Shouji Gatou
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8



FULL METAL PANIC!

BURNING ONE-MAN FORCE

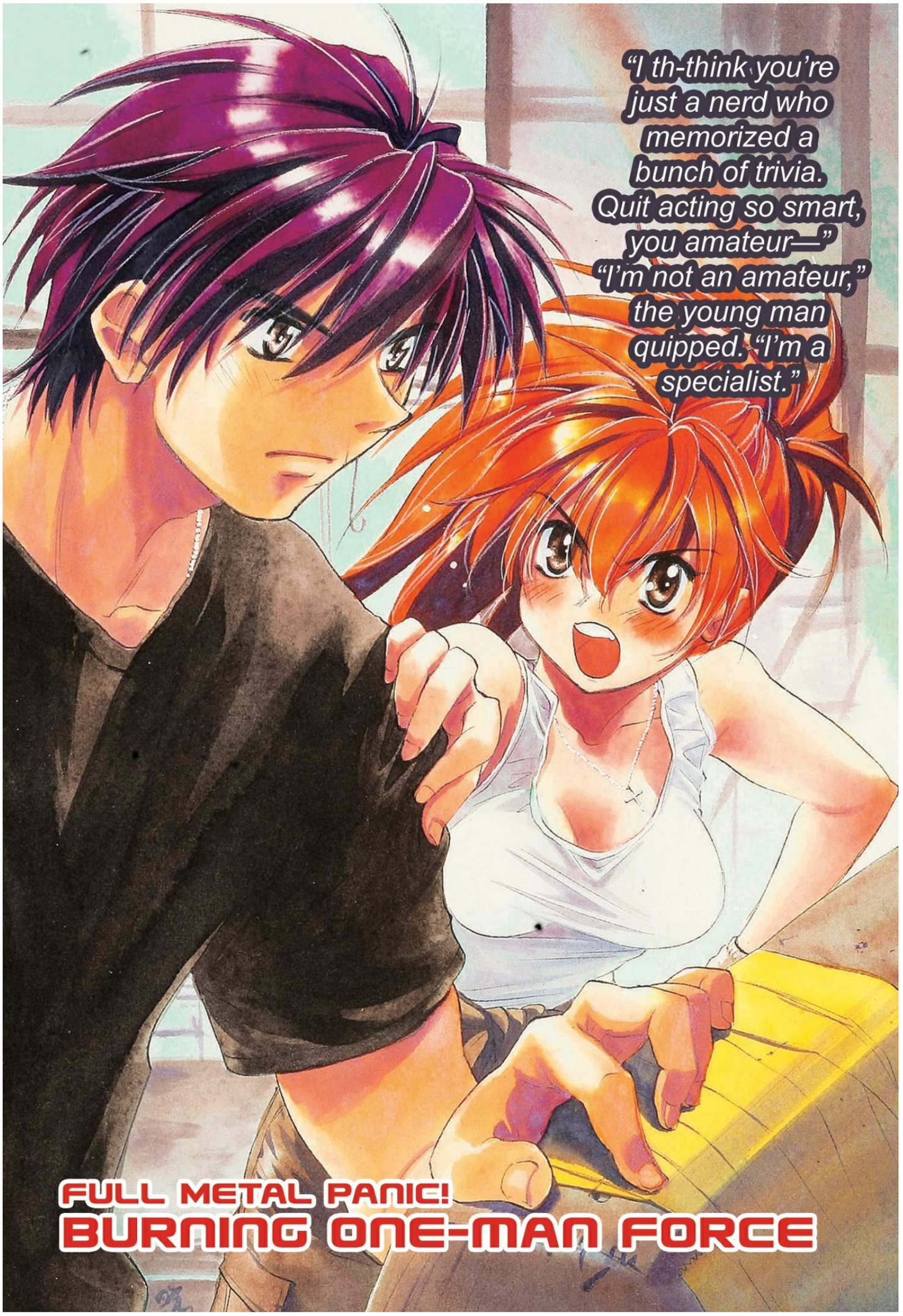
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FULL METAL PANIC!

BURNING ONE-MAN FORCE


"I th-think you're just a nerd who memorized a bunch of trivia. Quit acting so smart, you amateur—"
"I'm not an amateur," the young man quipped. "I'm a specialist."
FULL METAL PANIC!
BURNING ONE-MAN FORCE


Sousuke worked the Savage's arms to grab the head of the M9 unceremoniously, then swung the HEAT hammer down!


She heard a voice.
It was coming from far away.
From beneath a distant sky.
The sound of waves
rushing and crashing.
Faint fragments of information drifted around
converting into colors and sounds.

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Prologue

It was a world of muddied consciousness. Possibilities drifted into being and vanished. Lines blurred between times, places, self, and other.

A wide-eyed girl with coke-bottle glasses pleaded with him, sobbing, *I don't want to die without knowing anything.* She had C4 bricks strapped to her chest—an arrangement he knew; sixteen cords in a detonator circuit. He cut one, and the bomb went off. It tore the sweet girl to pieces. Her head hit the ground meters away.

Fade to black.

Inside a cramped cockpit, information flowed by on multiple screens. *Output increasing. All vetronics active. Control unit. Diagnostic unit. Passive perception unit. Tactical data unit. Fire control unit. Main balancer. All active. CCU link is—* The generator's cooling unit let out a low hum. He tightened his grip on the trembling sticks and confirmed the trigger locations; checklist complete. The enemy was on his doorstep.

Fade to black.

A girl with a strong-willed gaze paused in the middle of cutting his hair. Her face moved close to his, and she whispered, with hesitance, *Hey, want to kiss?* He had no reason to refuse. But as he tried to oblige, she put the razor to his throat. *You think I'd kiss a killer like you? How stupid are you?* Her eyes were full of scorn. Her hand moved. The blade sliced through his skin, his windpipe, his artery. He gurgled uselessly, unable to even scream her name.

Fade to black.

He was in a passenger plane, crashed on a world of ice. *It's cold. Cold. Cold.* The warmth had passed out of his beloved mother. She was holding him in the dark, forever motionless now. All he had left was the memory of her final whispered words, *"Live. Fight."* No help was coming. The ice broke. The crashed plane sank into the freezing ocean, with him still inside. He'd never feel

anything again. But maybe that was the best... the kindest result possible.

Fade to black.

A clear sky. A courtyard somewhere. He was surrounded by windows, surrounded by people. While he stood there, alone, an unfamiliar girl appeared. Her eyes were turned down. She was crying. *Idiot,* she whispered, then began to walk away. The people jeered and mocked him. And then...

Blinding light.

A brightness tore into his retinas, and gradually, orderly consciousness returned. With the same process one might use to address a wounded and confused soldier, he asked himself:

Where am I?

Under a bed. There's light streaming in from the window onto my closed eyelids. I'm in a cheap lodging, a motel in the city of Namsac, in a corner of Southeast Asia.

Who am I?

Sagara Sousuke. Kashim. Soski Segal. Sergeant. Uruz-7. And many other names I've been called.

What time is it?

Morning. Seven o'clock or so. One month since I left Tokyo. I was walking for hours last night and exhaustion finally caught up with me. I must have slept six hours.

How did I get here?

Through a network of connecting flights, and a few land routes as well. Using forged tickets. I have connections in the region, so it wasn't especially difficult.

Why am I here?

That one's obvious. I'm pursuing the enemy.

1: Arena

A massive steel foot slammed down onto cracked asphalt.

If he had been walking half a meter to the right, Michel Lemon's body would have been squashed into pulp. Then he'd have been just like a real juiced lemon, and the city police would have been left with some truly nauseating cleaning work.

Despite a sluggishness brought on by the unrelenting heat of the unfamiliar climate, Lemon cried out and dove away from the arm slave, an act which sent him crashing into a man walking on the crowded sidewalk from behind.

"Watch it, buddy!" said the young man he'd hit. He was dressed in a dingy work uniform, his face swarthy, covered in stubble, and deformed on the right side by a large scar. He was probably a former soldier, kicked out of the military when the war ended not long ago, now working as a day laborer to make ends meet.

"Ah..." Lemon briefly went silent.

Evening had fallen on the place he was visiting, a Southeast Asian city full of stifling heat and noisy crowds. Namsac was unique, a town whose location in a border region meant its ongoing development had been defined entirely by complicated power struggles, prolonged border conflicts, and civil war.

All around him he saw bicycles and rickshaws, three-person scooters, and overloaded kei-trucks. Yet among these shabby vehicles walked an old-model arm slave, strolling casually along the street as if it belonged there. It was probably Soviet-or Chinese-made—a model called a "Savage," he believed—with a squat torso and a large frog-like head.

The orange humanoid weapon was taller than a two-story home, but it appeared to have been stripped of its armaments. Its head had a large searchlight where its machine guns should have been, and its back was monopolized by a crane, a steam shovel, and other construction equipment.

With a marked indifference to how close it had just come to ending his life, the machine kept walking, its diesel engine roaring. Michel Lemon dumbly watched it go. He'd seen ASes in news reports and pictures, but he'd never seen one up close like this.

"Hey, you hear me, buddy?!" A hard shove to his shoulder brought him out of his reverie.

Suddenly realizing he'd forgotten to apologize to the man he'd bumped into, Lemon ducked his head awkwardly. "I'm s-sorry, monsieur..."

"Don't 'monsieur' me, sissy boy! Bumping your pasty ass into me... Look at you. You constipated or something?" The man's implications went a touch too far, but Lemon really was a rather delicate-featured young man. He had fair skin, untouched by the sun, and wore rimless glasses. He was on the tall side, but lanky; he'd look right at home poring over blueprints in an air-conditioned office. He also stood out like a sore thumb in this city full of roughnecks.

"Ah, er. I'm actually feeling just fine—"

"I wasn't worried, dumbass!"

The man yanked at the sleeve of Lemon's short-sleeved shirt, causing him to stumble. "Ah—"

"C'mere!" The man pulled Lemon into a nearby alleyway. His strength was overwhelming, and he ignored Lemon's cries of pain and distress.

"Really, there's no need for this. I didn't do it on purpose. I understand that you're angry, but please remain—" Lemon's attempts were interrupted by a back fist to the nose.

Stars flew in his vision and the world spun around him. As he doubled over, the man seized him in a headlock, and whispered to him threateningly, "Put a sock in it. You're gonna pay for bumpin' into me. Get it?"

"P-Pay... how?" Lemon managed as blood trickled from his nose. The alleyway was dirty and empty, a foul smell that stung his throat pervading the air.

"You're French, yeah?"

"Y-Yes..."

“And your job is...?”

“I’m a reporter.”

“You got a camera, then, right? Hand it over. Plus any foreign currency you have. Euros, dollars, all that shit.”

“P-Please, not my camera! And I don’t have any foreign currency!”

“Not buying it, asshole!” He slammed Michel into the ground, back-first. Somehow, the feeling of his freshly-laundered shirt turning soaked and sticky on the filthy alleyway ground was a greater immediate trauma than the pain.

The man got astride Lemon and wrapped his fingers around his throat. “Listen. I’ve been watching you awhile now, wandering around our town. Mr. Great Reporter can’t even offer up some spare change to buy a guy a drink?!”

Oh, he was marking me from the start, Lemon finally realized. Now that he thought about it, a white man in this crowded city, goggling around, occasionally pulling out a camera for pictures... it probably would draw attention, though he hadn’t considered that it might earn him a stalker.

I guess I overdid it. What a screw-up... he thought, as the man’s fingers dug mercilessly into his throat. He seemed to be holding back from killing him, but his power was incredible.

Just then, Lemon heard a woman’s voice coming from the alley’s entrance. “Knock it off, Dao.” He could see her over the man’s shoulder, but the light was behind her, so it was hard to make out her face. He could tell she was on the short side, and there was a childish quality to her voice.

“That you, Nami? Piss off,” Dao said in disgust.

“Can’t do that,” she replied, “Random muggings are gonna make the city’s reputation tank even worse than it already is. You want to chase away all the tourism the Arena’s been pulling in?”

“Who cares? It ain’t made this place any less of a garbage dump.”

“So unreasonable...” Lemon heard a clink of metal from the woman’s hand—a gun’s firing hammer moving into a cocked position.

“Wh-What the hell’re you doin’?!” Dao cried out.

“Don’t worry, I won’t kill you. Just put you out of action for... two, maybe three months.”

“You’re gonna shoot a member of House Ogre?! Over some asshole you’ve never even met?” Dao’s face went pale, and his voice shook with anger. Still, as he glared at the woman, his hands loosened their grip on Lemon’s neck.

“I didn’t say that,” she told him placidly. “If you just want drinking money, I’m happy to oblige. Here.” The woman walked up to them, and thrust a wrinkled banknote—riels, a currency often used in the region—in front of Dao’s eyes.

“You’ll pay for this,” he promised.

“Not today. Now, get lost.”

Dao snatched the banknote from her hand, spat on the ground, and then left the alleyway.

Lemon had been worried that Dao might leap at the woman despite her weapon, and that things might get bloody... so when that didn’t happen, he let out a sigh of relief. “Th-Thank you...” He sat up to get a better look at her. The woman—no, the girl—was indeed holding a gun. He didn’t know the make or model, but it looked like a cheap revolver, probably smuggled in from the Philippines.

Would she threaten him with the gun next? As if reading his mind, the girl smiled. “Oh, it doesn’t actually fire. It’s broken.” As she spoke, she pointed the gun at Lemon and clicked the trigger a few times.

“Wh-What are you doing?!” he gasped, recoiling in shock.

“So unreasonable!” she laughed. “I told you, it doesn’t fire.”

“What the...”

“Now, monsieur.” The girl’s large eyes sparkled, and she peered into Lemon’s face. “A commission for my aid, plus expenses... How’s four thousand dollars sound?”

The girl requesting the four thousand dollars was named Nami. Now that he was able to get a good look at her, she seemed about fifteen or sixteen years

old. Her hair was brown, unkempt, and tied into a ponytail. She didn't wear a trace of makeup, but her eyes were large and catlike, and she had an intelligent air about her. Her outfit consisted of oil-stained coveralls over a tank top; she probably worked at a garage or an electronics shop somewhere.

"Four thousand? That's outrageously high," he told her. It was evening, and they were walking around the entrance to Namsac's entertainment district.

Nami twisted her lips into an unhappy frown. "C'mon, that's cheap! That Dao guy is known all around town for his violent temper! He iced over thirty guys in the war! He really would've killed you if I hadn't stopped him!"

"Oh, really? Thanks, then," Lemon said with a scowl, wiping away the last of the dried blood from his nose. He pulled some bills from his pocket and held them out to Nami; it was the equivalent to about three hundred US dollars.

"Oh, please. This is nowhere near enough to cover it!"

"It's enough to live in luxury in a city like this for a month, right? Besides, it's all I have on me. Not that I'd ever give you four thousand anyway," he grumbled.

"I'll take your camera, then. Plus your PDA, your cell phone... you name it, I'll take it!" Nami's eyes sparkled like a child's.

"Oh, come on! I need that stuff for work!"

"So unreasonable!" As Lemon picked up his pace, Nami continued to hang close. "So, you need the camera for work. You told that guy you were a reporter, right? That true?"

"Yeah," he told her. "Hoping to be, anyway."

"So you submit articles to magazines, right? And you get paid for them?"

"Barely, but sure. And... there's no guarantee they'll buy what I write. It depends on the story."

"Ah-ha. The story, eh?" Nami smiled knowingly. It was the expression of a stray dog that had just stumbled onto a roadside feast. "If you're coming all the way to Namsac, you must have a real angle, right? It can't just be one of those stupid articles about all the poor people left behind in the post-war recovery,

from that syrupy sympathetic first-world perspective, right?”

“Don’t be so dismissive. That’s a perfectly noble subject.”

“Yeah, sure. Maybe. But it’s not what you’re here for, is it?” Nami tapped Lemon’s cheek with her finger. He fell silent rather than denying it. “You can pursue a ‘noble subject’ like that in any town in the world. But Namsac... we’ve got something special. You came to watch *that*, right?”

Lemon said nothing. The sun had set, and it was getting very dark. He slowed to a stop. Past the neon-lit buildings of the entertainment district they’d been strolling through, a towering soccer stadium had come into view.

Rather, it *had been* a soccer stadium... the construction had started before the war, but once hell had broken loose, it had been left to the elements. Now riddled with bullet holes, it had been repurposed for something completely different.

Inside, the stadium hummed with passion and noise. Gasoline engines roared without the mitigation of mufflers. Metal shrieked against metal. And above it all came the cheers, the shouts, the gasps of the crowd. Light poured from the stadium; it was like a sake cup set out in the middle of the city, filled with fine iridescent wine that overflowed into the night sky.

“Is that it?” Lemon asked.

Nami grinned. “Yep. That’s the Arena.”

There were a terrifying number of spectators present. At the center of the modified pitch, two humanoid weapons—arm slaves—were locked in combat. Both of them were Savages. Though far from the latest model, the Savage was still in use, active in civil wars all over the world. They had been so heavily mass-produced that they were sometimes called the world’s most common AS.

One, colored an eye-rending fluorescent pink, was the archetypal Rk-92 model; this was the relatively newer Savage that used a gas turbine engine powered by jet fuel. The other, painted with black-and-yellow tiger stripes, was an Rk-91, from the first Savage line. Its basic specs were roughly the same as the 92’s, but it used a diesel engine instead. There were quite a few of them out

in the world, as well.

Fluorescent pink-and-tiger pattern—with coloring as far from military camouflage as could be imagined, the two machines grappled, punched, and kicked each other to the frenzied cries of the crowd.



The pink one got a running start, then leaped. Its heavy body hung in the air for a moment, right before it channeled its incredible weight into a dropkick to the opponent's neck.

Contact was made, and sparks flew. The tiger-striped model flew back, its head hanging on by a thread as it slid twenty meters across the concrete. It collided with a mountain of water-filled barrels that ringed the battlefield, thoroughly deluging its surroundings before coming to a stop.

A siren blared out to signify victory. Cheers and boos from the spectators washed over the stadium like a storm, and scraps of paper flew through the air.

"Winner, Bloody Queen!" The announcer's voice echoed through the stadium.

Lemon, from the spectators' seats, scowled as he heard that. "'Bloody Queen'? That neon pink frog?" *How's that color supposed to be bloody*? he wondered. *It looks more like a porno queen.*

Nami, sitting beside him, shrugged. "They probably couldn't find the exact right shade. And anyway, it's all about... style, you know?"

"Ahh. Still, it seems..." *Violent*, he finished to himself. Firearms were off-limits, naturally, but outside of that, it was an 'anything goes' situation. It was hard to believe that the operator inside could remain of sound body after a thrashing like that.

Indeed, when finally exhumed from his tiger-striped AS, the operator had to be carried off on a stretcher by the venue's medical staff. Even from afar, Lemon could tell that the man was limp, and that his left arm was bent at an unnatural angle.

He was surprised by how the ASes moved, too. The Savage's egg-like torso made the model look dumpy and slow, but their footwork had proved seriously impressive. They seemed to move with even greater speed and agility than even human pro wrestlers.

Yes, something like this would make for a great story indeed.

"Very impactful," he commented.

"Right?" Nami looked a bit smug for some reason. "Nobody knows who

started it, but it's basically pro wrestling with decommissioned ASes from the war."

"They're former military weapons? I'm surprised that's not illegal."

"Oh, it's *crazy* illegal, but the police look the other way," she told him. "Maybe the promoters bribe them or something, I dunno. I mean, no one's even really sure which country or what faction the police here actually answer to, anyway."

"Ah-ha," said Lemon.

Namsac sat at a key point in a region located on the border between three different countries. It had spent years ravaged by civil war and border disputes until UN leadership had negotiated a ceasefire. Still, the treaty's ambiguous terms had left control of the city itself up in the air. It did guarantee that no country's military was allowed to station troops there, but that fact really just added to the confusion.

Still, as a trading hub, Namsac had become a nexus for flows of cash and people, which was why it was so bustling with activity. Real control in the city wasn't decided by politicians or the military, but by whoever had the most money.

"As you can see," Nami went on, "the Arena does big business. At first it was just for all the Savages left abandoned in Cambodia, but now we've got old ASes from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa pouring in. We get French-made Mistrals, German Draches, English Cyclones, and American Bushnells. Lots of others, too. You can find anything here. It's like a World's Fair."

Lemon glanced suspiciously at Nami as she rattled off the AS names. "You know an awful lot about it."

"Hah! Of course I do. I'm a team owner!"

"Uh?"

"I lead an awesome team with an AS of my own," Nami said proudly, puffing out her chest.

Lemon stared for a moment, then shook his head and turned to leave. "Oh,

for the love of...”

“What?! Don’t you believe me?”

“Of course I don’t. You’re a little girl who shakes tourists like me down for money in the streets. There’s no way you own a robot like that.”

“But I do!”

“Sell the robot, then,” he suggested. “It’ll probably fetch you tens of thousands.”

“Ugh. So unreasonable! The money’s for the hunk-of-junk’s replacement parts! And I only have two hours to get them!” Nami begged.

“Replacement parts? Two hours?”

“Yeah! Follow me, c’mon!” Nami started walking again, pulling Lemon by the arm.

As they cut through the crowd, he could hear her muttering, “So unreasonable”... It seemed to be her favorite phrase.

“Hey, now...” Though baffled, Lemon didn’t try especially hard to fight her. Of course, he didn’t intend to pay her four thousand dollars—an utterly outrageous sum of money—but he was becoming rather curious about the girl herself. She really had saved him from that lowlife before, and she could have used her gun to extort money from him, but she didn’t. She was the first person he’d met in this town who didn’t seem completely motivated by greed.

