

It was going to step on her, just as a standard AS might step on human infantry.

Is this the end? she wondered. *Dammit...*

With death staring her in the face, Mao found herself strangely relieved that she was frustrated rather than afraid; that her last stand had been about willfulness to the end, rather than powerlessness. She felt proud that she wasn't going to face death screaming like a fool. *From the Marines up to now, my life as a soldier hasn't all been in vain,* she found herself thinking. *At the very least, I'm not the "spoiled princess" the men mocked me about being behind my back. I've proven that now.*

A foot the size of a tennis court, sticky with mud and dripping with seawater, began to descend towards Mao's M9. She couldn't see the sky anymore. She couldn't run away. Her entire world, now, was that sledgehammer-like foot.

She felt a jolt of contact.

In an instant, her armor would break, her cockpit would rupture, and she would be mashed into pulp within. She wouldn't even have time to feel pain.

But that wasn't what happened.

Mao closed her eyes tightly, bracing herself, but the moment she was waiting for never arrived. Her M9 had been picked up by another M9, which was dashing with her along the ground. She realized immediately that it was Lieutenant Castello's machine. He'd scooped her out from beneath the Behemoth's foot just in the nick of time. At the same time, several shots had struck the Behemoth's head; it had to be Kurz's sniping, but she couldn't see where he was firing from.

Kurz and the others must have come running after taking out the first Behemoth.

"Still alive in there, Mao?" came Castello's voice over the radio. She looked at her screen and saw that his M9 was in awful shape. Its head was caved in, its shoulder armor blown away; its left arm ended in a stump at the wrist. Carrying Mao's nearly immobilized M9 had drastically lowered its movement speed.

"Lieutenant, you have to—"

Despite Kurz's support, the enraged Behemoth bathed Mao and Castello in machine cannon fire. They tried evasive maneuvers, but couldn't dodge all of it.

Several 30mm rounds hit their targets, blowing off pieces of M9 armor.

“Guh!” Mao choked out as Castello’s machine lost its balance, sending their two machines tumbling in a heap.

Behemoth A tried to finish them off, and Kurz continued to shoot at it. Though he was far from dealing it a fatal blow, he did seem to be getting on the enemy’s nerves. The Behemoth let out a roar, and turned the massive cannon in its hands towards Kurz.

Then, with incredible needle-threading aim, Kurz fired a shot right up the Behemoth’s barrel.

There was a spark. The barrel of the “clothes-hanger pole” warped as the ammunition loaded deep within caught fire, igniting a massive explosion near the Behemoth’s hand. It staggered and dropped its cannon. The “clothes-hanger pole” fell with a crash to the ground of Merida Island, crushing trees beneath it.

“Hah, got you again. Simpleton...” Kurz’s voice, over the radio, seethed with malice.

But despite having lost its primary weapon, Behemoth A still had its powerful machine cannons. There was little more that Kurz could do to support them.

Apparently still mobile, Castello’s machine used all its power to throw Mao behind a nearby rock, before turning around to jump. “I’ll be the decoy,” he declared. “Abandon your machine and run back to base.”

“I can’t,” she argued. “And—”

“That’s an order, Lieutenant!” Refusing to let her argue, the battered Castello turned to confront the Behemoth alone.

We should have switched opponents... Clouseau thought with gritted teeth as he piloted his M9 this way and that to draw the attention of Behemoth C. The rocky area that served as his battleground had more hiding places than the north shore, where Mao was. He had more power and more ammo, and more time to focus.

He wanted to go help Mao and the others, but he couldn’t afford to do that,

either—he had his hands full with the enemy in front of him. Additionally, the enemy seemed to be catching on to the fact that he was alone. His diversion wouldn't last much longer.

On the other end of the island, from the west shore, Clouseau could see a dozen or so large helicopters beginning to make their descent, one by one. With all of the base's intercept systems destroyed, there was no way to stop them now.

Clouseau gripped his stick. "Operate ZA-3, parallel. Unload everything on Behemoth C."

《Roger.》 The unpiloted M6 standing on the rocky shore eight hundred meters away, his final machine, launched a barrage of ultrafast missiles at the Behemoth. While the enemy was distracted, Clouseau's M9 Falke dove out from cover, and fired its rifle while moving at top speed.

Just then, Clouseau got a message from Major Kalinin in the command center. "HQ to Uruz-1. How much longer can you hold off Behemoth C?"

"Five minutes at most," he replied tersely.

"Understood. If you reach your limit, return. Dive into a trench and fight them man-to-man."

"They might employ bioweapons," Clouseau pointed out. A dispersal of biological weapons like sarin or tabun through the underground base would kill their entire command structure effortlessly, and there was no reason to expect mercy from the enemy at this point.

"Understood," Kalinin said, acknowledging the point. "If they take the air conditioning facility in sector C, it's over. We're mustering our forces. Focus on your target for now."

"Roger."

Shot down. Crushed. Crashed. Disabled. On fire.

Light injuries. Severe injuries. Critical condition. Dead. Missing. Incommunicado.

The carpet bombing of reports hit Tessa from all sides. With each new arrival,

she responded with an order, and then calmly remapped the situation in her mind. Even the report about Speck's death simply translated to "one M9 and one veteran operator lost," and based on that, she revised her ideas about their forces available, and altered her conception of their plans.

That was all the thought she spared for his death. The massive collateral losses it represented—his sarcasm, his crooked smile, his earnestly-felt salute at the end—she kept completely sealed off from her mind.

"Colonel." Kalinin gave a report.

He was telling her that an enemy drop squad had landed on the west side of the island—ten minutes later than she had expected, thanks to the destruction of the Behemoth B. Even though it was only one of three, it was a massive blow to the enemy forces. Those ten minutes, and the psychological damage they represented, were unspeakably precious to them in their current situation.

It would be a dozen or so minutes until the drop forces infiltrated the base. Maybe thirty, if the traps slowed them down. And if the ground forces in the base fought well... how long could they hold out then? And how many more losses would they suffer in the meantime?

"Captain," said Mardukas, who was supervising maintenance in the underground dock. He gave his report as well: there were two and a half hours left until the amphibious assault submarine, Tuatha de Danaan, was ready to leave port. Their main problem was the replenishment of the fuel pellets in the palladium reactor that served as its power source. They didn't strictly need it, but... without it, the de Danaan would be left adrift just a few weeks after leaving port. Sooner, if things went badly.

Unlike the standard shipboard nuclear reactors that had been phased out over ten years prior, palladium reactors could run out of fuel. A fully-charged de Danaan could remain in a dive for over eight months (ignoring the crew's need for provisions, of course).

The palladium reactor wasn't the only problem. The repairs to the high-pressure air compressor, indispensable for sailing, weren't finished, and if they left port with it in its current state, it could end up producing fatal noise. The loading of provisions and other supplies was only at about 40% complete, as

well.

Two and a half hours to get the de Danaan up to basic functionality... This was Mardukas's report, so she knew there was no margin for error. Two and a half hours. Could they hold out that long?

There's no way , Tessa realized with dismay. But a drowning man couldn't choose what shore they crawled up onto, and she gave her orders to Mardukas immediately. "Suspend the charging of the reactor. Suspend repairs to the compressor, as well. Put all personnel on watertightness inspection."

"I suppose that's the only way," Mardukas said after a moment. "Yes, ma'am." His voice sounded pained, but he made no signs of objection.

Kalinin must have overheard the order. He turned to look at her. "Colonel?"

"We won't hold out for two and a half hours, will we?"

"No, ma'am. I'm afraid not," Kalinin said hesitantly, after a pause.

It was strange. Most people wouldn't notice it, but there had been something off about Kalinin's behavior today. There was nothing unusual in his orders or instructions; anyone could see that his precision and speed was as determined as ever.

But something was off.

Is he rattled? Tessa wondered. *Perhaps so...*

But as a former Spetsnaz officer, he'd surely been through worse than this. Their current situation was bad, but it wouldn't explain why he seemed so shaken. After facing hundreds of battles with exceptional nerves of steel and careful thinking, surely this wouldn't be his breaking point?

From Tessa's point of view, his behavior seemed... how to put it? Indecisive? Yes, indecisive—Kalinin was distracted by some kind of greater dilemma, some deeper issue at play. Something beyond the immediate matter at their base. It was like he was reflecting on the distant past, and at the same time, gazing at an uncertain future ahead.

"Major?" she asked.

"Forgive me, Colonel," Kalinin apologized. "I'm doing everything I can, but—"

Just then, they received a message from Kurz, who was still on the battlefield. “Uruz-6 to HQ. I’m still fighting Behemoth A—” There was none of the tension or enthusiasm she would have expected to hear in his voice. “I’ve disabled most of its main weaponry, taken out its clothes-hanger pole and its 30mm machine cannons. As far as I can tell, its missile stock is down to zero, too. But...” It should have been good news, and yet he sounded despondent and powerless.

Before Tessa could ask about it, Kurz offered the information freely. “We lost Uruz-3,” he said next. “Old man Castello’s dead. He took a bath of 30mm shells at close range, and then that thing ripped him apart with its hands. I saw it go down myself.”

“HQ, roger. Well done. Return to base,” Kalinin said.

“No,” Kurz protested. “I can see the enemy drop squad. I don’t have much ammo left, but I’ll hold them off as long as I can first.”

“You don’t have to,” Tessa told him. “Return at once.”

“Thanks, Tessa. But I want to hang in there a little while longer. If I didn’t...” Kurz’s sigh crackled through on the radio. “If I didn’t, I’d feel like I was letting them down. I don’t know what happened to Big Sis, either... Anyway, later.”

“Weber-san?!” Kurz cut off the call before she could stop him.

A helicopter cut through the cold Tokyo sky. Data picked up by the Arbalest’s dual sensors told Sousuke that it was a police helicopter. Four kilometers west of it was a news helicopter, and he could also hear a distant police siren. His infrared sensors, which had greater range than the naked eye, told him about a JSDF AS transport helicopter traveling along a fixed route, on standby.

The ongoing unknown battle had Western Tokyo in a state of shock and chaos, completely brought about by him and his enemy. Yet the city appeared so laid-back... This wasn’t like Kabul or Beirut; most of the people here seemed to be going about their lives, if somewhat nervously.

But that was still wrong. Things weren’t okay.

The school wasn’t safe.

Sousuke leaped the Arbalest from building to building, making his way to

Jindai High as carefully as possible. He had no intention of abandoning his machine.