On top of that, now she was claiming to own an AS. He wasn’t about to take her seriously, but she probably wouldn’t have made the claim without some basis in fact. His interest was piqued, and there was no way he could just brush her off and go back to his hotel room now.

“Where are we going?” Lemon questioned.

“To our team’s paddock. We’re going on soon,” Nami said with particular intensity.

She led him to the field portion of the former soccer stadium. The outer circumference was made up of paddocks; these were spaces devoted to

maintenance. The area, cordoned off by walls of scrap steel and sheet iron, formed a ring around the central arena. It was where machines waiting to go on could run their final tune-ups and refuel.

The air was full of a particular smell; a combination of jet fuel, diesel, machine oil, and other unknown chemical substances. Burning metal, too—though, as he looked around, Lemon didn't see much respect for fire prevention in the area.

The noise was also incredible; a head-pounding cacophony of jackhammers, drills, buzzsaws, and hammers. There was also the humming of compressors and generators, and the roar of the diesel and gas turbine engines that powered the machines themselves.

"Here it is!" Nami shouted over the commotion, leading Lemon into one of the paddocks.

An AS was parked beneath chains and cranes, which dangled from the steel girders above them. It was currently on its hands and knees. Parts of its back armor had been removed, and three mechanics were messing around inside of it with power tools in hand.

"Well? Pretty great, huh?!" she insisted.



Lemon had to disagree; the AS was in an awful state. Model-wise, it was a Savage like many others he'd seen, but it was easy to see that this one was a hunk of junk. Many parts had damage that wasn't being treated. There was a broken eye that hadn't been restored; the armor on one arm was torn and wrapped in packing tape to keep it in place; oil leaked from its joints into black puddles. The hard points, antennas, hooks and other delicate bits had all been destroyed. It didn't seem to have much going for it at all.

"Looks bad," he admitted honestly.

"Okay, so maybe it's in rough shape," Nami said, clearly annoyed by his frank appraisal. "But with a little spit and polish, it'll work just fine! We'll swap out the muscle packages in the right arm and the right thigh, get some new hydraulics lines, fix the broken torque converter..."

"That's a lot of work. Can you do it all in time?"

"Yes! We just need the money!" Nami said, balling up her fists and raising her voice.

Just then, a mechanic shouted at her from the back of the AS. "Hey, Nami!" The man was Caucasian, and looked a bit over thirty. His accent suggested German or Austrian origins.

"What is it, Ashe?!"

"We've done all we can here! We need a number 51 pipe and fresh shock absorbent to do any more! Have you got the money yet?" Ashe asked impatiently.

"It's on the way! This monsieur here is gonna pay!" she shouted back. "Just give me a few minutes!"

"Oh! Thanks, monsieur! Just make it fast!" Ashe went back to work, without even a proper glance at Lemon.

Lemon, though, responded indignantly. "Hey!"

"What?"

"I never said I was paying! I only just got here!"

“The market near the arena is full of parts,” Nami whispered, nodding keenly. “But there’s a team with all the parts we’re missing, and they said they’d trade them immediately for cash.”

“Exactly four thousand dollars in cash?” Lemon asked, catching on.

“Yeah. And that’s where you come in. Please, be our sponsor!”

“I can’t give you money I don’t have!” he told her.

“It’ll be fine! You can do an in-depth story on our team! It’ll be a great scoop! Might even earn you a Peanuts Prize!”

“You mean Pulitzer Prize.”

“Yeah, that! So fork over the four thousand!”

“No. Even if I did write an article about you, it would only net me about four hundred, tops,” he said coldly.

Nami turned her eyes down and sighed. “Fine...” Then, seeming to summon up her courage, she slunk up to him, slipped her hand into his, and traced her other hand along his side. This left her chest, braless and covered only by a tank top, pressed up against his torso. “How about a night with me, then?” she suggested brazenly. “That should cover it, right? I’m worth ten thousand, easy, but I’ll give you a discount.”

“Why would I want that?!” Lemon protested. “I don’t go for underage girls, especially ones covered in oil and smelling like gasoline! And four thousand for one night is only for high-priced call girls!”

“I’m scared, to be honest... But you seem nice, and I know you’ll be gentle...”

“Listen to what I’m telling you!”

“Tsk. So unreasonable.” Nami clicked her tongue, changing moods on a dime. “This is a good offer from a cute girl, y’know? I’ve got men asking for it every damned day. Or are you... you know?”

“‘I know’... what? I’m not gay, and I don’t have ED, if that’s what you’re asking,” Lemon said.

“I see! So you’re a sheep ’n’ chickens man, huh?”

“Why would you assume that?! Darn it!” Lemon mussed up his hair.

Then Nami brought her lips close to his ear, coaxing. “Seriously, though. If we win, we can pay you back the four thousand and then some. I mean it.”

Lemon side-eyed her suspiciously from close proximity. “Hmm. The odds must be pretty stacked against you, then, huh? Which means you’re a huge underdog.”

“We can win! Our machine’s not perfect, sure, but we’ve got an awesome operator!”

“Oh?”

“His name’s Rick. He’s a lifelong veteran who used to pilot ASes for the US Marines. They called him the Jungle Eagle. He’s danced with death on a thousand battlefields, and he’s destroyed over ten ASes! He’s really, really good, but circumstances led him here to Namsac,” Nami continued, rambling on about things that weren’t exactly relevant. “No matter how crummy the machine, with Rick as the operator, we’ll win for sure!”

“Are you sure about that?”

“It’s true! I’m telling you, he—”

“We’ve got a problem, Nami!” Just then, a young man ran to the paddock. It was a member of the maintenance crew. His face was pale and sweat-streaked, and his expression was dire.

“What is it?”

“It’s Rick...”

“Rick” was slumped over a toilet in a corner of the arena’s bathroom. He’d apparently been dead when they found him. He’d been stabbed in the back with a knife—they must have hit him right in the kidney. He must have died before he could even cry out.

They hadn’t caught the culprit. The one who discovered him had said that when he arrived in the bathroom, he’d caught sight of “a man with scars over the right side of his face.” It was a vague description, but it was enough for

Lemon and Nami to know who it had been—Dao.

As they waited for the police to arrive, Nami remained silent, kneeling next to the corpse of the operator, who lay on the floor, covered in a tarp. Lemon couldn't exactly leave now, so he just stood behind her silently.

Between all the strange encounters and odd conversations of the day, he'd completely forgotten that while Namsac was a bustling hub of activity, it was also dangerous. This was a place where human life was considered to be worth less than spit, and everyone around you would just accept that as normal.

"If I'm gonna be real," Nami muttered, "I never liked Rick very much. I hired him because he was good, but he was still a shithead. He treated us like crap, and the second he had money he'd go into town to spend it on underage girls. He was constantly pawing my tits and my ass, and it almost came to assault a few times, too. He was a total freaking scumbag. But... you know?" Nami was trembling. "He's not someone I wanted to see dead." She patted the forehead of the corpse through the tarp, then stood up and made a beeline out of the bathroom.

Lemon followed her quickly. "Where are you going?"

"The paddock. We need to get out there."

"But he was your operator, wasn't he?"

"Yeah," she agreed. "I'll pilot instead."

"Do you have any experience?"

"Not in combat. But I can handle it well enough."

"But you haven't even finished the maintenance—"

"Don't worry about the money now. I can get it to walk, at least, if I forget the right arm and use the rest of our cash on hand. I'll make it work." Nami kept walking. In her anger, she seemed to have completely abandoned the idea of pestering Lemon for the four thousand dollars.

"Hey, Nami," a man called to her as she approached their paddock. It was Dao, the ex-soldier who had assaulted Lemon in the alley, accompanied by a few members of his gang.

So he's involved with the Arena too... Lemon mused.

"I heard Rick got his stupid ass stabbed to death," Dao continued. "Scary story. Dangerous town." As Nami glared at him wordlessly, Dao made a slow approach, and his scar-torn right cheek warped further in a smile. "I told you that you'd pay, remember? Not that I ever liked you from the start."

"Then you should've come after *me*!" she shouted.

"Yeah? Well, I never liked that American either. He was always running his mouth and pissing me off."

"You disgusting pig!"

"So, gonna forfeit the match or go in there yourself? Either way, more fun for me. I'll make sure to give you a good time. See you, then." Dao left with that parting remark, laughing as he went.

Even as Nami stood there, stock-still, Lemon spoke up hesitantly. "Hey, Nami. Is... the one you're going to fight..."

"Yeah," she said grimly. "It's Dao's team. And they have a pretty good machine."

"But he's crazy! He just killed a man over something that trivial... If you don't call off the match, he'll kill you, too!"

"I can't do that!" Nami shouted desperately. "I need to win and make money. I have to. If I don't..." She stopped herself, wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes with her wrist, and headed for the paddock. "Sorry to bother you, monsieur. Like I said, I don't need the four thousand anymore."

"Wait a minute," he protested. "You're looking a little desperate here."

"Maybe I am. But I have to do all I can."

"Stop it. It's dangerous."

"I know," Nami said flatly.

There was no reasoning with her. Unable to bring himself to accept it, Lemon followed Nami into the paddock. Ashe and the other mechanics looked depressed. They raised their ashen faces to her, as if expecting the worst. Nami

nodded to confirm it, and they all let out deep sighs.

A heavy silence followed. The sounds that filled that silence—ASes clashing on the pitch, the cheers of the audience beyond—just seemed to kick them while they were down.

The truth was inescapable: Dao was the operator they were about to face. She'd said he was ex-military, so he must be fairly skilled. There was no way this girl, a standin pilot for a rustbucket machine, could possibly stand a chance. Her machine would be bashed around and destroyed, and she'd end up humiliated at best, killed at worst. There was no way he could let it happen.

Just then, an almost inappropriately calm voice broke through the atmosphere of despair. "Is Rick here? I'm an old acquaintance of his..." They looked up and saw a young man of East Asian descent standing at the entrance to the paddock.

He was probably Chinese, Korean, or Japanese. Medium build, medium height, dressed in cargo pants and a black T-shirt. He carried a worn knapsack on his shoulders. His hair was black and disheveled, hanging over a sullen expression that was punctuated by a tight frown. There was a small scar on the left side of his chin.

He wasn't simply young; he looked like he was still a boy. He might have been the same age as Nami. But... there was none of the shiftlessness or immaturity typical of boys of that age in his tightly controlled expression.

The most striking things about him were his eyes; although he was probably in his teens, he had the eyes of a seasoned veteran at least twice his age. They shone with the light of unwavering will, always focused on a single point, while still perfectly aware of the whole of their surroundings.

"Where's Rick?" the young man asked again.

"He died. Just now, actually. Knifed in the back in the john," Nami muttered in annoyance.

The young man's eyes widened slightly, and a wrinkle appeared on his brow. "I see. I was always warning him to watch his back... a shame." Despite the words of regret, there was no particular surprise or sorrow in his tone. It

seemed he was likely—no, almost certainly—used to this kind of thing.

"Who are you?" Lemon asked.

"An acquaintance of his," the young man responded. "We were mercenaries in a civil war together three years ago. I heard he was a fighter here, so I came to see him."

"Oh, yeah?" Nami said tiredly. "Sorry, but it's like I said... If you came to shoot the shit with an old friend, you're out of luck. Get going already."

"We weren't especially close."

"Then what did you want?"

"I came to become a fighter in the Arena," the young man told her. "It seems insensitive to call this 'perfect timing,' but would you consider hiring me in his place?"

Nami and the mechanics stared in disbelief for a few seconds. "You? You can work an AS?"

"A little," he said modestly.

"A little... Whew." Nami smiled sarcastically, and glared at the young man. "You know, we see it a lot around here. Young guys like you come in, acting like hotshot AS pilots... but these aren't like the super robots you see in manga. They're complicated machines, former military weapons. Fighting in one covers you in bruises. Most people get seasick and barf their first time in. You end up with sprains and broken bones. It's beyond what some half-baked amateur can handle. You get it? Go home and watch TV, kiddo."

He can't be much younger than you, Lemon thought, but he opted not to say it.

"Hmm..." The young man stepped into the paddock to peer intently at the old Savage that had been left out for maintenance.

"Hey, keep your eyes off that! And your grubby hands, too!" The young man had begun grasping at the arm's frame and armor plates, as if to test their sturdiness. Nami, having lost her temper, strode up to him and seized his shoulder. "I said, knock it off!"

“Are you sending this machine into the fight?” he asked, ignoring Nami’s hostile attitude.

“Yeah! You got a problem with that?!”

“No... It could be made competitive very quickly,” the young man said. “But it will be difficult. Even for someone like Rick, it would have been difficult...”

“Big talk,” she retorted. “What do you know about this machine?”

“This machine?” The young man stepped away from the AS and began an emotionless explanation. “This is a first-edition Rk-91. They weren’t given a particular model number. Only about 130 were produced, a small number compared to the 91M and 92M that became popular for export later. The lack of a gas turbine engine gives it a weight and output inferior to the 92, but that’s only relevant for high-level combat maneuvers. The frame strength is superior to that of the 92, which gives it a considerable advantage when dealing in pure melee combat. Higher weight at the extremities can make the torque difficult to manage, but that issue can be solved with a few software alterations. Nothing a skilled operator can’t compensate for.

“The main problem with the machine is its cooling system. From what I can see, you’re intentionally using all 91 parts. Don’t. Common knowledge is that it doesn’t get along well with the more readily available cooler for the 92, but if you’re only turning it on for fifteen minutes at a time, that’s not an issue. In addition, it’s far more cost-effective; the money you’re devoting to that would be better spent purchasing mint-condition muscle packages. In a competition like this, explosive power should be your first priority.”

Lemon barely understood a word of the young man’s string of dizzying specialist jargon. But Nami’s reaction, her eyes opening in surprise, made it clear that the young man’s words were all right on the money.

“Hey...” In fact, she looked a little self-conscious, her face turning red.

Maybe he knows even more than she does? Lemon thought to himself.

“You think you’re pretty smart, huh?” Nami said, laying into him suddenly, “But that machine’s really important to us! And you—”

“Of course. I can see you’ve worked very hard to maintain it,” the young man

acknowledged, his tone absolutely genuine. “Just seeing an original intact 91 is a surprise; most people would have stripped it for parts ages ago.”

“I th-think you’re just a nerd who memorized a bunch of trivia. Quit acting so smart, you amateur—”

“I’m not an amateur,” the young man quipped. “I’m a specialist.” There was nothing argumentative or defensive in his tone. He simply said it, like it was a statement of fact. That, more than anything, made his words sound persuasive.

“Hey, Nami...” Ashe the mechanic said. “What’s the call here? This kid wants to fight. Maybe we should let him.”

Nami didn’t seem capable of refusing him out of hand. In fact, she appeared to be completely lost at sea. The kid’s explanation must have proven to her that he wasn’t a total novice, and there wasn’t any time to lose. Even if they got the parts they needed immediately, the final adjustments would still come down to the wire.

Most importantly, she didn’t trust her own skill. If she went out there herself, she’d be eating pavement for sure. Which meant they had nothing to lose by gambling on this boy who’d appeared out of the blue. It was natural that she’d be so strongly divided.

Eventually...

“Okay, fine! Might as well try it!” Nami said, as she mussed up her hair and glared at the young man. “Yeah, fine. We don’t have an operator right now. If you want to do it, you can.”

“Good.” The young man nodded. He didn’t smile, but Lemon sensed the slightest trace of amusement in his blank expression.

“But the machine’s in awful shape!” she said defensively. “We don’t have any money. No parts, either. So don’t blame me if it falls apart on you.”

“Understood.”

“Er, about that...” Hesitantly, Lemon spoke up.

“What now? Are you still here?”

“Unfortunately,” Lemon said ruefully. “But I just remembered something. If

three thousand will cover it, I might be able to spare that."

"Huh?" Nami stared at him, dumbstruck.

Her surprise was only natural; Lemon could barely believe the words coming out of his own mouth. "If I use all my cashback allowances on my credit card... I might be able to cover it. Is there an ATM nearby? I'll withdraw the money right now."

"That would be great, but... you sure?" Nami asked, still in disbelief. "You seemed pretty reluctant before."

Lemon winked at her with all the pretension he could muster. "I'll get it back if you win, right? Though if you lose... I won't be able to afford a ticket home. Still, nothing wrong with gambling big now and then, right?"

"No, the odds are in our favor," the young man whispered in reply.

Lemon laughed. "Maybe they are. Let's do it, then."

"Thank you, monsieur!!" Nami's face melted into a smile, and she leaped onto him with a hug.

Lemon turned flustered as her show of affection nearly threw him off balance. "Oh, I almost forgot," he said as he turned to the new operator. "I'm Michel Lemon, a journalist. That's Nami. And you?"

"Rick called me Segal, but..." The young man thought a minute. "Sagara. Sagara Sousuke."

"Japanese?" Lemon guessed.

"Yes," the man said in a low voice, while gazing into the distance. "I came here looking for something."

Once Arena management had Sagara Sousuke registered as a substitute operator, Nami and the others started channeling all their energy into getting the machine patched up.

The maintenance crew had done an admirable job in the limited time they had, managing to scrape together the bare minimum of parts their machine would need to get it working properly. The subsequent movement tests

suggested it might actually put up a decent fight.

But as for whether the busted-up first-generation Savage could actually *win...*

Yeah, it's not gonna happen, thought Nami, the team's owner, with a sigh. She was using up whole rolls of packing tape to hold the plates of the upper arm in place. She'd known she didn't stand a chance going out there by herself, which was why she'd accepted Sagara Sousuke's offer in the first place. But still, she felt nervous.

"It's almost our turn. You done messing around yet?" Nami asked Sousuke. He was sitting in a corner of the paddock, which smelled of burnt metal, typing away at a beat-up old laptop. The screen was a black-and-white LCD, and the OS was a relic from five years ago. He'd asked the maintenance crew to rig it up, as the language used by first-generation Savage programming wasn't compatible with modern software. "Hey! You ready or not?" she prompted again.

"Almost," Sousuke said, still messing with the dry lines of code on the screen.

Just then a violent crunch of metal echoed from the central arena, followed by a peal of cheers and applause. A fanfare played and the announcer named a winner.

The match preceding theirs had ended.

"Next combatants! Get ready!" a member of the staff shouted. Whether he'd heard him or not, Sousuke pulled the floppy disk out of the PC, stood up slowly, and leisurely began to work out his shoulders.

"You heard him, right?" Nami said. "We're the next match. Last chance to bail out if you want to."

Sousuke held the floppy disk out to her. "I was swapping out the motion manager's registry and CF65 data for this."

She looked at him, confused. "What in the..."

"I'll get ready now," he told her, while pulling a black leather jumpsuit out of his nearby knapsack. No, it wasn't a jumpsuit—it was an AS operator's uniform. The fabric was thin but sturdy-looking, with a matte black finish; the only color came from red lining on the shoulder pads and thighs. Sousuke removed his

cargo pants, then slid the uniform over his underwear as easily as a duck took to water.

“I’ve never seen an operator’s uniform like that before...” Nami observed.

Sousuke didn’t bother responding. He zipped the suit up, fastened its pads in place, and adjusted the neck ring cushion.

“Are you sure you can win?”

“I believe I can,” he told her.

“You know what the opponent’s machine is, right?” Nami asked incredulously. “It’s a first-generation, but it’s a freaking M6!”

Dao’s team ran a machine called an M6 Bushnell, which was an American-made machine. That made it a rare sight in the Arena. It was older than the now-popular M6A1, but its power and endurance still greatly exceeded that of Nami’s Savage. Dao’s team was well-funded, and they could afford all the best parts and fuel. Not to mention their superior operator...

She hated to admit it, but Dao was good. His record up til now was fourteen wins, three losses—the latter all being forfeits caused by mechanical issues.

He’d also killed two of his opponents in the ring. One had been an accident due to a breakdown in the shock absorbent system, but the other, rumors said, had been intentional; the dead man had had an argument about a woman with Dao and his gang a few days before the match.

There were two kinds of Arena matches: barefist, and melee weapons. That day, both machines were armed with bludgeons. Dao’s opponent was in an Rk-92 Savage, a relatively new machine, but Dao’s had the superior specs, which let it quickly knock the Savage over and tear its limbs off.

The match should have ended there. But despite the Savage’s total immobilization, Dao just kept slamming it in the side, in the place where the Savage kept its gas tank. The repeated hits warped the armor and ruptured the tank, which sent highly-flammable jet fuel leaking out. Despite the sounding of the siren to signal the end of the match, Dao kept hitting, until a spark ended up lighting the exposed jet fuel. The Savage had gone up like a box of oily rags, and the operator inside was roasted alive.

Dao's people insisted he just hadn't heard the match-end buzzer in his frenzy. The excuse was accepted, but everyone knew that he'd done it on purpose. In fact, a few days later, he and his men mockingly regaled the story to the patrons of a local bar.

Rick hadn't been the only operator Dao had assaulted before a match, either. Several rising Arena stars had ended up mugged or hit by cars, badly injured or killed. Namsac wasn't exactly a city of saints, but the behavior of Dao and his men was especially nauseating.

Still, he was good. That was one thing Nami had to admit. Even without all his dirty tricks and schemes, Dao and his machine were hard to beat. Even when she'd had Rick... she hadn't been entirely confident that he was good enough to beat him. Now the team could work their hardest, but with a substitute operator in the ring, anything could happen.

While Nami worried and fretted to herself, Sagara Sousuke seemed entirely composed. "All right," he announced. "I'll be back soon." Then he walked off towards the rusty Savage.