At 1100 hours, I'll take the Arbalest to the old factory in Sengawa and open the hatch. That was the deal he'd made with the enemy on the phone, but he'd never intended to keep that promise. The enemy was probably the same way; they were going to do everything in their power to neutralize him and learn her location—torture, drugs, lie detectors. They'd find a way.

What that negotiation had bought him was time.

He'd ensured a ceasefire until 1100 hours. That was what mattered. Of course, the enemy was aware of that, too. It wasn't just a sense of obligation that kept them from pressing the detonator switch; they wanted time to make the preparations needed to get him into custody. Having police and the media on the scene was making it harder for them to act than before. Maybe they could take out two or three police cars, but not fifty.

The one problem he faced was figuring out a new way, outside of the Arbalest, of locating the bombs. He'd run some recon from a distance, and as Kaname had predicted, they had a surveillance network set up around the school. Optical sensors, infrared sensors, ultra-wideband radar—there were likely to be human watchmen, as well. Even if he used ECS, they'd detect him if he got too close. That meant he couldn't use the Arbalest to find the bombs.

In that case... After moving to the roof of an office building a kilometer north of the school, he ran a passive sensor scan around the area, then said, "Al."

《Yes, Sergeant?》

"If I switch you to autonomous mode, what's the fastest you could get to Jindai High School from here?"

《Approximately 40 seconds.》

"Upon arrival, how many seconds could you keep your anti-air ECM going at maximum output?"

《It depends on the conditions, but about 150 seconds.》

Sousuke fell silent, doing some simple math in his head. Then, he pressed the

button to open the cockpit hatch. He pulled a submachine gun, pocket transceiver, and digital map from the rack on the underside of the hatch before climbing swiftly out of the machine. “Maintain ECS,” he ordered. “Stand by, alert mode 4. Come immediately when I call. The coordinates will be...” He looked at the digital map display, then punched them in.

《Roger. Closing hatch now.》

The Arbalest’s chest panel slid back into place, and the hatch closed with a thunk. Sousuke turned his back on the still-invisible machine. He was about to head for the roof’s exit, when Al stopped him.

《Sergeant.》

“What?”

《Please don’t leave me behind.》

Sousuke furrowed his brow at Al’s oddly-timed words. “I told you I’d call for you soon. I won’t leave you behind. Remain on standby.”

《Roger.》

“Why did you say that to me?”

《I have a feeling.》

“A feeling?”

《A feeling that we’ll be parted soon.》

Having abandoned her machine, Mao ran through the burning jungle. She had a submachine gun in one hand, and no way of knowing who was dead and alive. She was soaked from head to toe and covered in mud.

Though isolated in the ocean, Merida Island was rather large. It was about the size of metropolitan Tokyo, and the terrain wasn’t exactly accommodating to a wounded operator. Nevertheless, she had to keep running. She had to make it to the base, somehow. It was her only option.

Mao climbed over tree roots, leaped across streams, swam through muddy water and choked her way through smoke. Above her, jet helicopters roared. These weren’t their Pave Mares, but enemy transport helicopters—from the

sound of it, likely Super Stallions.

Were they searching for her?

No, not possible. They were here to take the base; they weren't going to bother with stragglers like her. Mao climbed from the stream to the cliff, cut through the grass, and then, pushing through dangling vines, she made her way southeast. She hated to admit it, but she couldn't be sure of her direction; even in the jungle that was basically her backyard, she could barely navigate without a compass.

And then there was the fire, which made it hard to breathe. Her body ached all over. The environment was a greater threat to her than the enemy right now.

Her knee was bothering her, too, in ways beyond what her old injury would account for. She must have wrenched it again when she was escaping her damaged machine. Every step felt like torture.

Where's the base? she wondered. *I just need ammo and I can still fight...*

As Mao continued down the animal trail, stumbling, her consciousness hazy, she ran into a white tiger. Its body was supple, and its markings were beautiful, like India ink drawn on Japanese paper. The image hung there, barely visible through the smoke that wreathed the forest.

A hallucination? She rubbed her eyes, assuming that to be the case. Just then, the tiger made a light jump and disappeared upwind. It seemed to be saying to Mao, "Follow me."

"Dammit..." She gritted her teeth and, clinging to nearby trees for support, began to follow after the hallucination.

He could get extremely close, but the enemy's tight surveillance made it impossible for him to get inside the school. It would be one thing if class was out for the day, but it was currently in session. With the school as quiet as it was, his approach would stick out like a sore thumb.

The minute he was seen, it would all be over.

How, then, was he supposed to locate all of the enemy's bombs? They would

be all over the school. He could think of any number of suitable sites—and he'd have to make sure he found every one of them, despite not even knowing how many there were.

It was impossible. Even with infinite time, Sousuke could only disarm one bomb by himself, at the most. There was no way to disarm them all simultaneously. Which meant...

Sousuke ran to a telephone booth at the corner of the shopping street a few hundred meters from the school. He opened Kaname's cell phone, located the appropriate number in her directory, and quickly punched it into the public phone.

An electronic voice picked up promptly. "The phone you have dialed is currently off, or not being answered. Please call back later."

Well, of course. He's in class. Yet Sousuke did the same thing again.

"The phone you have dialed is currently—" The same. He hung up immediately and tried again. The electronic voice repeated itself stubbornly; it was starting to get on its nerves.

"The phone you have dialed is—"

"Yes?" The person he was calling finally picked up. The voice was calm, and low, and male.

"Senpai. I need a favor."

Hearing Sousuke skip the pleasantries, the other person—Hayashimizu—said after a pause, "Trouble?"

"Yes."

"Understood. What should I do?" he asked, without seeking details.

Sousuke gulped, then explained his request.

"I'm not sure," Hayashimizu told him. "I could be suspended."

"It's necessary."

"I was only kidding. I'd gladly do it."

"Thank you."

“It’s nothing. But...” Sousuke heard a small sigh from the other end of the phone. “This is goodbye, isn’t it?”

“Most likely,” Sousuke admitted.

“I see. Take care, then. I enjoyed our ten months together. I really did.”

“So did I. It’s been fun.”

“Give her my best. I’ll help as much as I can.”

“Right.”

“Good luck.” The man hung up, and a simple dial tone sound rang in Sousuke’s ear.

Kurama didn’t feel any particular obligation to blow up the high school, nor any personal inclination to see it happen. He was a big man, with short-clipped hair, gray stubble, and small, round glasses. He was also a mercenary. He was ruthless when it came to executing his missions, but that didn’t mean he was particularly prone to cruelty—or, conversely, particularly given to compassion. He’d do what was necessary, no more and no less.

And right now, Kurama’s copious experience was telling him, unanimously: *No need for mercy. Blow it all up.* The slightest hint of compromise now would lead to major pain later. Every word a man said was like a contract; a threat meant nothing if you couldn’t carry it out.

There was more to it, as well. Kurama had lost several subordinates to Sousuke’s resistance, and he had the right to avenge them. At least, that was how he saw it.

What this all added up to was a complete lack of compunctions about the idea of pushing the detonator switch. It wouldn’t hurt anything, and the man deserved to suffer: This was the sum total of Kurama’s thoughts on the subject.

“Any sign of the white AS?” he asked his subordinate, who was on standby in the abandoned factory.

The subordinate replied with a grumble. “No, not yet.”

“Understood,” said Kurama, calmly removing the safety from the detonator in his hand. When its encrypted signal was unleashed, bombs set at eight places in

the school would blow up, all at once. One flick of his thumb would be all it took, and then the rest of the chips would fall where they may. He'd fight, he'd kill. The usual. And he'd do it all without hesitation.



Just then, he received a message from the surveillance team. “The fire alarm in the school has gone off,” it said. Sagara Sousuke must have done it. He’d called someone in the school and gotten them to set off the alarm.

But what good would the evacuation do? It might take thirty minutes for a high school of over one thousand students, who only did evacuation training once a year, to completely clear out of the building. Meanwhile, all he had to do was press a button.

His directional microphone picked up the cacophony. The bells blared, and the following announcement rang out through the school: “Testing, testing. This is the student council,” said a voice, clear and calm. “We’ve had a major disaster in the north school building. One of our aides—yes, the one you’re thinking of—brought a chemical weapon to school, which, due to unfortunate circumstances, has sprung a leak. Please evacuate the building in the next one hundred seconds. Any delay will lead to your death. Please hurry.”

A chemical weapon? Nonsense. No school would take that warning seriously. Just shouting “fire” would be more logical.

“Sagara Sousuke,” Kurama muttered. “Is this all your plan amounts to?” With a faint sense of disappointment, he adjusted his grip on the detonator switch. His hesitation lasted five seconds at most. He let out a small sigh, then pressed the button.

The bombs he’d placed should have exploded instantly, yet no detonation occurred. He pressed again, and again, but got no reaction. The signal wasn’t getting through.

While Kurama struggled with the detonator, the school’s students continued their evacuation. Their speed was beyond anything he could have expected; it was like they were all in a mad dash to be the first one out. He watched through the binoculars and saw the students rushing, as if in a race for their lives. It wasn’t at all what he’d expected.

“What’s going on?!” he fumed.

“Extremely powerful EM jamming. Origin: Point D,” a subordinate reported.

Point D referred to the roof of an apartment building to the north, a

surveillance point he'd set up to watch for AS approach. Shockingly, the white AS had set up camp there itself, crouching down on one knee. It had made the bold decision to shut off its ECS, making no effort to hide itself. But why hadn't the surveillance there—likely neutralized by now—noticed its approach?

Nevermind; he could figure that out later. The white AS had shut down its ECS to focus all its power on the jamming. It couldn't last long—probably only two minutes or so.

"Attack at once," Kurama ordered his subordinate. "It's a sitting duck."

Protecting twelve hundred people with one person and one machine: this was the unspeakably difficult scenario that defined what was likely to be Sousuke's final operation in Tokyo. After parting ways with the Arbalest, he'd invaded the enemy's surveillance point on foot, and silently neutralized the three men there who were on the lookout for an approaching AS. He'd shut off their monitoring equipment, opening a hole in their surveillance network, and then called the Arbalest to infiltrate the blind spot. Though Sousuke wasn't there to operate it, Al had managed to guide the machine through, swiftly and cleanly.

After that, Sousuke had ordered the Arbalest to stand by at the nullified monitoring point. He'd left the apartment building behind, to sneak in as close to the school as he could get. There he'd waited, until the predetermined time, when he'd kicked his plan into motion.

The Arbalest unleashed its jamming at full power. At the same time, Sousuke hurried into the school building. His ally inside, Hayashimizu Atsunobu, had ordered the evacuation via loudspeaker in advance.