The old engine let out a dull rumble as Sousuke's Savage stepped toward the ring. The Arena burst into cheers and jeers. "Kill him!" shouted the people around them.

Wincing from the noise, with his camera in one hand, Lemon said, "Are you sure about this?!"

"About what?!" Nami leaned in to hear him, removing one ear from her beat-up foam-cushioned headphones.

"I'm getting nervous," he admitted. "If he dies, I'm partly responsible."

"So?" Nami said. She sullenly turned her eyes downward for a second, and shook her head. Then she spoke again, in a whisper, more to herself than to Lemon. "He might really rise to the occasion."

"Ahh. I'd love to hear why you think that. It would certainly set my mind at ease!"

"One, he was right about those Savage parts. Two, there's his build—long arms and legs, no wasted muscle, brawny around the neck and shoulders.

That's something you see in AS operators who see a lot of combat action."

"Oh?" Lemon asked curiously.

"And when he was getting changed, I saw he had thick calluses on his wrists and elbows," Nami continued. "Those are the parts that end up chafed if you use master arms for a long time. This Sousuke kid might actually—"

In that moment, Sousuke's Savage, on its way into the ring, tripped over its own feet and toppled. Nami fell silent as thousands of spectators roared in laughter and the Savage slowly picked itself up.

"Okay, so he just tripped," Lemon observed.

"I take it all back. He's hopeless." Nami pitched forward in her seat, cradling her head.

Sousuke's voice came in over the radio headsets that Nami and Lemon were both wearing. "Sorry. I think I have the hang of it now."

"Oh, yeah?"

The opposing team's AS also entered the ring. It was an orange M6 with monstrous eyes drawn on the armor of each shoulder. Decorative illuminations here and there on its body—probably replaced after each match—glittered extravagantly under the night sky.

The MC's announcement echoed through the venue. Dao's ring name was Ogre, just like their team's name. The Arena had its share of over-the-top ring names, but when you looked at Dao's record, it was clear that this one was no exaggeration. Meanwhile, Sousuke's ring name—also matching Nami's team name—was Crossbow.

"Crossbow? That old hunk of junk?"

"Yes. What's wrong with that?" Nami asked defensively. "A crossbow is a keen, powerful weapon you want to have at your side. It can take out a target in one blow." She had meant it as a genuinely powerful and heartfelt ring name, but as she felt Lemon's dubious gaze on her, she began to feel self-conscious.

But Sousuke said through the radio, "It's a nice name, though it can't beat an arbalest."

Being unfamiliar with that term, Nami just cocked her head in confusion.

The Ogre and the Crossbow faced each other down at the center of the pitch. There was a brief moment of silence before both engines started to rev up, snarling like threatened beasts. Wind from their exhaust pipes kicked up dust around them as they both hunched down low in preparation for a charge. Around them, the spectators' chants grew louder. The siren rang out, and a repurposed street light lit up, acting as a countdown.

Dao let out a mocking laugh through his external speakers. "I can't believe you really went for it. I dunno who's in there, but it ain't too late to beg for your life, get it?"

Sousuke said nothing to counter Dao's provocations. The Crossbow's external speakers were broken, anyway.

The shouting of the crowd continued: *Kill, kill, kill! Tear its arms off! Smash its head! Rip off its chestplate and drag the operator out!*

Nami found herself grasping the cross on her chest, and whispering, "Please," in a weak voice.

The countdown proceeded. *One. Zero.* An even louder siren rang out, and the electric signboard displayed the word "START," and the match began.

The two ASes charged each other immediately. The M6 had greater spontaneous power by far, and Dao's Ogre took off with the force of a raging bull. In contrast, Sousuke's Crossbow seemed to plod forward with an almost agonizing slowness. It was obvious which one would be sent flying when the two collided. Except...

The two machines didn't collide. As the Ogre went in for a powerful tackle, Sousuke's Crossbow suddenly pitched forward.

Did it trip? Nami wondered, and it seemed everyone else was thinking the same thing. But a split-second after the two machines passed each other, the Ogre slipped, lost its balance, and wound up in a somersault.

"What?!"

No—a half-somersault. As the Crossbow straightened up nonchalantly behind

it, Dao's Ogre cracked the back of its head against the ground below with an ear-splitting crash and a huge plume of dust.

This sudden turnaround had the entire arena in a hush.

The Bushnell just lay there, spread-eagled and still. No one could work out exactly what had happened; there was no sign of damage to Dao's machine. The quiet discussion in the stands lasted for about ten seconds. At last, the judges determined that the Ogre wouldn't be getting up again, and the Crossbow's victory was declared.

The spectators launched into cheers and cries of disbelief. The unexpected upset had the arena in pandemonium, and betting tickets went flying like confetti.

"What in the world?" Lemon whispered in confusion.

His words snapped Nami back to reality. She couldn't believe what she had just witnessed. "I think... the operator lost consciousness."

"Th-That easily?"

"Easily?" she scoffed. "Don't be stupid. ASes have a shock-absorbent system to protect operators from rough falls. They're designed to keep you safe, even during the equivalent of crashing a car into a wall at a hundred kilometers per hour. But..." she gulped. "If you get flipped that hard that fast, the dampeners can't keep up. It's like pushing down on a spring that's already completely compressed."

"So it can't absorb the shock?" Lemon asked.

"Yeah. But the only way you could *plan* something like that is with encyclopedic knowledge of both machines, plus a perfect sense of balance and masterful control. In other words..." It would take a truly exceptional operator to pull off. "He's good. He's *amazing*."

"Ah-ha."

Nami said it all bluntly enough, but what should have been joy at her win was overshadowed by a sense of shock, a fear of Sagara Sousuke, and a sensation like goosebumps rising on her skin. *Who is he?* was the main question on her

mind. Her original operator, the now-dead American pilot Rick, had been very good. He'd logged hundreds, thousands of hours of training with his military of origin.

But Sousuke was on another level. In all her time coming and going at the Arena, she'd never met an operator who could pull off something like that.

Sousuke turned her Savage's back on the cheering stands, and returned it to the paddock. His manner was completely nonchalant.

"It wasn't that impressive," Sousuke said, coming out of his machine to find himself surrounded by a beaming crew. "Operators as good as I am aren't that hard to find, if you know where to look."

"It was still amazing!" Lemon said, beaming with joy. He embraced Sousuke so hard that Nami thought he might lay a French kiss on him.

Nami remained silent for a moment, fighting with a tangle of feelings. "I guess I should say thanks," she said at last, sullenly. "So, thanks. You saved our butts today."

"Not an issue. More importantly..." Sousuke peered closely into her eyes.

"Wh-What?" Nami asked, and felt her heart skip a beat. She didn't find his gaze frightening. It was the opposite... there was something endearing about it. It was like a large, hungry dog begging for his favorite food.

"I want to know if you'll continue to employ me," Sousuke asked earnestly. "If you can guarantee lodging and three meals a day, I'll do what I can for you."

Nami saw no reason to refuse.

2: New World

Once everything was packed up for the night, Nami and the others headed to a nearby bar to celebrate. They treated the laborers they met there each to their favorite drink, drank a lot of Tiger Beer, played music, and made a ruckus. The handful of eccentrics who had actually bet on Crossbow stopped by the bar and congratulated them on the fight.

With the reality of the victory finally starting to sink in, Nami was in high spirits. “Ta-daa, drink up! It’s all on us today!”

“Yeah!!” The whole group, Lemon included, raised their glasses, rosy-cheeked. He’d only met these people today, but they already felt like old friends.

“Boy, Dao looked like a damn clown, falling on his ass like that!”

“The people who bet on him are furious. I saw a few talking about killing him.”

“He was one step away from his coveted Class A rank-up, too. Serves him right.”

They talked, they laughed, they drained their glasses and shoveled in food. The overwhelming nature of the upset had resulted in quite a handsome payout for the team. They’d earned enough to give Lemon his initial investment back, repair the Crossbow’s wrecked portions, and even buy quite a few high-quality new parts.

All was well. The future looked bright. There was no reason they shouldn’t celebrate. Lemon and the crew were belting out old folk songs and military anthems and having a grand old time, stomping on the cheap floorboards.

“Hey, boss! You get some good pictures? You’re gonna win the Peanuts Prize for sure, right?”

“Ahaha! Actually, I was so caught up in the match, I didn’t take a single picture!”

“Then I’ll let you get pictures of my wife! She’s gorgeous, by the way!”

“Ohh?”

The mechanic Ashe interrupted. “Liar. She’s eighty kilos! Gimme a break!”

“It might get you a Raspberry, at least!”

“Isn’t that for movies?”

“Who cares! Another round!”

Some distance away from the laughing and joking friends sat Sagara Sousuke, silent and alone in a corner of the bar, with a glass of mineral water in his hand.

The bar building was a cheaply made one, and its walls were peppered with large holes that had been patched with corrugated iron. The roof was in a similar state, and it probably leaked badly when it rained. Naked light bulbs dangled from the ceiling, and they flickered any time someone in the kitchen used the microwave.

The walls were thin, and decorated halfheartedly with a ragged old poster from some piece of Thai cinema; a replica of a landscape painting whose name she didn’t know; fake flowers and beads. They failed to keep out the sour stench from the adjacent alleyway. It was a pretty bad place all in all, but Sousuke didn’t seem bothered by it.

Nami left the merrymaking group behind and sat down quietly next to Sousuke, leaning back against the wall. “Enjoying yourself?” she asked.

“Affirmative,” Sousuke responded, taking a sip of his water.

“Your English is strange.”

“I hear that a lot.”

Nami laughed, but Sousuke showed no sign of hurt feelings. “You’re Japanese, right?”

“Yes.”

“Japanese Army?”

“No,” he answered. “I wouldn’t be old enough to join a proper military. And Japan does not have an ‘army,’ just an organization called the Self-Defense

Force.”

“How’s it different?” Nami wanted to know.

“I’m not sure; apparently it’s a constitutional issue,” he told her. “Because they lost the War.”

“Ahh.” She’d brought the topic up to break the ice, but it was taking her in a more boring direction than expected, so Nami changed the subject. “Where’d you learn to operate that thing, anyway?”

“Afghanistan,” Sousuke answered easily enough. “I started out in a first-generation Savage just like that one. That was six or seven years ago. After that, I traveled, and learned how to operate all kinds of machines. Mid-model Savages, Mistrals, Cyclones, Bushnells, Gernsbacks...”

“Gernsbacks?” she questioned. “You mean M9s?”

“No. Forget I said that.”

Nami looked at him in confusion.

The M9 Gernsback was a cutting-edge AS currently in development by the US military. They were extremely high-spec and extremely expensive, with power and maneuverability far beyond that seen in the second-hand machines that grappled in the Arena. Nami had read estimates of their data in specialist magazines, where even the most conservative speculations made them sound like absolute beasts.

Of course, she thought, a simple mercenary couldn’t have experience in something that cutting-edge. “You mentioned Afghanistan, right?” she said next. “Do they get a lot of Japanese migrants there?”

“No.”

“Then, how’d you end up there?”

“A variety of circumstances.”

“It’s pretty weird, though,” she mused. “You’re clearly the same age as me, but only national militaries would have Savages, right?”

“You’re misinformed,” Sousuke said. “Guerrillas frequently stole Soviet ASes

and used them for themselves. I've been an operator since the practice started."

"Oh, really? Wait, guerrillas? What was a Japanese kid doing as a guerrilla in Afghanistan—" Realizing that Sousuke's eyes were downcast, Nami stopped herself. "Sorry. I'm being kinda nosy, huh?"

"It's all right," he whispered, then looked at Nami. "May I ask you a question now?"

"What is it?"

"You're young. I know this city is exceptional in many ways, but it still can't be easy to take ownership of an AS. How did you acquire yours?"

It was an understandable question, and she'd been asked it many times before. Since she had no particular reason to hide it, Nami decided to be honest. "I found it, just outside my home village." It would have been just a year or two ago now, but to her it felt like decades. "It was sitting there on its butt like a dummy, blocking the water to the rice paddies. Diesel was leaking from the tank and doing damage to crops, too. Of course... most everyone in the village was dead or gone by then, anyway."

"The war?" he asked.

"Yeah. It was kind of a crossroads... government and insurgent armies from different countries, all coming and going. The village got burned and all its resources were raided. The men went off to become soldiers and never came back. The women... they ended up kidnapped and raped by other soldiers, or they went to the city to work to afford food. Kind of the standard deal, I guess."

"I'm impressed that you survived."

"I got lucky," Nami said. "I happened to be on an errand in the next village over when we were attacked. But when I got back..." The scene replayed itself in her mind. She'd thought she was ready to talk about it openly, but quickly realized that she wasn't.

A wrinkle formed on her brow, and she shook her head, trying to brush off the unexpected resurgence of that lurking nightmare. "That Savage had been left there by the people who burned half of our village to the ground. It had

taken some shots here and there, but it could still move, so I took it. The other survivors were pretty strongly against it, but...” Nami looked up at the ceiling. “But I wanted to rebuild the village.”

Those painful memories had never gone away: the faces of the people she knew so well, twisted in desperation; the expressions of despair in people who had no other recourse. “So I came here to Namsac. I mean, I know how little girls in the city usually earn their money... There’s no shortage of poor kids standing on street corners who’ll end up as shredded as old rags before they ever get the money they need. But the Arena changes things. You saw that today, right? If you can do it right, you can make a ton of money. Especially if you rise to Class A.”

“I see,” Sousuke observed neutrally.

“I’m gonna use the money I make here to fix up the spoiled fields and rebuild the roads and bridges,” Nami continued. “I’m sure the people will come back then. But most of all, I want to fix the school I used to go to. That’s my main goal right now.”

“School?”

“Yeah, the only school in the village. Bombs and ASes trashed it and killed my nice teacher, but it was a good school.”

“A good school...” Sousuke whispered. For some reason, he said the words in a melancholy tone, his eyes pointed downward. He seemed to be remembering a world he had once known but could never return to, somewhere far, far away.

“A good school, yeah,” Nami went on. “They even accepted a half-breed like me.”

“You’re half-Japanese?”

“Was it that obvious?”

“Your name did seem unusual,” Sousuke admitted.

“Apparently my father worked for a Japanese trading company or something. I never met him, but my mom told me about him. She died before the village was destroyed, stepping on a landmine.”

Sousuke took a drink, and whispered something in Japanese, but *hitonireki* was all that Nami could make out. “What?” she asked.

“I was just saying, everyone has a past.”

“That’s a nice saying. I like it.”

“It’s common sense.”

Nami grinned. “Yeah, guess so. Hey, Monsieur! Monsieur Lemon!” Nami cut off the conversation and shouted back to the rest of the gang. “Shouldn’t you be getting back to work? Like maybe start up on your article before you get too soused to write?”

“Aw, c’mon, Nami-san. Don’t pull the plug on us now,” Lemon laughed drunkenly. “Come over here, c’mon.” Now nicely plastered, he raised his glass and beckoned her over. “I’ll start on the research right now! Gimme your me-mur-seants! Nah, kidding! Sorry!”

The men all laughed. “Nice one, monsieur! We wanna hear too! Get her measurements!”

“Nah, can’t do that... I’m too much of a... mentlegen. But Nami-san, that AS? That robot you got... That I wanna hear about. That’s my article. You’ll help out, right?”

“Why don’t you ask Sagara?” she suggested. “I just told him the whole story.”

“Aw, Sagara-kun? No fair! You gotta tell me too! C’mon!” Lemon approached to hang off Sousuke, stinking of booze.

Sousuke just turned away with a scowl. “If you like, but... I wonder if you’ll still remember it by morning.”

The party ended in the middle of the night. Lemon was so drunk that he could barely walk straight, and the mechanic, Ashe, had to escort him to his hotel, while the rest of the crew went their separate ways.

Nami and Sousuke walked most of the way back together. There were fewer people in the entertainment district now, and once they got to a quiet park—it was a bit overrun with weeds—they would have to go their separate ways.

“We don’t have any more fights scheduled this week,” Nami said before they parted. “But we’ve got lots to do, starting tomorrow. We’ll need to buy parts and do maintenance, and you’ve got a lot to learn. Meet me in the hangar before noon, okay?”

“Roger.”

“Okay, good night.” Nami gave him an exaggerated salute, then parted ways with Sousuke and started to walk. She turned back in time to see him disappear into the cheap hotel past the dim street lamps. She had to walk a while longer, as the apartment she was living in was another four blocks south. It was a stuffy old place, but she couldn’t wait to get back. It had been a very eventful day, and Nami was exhausted.

She was far from the entertainment district now, and things were so quiet that the commotion of the day almost didn’t feel real. A dingy taxi drove past her. An old folk song drifted through its open windows, moving farther and farther away. She focused. She sensed someone behind her, and turned around. No one was there. No—

“Dangerous to walk around alone at night, y’know,” said a voice close to her ear. A man had come out of the alley next to the sidewalk and grabbed Nami’s arm. He had a powerful grip, and she couldn’t shake him off.

Nami struggled in shock. She could see the man’s face, distorted with a scar, in the dim light. His voice was sticky and familiar; it was Dao. Either he’d tracked her back from the bar, or he’d set up an ambush. There was a large plaster over his nose, and his head was wrapped in bandages—both injuries from the day’s fight.

Dao wasn’t the only one there. There were three other men—probably his mechanics—helping to surround her. They looked triumphant, as if they’d sprung a brilliant trap on a hundred skilled warriors, rather than randomly accosted a single young girl.



“You really gave it to me today, y’know. It’s time I thanked you. Know what I mean?”

Nami struggled in his grip.

“Oh, right. You had a gun, didn’t you? Where’d you hide it? Was it here? Hmm, or was it here?” He’d already found the small revolver in her cargo pants pockets, but he continued pawing at her backside, her thighs, and her crotch.

“Oh, there it is. Sheesh... A kid shouldn’t be walking around with something like this.” Dao unceremoniously screwed the revolver he’d taken from her into his own pants pocket.

“What is this, revenge for me showing everyone what a loser you are? You really are rotten to the core. You pig!” Nami’s voice trembled, a mixture of hatred, anger, and fear.

A sharp slap stung her cheek. She cried out. And another. She let out a weak groan.

“Let’s lay down some ground rules,” Dao snarled. “Every time you call me a loser or a pig or some disrespectful shit like that, I pop you one. It’s automatic. You piss me off, I hit you. In fact, I get to slap you any time the mood strikes me, even if you don’t say squat. Get it?”

Nami said nothing.

“I said back in the Arena that I don’t like you. But it ain’t really like that. Your neck gets me hot... See? Like this...” Dao grabbed her by the hair and yanked her head toward him. The hairs on her body stood on end as his tongue traced its way up her neck line.

Nami felt her lungs expand and a scream escape her throat.

“Mm, yummy. But don’t worry... That ain’t the end of it,” Dao assured her. “I’m gonna make you mine for real, even if I have to drug you to within an inch of your life.”

“No! I’d rather die—” Another slap. Nami winced in pain.

“Rules are rules, right? Hey, our ride’s here... Get in.” An old van approached, with Dao’s gang inside. As it parked beside them, one of his men immediately

opened the door to the back seat.

“Oh, one more thing,” he said. “That bratty operator you hired... I don’t know his name, but I sent someone else after him.”

Nami gasped.

“Don’t worry, I didn’t tell them to kill him. But... well, if he ends up dead like a dumbass with his head in some cheap hotel toilet, that ain’t my responsibility,” Dao said. “Though I feel bad for the cops. They’re overworked as it is.”

“You asshole! You pig! All he did was fight in the match! He didn’t do anything —” Sure enough, her defiance earned Nami two more blows to the face.

“Sure he did. He did this to me, right? He deserves what he gets. I bet he’s kissing a sticky toilet bowl right now, limbs flailing around, struggling to escape...” The men all cackled at Dao’s words.

Just then...

“Were you referring to me?” They turned to look over at the new voice, and saw Sagara Sousuke standing in the dim light of the streetlamps. “Dao, was it? I’m afraid it’s your friend who’s kissing the toilet right now.”

Dao stared at him, stunned. “What the...”

“Let her go, then get in your van and leave. I have greater priorities right now, so I’d prefer to avoid trouble.”

Dao’s warped face distorted even further as he laughed. “You think you can tell me what to do? You’ve got balls, kid. You shoulda run off while you had the chance...”

He should have, Nami thought. But despite that, she still wanted Sousuke’s help. Wrestling with these contradictory feelings, she shouted, “I-It’s dangerous. You probably should run...”

“I can’t do that. You are my employer,” Sousuke responded, unconcernedly.

Dao addressed his men. “Get him.”

Watching the men approach with knives and steel pipes in hand, Sousuke let out a sigh, long and deep. “I was hoping I’d have an easier time on my first day,”

he whispered, preparing himself.

There were four men in front of him, and two in the van. They weren't carrying guns, but they had knives and bludgeons. Several of them held their knives in a reverse grip, suggesting military training. Others held the pipes like baseball bats, releasing then gripping them with both hands. Your average street punks wouldn't hold them that way.

Nami knew that much, too. This region had been home to prolonged civil war and border disputes, which meant most of its young men had some training with weapons, and experience with practical killing techniques. This wasn't like some street fight in an otherwise peaceful country.

But maybe that was why Sousuke's fight with Dao and his men finished so quickly.

"Die!" Dao shouted.

With moves faster than the eye could see, Sousuke dodged the knife strike, grabbed the man's wrist, and snatched his weapon away. He twisted his opponent's arm, locked it behind him, and plunged the stolen knife into his neck.

The men gasped in shock. The knife was sticking out of his neck, fifteen centimeters below the ear, halfway down the blade. There wasn't much bleeding, and Dao was still alive. His deformed face became further twisted with fear and shock, and his wide-open eyes stared into nothing.

"I'd advise against moving," Sousuke said to Dao and the others. "His windpipe, his nerves, his carotid artery... I've avoided hitting any of them. But the slightest movement in any direction..."

"Erk?!" Dao choked.

"You know, don't you? The smallest adjustment of my hand, and either you drown in your own blood, or you spend the rest of your life confined to a bed." Nobody moved a muscle. The tropical air had been hot and humid, but suddenly, it felt ice cold. Sousuke said, "Leave her alone and never touch our team again. Promise me that, and I'll let you go. This is the best compromise I can offer to the people who killed Rick. Well?"

Dao opened his mouth.

“Promise carefully,” Sousuke warned him. “I don’t want to nick the artery.”

A cold sweat appeared on Dao’s face, and he spoke up hoarsely. “I... I promise. I won’t... mess with her... again...”

“Does that go for all of you?”

The men glanced at each other, terrified, and then spoke up rapidly, all together.

“Yeah, we promise.”

“You win.”

“Let Dao go.”

Sousuke scrutinized them carefully, one by one. But at last, he removed the knife from Dao’s neck. “Go.” He shoved him in the back. Dao tottered forward, and the men held him up and helped him into the car. One of them remained behind, dropping his hips and checking Sousuke for openings. But Sousuke’s guard was perfect as he stared at him intently. There must have been something terrifying in his glance, because the man swiftly backed off.

“Wh-Who the hell is that guy?” the man whispered. “G-Gives me the damned creeps...” With that line, which barely qualified as a parting shot, the men piled into the van. The second the door was closed, they drove off, accelerating towards the Namsac city center.

“Sorry,” Sousuke said to Nami once the taillights had disappeared into the night.

“Wh-Why are you apologizing?”

“I probably should have killed him. Even after that, I don’t think he’ll back off,” Sousuke whispered casually, and Nami thought she saw something different in his expression than before.

If they’d been mere street hoodlums looking for action in an otherwise peaceful city, they would have driven off cursing at him. They wouldn’t have recognized how strong Sousuke really was. But Dao’s men and Nami, all raised in the fires of war here in Namsac, could see it all too well: Sousuke knew what

he was doing.

He had extensive experience in real-life combat. He'd killed more than a few people in his time. It was in more than the way he moved and spoke; it was his aura of complete calm when performing such violence. There wasn't a trace of tension about him, and that, more than anything, was what made his strength clear.

"I dunno," Nami said, her heart gradually slowing from its kettledrum pace. "They're pretty stupid, but I think you got your point across."

"Even so, I'm only one man," Sousuke said. "There's only so much I can do by myself." There was something strangely self-recriminating in his tone.

"I'm understanding you less and less as we go... You sound almost self-defeating," she observed.

"Do I?"

"But thanks, regardless. You saved me," Nami said genuinely, and flashed him a carefree smile. Normally she liked to put on a front around others, telling them, "Please, I don't need help," but she surprised even herself with the ease with which she'd been able to thank him.

"You are my employer. I have to protect you."

"Is that all it is?"

"It's not just that," Sousuke said. "You're a nice girl." He said it with such sincerity that Nami felt her heart skip a beat.

"Huh? Wh-What does that mean?"

"It means you're a kind person," he explained. "It occurred to me when you told me your story in the bar."

"Oh, yeah?" Nami whispered, feeling a little let-down. "Yeah, I really don't get you. You're kind of a weirdo."

"Am I?"

"Yeah. Major weird."

"I've been told that before."

“I’ll bet!” She let out a big laugh, then said, with a bit of smugness, “Well, it’s dangerous to travel at night. Will you walk a beautiful, delicate girl like me back to her apartment?”

“A beautiful, delicate girl?”

“Got a problem?”

“No, I have no objections to that statement. I’ll walk you there.” Sousuke moved to take the lead, but she curled her arm around his instead.

“Thanks,” she giggled.

“Not an issue.” Sousuke’s reply sounded as indifferent as ever. It was hard to tell if he even realized that she was pressing her chest against his side as he walked Nami back to her apartment, then headed back for his own cheap hotel without further comment. She hadn’t really wanted him to come up with her, but she still felt unsatisfied, somehow.

Ah, well, Nami thought. It had been a busy night, and she was still pretty worked up. She should cool off and get to sleep. She took off her clothes, had a cold shower, then curled up in her small bed in just her underwear and her tank top. A few minutes after the lights went off, the doorbell rang.

Dao’s men again? she wondered timidly as she answered it, with the door chain still on. But the person standing in front of the door was Sousuke. He was carrying his knapsack, a large bag, and various other heavy luggage.

“Wh-What is it?” she asked shakily.

“I was kicked out of my hotel,” he told her. “I need to stay with you.”

“Huh?” Apparently Sousuke had left one of Dao’s men half-dead in the motel bathroom, and when he came back, they had thrown him out.

“B-But... Look, I... I live by myself.” Remembering that she was basically naked, Nami went red and hid behind the door.

“That was part of my consideration as well,” Sousuke responded, unfazed. “Dao and his men could take advantage of that if they decide to try anything. I can serve as your bodyguard. You can subtract the lodging fee from my pay.”

“Um, but still, it feels...”

“You don’t like the idea?”

“I didn’t say that,” Nami protested. “But... it’s kind of weird, right?”

Sousuke nodded silently. “I don’t fully understand, but it appears you don’t want to be alone with me?”

“Huh? Um, no... well, I guess, yeah...”

Sousuke nodded in response to her vague yet flustered ramblings. “Understood. Prepare a change of clothes, then.”

“Huh?”

“We’ll go to Lemon’s place,” he explained. “His hotel is far away, so if anything were to happen, it would be difficult to help him. You come, too.”

“What? Why do I have to—”

“You can stay if you prefer.”

“Oh, fine.” In the end, Nami was forced to fight off sleep while they walked a kilometer through Namsac, all so she could stay in Lemon’s room.

The next morning, Michel Lemon woke from his drunken stupor to find Nami sleeping peacefully next to his bed in her underwear. “Oh, you’ve gotta be kidding me!” he muttered. Had he gotten so drunk that he’d propositioned an underage girl?!

Lemon rolled out of bed in a panic, and let out another perfectly reasonable scream when he discovered Sagara Sousuke, who was curled up underneath the bed, and sleeping soundly. His eyes were half open, and he was clutching a knife in one hand.

Once all the misunderstandings had been cleared up, Sousuke, Nami, and Lemon decided to live together in the same hotel room. This was less at Sousuke’s insistence and more at Nami’s; she couldn’t fully get over her fear that Dao’s men would come after her, and Lemon’s hotel was in a nice part of town. In other words, shady types would stand out more here. The fact that the room was comfortable didn’t hurt, either.

“I’m a lovely young lady, after all,” Nami said to Lemon. “And I’m still Catholic,

y'know? I can't room with a guy one-on-one. So I thought if there were three of us, it might reduce misunderstandings."

"Don't worry. I'm not into you like that at all."

"Then you wanna kick Sousuke out so it's just me and you?" she suggested innocently.

"I don't want that either."

"I knew it," Nami sniggered, "you're a perv."

"Why would you say that?!" Lemon asked defensively.

"C'mon, what's the big deal? It's only for a little while," Nami told him. "Anyway, nice to meet ya, roomie. I'm gonna take a shower now." Then she headed for the bathroom before he could even try to object.

Seeing that Sousuke had silently begun to unpack his own things in the center of the room, Lemon slumped over in disappointment. He'd been planning to stay in this city for over a month, but it seemed he was going to spend the entire time with Sousuke and Nami as roommates.

And so, the three began their life together: when it was time to sleep, Nami took the bed, Lemon had the sofa, and Sousuke hid under the bed.

No one knew quite how things had worked out that way, but they had.

●

Sousuke's time on the team began in earnest. As for Lemon, though he was acting in the role of sponsor, Nami and the rest of the crew still bossed him around and made him do odd jobs.

Matches at the arena usually happened at night. The busiest times were the weekends, but some of the smaller matches for Class B and below happened on weekdays.

Their team, Team Crossbow, had taken a week to fully refurbish the broken-down Rk-91 Savage and had managed to get it into fairly decent shape. They'd swapped out the worn muscle packages that served as the AS's muscular system, replaced the pockmarked armor with fresh plates, and renewed the parts of the hydraulic system that were leaking too badly to fix.

They even had enough money to buy paint and give the machine a proper touch-up. But while everyone else was arguing about what color it should be, Sousuke quietly returned from shopping and pulled out two cans of paint.

“What’s that?” Nami asked.

“Watch,” was all Sousuke said. Then he poured the paint and solvent into the trigger airbrush’s cup, affixed his mask and goggles, and began painting the Savage in the hangar before anyone could object. He styled it in matte white, with a deep navy blue reserved for the shoulders, the joints, and the forehead.

Nami, who was eating lunch with the others while they watched him work, looked up at the nearly complete “white Savage” and cocked her head in confusion. “Well, it’s tasteful, but... doesn’t it look a little weak?”

“These were the colors of the last machine I piloted,” Sousuke explained.

“Ahh...”

“It’s not weak at all. It’s in excellent company.”

“Oh... yeah?”

“Yes. And if you don’t mind, I’d like to call it Al Junior,” Sousuke said, and then nodded to himself with satisfaction as he gazed at the white Savage—a “walking frog” dressed up in the colors of a hero. Then he noticed the dubious look of the others and suddenly felt extremely self-conscious. “Is it too strange?” he asked.

“Yeah,” they all replied in unison.

They insisted that they would repaint it, but Sousuke wouldn’t yield. Because it was unusual for such a reticent man to assert himself to this degree, and also because no one else really cared that much about the Savage’s paint job, the group acceded to his whims in the end.

Later on, Lemon whispered to Nami, “He’s got a cute side, huh? Those colors make it look just like the main robot in an anime I saw as a kid.”

“Huh? What was it called?”

“*Goldorak*.” He was referring to an adaptation of *UFO Robot Grendizer*, a Japanese anime that had been a big hit in France long before ASes had ever

been invented.

“It doesn’t look like that at all,” Nami informed him.

“Y-You think?” Lemon blinked. “Wait, you know it?!”

“We got it over here, too. Anyway, forget the paint job; we’ve got work to do! The next match is tomorrow. We gotta get it perfect before then!” Picking up a wrench in one hand, Nami turned back to the reborn Savage.

They won the next day’s match easily. And the match after that, and the one after that. In less than a month, Team Crossbow had become the talk of Namsac.

Alarms blared, the engine’s roar shook the cockpit, and violent vibrations assaulted him from all sides.

Sousuke could see a close-up of the second-generation AS he was fighting on his screen. It had blocky armor and a slender silhouette, but no proper head; just a small sensor turret that protruded from the body, like you’d see on a tank or an armored vehicle.

The AS—a Mistral II—approached him, swinging its large hammer. Sousuke smoothly moved to the side, dodging the blow by a hair.

He moved his arms and legs as the scenery blurred past. Blinding lights shone above, and the fervent screams of the audience pierced through the gaps in his armor. The machine faithfully recreated the movements he executed on its master arms, sweeping the leg of the Mistral II and causing it to stumble.

Then, as it tried to get its balance, Sousuke grabbed it with his machine’s left hand and pulled the Mistral II down in the opposite direction. With an ease that was almost amusing, he slammed his opponent down on the ground back-first. The hit wasn’t especially powerful, but it had probably done a number on the operator.

While the Mistral II was lying helpless on its back, Sousuke swung his own machine’s melee weapon—a large ax—down at it mercilessly. Despite the name, his ax wasn’t a cutting weapon; it was basically just another hammer.

A grinding sound shook the air around them as white smoke began to pour from the Mistral II's abdomen. Sousuke had destroyed an important part of the generator, which had immediately overheated and shut down.

"Winner, Crossbow!" The Arena's crowd cheered at the declaration. The white Savage didn't respond to their fervor, but just quickly returned to its paddock.

Sousuke could hear the excited voices of Nami and the others through his radio. *Great job! You're the real deal! We're almost to Class A!* and the like.

"Not an issue," he responded simply, and returned his machine's output level to 'idle.' *Not an issue.* That was genuinely how he felt; nothing more and nothing less. No matter how much praise Sousuke received, it didn't affect his emotional state.

I barely even have to do anything, was the main thought on his mind. This was a sport and nothing more. It didn't reach the feeling of real combat—that sense of being thrown into a perilous environment and fighting for every inch of life, while every second stretched out for eternity.

What am I doing here? he wondered. He'd only fought a few matches, but impatience was already beginning to churn inside him. He didn't have time for these games.

Even so, Sousuke knew that this was an important step in his fight. He'd come to this town from Tokyo to participate in these games for a reason. It was necessary to get to where he needed to be. He couldn't even be sure this would bring him to his enemy, but it was his only available lead.

And yet, at the same time, Sousuke found his life here in Namsac strangely comfortable. It came with none of the hardships of his early life in Tokyo. There were no struggles with classical literature or Japanese history. He could put his natural skills as an AS pilot to use without fear of censure. He could live freely, with no stressful missions or overwhelming opponents to disrupt his easy routine.

Then there was his team: Nami, Lemon, Ashe, and the rest of the maintenance crew, who felt more like his allies at Mithril than his friends at school. Of course, he'd enjoyed the company of his school friends, but there

was something so reassuringly no-nonsense about the time he spent with Nami and the others.

Their relationships were just so much more logical than the sentiment-based ones that were so important in Japan. Nami was the owner, Lemon was their sponsor, Ashe and the others were the crew, and he was the operator. They had all signed their contracts, and knew exactly what to expect of the others involved. He rather liked this kind of life, and he was surprised to find himself feeling this way so soon after the incident in Tokyo.

“Sousuke, are you listening?” Nami’s voice, coming through the radio, snapped him back to his senses.

“What?” he asked after a moment.

“Hey! Stop your engine already!” she demanded. “Fuel’s expensive, you know?”

“Roger,” he replied. “Shutting down now.” After checking to make sure he’d crossed the parking line in the paddock, Sousuke turned off the Savage’s diesel engine. Then he used the power remaining in its capacitor to squat his machine down and lock the joints into place, before shutting down the control system in accordance with the checklist.

As he opened the hatch and disembarked, Ashe and the rest of the crew gathered around him, brimming with smiles and congratulations. Lemon was holding his camera steadily, taking pictures of Sousuke and the others from the back of the group. He’d been snapping photos of the crowd before, but he’d flown back to their side when the match ended. He must have been passionate about his work.

“Hey, calm down! Clear the way!” Nami pushed past Ashe and the others to take her place in front of Sousuke, then cleared her throat imperiously. “Well done. Here’s your pay for today.”

“Right.” Sousuke unceremoniously took the naked bills that Nami offered him.

“You were pretty cool, y’know,” Nami said with upturned eyes. Then, as if embarrassed by her own words, she quickly withdrew to the back of the paddock.

“She’s head-over-heels, and no doubt about it,” Ashe said several days later, over lunch in the maintenance area.

Ashe had started as a mechanic with the National People’s Army of the former East Germany. The Germanies had miraculously managed their reunion just before unrest in the Soviet Union resulted in a storm of crackdowns that had rocked both East and West in the early 90s. Accordingly, he was one of the people denied work just because he’d been born in the East. He’d had about three days’ experience doing maintenance on the Rk-89s placed with the Warsaw Treaty Organization forces just prior to unification, but that was enough for him to get a job on Nami’s team after he’d made his way to Southeast Asia.

“Who is, for who?” Sousuke asked, feeling confused.

“Nami is, for you.”

“I see. I suppose it’s only natural,” he said casually.

Ashe’s eyes went wide. “What?! You’re pretty confident, kid!”

“My operating skills appear to be far beyond those of anyone else in this city,” Sousuke pointed out. “It’s natural that our team’s owner would hold me in high esteem.”

“That’s not exactly what I meant,” Ashe said, slumping over. “She’s falling for you, as a girl for a guy. Nami’s pretty popular, you know? She’s got a gutter-mouth and she doesn’t mind hearing guy-talk, but she’s pretty steady about enforcing her boundaries. Members of our crew and guys from other teams have all made passes at her, but she turns them all down. That includes me, of course.”

“That seems unlikely. She speaks to Lemon more often than to me,” Sousuke said, still uncomprehending. The three of them were still living together, but it was Nami and Lemon who did most of the talking. Sousuke was a naturally quiet person, and he only engaged in conversation when he was spoken to first. Nami would sometimes approach him to offer him a snack or a drink, but that was it.

“She just finds Monsieur Lemon easier to talk to,” Ashe tried to explain. “When Nami talks to you, she turns totally blunt. It’s almost bizarre.”

“You don’t think she just dislikes me?”

“Doubtful,” Ashe said with a laugh. “When you’re not around and she comes down to the maintenance area, ‘Where’s Sousuke?’ is the first thing she asks. She wouldn’t do that if she wasn’t into you.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Sousuke mumbled.

“What about you?”

“In what regard?”

“Nami,” Ashe said. “How do you feel about her?”

Ashe’s question caused Sousuke to consider, for the first time, just how he really felt about her. *I care for Nami*, he decided, and that was probably it. He enjoyed Nami’s company, and making small talk with her and Lemon was relaxing. In the mornings, he found the sight of Nami tying back her hair before they headed for the Arena very beautiful.

But why is that? This question had been eating at him for a while. It was because Nami reminded him of *her*. She was energetic, uncompromising, and unsparing with her criticism and mockery of Sousuke. She was carefree, and invigorating. Perhaps he’d always had a weakness for such women.

“I care for her,” Sousuke said monotonously. If the women who knew Sousuke heard him say so, they’d probably be angry. But Sousuke didn’t share the religious belief that total fidelity to a single person was a virtue; he’d come out of a world with no time for love and romance.

The battle comrades he’d had before Mithril saw themselves as sailors, and women as harbors: welcome, but interchangeable. He’d kept his distance from his companions’ dealings with women in that regard, but compared to the environment he’d grown up in, his feelings for Chidori Kaname almost seemed a little bit too devoted. After all, the entire reason he’d come here, the whole reason he was fighting, was for her. She was the most important thing in his life. It had nothing to do with ideas about virtue; no one had forced that devotion upon him.

That was why, on that Christmas night, when Teletha Testarossa had asked him the question in the hands of the AS coming down in the parachute, there was only one answer he could give. He still cared for Tessa, too. Then, and now. So, hypothetically... If Nami were to ask him the same question now that Tessa had then, how would he respond?

Sousuke wasn't sure, and his lack of confidence in the matter surprised him. The fact was, he was finding it hard to recall Chidori Kaname's face these days, even though it had only been two months. Her smile... the memory that had once been irreplaceably precious to him was blurry in his mind now. He couldn't remember the color of the shoes she always wore. He couldn't remember which wrist she wore her watch on.

But those things didn't matter so much. What shocked Sousuke more was that he couldn't remember the color of the ribbon she used to tie back her long hair. It was red, wasn't it? Probably, but he wasn't quite sure; it might have been yellow. He'd had such a clear memory of that feature for work-related reasons, because he never knew when he'd need to describe her appearance to someone else on the radio. But now, it was gone.

Was it really that trivial? Was it that easy to lose sight of her?

Peering into Sousuke's silent, thoughtful face, Ashe said, "You made that sound pretty dire. Do you have a girl back home or something?"

"Actually..." he whispered, staring at the oil-stained concrete floor.

Just then, Nami herself entered the maintenance area.

"Hey, there she is." Ashe pantomimed zipping his mouth closed; it was a sign that the conversation was over.

"Ashe!" Nami called out. "Aren't you done with lunch yet? Go on, back to work!"

"Yeah, yeah!" Ashe made an exaggerated display of standing up before returning to his AS maintenance.

While Sousuke cleared up their empty dishes, Nami strode up to him. She said, "Here, Sousuke," then she handed him a sheet of paper, which had been scribbled on in barely-legible handwriting.

“What is this?” he asked.

“A shopping list,” she told him. “We’ve got more work to do today. Go out with Lemon and pick it all up.”

Sousuke silently looked through the list and said, “There are a lot of special AS parts here. You can’t get them in most stores.”

“Huh?” Nami’s brow furrowed. Then she said, “Wait, you haven’t been to the market yet?”

“‘The market?’” Sousuke asked. “No, though I’ve heard of it.”

“You can get it all there,” she told him confidently. “Just head east.”

The presence of the Arena had left Namsac flush with a greater variety of AS parts than even a military frontline base, and the “market” Nami spoke of, nestled in a corner of the city and covering an area about 500 meters wide, was like a symbol of Namsac itself.

It carried AS parts for purchase from all over the world: muscle packages from France; optical sensors from Czechoslovakia; titanium frames from Germany; cooling units from Israel; optical fibers from Japan; core processors from America. There were stalls whose entire frontages consisted of just an AS’s hand. Sousuke also saw message boards scrawled in chalk, listing the various shops’ stocks:

Genuine 1995 GTTO C122 invertebral disk dampener

Stress-tested Savage thigh C-frame, made in China

IFAV standard Rj23 torque converter, almost new

Mixed in with the AS parts were electronics and computer parts from all over the region, as well as a lively DVD and CD trade.

Not everyone buying here was an Arena participant; many were civilians and tourists on the lookout for cheap electronics. He also caught sight of a group of military men, likely from some small developing country. They were awkwardly negotiating with a parts seller through an interpreter, trying desperately to secure some marked-down goods.

“It’s almost like Akihabara,” Sousuke said, reminded of the bustling ‘electric town’ he had visited with his classmate, Kazama Shinji, while living in Tokyo. This market wasn’t as big as that one, but the chaotic atmosphere was highly reminiscent.