There was only so much time the Arbalest could perform maximum jamming; two or three minutes, at most. No school could complete an evacuation in such a short time. No school... except this one. This was the one school in Japan where it was possible.

Sousuke couldn't believe that this was the solution: an almost absurd state of affairs that he had unintentionally laid the groundwork for over the course of ten months. He was worried he might end up like "the boy who cried wolf," but his reliable comrade Hayashimizu had sold it brilliantly. The entire school had rushed to evacuate as if their very lives depended on it, just the way he'd

hoped.

Are they that afraid of the things I do? When he thought it over objectively, it did seem slightly disturbing, but Sousuke was also grateful for their reaction. If he could get them all out onto the school grounds, then even if the school exploded, the students would all be safe.

All except for one, that was, and that was who Sousuke was currently running at full dash to save. He had so little time, and the time he did have was ticking down quickly.

The jammer function used by the Arbalest and M9s was the polar opposite of what happened in a stealth mode like ECS; it emitted powerful EM waves over a wide area, serving to block an enemy's radar detection and communications. In a way, it was like blasting a siren over a loudspeaker to drown out a conversation.

Yet Sousuke and the others rarely used this function. Why?

Because it made your location crystal clear to the enemy, like a searchlight beamed into a moonless night sky. The jammer function would keep the enemy from detonating the bombs in the school, but it was basically suicide for the Arbalest.

An emotionless male voice echoed through the area around Jindai High. "Warning. Heavily armed infantry: twelve. Range: one. Vectors: 3-0-5, 2-2-7, 1-6-4." It was coming from the Arbalest's external speakers, broadcasting from the roof of the apartment building to the north of the school.

Sousuke and the Arbalest couldn't communicate via wireless transceiver with the wideband EM jamming in place, but he could hear Al's broadcast even at this distance. Al was using specialist jargon, speaking in English, so that locals and students wouldn't understand it... although the enemy would. Still, Sousuke needed to know the situation, even as he dashed up the emergency stairway behind the north school building.

The enemy was on the way to the Arbalest. They knew the machine would be locked down.

I have to hurry... Sousuke had figured out where Kyoko was being held. At this

point, he knew the ins and outs of school facilities better than anyone, and the only places where students and teachers wouldn't venture at this time of day were the water tower area on the roof and the gym storehouse. Radio waves wouldn't reach the underground storehouse, which meant it had to be the water tower.

Only one hundred seconds left.

Holding his submachine gun at the ready, Sousuke came out onto the north building's roof. No sign of the enemy. After throwing out a smoke bomb to minimize the chance of being sniped, he rushed out. Due to the presence of the water tower, about a quarter of the space on the roof's east side was blocked off by a fence. Sousuke ran up to the fence and bashed the cheap padlock off the gate with his submachine gun's grip.

There she is , he thought. Beyond the fence, he could see Tokiwa Kyoko, bound to one of the steel legs of the water tank. Her hands were cuffed behind her, she was gagged, and over her mussed uniform jacket, just over her solar plexus, there was a pound of C4 explosives.

Her face was haggard from fear and exhaustion. The childlike eyes behind her glasses were red and puffy from crying. The minute she recognized Sousuke, a pleading sound squeaked from her throat.

"Just wait, Tokiwa." He started to come toward her, then stopped. He'd noticed it—a laser sensor rig, designed to detect approach. He didn't have the time to disable it. He stepped carefully over the knee-level beam, before running up to Kyoko.

"I'm here to save you," he told her, cutting her gag off with his combat knife. "Hold still."

Kyoko spoke up fearfully. "S-Some strange men came... they said they knew Kana-chan..."



“They were lying,” Sousuke said, and gave the bomb she was strapped to a quick once-over. *I thought so,* he thought. *Nothing particularly complicated here. The remote detonation circuit itself is simple, but there are a few traps in place. Cutting the wire wrapped around her waist will activate the detonator. Pulling out the exposed fuze is a no-go, too... there’s a sensor on the fuze itself. I’d need time to bypass it, and I have less than a minute...*

Kyoko spoke again in a pitiful voice, “I don’t understand. It all happened so fast. Is... is Kana-chan okay?”

“She’s fine. She’s in a safe—”

A sharp blast came from the apartments to the north. The Arbalest was under attack. The sound was probably from an RPG, a handheld rocket launcher. The Arbalest’s composite armor could probably tank the hit, but Sousuke knew they wouldn’t stop with one. He heard a second, a third, and more, all coming in a steady stream.

“I am currently under attack. ECM still active. Thirty seconds remain,” Al’s voice boomed across the yard. Sousuke couldn’t see him from his current location, so he didn’t know the extent of the damage. Either way, he had to focus on this. Twenty-five seconds left.

“S-Sagara-kun, Tokiwa stammered. “What was—”

“It’s all right,” he told her. “Just close your eyes.”

He couldn’t disarm the detonator in time. He couldn’t bypass the traps. That left one option: fooling the remote signal receiver. Sousuke pulled out some tools and a multimeter, exposed the circuit and looked it over. He recognized the model; he’d learned about it from Speck in the SRT, and he remembered the blueprints. He attached a cord to bypass the amplifier. One wrong move could set it off, but he didn’t have time to be choosy.

Fifteen seconds left.

He hadn’t triggered an explosion, but it wasn’t over yet. Sousuke read the number on the circuit’s capacitor and recalled its model and volume. He snapped the multimeter’s clip over the terminal, and adjusted the IO equally. The digital meter wavered slightly, then stabilized.

Ten seconds left.

He'd seen some police drama once; a scene where the hero had to choose whether to cut a red wire or a blue wire. This wasn't like that. He *wished* this could be a one-in-two shot. The bet he was making had even worse odds: Sixteen leads extended from the circuit, fifteen of which were dummies.

Five seconds left.

He'd have to get into the head of whoever made the bomb. Given the makeup of the circuit, the maker was probably about as skilled as he was. The dummy circuits had a special smell to them, one that only an experienced bomb-maker could sense. Likes and dislikes, personal interests that guided their logic... Which wire would the maker mark for disarmament? *What would I do, if it were me?*

His hand on the nippers began to sweat.

Three seconds.

Which one?

Two seconds.

Which one is it?

One second.

If it were me, I'd choose...

With an almost ice-cold certainty, he cut one of the lines.

The instant felt like eternity.

"ECM stalled. This machine will—" An explosion drowned out Al's voice. But it hadn't come from here on the roof; it was the sound of another shell hitting the Arbalest.

He'd made the right choice. And Al had held out, too.

One hurdle down; he'd disabled the remote trigger. Sousuke let out a deep sigh, and shook out his tense right arm.

"Sagara-kun... Sagara-kun..." Tokiwa said.

“Don’t move yet,” he ordered. “I’ve only fooled the remote detonator. I need to remove the other traps now.” They weren’t out of the woods yet. None of the other bombs had gone off, which meant the enemy must have realized it was pointless—the other hostages had evacuated, after all.

The voice of the Arbalest had gone silent. Was it disabled, or had it simply withdrawn from the combat zone?

“I don’t understand. What’s going on?” Kyoko asked in a trembling voice.

With no better idea of how to respond, Sousuke just whispered, “I’m sorry,” and hurried along with his remaining work.

“Sagara-kun.”

“Yeah?”

“Is it the man from the hijacking? The, um... the bad man who took Kana-chan then?”

“No, he’s dead. He’s no longer a threat.” Remembering Gauron’s actions on the passenger plane, Sousuke continued his swift work on the detonator.

“Then why are they doing this? I...” Her voice was trembling. When she spoke next, it was as if the dam had burst on all of her pent-up anxiety. “Someone’s after Kana-chan, aren’t they? And they’re using us to get her? We’re all in danger, aren’t we? Why—”

“It isn’t Chidori’s fault,” Sousuke said, cutting her off.

“But then, why didn’t Kana-chan talk to me about it?” Kyoko asked. “I knew. I knew that she was carrying some awful secret burden. I asked her to talk to me again and again, and she never did. I thought I was her best friend. And...” Her chest began to heave. “*You* knew, didn’t you? You were the only ones who knew. I thought we were your friends.”

“Tokiwa.” He felt a pain in his chest, like a knife, grinding deeper.

“I don’t want to die without knowing anything. I don’t want to die... Maybe you guys don’t care if I do. But what am I to you? Am I just some outsider? I don’t like that. I can’t stand it. I’m not stupid.”

“Tokiwa.”

“Everyone else, too,” she went on. “We were all in danger, right? Why didn’t you tell us what was going on? It started when you got here. Something went off the rails. I don’t understand...”

“It’s—”

“Who *are* you?”

“Nn...”

“Just... who are you?” There was a powerful sense of accusation in Tokiwa’s voice, which had only ever been kind and gentle. And yet, there was no malice in her expression or her tone. She was just pleading with him, desperate tears streaming from her eyes. It was the pure and honest reaction of a person exposed, without warning, to concepts beyond her comprehension—the cruelest reaction imaginable.

Who are you?

“I am...” He paused in the middle of putting a clip on the detonator circuit. “I am...”

“A killer,” said a man’s voice from behind him.

Kyoko’s eyes widened, and she gasped.

Sousuke wanted to stop and reach for his submachine gun, but the nature of the disarmament process made that impossible. Pulling away now would activate the detonator. So instead, he just slowly turned his head back.

Three enemies were walking up to the water tank at a leisurely pace. Their guns were pointed straight at Sousuke. They had probably timed their approach for a moment when they knew he’d be locked down.

The man in the center appeared to be their leader. He was a large man, hair clipped short. He had five o’clock shadow and wore a black trenchcoat, and Sousuke couldn’t help but notice his fingers, which seemed especially long and delicate. His unassuming posture—a quiet, philosophical stance unique to hunters and snipers—suggested composure, backed by a hidden power ready to be unleashed at any time.

I see... Sousuke thought. If this was the man leading his pursuers, it explained

everything that had happened since his flight began last night. Sousuke knew himself to be an exceptional soldier; yet this man had driven him to desperation, tightened the noose, and shaken him to his core. It was possible that the only reason Sousuke had managed to turn things around to this degree was his greater familiarity with the local terrain.

The man spoke. “It’s impressive that you made it this far all by yourself.”

“Not that impressive. Your incompetence helped,” Sousuke said, brazenly continuing his disarmament work.

“You’re not bad at trash talk, Sagara Sousuke... No. He called you Kashim-kun, didn’t he?”

“You seem to know a lot about me.”

“Some, not much.”

“Were you working with Gauron, Kurama?” Sousuke whispered.

The man raised an eyebrow in surprise. “You know me? I’m honored.”

“I saw a picture during my days in Lebanon.”

“It’s a small world in our business,” Kurama commented, “so that’s not too surprising. I was a little less than subtle in those days. But like you, I’ve changed occupations.”

“A mercenary who once killed five SAS members, now taking innocent high school students hostage?”

“I hope you’re not trying to accuse me of cowardice.”

Sousuke didn’t respond.

Kurama turned his attention to Kyoko, who just stood there, trembling with incomprehension. He snorted. “All right, honey,” he began. “Let me tell you, since he won’t; the man standing in front of you is a professional killer. He’s a member of a mercenary squad, well-versed in all kinds of weapons and tactics. He lied to you about being a high school student, and entered this school with forged documentation.”

“Wh-What are you talking about?” Kyoko asked shakily.

“When the mood strikes him, he can kill as easily as someone like you draws breath,” Kurama told her. “He and I are the same. Just minutes ago, he killed three of my subordinates without batting an eye. That’s no mean feat.”

“Sagara-kun...?” Kyoko’s trembling eyes flitted questioningly between Sousuke’s chest, his cheeks, and the backs of his hands. She was recognizing the half-dried blood on his shirt and skin—ruddy black stains that gave credence to Kurama’s claim.

“Of course,” Kurama went on, “that squad of his... Mithril should be extinct by now.”

“What did you say?” Sousuke demanded.

“Your base is on its last gasp, and sorry to say, the order was ‘take no hostages.’ So even if you run, you’ll never see reinforcements. That white AS won’t last long either... Our ASes will be coming here soon, after all.”

Sousuke said nothing.

“You fought a good match, but you have limits,” Kurama said. “It’s time to give up. Give me Chidori Kaname, and I’ll guarantee that girl’s safety.”

Kyoko gasped. “Give him Kana-chan? What does he mean?”

Sousuke was helpless. By the time he got far enough to take his hands off the circuit, they’d have shot him in the head right before her eyes.

Just then...

Someone else had arrived on the roof. He could hear the unsteady clacking of high heels, accompanied by panicked breathing.

“Tokiwa-san? Where are you? Everyone’s evacuated! Say something if you’re here!” The voice was female. A woman appeared on the other side of the fence. She was in her mid-20s, slender, wearing a suit. Her hair was in a bob. Her shoulders were heaving; she must have been running all around the school.

Kurama gave the order. “Grab her.”

“Yes, sir.” One of his subordinates spun around and ran back past the fence.

“Wh-Who are you?! Only school officials are allowed— eek!” The woman

screamed and tried to run, but the man caught and restrained her almost effortlessly. “That hurts! Let me go!” He grabbed her wrist and dragged her back to the water tower side. Her face was pale and her lips were trembling in fear. “T-Tokiwa-san? And Sagara-kun? What’s going on? Who are these people? Why do you have a gun—”

“Looks like she’s a teacher here,” the subordinate said.

“Perfect,” Kurama replied. “Get her on her knees.”

“Ah!” The man did as he was told, shoving the teacher roughly to the ground by her shoulders. She showed no signs of resisting as Kurama’s subordinate put a gun to the back of her head. “P-Please don’t—”

“I doubt you’ll give up Chidori Kaname’s location that easily, so we’ll have to show you we’re serious,” Kurama told Sousuke. “Too bad for this teacher...”

“D-Don’t worry, Tokiwa-san. I’m your homeroom teacher; I can talk them down. Don’t be afraid, all right?”

Kyoko was afraid, of course—but as she peered at the teacher, her expression seemed to be more one of confusion than fear. At last, she whispered, “Who are you?”

“What—” Kurama began to ask, but was quickly cut off.

The woman moved like lightning. She knocked away the gun being pointed at her, twisted the man’s wrist, and then leaned forward to throw him. She had a small pistol drawn from under her skirt before he even hit the ground, which she pressed to the man’s head, then fired. He died instantly.

Sousuke moved at the same time. Having reached a safe stopping place, he released the detonator circuit and pulled out a knife, which flashed through the air in Kurama’s direction. The big man raised his left hand to protect his throat, and got a knife through the palm for his trouble. He hissed with pain.

The other subordinate fired at the woman, but he was too late. Using the man she’d just eliminated as a shield, she returned fire. Sousuke pulled his own pistol from his belt and fired at the man as well; the man took both shots to the head and collapsed to the ground.

Kurama took off, shielding his head with his knife-skewered left hand, spraying fire from the submachine gun in his right. Sousuke and the woman both ducked, letting the bullets spark harmlessly against the water tank. They returned fire moments later, and managed to land a few hits on Kurama's body, but it barely slowed him down.

They kept firing until they'd exhausted their clips, but he must have been wearing a bulletproof vest, because they didn't seem to have done any decisive damage. With a litheness belied by his appearance, Kurama escaped past the fence and was gone.

If I can catch and interrogate him— Sousuke changed his clip and attempted to follow, but the woman stopped him. "Wait, Sergeant." Her voice was entirely calm, a total change from the fearful act she'd been putting on before. "You won't catch him now. Focus on the bomb."

Sousuke growled in frustration.

"Am I wrong?" The woman cast aside her bob cut wig and stared straight into his eyes. He looked her over once more. From a distance, she'd looked like Kagurazaka Eri, their homeroom teacher, but he could see now that she wasn't. She had emotionless, almond-shaped deadpan eyes, and a tapered chin. Her skin was pale and her features delicate, reminiscent of a Japanese doll.



“Is that your true face?” Sousuke wondered.

“Unfortunately.”

“I never imagined you’d be a woman...”

“Is that all you have to say?” the woman—Wraith, of Mithril’s intelligence division—said dourly. “I didn’t have time for a proper disguise. You know I’d never show my face to you voluntarily.”

Sousuke knelt down by Kyoko, who had fallen to her knees in a daze, and resumed the last stages of disarming the detonator. Finally, he asked, “Where have you been?”

“Searching for you two,” Wraith told him. “Last night, while you were heading home from school, I’d moved to my usual monitoring point near Angel’s home...”

“Hold down that circuit board,” Sousuke said absently. “Do you have a light? Shine it in there.”

“Fine.”

“I appreciate it.”

“Liar.”

“It’s true,” he protested. “What then?”

While she helped Sousuke with his work, Wraith continued with her story. “Then they got me again—that silver-haired man and his robot lackeys. They crept up behind me... I don’t know why they didn’t kill me. Next thing I knew, it was two o’clock in the morning. I’ve been searching for you ever since.”

Sousuke disabled the sensor in the fuze, stabilized the circuit, then slowly removed it from the plastic explosives.

“Is it over?”

“Hold on.” He cut the lead wrapped around Kyoko’s body. The multimeter’s needle jumped, and the detonator circuit activated... but nothing happened, because the fuze had been removed.

“It’s over,” he announced.

“Good grief...” She must not have been accustomed to dealing with bombs, because Wraith let out a relieved sigh and wiped the sweat from her brow. “So, what are you going to do now, Sergeant?”

“You want to know where she is, don’t you?” He was being sarcastic, but as he said it, a shadow fell over Wraith’s previously expressionless face. There was no anger or irritation in it. It was almost like sadness.

Sousuke scowled at her questioningly, but Wraith averted her eyes, turning her gaze past the steel girders to the fence. “The man is gone, but we’re still surrounded. They’ll regroup and come again. The students are safe, but we’re still in the fire.”

“I know.”

“I’m saying that escape will be difficult.”

“Not that difficult,” he disagreed. The agent didn’t know about the Arbalest’s autonomous functions. If Al was still alive out there... “Al, do you read me?” he called over the radio.

《Affirmative, Sergeant.》

“Damage report.”

《Class B damage to right thigh and right forearm. Class C damage to left shoulder and left hip. ADC active. I have disabled AML to prioritize continuation of combat maneuvers.》

“Location?”

《Nearby. Approximately 800 meters north of the school. There are three enemy ASes with ECS capabilities approaching.》

“Can you shake them off and find us?”

《I will try.》

From the roof, Sousuke could see explosions in the city to the north. He could make out rising white smoke, and hear the voices of confused students from the southern schoolyard.

The city he’d made his home was in pandemonium. He wished it hadn’t come

to this.

“You mean to fight to the end, Sergeant?” Wraith inquired.

“Yes,” Sousuke said, as he helped Kyoko up. “Defeat the enemy and escape. Return to Chidori and take her to safety. I don’t know what exactly that will entail, but I’ll go as far as I need to.”

“And if she refuses?”

“She won’t.”

“What makes you so sure?”

Sousuke clenched his fists. “Surety is irrelevant. Protecting her is the only thing I can do right now.”

“You—”

“I will protect her,” he declared fiercely. “I will.” The Arbalest was on its way, jumping from roof to roof, building to building, trailing white smoke. “I’ll use the Arbalest to take you and Tokiwa to safety. You can do what you like after that.”

“But—”

“I won’t give you Chidori. Don’t ask again.”

The agent said nothing in response.

Then, Sousuke put his hand on the shoulder of the puzzled Kyoko, doing everything he could to keep his voice calm. “I’m sorry I put you through all this, Tokiwa.”

“Sagara-kun...”

“I’m... exactly who he said I was. I don’t think I’ll be able to come back to school like before. This will be goodbye.”

“What? But—” Kyoko started, baffled.

Sousuke answered by handing her a key, the key to Kaname’s apartment. “When things settle down, go to her apartment. Take care of her hamster. Chidori’s been worried.”

“Ah...”

A gale swept over the roof, followed by a mechanical shrill and a crack of concrete as the Arbalest landed on the roof nearby. It was in bad shape; the white exterior was dingy, and damaged in spots. Its cutting-edge composite armor was the only thing that had let it survive so many hits from HEAT warheads.

《The enemy is approaching. Please hurry,》 Al urged over the radio.

The Arbalest crouched down and its hatch opened. Sousuke began to run toward it, stopped, and cried out to Kyoko. “Tokiwa!”

“What?”

“I had fun spending time with you. Thank you.” He didn’t have time to wait for a response. Instead, Sousuke leaped and slid into the Arbalest’s cockpit. “Close hatch,” he told Al. “Mode 4. Power to max.”

《Roger.》

The master suit in the cockpit adjusted to him immediately, and the generator revved up to maximum output. The ECCS picked up a signal: three enemy ASes were closing in. Bearing, north-northwest. Distance, 300 meters.