“Oh, a friend of mine said he went sightseeing there,” said Lemon, who also raised an eyebrow at Sousuke’s words. “It’s a legendary porn town.”

“You mean electric town,” Sousuke corrected.

“Maybe it was, back in the day. Now it’s full of hentai manga and lolicon games.”

“I don’t know what those are, but I suspect you’re mistaken.”

“You think?” Lemon asked indifferently, and took a bite out of the bright red sausage he’d bought at an open air stall at the edge of the market earlier. “Whew, spicy...”

“I’m impressed that you can eat that,” Sousuke told him.

“Well, it’s also delicious.”

“I’d heard the French only liked the finest foods.”

“That’s a stereotype, like the Akihabara thing before,” Lemon told him. “I’m a junk food man, myself.”

“I see.” Offering no particular opinion about that statement, Sousuke went on with his shopping.



Even after all he'd heard, Sousuke found the market was so much livelier than he could have imagined. To think that AS parts—genuine military hardware—could be purchased this easily...

I'm surprised, he thought. It was like being able to buy attack helicopters and tank parts on demand. Nami had said that if you pulled the right strings, you could even buy artillery and ammunition. You'd never find another town like this in all the world.

When Sousuke had been a mercenary in Southeast Asia—still just two or three years ago—he'd never imagined a city like this could exist. AS parts had been specialized electronics you had to buy through specific arms dealers, and they never came cheap.

Yet now... "Four hundred dollars for a TI gyro?" Sousuke said in wonderment, gazing at the sign in front of a stall.

"Is that expensive?" Lemon wanted to know.

"No, the opposite. The cheapest price I've ever seen before was two thousand. That was a year ago, and you had to buy them by the dozen."

"Wow. That *is* a lot cheaper, then," Lemon said, impressed. "Have ASes really become that common? Guess it's good for the economy, at least."

"It's not that simple," said Sousuke. He found himself remembering the words of Andrey Kalinin, who could be dead or alive right now: *Something is wrong with this world.* For the first time in a while, those words echoed in his head with a new weight of reality. The speed at which ASes had become commonplace in this world was unreal. Even someone as young as Sousuke could feel it, and that feeling had been especially strong lately.

Compared to the rate at which other weapons systems evolved, the development speed of ASes was excessive. As the former operator of the Arbalest, a state-of-the-art test-type mounted with a lambda driver, Sousuke was especially appreciative of this fact. Witnessing technology on the cutting edge, so far beyond anything anyone here could imagine, gave him a unique perspective on how unnatural what was happening in this market really was.

Why are we in such a hurry? The question nagged at him. He knew this was a

common mindset for soldiers in action with no real power to change the world on their own. But Sousuke was vaguely—yet at the same time, it seemed, inevitably—starting to feel like there was some kind of “invisible hand” behind it all.

Maybe everyone in Mithril felt that same sense of wrongness. But it was hard to express, which was why he tended not to bring it up...

His thoughts were interrupted by a rapid electronic beeping. Lemon was taking a picture of Sousuke with his digital camera. “I won’t tell you not to take my picture, but that was a little bit intrusive, wasn’t it?” Sousuke glared at him.

“Heh,” Lemon said with a shrug. “‘Intrusive’ is the only way to take good pictures.”

“Is that your philosophy as a reporter?”

“That’s right,” he boasted. “And I’m partly an artist, too.”

“You can’t create art with that pocket-sized camera,” Sousuke said in irritation.

Lemon laughed in amusement in response. “Maybe if you’re shooting a supermodel in a studio. But if you’re flying around the world, this is a lot more convenient. If I walked around with an SLR, it would be stolen in an instant. Tools are only as good as the use you get out of them, you know?”

“Of course.”

“Three million pixels is more than enough for my brand of art,” Lemon said simply, then turned his eyes keenly to Sousuke. “But I’m curious about *your* art.”

Sousuke responded with silence.

“Watching your fights has got me thinking... You’re not just some former child soldier,” Lemon theorized. “You’re not a guy fighting to put food on the table. You have a bigger... a more distant goal in mind. I don’t think you’d be able to fight the way you do otherwise.”

Sousuke glanced into Lemon’s eyes. For the first time, he realized that Michel Lemon was no mere happy-go-lucky reporter. The eyes behind his glasses

gleamed with intelligence, and keen insight into whatever he set them on.

“The brilliance in your fight goes beyond mere skill,” Lemon continued. “I feel it, as a photographer. What you do is art. That much is obvious, even to an AS amateur like me. And no matter what you yourself might think.”

“You might be right,” Sousuke whispered, as if to himself. “This may be my only method of self-expression, after all.”

It was true. Photos, art, models, music—in Tokyo, Sousuke had met people who used all those things as methods of expression. They did all kinds of activities: satisfying, meticulous, and exciting. But what did he have? Nothing, he’d assumed. But maybe, looked at another way, he did have something.

Combat.

Combat was his one and only form of self-expression. Wreathed in gunfire and destruction, that was the only time Sousuke could really express anything. *That’s why she... That’s why, in that moment, Chidori looked...* His thoughts turned dark, and something dug at his heart.

“Ah... sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it,” Lemon said hastily. “It’s just...”

That was when it happened. Two police cars stopped in the road behind them, blaring their sirens. The crowds of people coming and going in the market came gradually to a stop to look at the cars.

“Hm?”

Two police officers dove out of each car, and pulled revolvers from their hip holsters. They used their bulletproof doors and engine blocks as shields. They readied their guns... and pointed them right at Sousuke and Lemon.

“Don’t move!” one of the officers shouted.

Lemon, surprised, tried to hide behind a nearby stall, but Sousuke stopped him. “It’s better if you do as they say.”

“Huh? Ah, right...” Lemon froze up in a weak-kneed posture, while Sousuke crouched down with a stoic expression.

The older officer called out to them. “Put your hands up slowly. Turn around, kneel on the ground, and cross your legs. Get it? Slowly, now.”

“Ah... Officer? I’m sure there’s some kind of misunderstanding—”

“Hurry!” the officer barked.

“Right. Slowly, but hurry. I wish you’d pick one...” Lemon grumbled, even as he followed the officer’s orders. Sousuke did so, as well.

Just then, a third police car arrived.

Sousuke and Lemon were already looking at the ground in surrender, so they couldn’t see it from their position, but a man had gotten out of the police car. From ahead of them, the sound of boot heels clicking on the ground approached.

The man wearing them looked down quietly at Sousuke and Lemon. His eyes were sharp and catlike, yet held a dour sort of look. Despite the striking keenness of his gaze, he had massive jowls that seemed to merge his face seamlessly into his neck and shoulders. He was short, with a big belly that protruded over the belt on his hips. A potbellied pig, gifted with a keen intellect and standing up on two legs—that was the impression given off by the uniformed man before them.

“We received a report that two young foreigners committed theft in the market nearby. This information came from a *very* reliable source,” the man said. His voice was annoyingly high-pitched. “Being able to arrest the suspects this quickly was an unexpected pleasure. But it’s a shame that they happen to be members of a team that’s been tearing things up in the arena lately...”

It was a preposterous story, and completely fabricated. Lemon argued back immediately, shouting at them even as his face remained pointed at the ground, “What the hell are you talking about? When that guy Rick was killed, you didn’t give a damn, so why—mm!” Lemon grunted as the officer grabbed him by the throat.

“Shut your mouth, foreigner. I’m just doing my job,” he said with a mocking smile.

“And who are you, who does that job with such gusto?” Sousuke asked in annoyance.

The man’s purple lips showed a hint of amusement. “No need for you to

know, foreigner. Just call me Chief."

"That's easy to remember, at least."

"Another unexpected pleasure." The chief smirked wider. His long, skinny tongue ran over his protruding front teeth. "But remember this: if you show me any more disrespect—" His shining black boot kicked Sousuke across the face. Then he kneeled down on the ground and bent over, to whisper very quietly in his ear. "—You'll pay for it. You see, Sagara Sousuke-kun?"

3: Real Bout

“Come out. Hurry.” With a grinding sound of metal, the rusty iron gate opened and the guards yanked Sagara Sousuke out of the shared cell.

He’d spent the night there.

An unjust arrest based on forged evidence—It was a common enough story in third-world countries like this one. Sousuke wasn’t surprised at all by it, and the dingy state of the holding facility, too, simply inspired the thought, *Ah, of course.*

Still, it was an awful place to spend a night. The floor and the walls were moist. They were also perpetually grungy and sticky. A variety of pervasive stenches blended together in a unique cocktail, and winged insects buzzed annoyingly around them at all hours. The only real light came in through a tiny window close to the ceiling.

Three days here would be enough to break anyone, either physically or mentally. In fact, there were several other men in the cell with them in that very condition, their bony shoulders trembling, constantly mumbling to themselves.

Sousuke was the only one brought out. Lemon, who had been arrested with him, remained in the cell. He watched him go with a mixture of nerves and exhaustion. “Sousuke,” he said.

“Don’t worry,” Sousuke told him, and then left the jail behind.

With his hands cuffed behind him, Sousuke was taken to an interrogation room on the second floor of the station. Really, it was just an empty room with no furnishings except for two folding chairs and a naked bulb hanging overhead. The walls were made of exposed concrete, and marked here and there with reddish-black stains—bloodstains put there by the officers’ “interrogations,” no doubt. And the blood wasn’t all; in a corner of the room, mixed in with the dust and trash, he saw a scattering of what looked like small, brownish pebbles.

Teeth.

Had they been knocked out, or yanked out with pliers? How many people had they brought through here to reach a collection of teeth that large? It seemed like they had been left there intentionally, rather than cleaned up, to inspire fear in their next victim.

But Sousuke, looking at that tragic sight, merely felt a strange sense of nostalgia.

That's right. This is where I belong.

A warm apartment in Tokyo. A classroom filled with light. High-quality food, happy laughter... They're all wonderful things, of course. But they're no longer part of my world. At least, for now.

I have to become a weapon, he told himself. *The right tool for the job at hand.*

Sitting there in that room, empty except for old signs of suffering... Just staring at a point on the wall long enough left his heart slowly desiccating. He closed his eyes and honed his nerves. Sharper. Colder.

He was becoming Kashim again. It had been happening gradually since he'd left Tokyo behind, and it would be necessary for what was to come. In a way, his life with Nami and Lemon had actually stalled that necessary process.

After leaving Sousuke to wait for nearly an hour, the chief entered the interrogation room. He came forward with slow, evocative steps, probably meant to assert dominance over the pathetic Sousuke. The flared thighs in his pants, combined with a pair of riding boots, brought to mind the monstrous officers of Nazi Germany.

"Robbery, assault, attempted murder," the chief said. "Blackmail, giving false testimony, illegal immigration, gambling, forgery of documents, obstruction of an officer in the line of duty, unlawful possession of a weapon... any other requests?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Your sentence, Sagara Sousuke. Altogether, you're looking at a sentence of at least forty-eight years. I'd like to get you to an even fifty..." mused the chief.

“How about assaulting an officer?” Sousuke suggested. “I could do that one now.”

“Hm.” The chief scratched his chin. Immediately, the musclebound officer beside him punched Sousuke across the face. The smack echoed through the interrogation room.

Sousuke had expected it, but the hit still knocked him for a loop. His body reeled backwards in defiance of his will, and his chair would have toppled over if not for the officer pulling him roughly upwards again.

“You don’t seem to understand the position you’re in,” the chief leered.

Sousuke grunted in response.

“This is no mere interrogation room,” the man clarified. “It’s a courtroom, and it can be an execution chamber, too. I’m the judge. I’m the jury. And I am the executioner.”

“You appear rather understaffed,” Sousuke whispered, putting in extra effort for the sarcasm. His mouth was full of blood, and a broken molar rolled onto his tongue. He thought about spitting it out, but he didn’t want to add to the room’s trophies, so he swallowed it instead. “Now, what do you want? I’m sure you didn’t come here just to tell me I was getting fifty years.”

“Very perceptive.” The chief laughed, his stomach and jowls swaying rhythmically. “It’s about the Arena.”

Sousuke said nothing.

“You’ve won every match you’ve fought since you started,” the chief observed. “If you win your next match, your team ascends, correct? You’re already getting a reputation among the organizers for your skill. Once you move up to Class A and the money rolls in, you’ll shoot right to the top in no time.”

“That’s the plan,” Sousuke agreed stoically.

“But we can’t have it.” The chief took off his cap and rubbed his bald head. “The Arena has its star teams. They win and lose in the proper ratios, and we control who wins the title, to ensure the perpetual enjoyment of the audience. It’s a very efficient way of running things; stable and balanced. And very

profitable for us. Understand?”

Sousuke knew exactly who the chief meant by “us.” He was speaking for the Arena’s management: the organizers; the merchants who sold AS parts; influential people in the city; organized crime lords and government bureaucrats. All the usual people who swarmed to a massively profitable sport like this, hoping for a piece of the action.

“Dao and the others are Class B, but they’ve done good work for me,” the Chief went on. “And... Sagara Sousuke, was it? You’re on your way to upending the order we’ve established. That’s why I brought you in here. Do you think we could come to an understanding and do a little ‘adjusting’ for the sake of both of our futures?”

“I see.” Adjusting—in other words, rigging the matches. Or something similar. “And if I don’t cooperate, you’ll lock me away for fifty years?”

“That Frenchman, too,” the chief agreed. “And the owner girl, and the rest of your team. I don’t think I need to tell you the way bored guards and prisoners like to treat young women. No one defies me in this town.”

Even when he brought Nami and Lemon into it, Sousuke felt no sense of panic. To the contrary, he began to run the mental calculations needed to determine if he could kill the two guards and the chief, even with his hands cuffed behind his back.

I most likely could, Sousuke decided. He imagined killing them, removing the handcuffs, stealing their weapons and escaping. *It wouldn’t be especially hard.*

Could he get Lemon out of prison, run to Nami, and escape this town with them? *Easily,* he told himself. But that would defeat the point of everything. So instead, Sousuke just responded: “It appears that way. If things need ‘adjusting,’ I’ll play along. But I have a request.”

“Hmm?” The chief raised an eyebrow in amusement.

“I don’t mind fighting fixed matches in that soccer stadium, but I want a chance to go all out,” Sousuke explained. “A place where I can stretch my legs and earn more money. Does a place like that exist?”

The chief eyed him silently.

“It does exist, doesn’t it?” Sousuke asked.

The chief said nothing for a time as he evaluated him cautiously. “What are you talking about?”

“I’ve heard the rumors.”

“From where?”

“Around.”

The chief, expressionlessly, said something in the local language. One of the officers nodded and silently left the room. The other officer—the one who had hit Sousuke earlier—remained. He must have been aware of the circumstances in question.

Once the door was closed, a smile appeared on the chief’s lips. “You know all about it, then?”

“Of course,” Sousuke answered. “Underground battles staged for VIP guests, using live rounds. The rewards are appropriately excessive.” Sousuke related the story he’d heard from an old war buddy during his time in Tokyo. It was tales of those underground battles that had brought Sousuke to this town in the first place.

“Half of the participants die within a few months,” the chief remarked. “Do you know that, too?”

“I expected it,” Sousuke said casually.

The chief adjusted his cap as he whispered, as if feeling him out, “There are only two kinds of people who participate in those fights: former AS pilots in debt or being blackmailed, and cocky idiots. I want to know your reason for pursuing this.”

“First, I need money,” Sousuke told him. “I want to buy my woman back. She’s a prostitute.”

“Where?”

“Not here. In Tokyo.” It was all nonsense, of course, just a common story he’d heard in bars and on TV. The only reason Sousuke had said she was in Tokyo was to make it harder for the chief to check up on his story.

Fortunately, the chief accepted it easily enough. Showing no further interest in Sousuke's woman, he asked, "And second?"

"Well, it's a little bit like your job. You like this room, don't you?" Sousuke looked around the interrogation room—the blood stains, the teeth, the scratch marks on the walls. Traces of suffering. The scent of violence. The real thing, not a show. "Arena matches are just a sport," he clarified. "You get the stinging smell of jet fuel, but no blood or gunsmoke."

"And that's your reason?" the chief wanted to know.

"Isn't that enough?"

The chief's body shook a little, and he smiled. His jowls quivered, and a stiff laugh drifted from his purple lips. "I see you're the second kind," he observed. "Cocky as hell."

"What's your verdict?"

"It's interesting, interesting. I'll take you up on the offer. But... you don't have a backer. Until you complete your first underground match and I know I can trust you, I'm keeping that Frenchman in lockup. You can go now, Sagara Sousuke." And with that, the chief left the interrogation room.

Sousuke didn't like the idea of leaving Lemon there, but he didn't have a choice for now. Before he left the station, he handed fifty dollars to a likely-looking officer, and told him, "Treat the Frenchman in the cell well, and I'll give you the same amount later."

He'd only been walking outside for a little while before he heard Nami's voice. "Sousuke?!" She cut across the dusty street, running towards him. She must have heard that they'd been arrested, and was apparently killing time at a run-down cafe across the way. "What happened? Where's Monsieur Lemon?"

"He's still inside," Sousuke told her. "I talked to the chief and he let me out."

"The chief... that snake?" she asked.

It seemed the chief was well-known in these parts. Sousuke could tell that much from the surprise and concern on Nami's face, and he nodded.

“Why’d he let you out so easy? ...And whew, you stink.” Nami sniffed at him, then grimaced hard. He’d only been there one night, but after sleeping in that unhygienic cell, it was only natural that he’d stink to high heaven.

“Let’s get back to the hotel,” he told her. “I’ll explain there.”

They got a taxi back to Lemon’s hotel.

Sousuke took a long, refreshing shower, then put on a freshly-laundered T-shirt and chugged a bottle of cold mineral water. Clean clothing and fresh water—it had been a long time since he’d appreciated them for the luxuries they were.

When he returned to the living room, he found Nami sitting cross-legged on the sofa, watching the room’s TV in silence. She looked extremely agitated, which was understandable. “So? What happened?” she asked.

“Our victories have been too ostentatious and it’s made his associates angry. He threatened to imprison Lemon, you, and the others for life if I refused to fix the matches, so I agreed,” Sousuke said, sitting down on the sofa across from hers.

“Fixed matches, huh? Okay, I get it.”

“You aren’t angry?”

“Not really,” she admitted. “There’d been rumors going around about that kind of stuff for a while. Shame on me if I expected sportsmanship from gamblers and scam artists, y’know? Actually, the fact that they came to us proves that we’ve made it. But...”

“But?” said Sousuke, prompting her to go on.

“We won’t want to bend over too far for them,” Nami decided. “They probably arrested you and Lemon as a threat in the hopes that they could get us to play along for cheap. We’ll need to be hard-nosed in negotiations, or they’ll chew us up and spit us out. Did the chief offer you some kind of condition?”

“Yes.”

“What was it?”

“That I participate in underground battles,” Sousuke told her.

“What?” Nami’s legs suddenly stopped their fidgeting. “Underground battles?”

“Yes.”

“For real?”

“Yes. It’s good money.”

“Uh, you know what kind of matches those are, right? Everyone in the business has heard about ’em, but they’re not exactly lining up to volunteer. You know what that means? It means it’s suicide. I mean, that’s real combat with live rounds, you know?”

“That’s what he said,” Sousuke confirmed.

“And you’re gonna participate? In *our* machine?”

“That’s the plan.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!” Nami objected, rising to her feet. “You know that machine can’t handle underground battles! I haven’t touched the fire control system since I found it, and the armor’s falling apart! I get why the administration would want to fix our fights. But underground battles are beyond the pale. They’re seriously dangerous, okay?!”

“Of course they are,” he said.

“Then why’d you agree?” she demanded, just as furious as he’d expected her to be. “I mean, no skin off my nose if you wanna go suicidal, but you’re not wrecking my machine!”

“Well...” Sousuke finished drying his hair with his towel, then fell silent. It was time to answer the question he’d been debating since he left the police station. Should he tell the truth, or should he lie?

Nami wouldn’t accept the generous stipends as a reason for participating in underground battles; even Sousuke could predict that much. He could try, *I had to accept, since they took Lemon hostage.* If he told her that, and they resolved

the funding issues involved, she might be convinced.

He'd lived with Nami all this time, and understood that she was a good person. But he still didn't know if she trusted him enough to get in his corner about this.

Then the words popped back into his mind: *I don't want to die without knowing anything.* The words Tokiwa Kyoko had said in that moment, her eyes filled with tears, had stayed with him every day since.

Pathetic. Just hours ago, I was on the verge of becoming an emotionless machine, thought Sousuke. *My heart is constantly being swayed by my immediate circumstances and environment. How can I fulfill my mission like this?* He wasn't sure.

Close to a minute passed. Nami waited patiently, then said, "What's the cost—benefit analysis you're running there, huh?"

Sousuke said nothing.

"Look. I know I'm a loudmouth when it comes to budgets. If people call me a cheapskate, I'm not gonna deny it. But do you really think of our relationship like a business? You have to choose your words that carefully?"

Sousuke blinked. Confused, he looked up and peered into Nami's large eyes. She was leaning forward on the sofa, staring at him. "...Of course not," he said.

"I mean, I figured we were friends, at least. Aren't we?"

The cleavage visible through her tank top inched closer. He realized his heart was beating faster, and he was forced to speed through his inner argument. *An emotionless machine, fulfilling its mission? It's all nonsense. I learned that before, didn't I? I'm a human being, full of contradictions. No matter how I might try to change it, it's a fact.*

It's also the source of all my trouble... Averting his eyes from the supple skin before him, Sousuke said, "I see. I'll tell you, then." Maybe it was better to reveal the whole story to this new friend. If she heard it and rejected him, he'd deal with it then. "I'm the one who proposed the underground battles."