The Arbalest ran to the water tower area and scooped up Kyoko and Wraith. He could hear Kyoko’s scream through his external microphone.

《Lock-on detected. Two, one...》

Sousuke gritted his teeth, and leaped. The enemy fire rained down a split-second later, blowing holes in the roof and the water tank. The shots were exponentially more powerful than those of human-sized firearms. Steel and concrete went flying. Shrapnel struck his armor. The Arbalest cut across the road before the school gate and landed in a local factory’s parking lot, then placed its two passengers behind a truck.

That was when he realized it: Kyoko was doubled over in pain. It was immediately obvious that she was bleeding from the head and the arm, but the side of her white uniform had a growing bloodstain as well. She’d been hit by the shrapnel while he was dodging their attacks.

“What...” Like a new soldier just realizing a bomb had taken off his limb, Sousuke stared at her, dumbfounded. Damn it. It had finally happened. *Why her?* He wondered. *Why her, after everything? What should I do?*

Someone was shouting. “—gent! Sergeant!!” It was Wraith. Despite being battered and bleeding herself, she lay Kyoko on the ground and quickly began stripping off her bloodstained clothing. “I’ll treat her! You go!”

“Ah...”

“What’s wrong with you?!” she demanded, and that was all he needed to rebound from the shock. He could think about it later. His soldier’s instincts returned immediately.

Sousuke turned around. The enemy machines were already there.

《Enemies have deployed. Designating priority target: Mike-2.》

“Mike-1.”

《Roger.》

He sent his machine into a run.

The three enemy ASes cut across the leaden sky to nimbly surround the Arbalest, and then disabled their ECSes. Gray urban camouflage, massive silhouettes made up of curving lines: Sousuke knew them well. These machines were Venom-types—Codarls, the enemy called them.

How dare you... Sousuke fumed. He couldn’t use his shotcannon. He didn’t want to do any more damage to the city. Gripping the stick in his right hand, he drew the monomolecular cutter stored in his machine’s weapons rack.

5: When the Crossbow Breaks

Why has this job been so rocky? Kurama, having successfully made it off the roof, reached for a cigarette in his coat pocket in lieu of cursing. But the cigarettes weren't there. *That's right. I'm trying to quit.*

He therefore had no choice but to curse quietly as he moved away from the school, quickly arriving at a general store near the shopping district. Due to the general panic that had overtaken the city, it had already been abandoned.

An enormous explosion came from the school. It wasn't the bombs he had set; he could faintly hear the sound of AS drive systems behind it. Kurama gave brief directives via radio to his subordinates. "The reinforcement ASes?"

"They're here," one subordinate confirmed. "They're pursuing the enemy machine right now, but..."

Kurama could hear the sounds of shots being fired. AS combat was happening, and very close by—black shadows crossing the sky; buildings destroyed here and there... "Oh?" he asked. "What is it?"

"The enemy machine has withdrawn to the school, most likely to meet up with Sagara."

"Destroy it before it gets there."

"Sorry, update. They didn't make it in time. The enemy machine is fighting back now. The platoon chief—"

Kurama heard an especially massive explosion overhead. A Codarl-m had clashed with the enemy's white AS about fifty meters above him. They clashed again, and then, grappling, began to descend.

"Urgh..." He threw himself to the ground as the two ASes continued to fight, toppling electric poles, plowing through guardrails, and crushing half of the general store. Concrete and glass went flying, and dust hung thickly in the air around him.

The grappling had seemed chaotic, but the victor was immediately clear. The white AS's monomolecular cutter had stuck in the chest of the Codarl-m, which

had been on the bottom when they landed. The white AS yanked its monomolecular cutter out with an ear-piercing shriek of metal, then sprang back up immediately and leaped towards a corner to the southwest, in order to face down the remaining Codarl-ms.

“Damn it,” said Kurama, as the gust from the machine’s motion sent his coat flapping.

“He seems to have taken out the platoon chief’s machine,” said his subordinate.

“Yeah, I just saw it happen.” Kurama, still on his backside, reached for a pack of cigarettes that had fallen amidst the rubble. “Leave the AS to the ASes. Still no sign of the girl?”

“Not yet, but we found traces on the roof of the 21-31 shopping center. Signs of recent damage to the concrete, likely from an AS landing.”

“So?” Kurama scoffed. “The enemy’s been moving around a lot today.”

“An employee mentioned it... There’s a parking lot on the roof, and right after he opened shop, he saw a woman driving away with an unconscious girl in her car.”

Kurama hummed curiously. “Did he describe the woman and the car?”

“The woman looked young, but that was all he could say,” the subordinate answered. “The car was a white Alphard.”

“Tap the Tokyo Police. Run it through the last three hours of ORBIS.”

“Roger.”

Kurama turned the radio off, then idly broke the seal on the cigarettes as he puzzled it out. *What’s going on here? Did he hand her over to someone else? Was it that woman from before? But if so, why didn’t she support him earlier? Or more to the point, why did she choose to show herself then?*

Someone was calling on another channel. It was Leonard Testarossa.

“What do you want?” Kurama asked.

“You seem to be struggling.”

“Why, thank you. I’ve had quite a lot of trouble, in fact.” Kurama took a cigarette from the opened box and put it in his mouth. He wasn’t going to light it, just hold it there. That wasn’t technically the same as smoking. “We still don’t know where the girl is. I think I’m out of options.”

“You’re not.”

“What’s that?”

“The girl can’t have gone far,” Leonard pointed out. “And who, do you think, would be the most effective hostage to lure her out?”

Kurama scowled. “Well...”

“Him. The man himself.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. He’s still out there—”

There was an explosion in the distance. His subordinate reported, “Two allies shot down,” over the radio.

“—wreaking havoc,” Kurama finished.

“I see,” Leonard said neutrally. “Can you ask them to hold out a bit longer? Three minutes should do.”

“What?”

“Three minutes. That’s all I need.” Leonard’s transmission cut off there.

Kurama clicked his tongue and searched for a lighter. There wasn’t one—not in his pocket, nor on the ground around him. “Dammit.” He tossed the cigarette away.

In the dimly lit hangar of the transport helicopter, he tested the feeling of the thin gloves. He clenched his right fist, and then opened it. *Not bad.*

He listened to the pilot’s report through the receiver in his ear. *Now above Tokyo, altitude 5000 meters. Expected arrival time, about three minutes.*

“Thank you,” he said. “I’m boarding now.”

“Are you certain you need to go personally?” a woman’s calm voice asked through the receiver on a separate channel. She was actually sitting just across from him, but the roar of the helicopter drowned out her voice.

“Sometimes, it’s necessary to stretch one’s own legs,” he told her, looking down at his operator’s uniform with a hint of self-recrimination. “And to correct certain grave misunderstandings.”

“I see. Stay safe, then.”

“Thank you. I’ll return soon.” He turned around, walking up to the machine that crouched in the dimly lit hangar. The vibrations all around them made the faint lights of the head-mounted sensors appear to tremble.



As the battered Arbalest engaged the enemy ASes, Wraith remained where she was, treating the injured girl. The head wound was just a bruise and a cut; the blood loss wasn't as bad as it looked. The bleeding from her right side was much more concerning.

Wraith used her army knife to cut Tokiwa's clothing away and get a better look at the wound. A bit of scrap metal, no bigger than the tip of her pinkie, had flown just under her ribs and into her diaphragm: a penetrating wound. There was no telling how much internal damage it might have done. She'd have to patch it up and take her quickly to the hospital.

In this chaos, she couldn't count on an ambulance. Wraith lifted up the limp girl and hurried to a parking lot two blocks away. *This is so stupid,* she told herself. *Why am I even doing this?*

All she had to do was dump the girl on the ground and run to her car. Then she could say to the other waiting girl, "I saved them as promised. Now, come with me." But Wraith wasn't doing that. Instead, she was going to try to keep this girl from dying. She carried her, carefully but swiftly, to the white van in the parking lot. When she unlocked it, the automatic door in the back seat opened.

"Kyoko?" Chidori Kaname, who was lying inside, sat up shakily when she saw her friend.

Right, left. Up, down. The target box moved, dancing with the enemy AS in the city of Sengawa at noon. The familiar cherry trees had been smashed to bits. The donut shop he'd frequented with the others was a pile of rubble. The kei-truck the baker used to make deliveries to their school was a wreck. Everything was breaking down before his eyes. All of the sights that had healed him, that had given him a hint of humanity...

《Proximity alert,》AI reported, sounding an alarm.

An enemy was approaching. Its rifle was pointed right at him.

It fired.

Throwing out its left hand, the Arbalest warped the air around it and the shot burst into pieces. The machine approached him at high speed. He dropped his weight as they passed each other, stuck out a foot and tripped the enemy. It

went tumbling, taking trees and electrical poles with it.

Sousuke didn't even wait for it to stand up again; he spun around immediately and threw an anti-tank dagger. The blast from the directed explosive hit the machine in the side, taking out his third opponent.

With that, the city was quiet again.

He stood on the road in front of Jindai High School, using his active sensors to search for any enemies that might remain. He found nothing. Most of the students had already evacuated to the residential area, but some had remained in the schoolyard, staring dumbly up at the Arbalest.

He could see several of his classmates there, as well: Kazama Shinji was there; Onodera Kotaro, too.

Sousuke ran down his damage checklist and saw that half of his ECS projectors were destroyed. It would be harder now to turn invisible and move freely around the city. *What to do?* he wondered. Recover Kaname, flee the city at full speed... and then...

An alarm sounded.

《Large transport helicopter approaching. Heading: 187. Distance: 20. Number: 1. Speed: 500. Altitude: 1000 and dropping.》

His brain wasn't working right. His vision was blurring, too, probably from exhaustion and blood loss. Sousuke shook his head, blinked his eyes and squinted. His screen showed a transport helicopter approaching from the southern sky. The targeting box declared it a "low threat aerial unit." It was a C-17, enemy/ally classification unknown.

The transport came closer and closer. It was moving quite fast, and dropping in altitude. It was only about 300 meters away now. The roar of the turbofan engines shook the rubble on the ground. They were in an urban area, so he couldn't shoot it down. Sousuke dropped his weight in preparation, and the transport flew past.

In that instant, something other than the transport passed above him like a shadow. He could see a parachute, detached from its wearer, fluttering in the sky above the north school building... but that was all. Meanwhile, the transport

picked up altitude again and sailed away again into the western sky.

Sousuke's mouth opened questioningly. The transport had dropped something, but he didn't know what.