Nami's eyes went wide at that. "Why?!"

“That’s what I came here for from the beginning,” he admitted. “The Arena matches were merely a means to get closer to the shiftier elements of the local administration. My fellow mercenaries used to talk about the ‘real combat’ underground battles here—and I think Amalgam is involved in them.”

“Amal... gam?”

“The name of a certain organization. They have deep ties to terrorist groups and the military-industrial complex, and they incite regional conflict all over the world. They’ve played a role in most major terrorist activities these last few years.”

“H-Hang on,” Nami objected shakily. “Wait a minute, here...”

“There’s also a top-secret mercenary squadron that fights against Amalgam,” Sousuke went on. “They use equipment a generation ahead of the rest of the world, and have training on par with the special forces of most national militaries. They fight evil terrorists and criminal organizations, intervene in regional conflicts and try to stamp out fires before they spread. I’m their last survivor.”

Nami seemed even more confused by the sudden scale of what Sousuke was describing. “I... I’m not sure I followed all of that. But... survivor? Um... exactly what happened to these mercenaries you were a part of?”

“They were slaughtered by Amalgam.”

Nami fell silent.

“Amalgam keeps its existence a highly guarded secret. I have no way of finding out who runs it, where they are, or who’s involved. The underground AS battles here in Namsac are my only clue,” he told her. “My squadron has destroyed several of Amalgam’s ASes in the past, and when we recovered the operators’ ID tags, we learned that many of them had participated in matches here in Namsac.”

“I...”

“You don’t believe me?” Sousuke asked, gazing at her with all the sincerity he could muster.

But Nami remained frozen, returning his gaze dubiously. “Are you serious about all this?”

“Affirmative.”

“Well, I always thought you were freakishly good at what you do... but that means the guys you’re after are seriously dangerous, right?”

“Yes.” Sousuke nodded, as if this went without saying. “I want to get closer to Amalgam. And I need your help to do it.”

Nami took a deep breath. What followed was, again, a perfectly reasonable reaction. “You’ve got to be kidding me!” Nami had fumed. She’d flipped the table and shouted, “Go fight on your own time,” then threw a plastic bottle at him. She screamed, “Never show your face around here again!” and stormed out of the hotel room.

He couldn’t blame her at all. She was entirely justified.

I knew it was too much to ask, Sousuke told himself with a deep sigh, and then went to work cleaning up the messy room. He considered how, without Nami, he could round up a new machine himself. But the line of thought turned up dry.

Well, what now? He rolled over the question in his mind as he picked up the trash. Then, he heard the doorbell ring. He opened the door and found Nami standing there. She was looking up at him awkwardly.

“I just wanted to be sure,” she said, lips pursed. “You’re at the end of your rope, right?”

“Yes.”

“You really need my help?”

“Affirmative.” He said it genuinely.

Nami let out a sigh, relaxed, then clenched a fist and tapped it against his chest. “Got it. Then I’ll indulge you, at least for a while.”

“You’re sure?”

“Monsieur Lemon’s still in prison, after all,” she told him. “And the purse is

good, right?”

“Well, yes.”

“But don’t get your hopes up. I still don’t know if the crew’ll go for it. If they say no, it’s a no.”

“Understood.”

“Also, don’t tell them about this Amalgam stuff,” she decided. “That’ll lessen the chances of them getting hurt.”

“I appreciate this.”

Nami really was a force of nature, because in the end, she convinced Team Crossbow’s maintenance crew to agree to participate in the underground battles, as well. Quite a few of them were against the idea, but when she told them that the administration was holding Lemon hostage and explained that Sousuke could handle himself, they reluctantly agreed.

The next evening, a messenger from the police chief stopped by their maintenance area and told them, “Saturday night at nine o’clock: be at the dilapidated church on the north side of Munamera by then. With your machine, of course.”

Munamera was a small farming village along the main road, twenty kilometers north of Namsac. Naturally, there was no way Namsac itself could play host to live combat; they’d be employing live 30mm AS rounds capable of blowing away a truck in one hit. Instead, the venue for the underground battles were somewhere outside Namsac, in a nearly unpopulated mountainous region, it seemed.

“And don’t be late, unless you want to see your friend in the holding cell pay the price,” the chief’s messenger said, then left their hangar.

“Poor Monsieur Lemon. I hope he’s not going crazy, or playing bottom to one of his cellmates,” Nami whispered while taking apart the white Savage’s control box.

While helping her, Sousuke said, “I bribed one of the guards just in case.”

“That might improve things a little, yeah... Hey, take out that one, too. We don’t need it.” Nami poked at a circuit board connected to the fire control system.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. The Flbn-32 will be useless either way, so better to lighten the load on the homebrew software.”

“Homebrew software?” Sousuke asked.

“I rewrote it for the underground battles. Took me all morning! I’m not great with that kinda stuff, so I’m feeling pretty accomplished!” she grinned.

Sousuke stopped what he was doing and stared in disbelief. “You rewrote that software in just one morning? By yourself?” As far as Sousuke knew, that wasn’t something a person could accomplish in the span of a few hours. It was more the kind of thing that a brilliant, highly trained engineer might *just* manage after days of careful work. It was far beyond the capacity of a teenage girl off the streets.

Case in point—during Sousuke’s time in Afghanistan, he’d seen a group of former engineering students serving with the guerrillas mess around with the software for the same model of Savage, and it had taken them weeks to get it working right.

“Did you ever study that kind of programming?” he checked.

“Nah,” she told him. “I just mess around with it from time to time.”

“That shouldn’t be sufficient. Where did you learn how to—”

“I told you!” Nami waved a hand in annoyance. “I’m not great with it or anything. I just messed with it until I worked it out. Quit making a big deal out of it.”

Impossible. With an indescribable anxiety bubbling up in his chest, Sousuke asked her his next question: “Who was it that taught you to service this machine in the first place?”

“Huh?” Nami stopped her work and gazed at Sousuke in deep, genuine confusion. “Um, nobody?”

“Then how—”

“I told you, I messed around with it until I figured it out. I just *did*.”

It was unimaginable. Even if it was a mere second-generation machine, it took significant training to be able to understand and operate an AS’s system with this much precision. A girl with no engineering experience couldn’t “just do it” without being taught.

Could she also be... he wondered. No, it was too much of a coincidence. Those people were one in ten thousand, in a hundred thousand, maybe even fewer. The idea that he would run into one, completely by chance—

“What are you staring at?” Nami asked, and Sousuke snapped back to reality. “Get back to work,” she ordered him. “Unplug it already.”

“Right.” Setting his remaining questions aside, Sousuke went back to working on the Savage. It was true that he had no time to lose right now. Once this was over and done with, he could take her aside and ask her more.

At the time, it had seemed just that easy.

That Saturday evening, Sousuke packed the Savage into a large rented trailer. He then headed for the village of Munamera outside of Namsac, where damage done to the road’s pavement in the war still hadn’t been fully repaired. The street itself was narrow enough that things got dicey any time a car coming from the other direction had to pass.

To the east of the road were vast rice paddy fields, and to the west, a mountainous region covered in broadleaf forest. That monotonous scenery seemed to go on forever. There was a strange chill in the dry season air, and the trailer kicked up dust that compromised his vision.

Upon arriving at the old church, he found several armed officers waiting: the Namsac police. The agreed-upon time came and went, but they just pointed their rifles at them suspiciously and told them to wait.

About thirty minutes later, the chief finally arrived in a helicopter. The turboshaft engine shook the ground around them as the helicopter landed in front of the church. The chief got out, inspected Sousuke carefully, then grinned

his unpleasant grin. “Board your machine here,” he said. “Sagara Sousuke. Head for the ruins two kilometers northwest of here. That’ll be your ‘Arena’ this time. The rest of you can wait here.”

“Huh?! But at that distance, I won’t be able to radio him instructions! What are you—” Nami and the others attempted to argue, but the officers just pointed their carbines at them. “—Of course. A very sensible order, sir. Ohoho...”

“Well done, little girl,” the chief said, then began walking toward the pickup truck that had arrived just after the helicopter.

From behind him, Sousuke spoke. “Where do they watch from?”

“There’s a special place for that. You don’t need to know it.”

“Really? I thought you’d want me to watch out for stray fire.”

The chief stopped in front of the truck and snorted. “No need to worry. We’d never let anything happen to our precious patrons.”

“Then I’ll gladly let loose.” Just as the chief boarded the truck, Sousuke began heading for his white Savage.

First, Sousuke activated the auxiliary power unit, then booted up the main electronic equipment. Then, after running his preliminary checks, he activated its main power unit—the 1200 horsepower diesel engine.

The engine roared. The drive system hummed. He released the safety, moved the legs carefully, and stood his Savage up. The hydraulics were green. The muscle packages were as good as new. Three days of grueling hard work had gotten the capacitor back in top shape too.

“I’ll be back,” Sousuke said to the worried Nami after flipping the switch on the just-repaired external speakers.

The machine’s ears—in other words, its directional microphones—weren’t the greatest, but he could see Nami shouting at him through the low-res screen. “Be careful!”

“I’ll be fine. Don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried about *you*! I’m worried about my machine!”

“I see.”

“But—” Nami turned her eyes hesitantly downwards, then looked back up at his Savage. “Seriously, don’t be reckless, okay? Come back in one piece!”

“I intend to.”

Her expression was a blur in his optical sensors, yet her gaze seemed fretful somehow. She was staring at him, her cheek trembling slightly. “Okay, then. You’d better treat me to something good when this is over.”

Sousuke found her smile very inviting. He wanted to forget what he was about to do, return to Namsac at once, and have a meal with her. Actually, there was something else he felt even more urgently—he couldn’t explain why, but he felt a sudden urge to leap down from the machine and take her in his arms.

And then a strange question appeared in his head, almost against his will. *Why not just call it off? Why not forget all this dangerous nonsense, and accept a life of fun and freedom with Nami in Namsac?*

“What is it?” she asked.

“...Nothing,” he said, speaking to them both. *Don’t be stupid. Why am I thinking that now, after everything? Have I gone completely mad?* Sousuke struggled to remember Chidori Kaname, and felt a vague sense of guilt wash over him. Feeling guilt for someone he had to work to remember—it was a strange mental trick, but it allowed him to shake off the strange urges that had swept over him so suddenly.

“I’ll treat you to anything you ask for.” With those as his final words, Sousuke set his machine running. After about a hundred meters, he turned back. Nami was still there, watching him go. He held up the machine’s hand in a casual acknowledgment, then continued on to the designated location.

The area around him was full of deep hills and valleys. Each step onto the dried mud below raised up a cloud of dirt and sent a dull jolt through his machine. He broke through the sparse trees and headed northwest.

As the white Savage ran, he ran a checklist of its various systems. He was especially focused on the ones this machine hadn't used before: the just-replaced optical sensors and fire control system. He still didn't have any weapons.

It was much less reliable than the equipment he'd had in his Mithril days, but... *This is how I started out, anyway.* In fact, relatively speaking, he wasn't holding a bad hand at all. The Savage he had started out in was the same model as this one, but in much worse shape.

Keeping one eye on the digital map display, Sousuke managed to make it to his destination, which was the ruins of an old temple. Vines the width of human legs ran up the crumbling stone walls. Next to a broken idol snapped at the waist—something that had likely happened in a relatively recent battle—lay a 37mm AS rifle.

A BK-540. In appearance, it looked a bit like a human-sized AK-type assault rifle, and it was a standard AS optional armament. Next to it lay two spare clips for the rifle, and two close-range weapons—HEAT hammers.

"Welcome to the true Arena, Crossbow," came a voice on his radio's preset band. It was the chief. "Those there are your weapons. Use them however you wish." Sousuke tried using his transceiver to track the source of the radio waves. He also used his old-fashioned infrared sensors, but there was no sign of the chief and other spectators. A sonar or ultra-wide band radar would be extremely useful right now, but such luxuries were limited to Mithril's ASes. He'd have to save the search for the spectators for later. For now, he had to defeat his enemy.

"Very kind of you." Sousuke's Savage knelt down and picked up the weapons and clips. He equipped them to his hip and back hard points, then whispered quietly, "So, where is tonight's opponent?"

"Right in front of you. Its operator is laughing at you."

Sousuke looked around questioningly. All his sensors were picking up around the ruins were a few small mammals. His machine, kneeling on the stone floor, couldn't perceive anything in front of it at all.

Not with optical sensors. Not with infrared sensors.

Wait...

If he'd been in an AS with a completely sealed cockpit, he wouldn't have noticed it, but his busted-up Savage was another matter. He could smell the outside air through the vents, and the gaps formed by warping in the machine's body.

The familiar smell of ionization tickled his nose. It triggered old memories and told Sousuke that there was, in fact, something there.

The air rippled in front of him.

Sousuke gasped. He moved his limbs instantly, and the Savage reeled back with almost maddening slowness. There was a scream of metal. A blade appeared out of thin air and flew in an arc, shaving off part of the Savage's chest plating. A monomolecular cutter!

He went into a roll and pointed his machine's rifle at the empty space in front of him. There, a gust of wind whipped up a cloud of dust, indicating that something had jumped high into the air. The only reason Sousuke was able to guess its destination was because of his experience and skill.

The enemy's jumping power was incredible. It landed atop the main hall of the crumbling temple ruins. It was a move that a second-generation AS like a Savage or a Bushnell could never pull off, no matter how skilled the operator.

What, then, was the enemy that had landed on the temple's roof? The invisible enemy that had executed such a terrifying ambush?

"Caught on yet?" the chief asked him.

Lights danced on the centuries-decayed temple summit. A veil of blue light flickered into being, and an AS appeared from within. Backlit by the moonlight, a slender gray silhouette. A head that resembled a fighter pilot's helmet. Relaxed movements that belied the great power behind them, reminiscent of a bird of prey.

"An M9...?" He'd operated one countless times in the past, but in this moment, it felt completely otherworldly, as if he was seeing it for the first time. He'd known he'd be facing a difficult opponent, but *this?* They really were merciless.

He was fighting an M9. A next-generation arm slave, the M9 Gernsback. Sousuke had piloted these cutting-edge machines many times before as part of Mithril. He knew better than anyone the incredible specs and advanced equipment they had at their disposal.

Meanwhile, he himself was in an old-fashioned Savage. Nami and the others had done a great job getting it into shape, but its performance in every respect was inferior to an M9's.

Power, for instance—the engine output for a Savage of this type was 880 kilowatts; in other words, about 1200 horsepower. It was roughly on par with a tank of the same generation, or ten civilian passenger vehicles. This was nothing to sneeze at, but the M9's horsepower—as the name of its low-temperature nuclear generator APR-2500 would suggest—was 2500. That meant an output of 3300 Kw from the Roth & Hambleton-made engine. It was far outside the territory of conventional land weapons, and well into that of high-priced jet fighters.

Despite its slender, artistic appearance, the M9 packed power far beyond that of any tank or armored car. On top of that, its weight was seventy to eighty percent that of the Savage. With a weight—power ratio like that, it obviously far outstripped it in agility. The M9 also came mounted with all the latest technology in terms of sensors and electronic weapons.

The reason that Sousuke had been able to dispatch so many Savages in his missions with Mithril wasn't purely his incredible piloting skills. His machine's specs had been on another level to begin with; his victories had essentially been inevitable. It was a necessary level of functionality to perform difficult and delicate missions like "save a hostage without backup." In fact, thanks to its M9s, Mithril had succeeded in several missions that most would have previously deemed impossible.

Right now, the battle was a simple one-on-one, which meant there was nothing holding the M9 back. It had no need to conserve ammunition or worry about stray fire, and there was no time limit. But even so...

I made the right decision. Despite all of those factors, Sousuke's primary feeling was one of relief. There was no way they'd paired him up with this

cutting-edge machine by chance; at the very least, the chief must have the backing of an organization with incredible financial power. He'd come to the city of Namsac and made a name for himself in the Arena based purely on speculation and rumor, but this confirmed to him that it had all been worth it. It was a better response than he could have dreamed of.

Yes, it couldn't be a coincidence. The chief, or someone who worked with him, had figured out who Sousuke really was. That he was a Mithril elite, and one who had repeatedly foiled Amalgam's activities in the past.

It was the reaction he'd been hoping for when he'd chosen to use his real name. It had been a dangerous ploy, but it had clearly been effective, if they were sending an M9 at him. Maybe they were hoping to figure out who he was working with, based on his reactions to fighting this cutting-edge AS. Or, then again, maybe it was some kind of game...

"Surprised, are you?" the chief said over the radio. "I'm told you used to use that machine all the time, in some organization or other called Mithril."

"You knew my background, then?" Sousuke whispered, not particularly fazed by this revelation.

"You didn't use an alias, so how could I not? I could have finished you in the city, but that wouldn't have been as much fun. Then, since you gave us the chance, I decided to have you fight the M9. Of course, you have no hope of winning."

Sousuke was curious about where the M9 had come from, but his mind gave first priority to the chief's words, "finished you in the city." *In the city*, he'd said—not *while I had you in custody*. In other words, the chief hadn't known who he really was when they were hashing things out in the interrogation room. It was only afterwards that he'd learned about Sousuke's involvement with Mithril.

He's a minor figure in the Amalgam hierarchy, Sousuke decided. That had to be the case. How had he learned about Sousuke, then? Someone close to the chief must have either known his history, or at least had a very good information network.

Sousuke decided to test him. "Your patrons must be very happy tonight."

“Perhaps so. They want to see a good fight,” the chief mocked him through the staticky radio. “But... if you tell me who’s backing you, I can order the other operator to take it easy on you.”

“Sorry to say it, but I’m alone.”

“Then you can die.” The radio cut off. Static, then silence.

The M9 on his monitor moved, and the battle began.

It’s coming, Sousuke realized. It was like a hungry hunting dog being ordered “sic ’em” by its master. The M9 spun the knife-like monomolecular cutter in its hand before sheathing it in its hip holster. It was a theatrical move, but easily performed for a third-generation AS. Then it smoothly drew the rifle from its back hardpoint and pointed the weapon at Sousuke.

Sousuke’s Savage pointed its rifle back at the enemy, then lurched its body to the left. Left was the only path to survival—he knew that very well.

The roar of shots tore through the quiet ruins. Both of them fired while moving; the M9 had leaped effortlessly into the night sky to dodge Sousuke’s shot—more precisely, it had begun its evasion before Sousuke had even opened fire; not even an M9 could move faster than bullets. Of course, the same went for the Savage. He’d also started his evasion before the shot ever came, but the old machine’s movements were sluggish compared to the M9’s.

A shot grazed his right shoulder armor, and Sousuke gritted his teeth. It had been terribly close; just a split-second later, and it would have hit the chest where his cockpit was located. The only reason he’d managed to dodge the enemy’s first shot was that rather than having the Savage jump, he’d let it basically fall to the left.

ASes were bipedal, so unlike a normal vehicle, they stored up some potential energy simply in the act of standing. Thus, just letting it succumb to gravity would move it faster than a jump, given the Savage’s specs.

Why, then, to the left?

From the enemy’s point of view, he was moving to the right. The M9 held its rifle in both hands, but it used the right one to aim. This meant that, to keep the

Savage in its sights, it had to move its right arm to its right side.

ASes—to a very minor degree that rarely mattered at all—were slightly better at moving their arms inward than they were at moving them outward. This was also true for the human body that the AS was modeled after. The arms of ASes and humans were wonderfully flexible, but they weren't like the rotating turret of a tank: their structure meant that movements to the outside of the body would always be slightly slower and less accurate.

The effect was then amplified when holding something heavy, like a rifle, which severely raised the weight at an arm's extremities. If a human held a barbell of about three kilograms, or a plastic bottle filled with ice, and swung their arm back and forth sharply, they wouldn't be able to stop as precisely as if they were empty-handed.

The same was true for an AS. The M9 might be a cutting-edge piece of equipment, but it couldn't escape the structural issues fundamental to a humanoid form. In other words, the direction that Sousuke had chosen for his Savage demanded the least comfortable movement possible from the M9. He'd spent enough time in the machine, after all; he knew exactly what he could do to frustrate the enemy operator.

What would that operator try next, then? It would probably land and then run forward, low to the ground. Considering the terrain, obstacles, and their relative locations, that would be the best way for him to get into an ideal firing position.

Sousuke had to be on the watch for bullets, too. The M9's bullet resistance was better than the Savage's, but a hit from a rifle would still damage it easily enough. A 37mm shot would at least bring it to a severe drop in functionality.

Like most armored cars, the M9's armor could be thicker or thinner in certain places, and the armor on its back was much weaker than on its front. Thus, the enemy would try to avoid turning his back on Sousuke at all cost. Of course, there would be times when he would have to, but he'd try like hell to avoid it.