What could it have—

《Six o'clock, distance zero!》

An AS was standing right behind him.

Sousuke moved his machine, but in that exact moment, the enemy's right arm flashed. Armor fell from the Arbalest's shoulder. Before it could even hit the ground, Sousuke reached his machine's hand back, drawing the shotcannon from its waist, and fired. The enemy seemed to shudder—but it was just an afterimage. His shot cut through the air fruitlessly and disappeared into the sky beyond.

It was quiet. Achingly quiet. Sousuke hissed and jumped back to gain distance, but the enemy was already there.

Sharply angular, with dark silver armor: it appeared to be from the same production line as the Codarls he'd fought many times before, but he'd never seen this specific model. The limbs were slender and elegant, without appearing weak. There was something hanging from the shoulders—parts vaguely reminiscent of wings, or a cape—which gave the machine an extra sense of weight and majesty.

Yes, this AS was less a weapon and more a polished silver idol. It far outstripped the battered Arbalest in strength, beauty, and presence.



《No data found on this model,》Al reported.

“Try extrapolating its specs.”

《Equal output, mobility, and stealth to a Codarl. It likely contains a lambda driver. Further speculation impossible.》

“We’re in agreement, then,” Sousuke said.

《Affirmative. It’s dangerous. Swift retreat recommended.》

“You think it’s possible?”

《Negative.》

“We’re in agreement there, too.”

The enemy was barehanded. It didn’t have a single rifle or other portable weapon. The machine turned its head to the people in the schoolyard, as if it didn’t see Sousuke at all, and slowly put its right hand on its hip.

“Now, then... Sagara Sousuke-kun,” said a voice, booming out from the enemy’s external speaker. It was the cool, clear, and all-too-familiar voice of a certain young man. “I don’t intend to take anybody there hostage. I don’t really see the point. But I will tell you this: This will be my last warning. Will you surrender and give me the girl?”

“You know my answer,” Sousuke responded through his external speakers, despite knowing his classmates in the yard could hear him.

“I thought not,” Leonard said. “But... that uncooperative nature of yours. Do you really think it makes you impressive?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, you know... I really hate that kind of thing.” Breaking through the silence, the enemy machine’s shoulder wings unfurled, and its toes left the ground as if gravity had ceased to hold it. The air around it warped; dust swirled, and the machine simply rose into the air.

It hadn’t leaped off the ground. It was simply hovering, somehow. The eyes in its asymmetrical head glared down at Sousuke, and the attack that followed was as powerful as a gale.

Inside the van, Kaname could only watch and cry as Wraith took out her medical kit and started treating Kyoko's wound. "Can... you save her?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?!"

"Just watch me." Wraith silently continued her work, her hands stained crimson.

"Kyoko... I'm so sorry, Kyoko..." Kaname moaned.

It's my fault, she thought. *It's all my fault. Everything: because I hesitated, because I couldn't decide. Because of me, my best friend... The symbol of my happiness... It's all my fault. Someone save her. Please, God. Don't let my best friend die. Please. I'll do anything. Please. Please...*

Just then, she heard another voice.

It was the voice of a young man trying to destroy something equally precious to her.

I see. That white AS is a fine machine, after all. Its maneuverability and power are adequate for something based on the M9, Leonard thought. *I'm genuinely impressed by its mobility, despite the damage it's taken. Its toughness is far beyond any test model. It was clearly created with live combat in mind.*

"But..." His Belial spun in midair, stopped, and then zigzagged behind the enemy machine. The laws of physics were, in a sense, his to command. He didn't even have to employ the weapons mounted in his back; his hands had more than enough cutting power on their own. With a spin, he sliced off the left arm of Sousuke's machine, just below its shoulder. Even as the beleaguered AS lost its balance, it pointed the shotcannon in its right hand at Leonard.

It fired.

Leonard effortlessly blocked the shot, and threw it back at his opponent. A shockwave hit him. Metal fragments went flying, and the enemy's right knee bent the opposite way that it should.

He can't possibly win, Leonard thought, knowing who was listening. *He can't beat me—me, who can freely commune with the omnisphere, who can use the*

lambda driver's power to its fullest!

Are you watching? he asked her.

"Stop it," Kaname told him.

Do you see now?

"Don't kill him," she pleaded.

I'm very annoyed.

"Please."

You're the only one who can stop this, said Leonard.

"I'll love you, if you want."

Your nobility, your strength...

"I'll try so hard," she promised him.

Why are they only for him?!

"I'll forget."

Meanwhile, Sagara Sousuke refused to fall. He used his machine's one remaining leg and arm to stay upright, then scrambled for cover, escaping into the school courtyard. He fired another shotcannon shell on the way.

Leonard dodged this one easily enough, soaring forward on his dark fury, and blasted the next shot back at his attacker. Then, he heard an explosion from behind. *A directional mine with a delay fuze... a silly trap, after all this?!* he fumed to himself. *The stubbornness... the sheer bloodymindedness...!* The white AS continued to fire off its head-mounted machine guns, and drew its final anti-tank dagger with its right hand.

"Unsightly," Leonard said out loud, opening the weapons bay in the Belial's left arm. Leonard then fired the 40mm cannon within, tearing to shreds the other machine's right arm, its right shoulder, and its head. The enemy's pitiful lambda driver was helpless to stop it.

He stepped on the stomach of his enemy's machine—now delimbed, decapitated, and disarmed—and tore open its chest armor. Beyond a set of warped, ruined, sparking screens, he could make out Sagara Sousuke, its

operator. He displayed none of the panic that Leonard had hoped to see; instead, he just released the master stick and pointed his pistol straight at Leonard, through the gap in the screens. His face was covered in blood, but the fire in his eyes couldn't be extinguished.

Sousuke fired, aiming at the Belial's sensors. It was a truly pathetic shot, compared to what an AS was capable of. The best it could do was leave an annoying scuff mark.

Leonard could hear the voice of the Arbalest's AI. "Generator... shut down. All capacitors destroyed. Escape... immediately. Recommend... to abandon unit and..." Then, silence. The ARX-7 had been effectively demolished: it had lost both of its arms, its right leg, and its head. Its core was annihilated.

A gentle breeze blew through the courtyard. It passed over the dying giant, and the one that had conquered it. "You did well, Al," said Sousuke, waving his gun. "Your discharge is... granted." Then he lifted his pistol and fired again.

One unsightly scorch mark on the Belial's sensors became two. It was like an annoying mosquito buzzing around Leonard's ear. He'd never felt quite this brand of annoyance before.

I don't even care now. I'll just crush him, Leonard thought, even as he knew, deep in his skin, that it wouldn't give him true victory over the man. *But I don't care anymore. If you refuse to submit, even now...*

"Please, stop." A girl appeared in the corner of his screen. She was standing before the bushes in the courtyard, looking up at the two machines, shoulders heaving with breath.

It was Chidori Kaname. "Stop this," she said. "I'll go."

"With who, I wonder?" Leonard mused.

Her long black hair rustled in the breeze. A long hesitation? No, her answer was clear... "With you."

Leonard turned his machine's head to face Sagara Sousuke, and whispered, "You heard her, Sagara Sousuke-kun." His Belial pulled away from the Arbalest's remains to kneel down in front of her, reverently. It proffered its right hand. Eyes fixed downward, the girl slowly sat down in its palm. It stood up, and

together, they looked down at the duel's loser.

"Chidori... don't..." Sagara Sousuke whispered. He slowly lowered his gun.

"It's okay now," she told him.

"No, it isn't..."

"I'll be fine. And you will, too."

"I will... bring you back..." His arm went limp, falling back against the warped cockpit frame. "I'll bring you back... to this place..."

The sensors of Leonard's machine couldn't pick it up, but he knew that she was trembling, and holding back the urge to weep. "Let's go," she said through the screen. Leonard shrugged and quietly began to move.

The minute he turned his back, Chidori Kaname whispered something to Sagara Sousuke. He could only see the movement of her lips, so he didn't know what she had said.

She could hear an ambulance siren. Firefighters and police, as well. Wraith was on her way to a nearby emergency hospital when something flew over her head, moving in the direction of the school: it was a dark silver machine, and it made none of the sounds that would accompany rotors, or a jet engine.

An... arm slave? She wondered. Then its ECS activated, and the machine vanished into the dull gray sky above. For just a second, Wraith glimpsed someone in its hands. She knew exactly who the person was. After all, she was the one who had made the decision not to stop Chidori Kaname from getting out of the van. This was in clear defiance of the intelligence division's orders: General Amit would never forgive her.

Good grief... she thought.

Once she'd dropped the girl off at the hospital, Wraith would have no choice but to go into hiding herself—somewhere far away, where nobody knew her. She'd originally come out of the intelligence agencies of North Korea, so this would be her second time on the run from a former employer.

Having been swayed by emotion into forgetting her mission, Wraith found herself reflecting that perhaps she wasn't cut out for this job, after all. Maybe

that girl was right. Maybe she was better off as a starving actor.

●

The battle with the enemy force that had landed on Merida Island was still raging inside the underground base. The fighting topside was finished.

The base personnel had taken up arms and formed impromptu squadrons to hold the enemy back. They'd blown up their air conditioning system and several other base facilities, preferring that to letting the enemy get them.

The sounds of gunfire and vibrations from distant explosions could be heard even in the command center, along with screams of rage and terror.

It was only a matter of time before they were under siege.

At last, Tessa had no choice but to give the order to abandon command. The forces remaining there took up firearms and hurried for the untouched submarine dock. Corporal Yang of the SRT was leading; Major Kalinin was bringing up the rear.

They didn't know what condition they'd find the submarine dock in. Internal base connections had been severed, making it difficult to get in touch with other departments. Tessa had managed to use the PA system to give the order to retreat to the dock, but she didn't know how many of the fighting base personnel had heard it.

They were hurrying down the (presumably still safe) third passageway to the dock when an attack came from an unexpected direction. A communications officer right beside Tessa, a lieutenant, took a bullet and fell. He didn't even have time to scream.

"Protect the colonel!" somebody shouted. Her people fell one by one, some while shielding her, some while trading fire. Bullets ricocheted around the passage, and explosions from hand grenades echoed in the dark.

She could hear Major Kalinin, firing a submachine gun, call out, "Forget me, just go!"

Corporal Yang emerged from the smoke. "This way," he said, and he pulled Tessa by the hand.

She ran down the corridor, staggering, coughing, dragging her feet. She couldn't see Kalinin, nor many of her other subordinates. Far behind her, she could hear the steady but sporadic sound of gunfire of those who stayed to fight.

Yang was the only one with her now. "The major—"

"There's nothing we can do," she said. "Hurry."

But the enemy was proving extremely crafty, and must have known the layout of the base better than she'd expected. All of a sudden, four enemy soldiers, each carrying carbines, came flying out around a corner in the direction they were heading.

Tessa exclaimed in fright. They'd gotten around behind them? With the dock just ahead— Nevertheless, it was Yang who fired first. The lead soldier took a shot to the head, and flew back forcefully. But the enemy soldiers registered no surprise before firing their submachine guns back at Yang, who took a shot to the center of his chest and stumbled.

"Colonel." Yang stepped in closer and kept firing. A second enemy pitched over and fell. "Run—"

He didn't stand a chance. She watched as Yang took more shots and tottered limply back. All Tessa could do was hold him upright.

No, she told herself, *I'm not finished yet.* Tessa snatched the carbine rifle from Yang's hands, and while feeling surprise at its heaviness, she pointed it in front of her.

But the remaining enemies closed in on her fearlessly and knocked the rifle out of her hand. Tessa cried out in frustration as the enemy soldier spoke up, in a whisper of barely-contained rage. "This brat is their commander?"

"Guess so," one of his compatriots agreed. "She's put us through a lot."

"Time for compensation. Strip her down."

"Sure. Gonna sample the goods?"

"As long as we leave her alive, no one'll complain. And we still have time—"

Just then, a new voice rang out, from the side. "I'd say your time's up." The

two men turned, just in time for Melissa Mao's submachine gun to rip into them on full automatic. Shell casings and smoke went flying. The two enemy soldiers slumped into a mist of blood.

"Melissa..." Tessa began to say.

Breathing heavily and covered in mud from head to toe, Mao approached. "Let's go," she told Tessa shortly.

"But Yang-san—"

"He's fine," said Mao, cutting her objections off. "He's wearing body armor. It looks like he took it in the stomach and the leg..." Turning to Yang, she said, "Y'know, you're the best in the SRT in terms of lucky breaks."

"Yeah..." The fallen Yang laughed, then let out a pained groan as the two helped him up. "But... you really stole my thunder... back there..."

"Stupid," grumbled Mao. "Can you walk?"

"Yeah, no problem... Urgh!"

Mao and Tessa, supporting the bleeding Yang on either side between them, hurried to the dock.

"What's the situation?" Mao asked, panting. She looked like she'd been through hell.

"The base has fallen. All personnel are retreating. They even attacked us here, though I and the five remaining command center personnel fought to the end..." Tessa gulped. "Then Kalinin-san remained behind. I think... he's gone."

"I see..."

"Castello-san is dead, as well."

Mao's face tensed up.

"Clouseau-san and Weber-san are incommunicado," Tessa went on. "Given the state of things on the surface..."

"It's fine. Comes with being on the losing side." Nevertheless, Mao's voice was hoarse and trembling. "Dammit. I'll get them back for this."

"I intend to as well," Tessa agreed.

“Hah.” For the first time, Mao let out a small laugh of her own. “Yeah, you’d better. I love you, Tessa.”

“And I you.”

Faintly, Yang managed to whisper, “Hey... what about me?”



Tessa's feet felt heavy. Her breathing was ragged. Her body hurt all over. Nevertheless, the entrance to the dock slowly neared. "Hang in there," she told Yang.

"Sure."

Beyond the barricaded entrance to the dock, someone was shouting, a rifle in hand. "Hurry!" Assisted by several PRT personnel, Tessa made it into the submarine dock, where she found several hundred men and women, including both submarine crew and base personnel, waiting for her.

"Atten-SHUN!!"

Incredibly, despite the situation... they were all lined up in perfect formation. The flooding of the dock was complete, and their rows stretched into the distance, three neat lines, in front of the Tuatha de Danaan ready to move out.

"We've awaited your arrival, Miss Captain." At the head of the lines stood her XO, Lieutenant Colonel Richard Mardukas. "The unparalleled vessel Tuatha de Danaan, ruler of the seven seas, is ready to depart. On your order, ma'am!" He must have been helping with the repairs to the very end, and he looked a little bit pathetic, standing there covered in oil. But at the same time, his unwavering pride and nobility shone through.

"Oh... honestly." Tessa said, while handing the unconscious Yang off to medical personnel. "Formality, in times like these?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'd argue it is *paramount* in times such as these."

She didn't argue with Mardukas, from whom she couldn't have imagined a more characteristic response. They could still hear gunshots in the distance, and the surviving Behemoth would be waiting for them when they left the dock.

Still, Tessa gave the command in a sonorous voice. "All crew, come aboard!"

"Aye, aye, ma'am!" Her subordinates responded in unison.

The generator was working. The rearguard held out as long as they could, fending off the enemies that made it into the dock with disposable M6s. But the second the last of them was on board, Tessa gave her order from her seat in the control room. "Forward, one- third!"

“Aye, ma’am. Forward, one-third!”

The boat slowly began to set out, aiming for the great ocean outside the underground base. When the enemy forces came running, firing rocket launchers at the submarine, explosives rigged up to the roof of the dock began to burst. Rocks and steel rained down on the soldiers, raising up swirls of dust and smoke.

“Open the fourth hatch!” Tessa commanded next. She was referring to the large hatch for ASes on the upper deck—the hatch they’d used to retrieve the Arbalest in Sunan.

“The fourth? Why?” Mardukas asked suspiciously.

“Because if they’re still alive, they’ll be coming,” she told him.

“True indeed. Open the fourth hatch!” Mardukas ordered without further hesitation.

The Tuatha de Danaan began to pass through the giant underwater tunnel, accelerating rapidly. The end of the tunnel—the bright white light ahead of them—grew closer and closer. The exit was right in the middle of the cliff. The shutter, which was disguised as a rock face, was already open.

The enemy would be there. They would be waiting for them. Tessa was perfectly aware of that scenario when she said, “Load ADCAPs one through six. Flood all launch tubes and have them open.”

“Aye, Captain. Load ADCAPs one through six. Flood and open all launch tubes!” Her XO relayed the order and the fire control officer executed it.

“Warning! All launch room and armory crew, evacuate to the aft!”

“Warning!”

They all knew what it meant. A siren blared through the submarine, and the sonar tech shouted. “High-frequency array, new contact! Something huge dead ahead!”

“As expected. Perfect.” Tessa smiled. “Fire one through six!”

Six ADCAP torpedoes fired from the Tuatha de Danaan’s torpedo tubes. Each was a 300 kilogram warhead capable of rendering a large ship immobile.

Explosives totaling 1.8 tons shot at high speed for the tunnel's exit—at the Behemoth waiting in front of the cliff that formed Merida Island's shore.

Every one of them hit.

There was a tremendous explosion and a shockwave that ran through the de Danaan, too. The floor below them bucked up and shook them in all directions.

The ST cried out, "Dammit, it's still alive!"

Tessa could see the image through the periscope. The Behemoth was outside the tunnel's entrance, just in front of them, and now it was in a rage. It had lost its "clothes-hanger pole," but it still had its head-mounted machine cannons. Though staggered by the tremendous explosion, it still spread its arms to intercept them.

"Plow through!" she ordered.

"I—"

"Push it over!"

"Aye, aye, ma'am! On into hell!" the helmsman shouted. The 210,000 horsepower generator let out a howl. The propulsion machinery roared with joy, and the ten-thousand-ton boat accelerated.

"All crew, prepare for impact!"

Just then, a series of explosions peppered the Behemoth's head. For one instant, the giant lost its balance. Where had the attack come from? Probably from the cliff— Impact.

The de Danaan's prow had struck the Behemoth's hip, and a sharp screech of metal assaulted their ears. The two great giants had collided—but it was they, the de Danaan's crew, who had won the bet. The opponent was only several thousand tons, while they were 44,000. No matter how bulletproof it was, the Behemoth couldn't resist a difference in mass like that. It was like a tractor-trailer slamming into a pro wrestler at full speed.

The overwhelming power of their collision sent the Behemoth flying. It rolled as it went, slowly, kicking up waves in its wake. The hit must have come by surprise, because the enemy lambda driver didn't seem to have activated;

instead, the metal monster soaked the full force of the hit and collapsed. Its hip and abdominal armor went flying, falling in pieces as it fell into the ocean head-first.

The Tuatha de Danaan was now free in the endless horizon of the sea.

“I knew you’d do that. You’ve got a real violent streak, y’know,” came a familiar voice over channel U1. It was Kurz. His vector was unknown, but his distance was zero.

“For once in our lives, we’re in agreement. Looks like we made it just in time,” Clouseau’s voice agreed. His vector, too, was unknown; distance zero.

The periscope’s optical sensors activated automatically. Two M9s in battered armor, one black and one gray, were clinging to the mast by the open fourth hatch.

“Weber-san! Clouseau-san!” Tessa greeted them joyfully. They must have jumped down from the cliff just as they exited the underwater tunnel. They were also the two who had ambushed the Behemoth.

“Pretty cool, aren’t we?” Kurz boasted.

“We’re in agreement again,” said Clouseau. “Well... permission to come aboard, Colonel?”

While privately aghast at their boorish behavior, Tessa was relieved to see them. “Of course,” she said happily. “You have permission to enter through the fourth hatch.”

“Roger, and thanks.”

Mardukas, standing next to the captain’s chair, simply shrugged. “Honestly... they’re all very stubborn.”

“That is one of our strengths,” Tessa agreed.

“Maybe so. But... we took losses today. Severe ones.” Mardukas grabbed the brim of his cap and lowered his eyes as if in silent prayer.

“Yes...” Tessa knew that they had indeed lost much, both in terms of things and of people. The shame of it would probably torment her forever, and they had no way of knowing what lay ahead.

Their situation hadn't improved in any way. The Pacific Ocean seemed infinite around them. The de Danaan was completely isolated, and had no hope for aid. But... "We can kick ourselves another day," Tessa decided. "Once we actually have time for self- reflection."

The officer of the deck reported the retrieval of the two machines, and they closed the fourth hatch. The electronic warfare technician declared that enemy helicopters were trying to track them.

Tessa stood up once, then retook her seat in the captain's chair. "Let's break through the enemy barricade. Emergency running. Vent MBT."

"Aye, ma'am! Emergency running! Vent MBT!" The alarm echoed throughout the submarine: loud, yet reassuring in its familiarity.