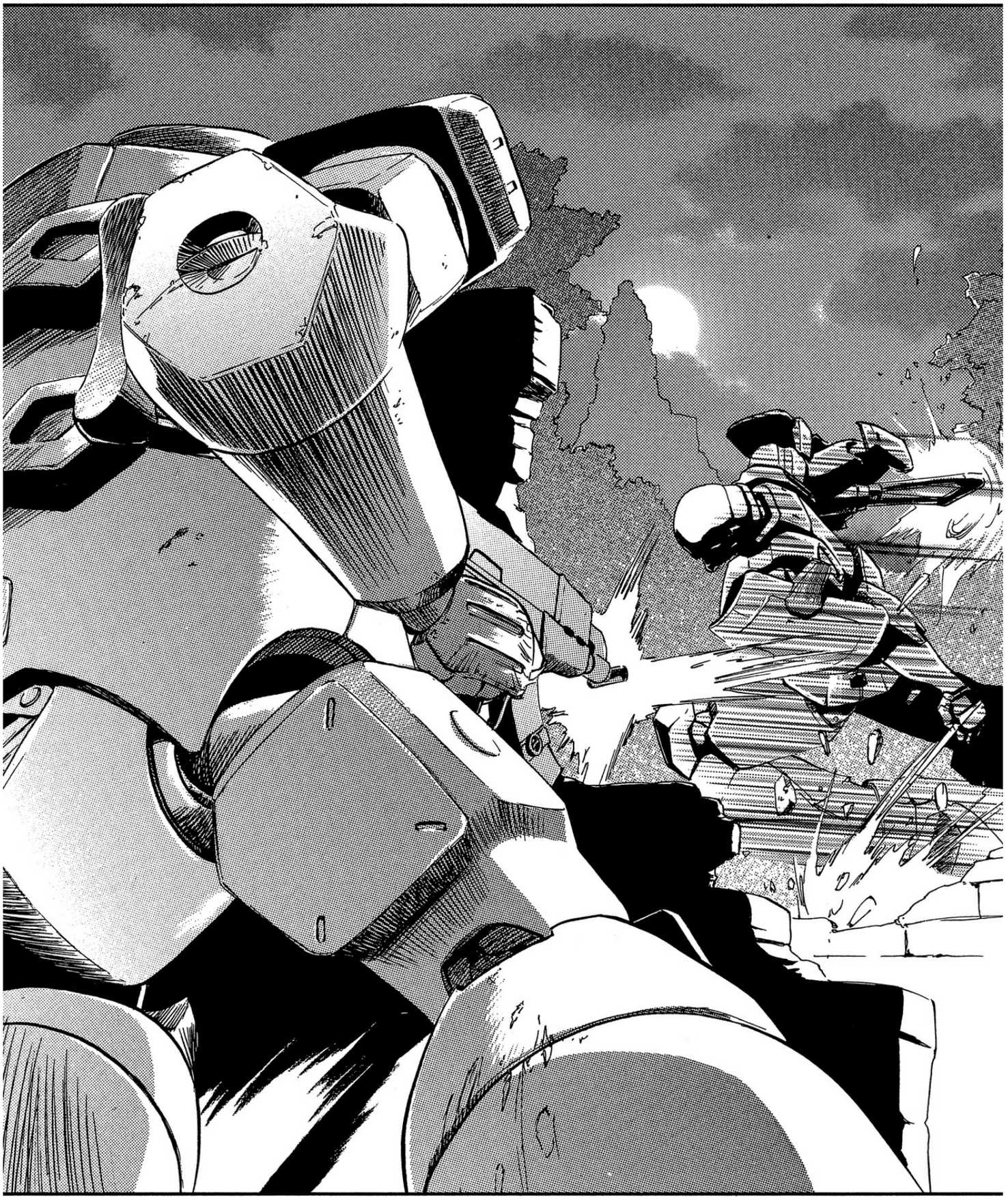
In that case... Sousuke carefully manipulated the Savage into a clean forward roll, then leaped it behind the wall of the ruins to the left and ahead of him. Then he kept his posture low and ran, keeping hidden behind the obstacle.

These were more movements that should be difficult for the enemy to cope with. It would make it hard for the M9 to get the Savage in its sights, but more importantly, it would also force it to expose its vulnerable armor plating on the rear-left-diagonal.

Bounding from a patch of dried mud, the M9 landed on the ground, and began to run in the direction Sousuke expected... then stopped. It used a lithe step to change direction, trying to give itself a minute to decide what to do next... but Sousuke caught the moment of vulnerability, thrust his gunbarrel through the crumbling wall and fired a three-round burst. It was a manual shot, reliant only on the master arms in the cockpit; he knew better than to trust this machine’s fire control system.

He missed.

The three-round burst of 37mm shells hit a stone wall two meters to the left of and behind the M9. The impact sent shards flying, and kicked up dust as the gunshots echoed through the surrounding mountains.



I can't take him in a shootout... Sousuke clicked his tongue. His aim had been awful; it would have basically been a miracle if he *had* hit. He'd hoped that by continuing to apply pressure, he might just lure the enemy operator into a mistake, and then—

Sousuke gasped as the M9 returned fire. By weaving his machine lithely around the battlefield, in between rapid successions of shots, the enemy operator was trying to get into an advantageous position.

Sousuke felt a jolt of impact. The stone wall the Savage was hiding behind was like cardboard before the power of an AS's rifle. Countless stones, penetrated or pulverized, showered down on the Savage's armor.

An alarm sounded and warning lights flashed. The first cooling unit was having problems. The words "losing hydraulics" appeared over the left arm's power transmission system. No fire in the power system, though; Sousuke had managed to avoid taking fatal damage.

He released the stick, and manually worked damage control from the switch panel. Engine management, hydraulics control. He smelled gasoline. Was there a fire after all? An instrument breakdown, maybe?

His fingers flicked the switches quickly, almost automatically. It was work that the AI in an M9 could do in an instant, but he wasn't far behind: his precise, swift movements had been ingrained in him over long years of piloting.

While Sousuke managed damage control with one hand, he used his remaining limbs to dodge the enemy's continuous attacks and fire occasional checking shots back at it. A less remarkable operator wouldn't have been capable of such a thing; a newbie soldier would have had to stop somewhere, open the user manual, and undergo a process of trial and error to get the system working again.

How much longer could he move freely like this? The machine's control system listed 120 seconds as the amount of time until the left arm stopped functioning, but Sousuke knew very well that he couldn't trust those numbers. They were the result of a disgustingly simple algorithm, applied by some engineer in some design department with no real combat experience.

Sousuke ran some rough calculations based on his experience and his machine's status, and the tactics he was going to have to take in the future. Fifteen minutes at the longest. Eight at the shortest.

He'd have to do the impossible before then. But could he get the M9 to show an opening?

"It's started," Nami whispered, from the outskirts of Munamera Village where she'd been left. Even this far from the battlefield, the roaring of cannons and bursts of fire that illuminated the mountains told her that her Savage was doing battle with Sousuke inside.

The officers continued to surround her and the maintenance crew, carbines in hand. There were about five of them in all, too many to fight.

The maintenance crew, meanwhile, were whispering to each other.

"Sure, it's started, but that doesn't tell us much..."

"Let's go watch it closer up."

"Stupid! You wanna get hit by a stray shell?!"

They seemed awfully laid-back considering the circumstances. Ashe, the team leader, was the only one who seemed worried. "I tried to stop this. I don't like it... Not a nice vibe. Just because it's good money..." he kept muttering.

"Quit griping, Ashe," Nami said in irritation.

"I can't help it. I've got a bad feeling about this. I mean it," he whispered, eyeing the silent officers and their rifles.

"You know how good Sousuke is! He'll be back in no time."

"Right. But... that's not exactly what I meant..."

One of the officers, wearing a sergeant's badge, pulled out a walkie-talkie and began a short exchange. "Yes, Chief? ...The girl? ...Yes, sir. ...Consider it done."

Nami and Ashe watched the sergeant's conversation, then looked at each other gravely. "See? This is what I was—"

"Time to move," the sergeant said, interrupting him as he shut off the walkie-

talkie. “Girl, you come with me. The rest of you, into that van.”

“Huh? Why—”

“Just do it!”

“H-Hang on—”

The man grabbed Nami’s arm and dragged her into the nearby police car, while Ashe and the crew were forced into the black van at gunpoint. “Nami!”

“Don’t worry! I’ll contact you later and—”

“Get going already!”

The police car drove off in a cloud of dust, carrying the sergeant, one other officer, and Nami. The van carrying Ashe and the others departed in the opposite direction.

The spectator seats, from which the chief and his guests were watching the battle, were at the peak of a mountain two kilometers from the ruins. Structurally it was built like a pillbox, buried halfway into the ground, with the wall facing the conflict reinforced with armored plating and concrete several meters thick. Even the small window through which they watched the fight was fortified with bulletproof glass, to keep the VIPs safe even if a stray shot did fly toward them.

In contrast to this spartan exterior, the interior was unspeakably luxurious. The floor was carpeted; the ceiling stocked with high-quality, understated lighting equipment; and the walls covered in paintings of Roman gladiators done in a realistic style. All of that, along with the finest quality sofas, left the space reminiscent of a lounge for first-class passengers.

Multiple large-screen LCDs offered multiple angles of the battle between the Savage and the M9.

“Honestly...” A man, watching with binoculars out the small window, sagged in disappointment. “I knew it was a small world in our business, but to run into him again already...”

“Mr. Kurama. You know him personally?” asked the chief, who was lounging

on one of the sofas.

“I wouldn’t go that far. I’ve spoken to him for a few minutes at most,” the man named Kurama whispered flatly. He was a large, stoic type with short-clipped hair and small, round sunglasses. Despite a robot battle with live rounds unfolding right before his eyes, his body language was that of someone watching a tedious soccer match.

“A few minutes? Seems like more than enough to me... Though he doesn’t seem much different from any other ex-child soldier I’ve seen. We get them all the time around here.”

“That ‘child soldier’ entered Mithril, qualified for their elite special forces, and held his own several times against Gauron.”

“Who’s Gauron?”

“You haven’t heard of him?”

“No, never,” the chief said guilelessly.

Kurama met his smile with a glance of indifference, then whispered in Japanese, “Must be nice, living out in the sticks...”

“Hmm?”

“Nothing.” Kurama returned his gaze to the binoculars to focus back on the battle.

The spectator area provided an excellent vantage point to view the two machines in the ruins. Sagara Sousuke’s white Savage was using terrain and obstacles to just barely keep the fierce attacks of the M9 at bay. An outside observer might think he was only delaying the inevitable against the far more advanced machine, but...

“Not bad at all,” Kurama murmured, his tone tinged with a sense of irony. “With skill like that, it’s no wonder he was unstoppable in that white thing.”

“Hah,” The chief said scornfully. “Whatever color it might be, a Savage is still a Savage.”

“Not *that* white thing—Ah, never mind. That M9, though... does its operator know Sagara?”

“No, they’re not acquainted.”

“He might just lose,” Kurama said.

The chief snorted. “Oh, please; that’s impossible. It’s an old-model Savage. And he’s not even giving him a handicap.”

“I wonder.” *But never mind,* Kurama thought. That M9 was simply one of many prizes they’d acquired during their grand assault. They couldn’t exactly reveal it to society at large, and anyone who saw it would have to be killed. Even if it was destroyed here, by chance, it would just be a minor delay on one data collection project.

Besides, the chief’s confidence was entirely understandable. No matter how good a fight it might put up, common sense rejected the idea of a Savage beating an M9. The eventual result seemed inevitable. *A shame, Sagara Sousuke,* Kurama thought again. *You made it pretty far, but you deserve what’s coming to you.*

Just then, the room’s phone rang. The chief picked up the receiver, had a short exchange in the local language, then hung up immediately.

“What is it?”

“The Savage’s team is being dealt with,” said the chief, his purple lips twisting into a smile.

“You’ll be sure to take care of them, right?” Kurama pressed.

“Yes. The crew will be taken to a nearby hog farm. But the owner is a girl... and I’m going to have a little fun with her first. Heh heh heh...”

“Neither of those things is worth bragging about.”

“I disagree. Maybe not the men’s deaths, but what I’ll do with the girl is definitely worth bragging about,” the chief gloated. “If you’re interested, I’d be happy to tell you my stories.”

“I think I’ll pass.”

“Don’t be like that. First, I’ll tie her—”

“I asked you to stop,” Kurama interrupted with a quiet but firm voice, and the

chief didn't say any more.

Sadistic pervert, Kurama spat to himself, pulling a cigarette case of carrot sticks from his pocket. *You're the one who deserves to be in a pigsty.* He'd quit smoking a long time back, but he always missed them whenever he got annoyed.

They were assuming they'd be taken back to Namsac, but Ashe and the rest of the maintenance crew soon found themselves in a farm close to Munamera, just two minutes outside of town. No... As they got out of the van, they realized it. This was a pig farm. Why in the world would they be brought here?

"Officer. What—"

"Walk. That way."

Ashe felt another nudge from a carbine's muzzle. Unable to fight back, he and the others walked into the feed hut, where a rank smell stung their noses. It was a plain little hut, piled high with feed pellets. In the center was a large chipping machine; the pellets were thrown in the top, then spat out in a granular form that was taken by the conveyor belt to the neighboring pig pens.

"Hey..." By now it was obvious what the officers were up to: they were going to kill them and grind their bodies up in the chipper.

"Line up over there."

"Y-You've got to be kidding!"

"I said line up!"

"No! Hey, you can't treat us this—" The officer used the butt of his rifle to slam Ashe in the temple.

"Urgh!" Ashe fell to his knees.

"Don't waste our time. I want to get out of this vile place too."

"Are you serious?!"

"Please, don't do this!"

The maintenance crew gathered around the fallen Ashe and begged for their

lives. But the officers just looked down on them with cold eyes and thin smirks. “Yeah, I feel sorry for you,” one of them admitted. “It’s a bad break. We’ll give you time to say your prayers, so shut your traps and line up.”

Just then, a man entered the hut. “Don’t listen to them,” the skinny white man said. He was wearing a trim button-up shirt and slacks, and glasses that gave him an air of a frail intellectual.

“Monsieur Lemon?” It was the journalist Michel Lemon, whom they’d assumed was in prison. He looked extremely calm, completely different from the anxious air that had hung about him perpetually in the Arena’s unfamiliar environment. Ashe had never actually seen Lemon this calm before. “Wh-What are you doing here? Weren’t you in holding?”

“Don’t worry about that,” Lemon whispered back with a smile. “Just get down.”

The two shocked officers snapped back to reality and turned their carbines towards him. “I don’t know what you think you’re doing here, but it’s a stupid thing to try. Maybe we’ll feed you to the pigs, as well.”

“Sorry about this,” said Lemon. Then, not moving an inch, he merely whispered a word: “Kill.” The next instant, a rifle bullet hit the lead officer in the side of the head. Blood and bits of brains went flying. The officer died on impact and slumped to the floor.

The other officers cried out in shock. At the same time, men in black battledress crashed into the feed hut, sweeping in through the entrance and the windows. They were all carrying suppressor-attached submachine guns, and opened fire before the officers could even react.

It was over in three seconds.

Ashe and the others opened their eyes timidly, and they looked around to see every officer there dead, on the ground, shot through the head.

“What...” As Ashe tried to inquire, the men in battledress cautiously turned their guns on the crew. “Hey... d-don’t hurt us!”

“It’s okay. It’s okay.” While Ashe reflexively cringed, Lemon walked up and patted him on the shoulder. The heavily-armed men quickly stood down. A few

of them let out what sounded like curses, all in fluent French.

"That was a close call, monsieur," one of the men said through his mask.

Ashe stared in disbelief. "Monsieur Lemon, what's going on here?" he asked.

"Yeah, about that..." Lemon let out a sigh and helped Ashe up. "I was lying when I said I was a journalist. Though it's true that I know nothing about ASes, and I was in a pretty desperate spot. These men are my comrades, and I'm afraid that's all I can tell you. Although..." he whispered, walking to the entrance of the feed hut to look in the direction of the "battleground" in the distant mountains, sporadically illuminated by a gunshot or a cannon flare. "Sousuke seems to have gotten close to his target. Most likely the same target I'm after."



Explosions. Gunshots. Roaring of engines. A tracer bullet tore through the night and grazed the Savage's head. The M9's silhouette flitted through the air, charging straight for him.

"Ngh..." Sousuke sent his machine into a sharp turn and pointed his rifle at the enemy. But... *I won't make it,* he realized instantly, and decided to focus on evasion instead. An M9 had amazing accuracy while in the air; there was no way he could win a straight shootout.

Fire rained down on him from above. Moving his machine in well-timed steps back and forth, left and right, he managed to dodge all the enemy's shells. Doing so took every bit of maneuverability the Savage had, and then some.

The M9's leap carried it over the Savage's head to land on the stone floor behind it. Sousuke fired the second it was grounded. The M9 ducked lithely to avoid the blast, then opened up parts of its armor to activate its ECS. With an outpouring of faint blue light, it immediately vanished into the night.

So he's ready to end it. Sousuke clicked his tongue. His Savage didn't have an ECCS, an ECS counter-sensor. All it had were last-generation optical and infrared sensors and a crummy radar—and even the radar was showing its age. In other words, he had no way of sensing the enemy when it was invisible. The only way to survive was to get moving.

Sousuke retreated his machine back into the temple that towered behind him. The M9 opened fire, to try to take him down before he got away.

There was a flash and a jolt as a bullet struck his chest armor. Thankfully, it was a shallow angle, and the chest armor—already the sturdiest part of the machine—managed to deflect the shot. The damage was light, but the jolt from the hit reached the cockpit and sent Sousuke's head spinning. Even so, he couldn't afford to stop.

He continued to back up, always facing the M9, until he made it inside the temple proper. The ruins were home to sacred statues at least a dozen meters tall, which left the ceiling high enough to easily accommodate an AS. Thick stone pillars towered around him, and moonlight streamed in through the holes in the ceiling.

Sousuke got his machine to the back of the temple and changed its rifle clip. This was his last one; his only other weapons were the two HEAT hammers stored on its back. The hydraulics in the left arm, damaged in that first shot, were also reaching dangerously low levels. It might hold out a minute longer, at most.

Should I risk it? Sousuke asked himself, but decided instantly. He didn't have one second to hesitate.

He fired his rifle at the stone pillar on the left side of the entrance. Five shots, six... The pillar crumbled. He fired at a few other pillars at the same time and destroyed them, too. He watched his "shots remaining" counter slowly tick down, until it stopped at one. The massive hall was now swirling with dust; he'd be able to see his enemy now, even if it used ECS.

There was a brief silence, and then the M9 entered the hall. It moved straight at him, with the speed of an arrow. Its ECS was disengaged; the operator must have judged it useless with all the dust around. *Smart thinking.*

Sousuke fired his one remaining shot. The M9 dodged it cleanly with a pivot, then pointed its own rifle back at the Savage. Sousuke had expected it to miss, and before the enemy could return fire, he'd pulled out his HEAT hammer.

The HEAT hammer—As the name might suggest, it was a melee weapon, a powerful hammer-shaped object with a shaped explosive "head" for taking out tanks. It was single-use only; it would explode when it hit the enemy, and the energy released would tear through armor and destroy whatever was inside.

But instead of the enemy, Sousuke slammed the HEAT hammer into the pillar next to him, which instantly crumbled from the force of the explosion. The temple's ceiling, already barely hanging on after the destruction of the other pillars, could remain in place no longer after the HEAT hammer strike. There was a massive roar, and hundreds of tons of rocks came raining down. With nowhere left to run, the two machines in the hall found themselves buried by the collapsing walls.

Sousuke felt an unrelenting series of impacts, and the sight of the enemy machine on the monitor disappeared in an instant behind dust and rubble. His machine rocked back and forth, with all of his warning lights and displays

flashing. The mechanical attitude indicator began to tremble and roll, telling Sousuke that his machine had gone from standing to flat on its face. And that was all that he, buried under the collapsing temple, knew about the situation.

At last, the cave-in stopped. The echoing rumbles vanished, and the silence of the night returned. The only sounds were the growl of his just-barely-working diesel engine, and the groaning of his frame and armor beneath the tremendous weight above.

Sousuke was silent. Their machines were both buried alive. His monitor showed nothing but blackness, and the cooling system must have shut down, because his engine and hydraulics temperatures were rising.

He didn't have any time to waste. Sousuke manually manipulated his joints' torque control, setting reaction speed to minimum in exchange for maximizing arm strength. It was the same principle as putting a vehicle into first gear.

He manipulated the machine's four limbs to slowly bring it to its feet. It pushed its way out from under tons of rubble, and began to crawl out towards the night sky again. Fragments of pulverized stone fell in through the gaps in the Savage's armor, and dust clouded around him.

And the enemy? Sousuke searched for the other machine, using the simple cleaning device to wash off the dust clinging to the Savage's optical sensors. The M9 was nowhere to be seen; it must still be struggling under the rubble. It would surely dig its way out eventually, but it had taken considerable damage, and its functions would be severely compromised—just as he'd planned.

The M9's drive system was all-electric, lacking the hydraulics of the Savage. It was designed to move its joints purely through muscle expansion and contraction, just like a person. That made the M9 vastly lighter and more maneuverable, but at the same time, prevented it from dealing with heavy loads in the same way. If one had to move something of incredible weight by force—a rare situation, of course—the Savage, with its heavy but flexible hydraulics system, would have a great advantage over the M9. No matter how high a machine's engine output, it was the makeup of the drive system that controlled how its power was applied.

There were also relevant differences in the machines' designs. The Savage

had a much simpler joint structure than the M9, and its resilient egg-shaped torso helped it to resist external pressures better than the M9's flexible concave one. In terms of bullet resistance, the M9 had the advantage due to its armor composition, but overall structural integrity was one area in which the old-fashioned Savage was by far the M9's better.

Sousuke's plan to take the enemy out with him by collapsing the temple was effectively gambling on the Savage's characteristic durability. It might not be strong, but it was a tough little machine. You could push it to its limits and beyond, and it would stick with you to the end. This was the greatest strength of the Rk-91/92 series. Heat, humidity, sand, and dust; inferior-grade fuel and oil; outrageous payloads and wear and tear... it was a professional tool that could take anything the battlefield might dish out, while continuing to fight without complaint. That was this "bestseller" machine's true value.