Epilogue

Sousuke had been abandoned, powerless. It took all the strength he had just to crawl out of his trashed machine, and with a few tottering steps forward, to lean his shoulder against the wall.

He didn't encounter any more enemies. No police or firefighters, either. He arrived at his personal armory, which was disguised as a trailer that he kept in the city, and treated his wounds there. None of them were fatal, so he assumed he'd be back in working order with two days' rest.

He didn't watch the news or read newspapers. He couldn't bring himself to.

Actually... he did check the Internet once, out of curiosity about Kyoko. She was on the list of several badly injured, but he learned that she'd been taken in at a city hospital he recognized. That was all he needed to know, so that was the last report about the incident he'd read.

Wraith had probably taken her there, but he had no idea where Wraith was now. Sousuke didn't particularly feel like looking for her; he'd probably never see her again. He wasn't even sure if Mithril itself still existed.

He couldn't get in touch with the Merida Island base. Nor Sydney either, of course, nor any other related hideouts. All channels were down, so even when he braved the danger to try and call, no one answered. He'd tried countless lines, countless methods...

But in the end, there was only one conclusion to reach: Mithril was gone. Every base, every stronghold was wiped off the map, and the mercenaries that worked for them were nowhere to be found. They could be dead, or on the run; he had no way of knowing which. A single soldier was helpless to comprehend the movements of a secret force on Mithril's scale.

He didn't know what had happened to Kurz or Mao. Tessa, either. They could all be dead. When he forced himself to think about it objectively, he knew that that scenario was by far the most likely one. Kalinin, too, he assumed to be lost. Sousuke had a way of contacting him independently of Mithril, but that, too, yielded nothing but silence. He was dead. There was nothing to make Sousuke

think otherwise.

Four days later, in the morning, Sousuke carefully evaluated the situation he'd found himself in. The conclusion he ended up reaching was a shockingly simple one: *I'm alone. I am completely and utterly alone.* Everything he had gained had been lost in an instant. There were no comrades to aid him. No class friends to comfort him. No organization to support him. No foster father to rely upon.

No smile from the girl he treasured.

He had no idea what to do. No, he knew... It wasn't just her body that he had to protect. He had to show a bare minimum of good faith to the world she had come from.

I don't want to die not knowing anything. The memory of that innocent plea stung at his heart.

Then, on the fifth morning, Sagara Sousuke went to school.

Classes had apparently only just resumed, and as he walked in the front gate, he felt the students watching him, eyes wide open in shock. Well, the vast majority were shocked; the rest were curious or angry.

The parts of the school building damaged in the giants' clash were still covered with large tarps. The broken windows hadn't been repaired yet, either, and these were covered in cardboard and packing tape.

The remains of the Arbalest that he had left in the courtyard had been neatly carried off... by the Japanese government, perhaps, or some related organization. He didn't know which. Either way, they were gone now.

Ironically, his shoe cubby was just as it had been: number thirteen, Sagara. He took out his slippers, which had been worn out by ten months of wear, and headed for classroom 2-4.

As he opened the door and entered the classroom, the commotion inside died down into a hush. Everyone was looking at him, including Onodera Kotaro and Kazama Shinji.

Nobody was sitting in Chidori Kaname's seat. That was as expected; she might never return to it again.

Kyoko's seat was empty, too. She was still in the hospital.

The first bell of the day chimed as their teacher, Kagurazaka Eri, came in to start homeroom. There were bags under her eyes, and she looked exhausted. When she saw Sousuke, she froze in place. She didn't seem to know what to say to him.

They can be cruel. Hayashimizu's words played back in his mind. The third years were gone for entrance exam season, which meant Hayashimizu was no longer in the school. Yet Sousuke worked up his courage—yes, a different kind of courage than the battlefield required—and said to Eri: "Ma'am."

She stared at him for a full second. "Yes?"

"I would like to say something. Could I have a moment?"

"Well..." Eri hesitated. She turned her eyes downward, then looked over at Kaname's seat and responded, as if to brush her sadness away. "Yes. You may."

"Thank you." Sousuke stepped up to the podium. For some reason, he was reminded of the day he had transferred here and introduced himself. "I'm sure you've already heard a great deal," he whispered into the stony silence. "The operator of that white AS... as you likely guessed, it was me. I'm... a soldier with a certain mercenary organization, and a pilot for ASes like that one. I lied when I said that I transferred here from an American school."

The others listened quietly, watching Sousuke with guarded eyes.

Bathed in their gazes, Sousuke explained everything: that he was a mercenary with a secret organization; that he'd forged documentation to transfer to this school; that he'd been assigned to be Chidori Kaname's bodyguard; that there was a massive organization that was after her; that he was the reason the school had been attacked during two separate field trips.

He continued on to explain that the enemy organization had decided to come after Kaname seriously. This was the reason why the fight had started, and how Tokiwa Kyoko came to be injured so badly. And that, in the end, Kaname had been taken.

"I'm sorry for hiding it," he finished quietly.

“Wait a minute,” one student spoke up in response. It was the person Sousuke was closest to, Onodera Kotaro. “Did you just say you’re sorry? Try saying that to Tokiwa.”

Sousuke said nothing.

“She’s in the hospital, you know. She’s hooked up to tubes. And what did she say to her family when they came? She gave them that key she’d been clutching, and she said, ‘Look after Chidori’s hamster.’ She said you’d asked her to.”

“I see.”

“Don’t you have any sympathy? Don’t you people feel anything? Don’t you care about what you got her mixed up in?!” Kotaro got up out of his seat, eyes bloodshot, and began to stride towards Sousuke, but several classmates and Eri stopped him. “Let me go, dammit!”

“Stop it, Onodera-kun!”

“I’ve got business with this bastard!” Kotaro yelled. “I thought we were friends! What the hell was this all about?!”

“I...”

“What did you come here for?” he bellowed again. “Did you think it was funny? But you can’t need us now, so get the hell out!”

“I... I just wanted to tell you,” Sousuke said sadly. He knew now, why he had come here. What he wanted to do. The firm words that had echoed in his heart since the moment he’d lost the battle five days ago.

“Tell us what?!”

“That I’m going to bring her back.” Yes. That was all it was. He wanted to tell them that. That, and nothing else.

“I’m going to bring her back,” Sousuke said again. “No matter what happens, no matter what I have to go through. I will bring her back to this place. That’s all I wanted to say.”

Everyone fell silent. Even Kotaro simply stared at him, uncomprehending.

“I’m the only one to blame for this,” Sousuke said. “She doesn’t deserve your censure. I will bring her back. I promise.”

He had no one to turn to, and no plan. But something deep in his cells commanded him: *You can do this. Go out there and fight.* And so...

“Please welcome her when she returns.”

He didn’t need to hear their responses. Sousuke just turned around, left the classroom, and walked out into the familiar hall. He walked through the courtyard, out the gate, and then kept on walking. Far away.

Yes... very far away.

He didn’t look back at the school even once.

To be continued

Afterword (Dehumidifying)

Hmm. That escalated quickly, didn't it?

People lately like to call this kind of development "depressing," but I'm not a fan of that term. It's not especially depressing; it's just serious. No one's given up, after all.

When was it that people decided that a story's protagonist withdrawing into his shell and kicking himself instead of taking action makes a story "deep"? I guess it's been almost ten years now (distant gaze).

Sousuke's not that kind of protagonist. He might kick himself about things, but he still takes action. Decisively.

Liberated from the world of the short stories, he can show his real ability. It's just like when Kinnikuman, who started out farting while he flies, became super cool by the time he joined the Chojin Olympics! (Okay, maybe not the best example.)

Anyway, let's make some plans for the future!

1: A heartbroken Sousuke heads to Tohoku and ends up in a hot springs town full of interesting characters. While he spends day after day in the warm and tranquil environment of a local inn, he gives up on finding Kaname and decides to start a new life there. He marries an ordinary girl and has a happy ending.

2: To find information on the missing Kaname, Sousuke infiltrates another school. A beautiful girl believes that Sousuke is her long-lost brother, and she barges into his apartment with 108 people and it's chaos. Shenanigans ensue, like him accidentally peeping on the girls' bath, or the girl coming to wake him up, yanking the sheets off his futon and shouting "Eek! Big Brother! That's disgusting!" Amidst all these delightfully embarrassing events, both Sousuke and the author forget about Kaname.

3: We follow Tessa and the de Danaan crew as supplies run low. To earn funding for their activities, they form a traveling circus troupe. The athletically disinclined Tessa is forced to undergo training of fire, and ends up doing an incredible trapeze routine. It's all very inspiring. When it gets an anime

adaptation, the DVD will only be sold on ***zon.

4: Kaname, in Amalgam's possession, uses her paper fan to purge Leonard and the other executives from the ranks of command, and takes the reins of the organization herself. As their newest leader, Kaname sets her sights on taking control of the Kanto criminal underworld! The only one who can resist the cruel and merciless Amalgam's reign of terror in Sengawa are the Mikihara Gang and its Bonta-kuns, who've recruited Hayashimizu to be their top general! Meanwhile, Sousuke is wandering around, blissfully unaware of all of this.

I guess that's all I got. Three more pages, huh?

That reminds me. The other day I went on a trip to Taiwan and Hong Kong. There was a meet-and-greet in Taiwan, and I was surprised by how big the welcome was. The food was tasty and the town was interesting and the girls were pretty, and I had a great time. Yano-san, Shi-san, Cindy-san, and everyone else from Kadokawa Taiwan, thank you so much! I'll be back again soon!

Now, in Hong Kong... I talked to the anime staff (grin). Timing and medium haven't been decided yet, but thanks to you all, we've got a new anime in the works. I shared a hotel room with the director, Takemoto-san, but maybe because I was exhausted, I kept snoring really loudly and made a ton of trouble for him. It was a busy time, but an interesting and eventful trip.

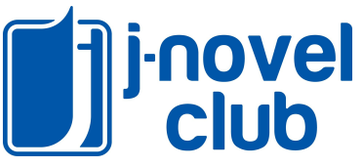
We're full speed ahead on the main story now, so don't expect the next book to be the last one or anything. We're just getting started. My number one objective is wrapping things up cleanly. I'm not gonna taper out with slow developments, or start a new series with things left unfinished, or anything like that. Don't worry!

What will happen next? Where do I take the story?

I don't know. Sousuke and I are both at our wits' end.

But I'm sure he'll figure something out. Have a little faith, okay?

Well, see you.



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Full Metal Panic! Volume 7 Tsuduku On My Own

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7
FULL METAL PANIC!
CONTINUING ON MY OWN