It was only natural that Sousuke, having started out in ASes like these, would have initially hated the Arbalest he piloted for Mithril. The only people who would enjoy being stuck in a glorified prototype crammed with advanced technology were new recruits wanting to play hero.

Sousuke glanced at the machine's status. Hydraulics in the left half were dropping. The engine's heat wasn't going down. The balancer was acting up. There was an unpleasant grinding sound coming from the frame around the leg joints.

Yet Sousuke still whispered, in satisfaction, "It's a fine machine."

At last, the M9 parted the rubble and crawled into view. The collapse had really done a number on it. Sousuke worked the Savage's arms to grab the head of the M9 unceremoniously, then swung his last remaining HEAT hammer into the enemy machine's abdomen, crushing the generator within.

Kurama let out a snort of laughter as a precision strike to the generator took the M9 out of the fight. He didn't like it, but he had to admire the bastard for pulling it off in that big hunk of junk. Kurama had met more than his share of AS operators in his time, but he'd never seen one beat odds so stacked against him purely through intimate knowledge of a machine's capabilities.

That coolheadedness, that quick thinking... The AS as a genre of weapon had a limited history, of course, but Sagara Sousuke's operating skill and combat experience far outstripped that of most professional soldiers. He was just the kind of man Amalgam wanted in their ranks, but...

I doubt he'd accept an invitation, Kurama reflected. There was little chance Sousuke would willingly join up with the people he'd been fighting tooth-and-nail since Sunan. Even if they used the woman Mr. Silver had brought in as bait, there would be no way to enforce a contract or instill any real loyalty in him. The moment he had a chance to get the girl back, Sagara Sousuke would turn those same combat skills back on Amalgam.

Which meant they'd just have to kill him.

Kurama cast a glance at the chief, who clearly hadn't expected the M9 to lose, either. Unable to hide his dismay, he was muttering things like, "Impossible" and, "Who is that man?"

"So? What are you going to do?" Kurama asked, and the chief blinked as if awakening from a dream. "You let him know who we really are. He's going to come after you now. And when he finds you, he'll interrogate you to within an inch of your life."

4: Collateral Damage

The M9 lay limply on its smoking right side, on top of the rubble. Sousuke looked down at it, then used his external speakers to address the operator. “Come on out.”

A little while later, he saw a small explosion around the M9’s neck joint, which blew the head off. It was an emergency escape mechanism for when the hatch in the chest portion was locked and wouldn’t open. The loss of the head exposed a narrow escape hatch, out of which the machine’s operator crawled. Despite the destruction of the generator in the abdomen, the cockpit in the chest had remained unscathed, so the man didn’t seem badly injured.

“Dammit,” the operator cursed as he picked himself up on top of the rubble, removing his headgear. He was a man around thirty with a suntan and a goatee. His operator’s uniform looked just like the one Sousuke had worn at Mithril.

Sousuke’s Savage had used up all of its weapons, but there was no way an unarmed human could escape an AS. The man seemed to realize that, too, and showed no signs that he meant to put up a struggle. “I thought you’d gotten desperate and decided to go for a double-suicide... but I guess not. You actually planned it like that? Who are you? How do you know the M9 that well?”

“I’ll ask the questions here,” Sousuke said, then knelt his machine down next to the man. That should be sufficient intimidation. “Tell me who you are and where you got that M9. You can’t exactly buy them on the open market.”

“You really think I’m going to tell you?”

“You really think I’ll accept that answer?” The Savage reached out with its left hand and grabbed the man around the torso.

“Erk...”

“The battle really did a number on my machine,” Sousuke admitted. “It’s hard to regulate the grip strength properly. I’ll try hard not to crush you, but you may lose a few ribs in the meantime.” With the five clumsy fingers latched around

him, the man flailed his arms and legs. “It’s hot, I’m sure. One of the defining aspects of the Rk-91 is its old-fashioned cooler system. If you fight hard enough for long enough, the heat from the engine and hydraulics reaches as far as the fingers. If you weren’t wearing that operator’s uniform, you’d probably have third degree burns by now. But even that protection will only buy you a few seconds...”

“I get it, I get it! I surrender! Let me go! I’ll talk!” Cowed by the creeping pressure and heat, the man screamed and flailed his arms. Sousuke released him, and the man fell on his backside onto the rubble, panting. “Dammit... you’re a monster.”

“You were trying to kill me,” Sousuke retorted, “Just be grateful I’m not so eager to return the favor.” While they talked, he ran the machine’s sensors in a brief scan of the area. He was worried about the fact that the chief hadn’t contacted him, even though the fight had ended. If he wanted to finish him off, he could send a new AS to attack at any time, but he hadn’t seen any sign of that being in the plans either.

“Are there any other ASes hidden in the area?” Sousuke asked.

“No. I think it’s just me.”

“That seems incautious.”

“He didn’t think an M9 would lose to a Savage, I’m sure. I sure as hell didn’t.”

“Are you a soldier for Amalgam?”

The man fell quiet for a while at this question, and at last, a self-effacing smile appeared on his lips. “I guess I am now. But at this rate, I’ll probably be fired right away. No... executed, probably.”

“Were you a Mithril soldier?”

“Yes.” The man seemed surprised to hear the name Mithril brought up. “Until just recently. Wait, are you—”

“I was with the West Pacific Battle Group,” Sousuke affirmed. “SRT.”

“No wonder you knew the M9 inside and out... Tuatha de Danaan, huh? I’d heard rumors about that formidable female commander of yours. But that

goddamned chief... he never told me I'd be fighting a former comrade." The man's voice was hushed with pain. He narrowed his eyes and let out a small sigh.

"Where were you assigned?"

"Mediterranean Battle Group," the man told him. "Sergeant George Lovelock. I was SRT, too."

Lovelock. Sousuke had associated with other battle groups, but he didn't recall the man's name. That didn't mean much, though—between the four battle groups and the headquarters division, Mithril's SRT alone comprised dozens of soldiers. There were more men he didn't know than men that he did.

The man—Lovelock—asked him, "Do you know Ben Clouseau? He's a lieutenant who transferred to you guys last year. He was with us before then."

"I know him well," Sousuke answered. "What happened to the Mediterranean Battle Group? Why are you piloting an M9 for Amalgam?"

The man paused before responding. "I think the whole group was destroyed. The Aegean Sea Base was ambushed and most of my comrades were killed. I don't even know how many survived."

"Why were you spared?"

Lovelock turned his eyes down, his expression pained. Sousuke might as well have asked why he had subjected himself to the indignity of survival. "I happened to be off-base at the time. A simple operation in Basque Country, just running observation with a lone M9. I had just finished and was heading back in a Hercules."

Basque Country was a region in Spain, an area home to constant acts of terrorism and separatist movements. "Hercules" referred to a C-130 transport craft. Nothing about the story stood out as suspicious; Sousuke had done a number of such missions for the West Pacific Battle Group.

"By the time we got back and realized something was off, they'd already taken the base," Lovelock continued. "The plane was running low on fuel, so we couldn't get away. The only runway we could land on was held by the enemy. So the group of us discussed it..."

“And you surrendered?”

“That’s right. I proposed a trade with Amalgam, our lives for that machine.” He glanced back at the trashed M9. “Info on its controls and tactics... all that. Amalgam had data on the M9, but it was all spec-related. The only way to get the lowdown on how it performs in combat is to ask someone who operates one.”

“And the enemy accepted your terms?” Sousuke asked, finding it suspicious.

Lovelock was silent for a moment, staring up into the Savage’s optical sensors. “Yes,” he said at last. His voice broke a tiny bit, and he trembled. “They did. They run exercises too, which means they need ‘aggressors.’ They let me join Amalgam on condition that I play that role and help them gather data.”

“What about the others?” Sousuke wanted to know. “The whole transport surrendered, right?”

“I don’t know,” Lovelock said, after a moment. “We were split up right after we surrendered, and I haven’t seen them since.”

“Are there any other ex-Mithril among the enemy?”

“I don’t know. But I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“What is the scale of Amalgam?”

“I don’t know that, either. Even if it was an ambush, they still managed to drive Mithril to extinction. They must have much more than just a few isolated regiments.”

“Where are their main bases? What’s their hierarchical structure?”

“From what I know... Bucharest, Tripoli, Corsica, Crimea, Sri Lanka, Yemen. I don’t know where, exactly. The ones I’ve seen personally are a camp outside of Tripoli and somewhere in Ceylon. They weren’t especially grand facilities. In fact... they seemed designed to be dismantled and rebuilt somewhere else at the drop of a hat. I don’t know who sets up the bases, or where they get the money. I doubt even most members of Amalgam know the full scope of it. They’re trying to keep things fluid, and what passes for a command structure is completely decentralized.”

“Like the Internet,” Sousuke mused thoughtfully. The original Internet was a network created in the USA to decentralize the chain of command, allowing it to keep going even in the event of a Soviet nuclear attack. Amalgam had applied that concept to a terrorist organization, and in so doing, achieved a similar longevity.

“Yes,” Lovelock agreed. “If you crush one location, another will take its place. That means it’s fundamentally impossible to grasp the full scale of the organization, or to wipe it out. Nobody actually knows the entire situation. That’s their strength.”

“But that must make it impossible to make decisions,” Sousuke protested. “Without a top to the pyramid...”

“It’s not exactly impossible, but it does happen slowly. I haven’t seen enough to know for sure... but I think Amalgam is a democratic organization. Ironic as hell, isn’t it? It takes them forever to reach a decision and then execute it.”

“I see,” Sousuke finally said. So that’s why they’d sat back and allowed him to guard Kaname in Tokyo for so long; an organization with a faster decision-making process might have struck back hard immediately after the Sunan Incident.

The same could be said for the A21 incident, and the Pacific Chrysalis incident. There was too much about those incidents that didn’t add up when assuming an organization that could make a decision and react quickly. It was incredibly inefficient.

The tradeoff, then, was mitigation of risk. Their plans had been continuously blocked by Mithril. They’d lost valuable personnel and rare machinery over to Mithril, too. With enough careful analysis and questioning, the information they’d given up should have proven fatal... yet after all this time, Mithril still hadn’t gotten a handle on Amalgam. Multiple large-scale plans could end in failure without them suffering a bit as a result.

“I came to Namsac just two days ago. I was in the Libyan Desert Camp until then. Then a man named Kurama came, and—”

“Did you say Kurama?” Sousuke found himself saying.

Lovelock's brow furrowed. "You know him?"

"A little bit. So he's here, then?"

"Yeah. He was probably watching this battle. There's a mountain to the north-northwest. There's a spectator chamber for the VIPs there—"

Just then, Sousuke got a reading on his infrared sensors. "Hold on." Bearing: 348. Distance: 3000. Altitude: 85 meters. A small attack helicopter was approaching, probably sent by the chief. He turned the Savage's sensors towards the target, zooming in as much as he could and straining his eyes, and saw that the helicopter had rocket launchers and machine guns on its stub wings. It was definitely coming to kill Sousuke; the chief must have known he was out of weapons and had no way to fight back.

"It seems we're out of time." Sousuke clicked his tongue and revved up the broken-down machine's engine.

The man looked at him in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said; time's up."

Sousuke's machine extended a manipulator towards the limp M9's right arm, grabbing its wrist with both hands, and increased the grip strength to full. The Savage used every last inch of its strength to pry the armor plating from the M9's wrist. With a sound of warping metal, it came off, exposing the interior mechanisms. Sousuke then used the Savage's manipulator to pull the wire from the wire gun mounted in the M9's lower arm.

"Hey, hang on," said Lovelock. "The Savage doesn't have any more weapons, does it? How are you going to fight them?"

The enemy helicopter was approaching at full tilt. Sousuke stepped his machine to the left and began to whip the wire he'd taken from the M9 over its head, looking like a cowboy in a Western.

"Hide," Sousuke commanded, and in that same moment, the helicopter entered firing range and launched its rocket.

The large rocket fired from the lotus root-shaped launcher, streaking towards him. The Savage stepped left and then right, throwing off its aim. The rocket

detonated nearby. Without even flinching from the force, Sousuke threw the wire at the enemy helicopter above.

The M9's wire gun was a special piece of equipment meant to help the ten-ton machine move freely in mountainous or urban regions. You could fire the anchor to the top of a sheer cliff and run the machine up the side. Though it was only about ten millimeters in diameter, it was made from a combination of metallic and carbon fibers, and powerful enough to withstand instantaneous force of over ten times the machine's weight—in other words, one hundred tons.

The wire twined like a living thing around the rotor of the enemy helicopter, and the rest was simple; Sousuke grabbed the base of the wire and pulled with all his might. That was enough to completely throw off the helicopter's balance, which sent it crashing into the ground with an explosion.

"Still alive?" Sousuke asked, casting his wire aside.

Lovelock climbed out from behind the ruins of the M9. He seemed unsteady from the shock of the nearby explosion. "Yeah..."

"There's a lot more I'd like to ask you, but we don't have time. You should—" Sousuke clicked his tongue. It would be one thing in an M9, but the battered old-fashioned Savage was in no condition to carry a person around. Just grabbing Lovelock's body with the overheating machine could kill him. "—Never mind, just do what you want. Go wherever you need to go to get away."

The man was even more surprised by this. "You're letting me go? I don't understand. Why would you—"

"I don't have time to deal with you. That's all."

"Wait. Are you alone? You don't have backup coming?"

Finding his words suspicious, Sousuke responded in a clipped manner. "No backup. I'm alone."

"What? What are you fighting for here, then?"

"I owe Amalgam one. My circumstances are the same as yours; I was off-base, and they slaughtered all my allies."

The man said nothing.

Sousuke checked his machine's status: hydraulics were still tanking, and there was only a short time until the cooling system completely crapped out. But it was still better than being out in the open. He'd caught the enemy by the tail, and he wasn't about to let it go. "They also stole something important from me," he went on, "and I'm going to get it back."

"Hey, now... That's the only reason you're fighting them?" Lovelock asked. "Are you crazy?"

"The only reason?" The output on the machine's generator was rising. Sousuke severed connection to the left arm hydraulics, and made a few other adjustments to buy time. Then he said, "It's enough reason for me. I will retrieve what they stole, no matter what they try. I made a promise."

Yes, he'd made a promise in that classroom.

He turned back in the direction he assumed the chief was likely to be, and was about to leave the pile of rubble behind, when Lovelock called after him, "I don't get it! You're just a mercenary too, aren't you? We change employers with the winds, looking for the best deal! Isn't that in our nature?!" For some reason, there was something plaintive in Lovelock's cry. He seemed to be asking not Sousuke, but someone farther away... or perhaps, asking himself.

"Yes," Sousuke affirmed. "That is indeed the nature of the wanderer."

"In that case..."

"But I'm not a mercenary anymore. I'm just a man," Sousuke whispered, then set his machine running.

Lovelock fell to his knees and shouted something, but Sousuke's external microphone was in such bad shape, it couldn't pick up any more of his words.

Michel Lemon and his men, having saved Ashe and the rest of the mechanics, didn't bother to clean up the dirty cops' corpses before immediately moving on.

"So, who are you people anyway?" Ashe asked from inside the van, which was currently driving down the unpaved road. The other mechanics had been

dropped off on the outskirts of Munamera Village where they'd started, accompanied by a few of Lemon's subordinates.

"Probably better if you don't know the details," Lemon said flatly, then went silent.

Ashe waited patiently for the man to speak again, but when he realized he wasn't going to, he tried pushing. "I have a right to know what's going on here. How did you get out of jail? Are you a spy? Have you been lying to us this entire time?"

"It's true that I lied to you, but I didn't do it intentionally."

"Is that supposed to make it all right?!" Ashe demanded.

Lemon furrowed his brow, frowning, as if in pain. "I was looking for a strong team to get me a foothold in the Namsac Arena culture. I ran into you people completely by chance. When I realized Nami wanted me to invest in you, my first thought was to brush her off and find contacts elsewhere. Look... I'm sorry to say it, but you guys looked really weak. That's about all that I was thinking. But then..."

"Then...?"

"When Sousuke showed up, I changed my mind," Lemon admitted. "It's not just what he knew about ASes, but the way he carried himself that spoke to me. He was young, but he'd been in combat. I could tell that much on sight. Anyone could," he whispered, as a sad shadow fell across his face. The expression was similar to the one he'd worn when ordering his men to shoot the corrupt cops. "So I thought I'd stick around and see how things played out. I figured that, sooner or later, he would bring me closer to the organization I'm after... but I never dreamed he'd be after them, too."

Ashe could only tilt his head in response to Lemon's vague words. "I don't get it," he finally said. "Who does that make you, again?"

Lemon let out a self-effacing laugh. "I'm with a certain nation's intelligence agency. Our country distances itself from the likes of Amalgam and Mithril, you see."

"I still don't understand, *monsieur*." Ashe whispered, and Lemon laughed

again.

Sousuke was using every trick in the book to keep moving, but his machine was reaching its limit. The cockpit was lit up like a Christmas tree as it flashed with every alarm light it had. By the time he'd made it to the mountain, where Lovelock had told him the spectator seats were located, the gauges for the machine's hydraulic system and temperature readouts were far into the danger zones. If he patched up the damage and replaced the lost oil—similar to a human blood transfusion—he could probably get a little more use out of the AS, but he had no time for that right now.

Sousuke stopped his machine and opened the cockpit hatch, pulling down his faithful automatic pistol and a replacement clip from the cockpit rack before he jumped out. The gun was an Austrian-made Glock 19. He'd managed to smuggle it into the country via separate post, and had only just reunited with it two days ago. The pistol didn't have the greatest firepower in the world, but he didn't care. It would let him take out several men, and from there he could substitute whatever guns they were carrying.

The mountain containing the spectator seats was located inside an archetypal jungle made up of broadleaf trees. At first, he'd been stumbling around blindly, but his eyes had adjusted by now; he let a few foot soldiers run past as he approached the mountain's east side, tearing through the dense foliage as he went. He'd memorized a map of the area in advance, and he was familiar with the terrain itself from previous battles in Southeast Asia.

After moving through the darkness for a while longer, he finally caught sight of a large concrete gate built into the slope. It was surrounded by barbed wire fencing on all sides, and illuminated by powerful lights. There were a lot of guards present: Sousuke had brought his Savage pretty close to their hideout, so it was understandable that they'd assume he was sniffing around nearby. He had to act fast, or the guards might even find him hiding out in the brush.

Now, what to do... While Sousuke considered his plan of attack, he saw new movement in front of the gate. A police car from Namsac had arrived, seemingly in something of a hurry. Two officers and a girl got out—the girl was Nami.

Just then, the men he was there to see also arrived from out of the gate, two men surrounded by a small private army. One was the chief, and the other was... him. Kurama. That tall, muscular man, clad in a black coat despite the sweltering Southeast Asian climate.

Kurama had barely laid eyes on Nami when he suddenly yanked her toward him, and pushed his pistol against her chin. “Sagara! Are you watching?” His voice was loud enough to echo around the valley. “I know you’re out there! Come out and drop your weapons, or I’ll kill the girl! You have until the count of ten!”

Nami’s small frame visibly trembled as she looked around at the surrounding jungle. The tropical air was stiflingly humid at this hour, and there wasn’t a single breeze to rustle the trees. The various insects, reptiles, nocturnal birds, and mammals all seemed to hold their breath, looking down on Sousuke where he was hunched in the dark. They almost felt judgmental; so many eyes, designed only to gather external information—like an AS’s sensors—glaring straight at Sousuke’s back, as if to bear dispassionate witness to his fate.

“...Ten!”

Nami was surrounded by the chief and his private guard. Too many to beat all in an instant. But...

“...Nine!”

Kurama was clearly serious. This wasn’t just a bluff. And... he wasn’t sure why, but there was something else gnawing in his gut. Something else that wasn’t right.

“...Eight!”

What to do? He’d never felt this particular sensation before. It was like something... something very bad was about to happen. Something that he couldn’t take back.

“...Seven!”

Seven seconds left. Seven seconds, and no more. What would happen if he came out of the brush now? They’d probably just shoot him. Kurama wasn’t the type to show mercy.

“...Six!”

Each second seemed to drag out longer and longer. Each one felt like a minute, a day, a week, and finally a month. He might be able to save Nami if he went out there. She wasn’t a part of this, and never had been. But Sousuke had no doubt that if he did so, he would be killed—the action would be more than justified, after all he’d done to Kurama. After all the violence he’d survived so far, to hit a dead end here...

“...Five!”

Still, that was no justification for letting Nami die. There was no way he could let them kill an innocent girl, one who had nothing to do with the fight between Mithril and Amalgam. But he couldn’t let himself be killed, either. What would happen if he died? Who would save Kaname? Who would make Leonard and the other members of Amalgam pay?

“...Four!”

He couldn’t die here, not now. He had to do everything he could, use everything he had—skill, experience, stamina, intellect, everything—to save Chidori Kaname from those people. *I can only die once that is done,* he told himself. *Which means I cannot die here.*

But then again, the same principle applied to Nami, who had worked so hard to get that scrapped Savage into fighting shape. To rebuild her ruined hometown. To take back her peaceful school. Nami, who had come so close to making her dream a reality. The idea of her journey ending here... that, too, was unacceptable.

But Kurama was making him choose between them. He had enough resources at his disposal right now that Sousuke wouldn’t stand a chance in a fight, and he was starting a countdown he couldn’t possibly turn back. The entire time he stewed over this moral dilemma, Sousuke had been searching for a third option. Some clever way to keep both him and Nami from dying. He ran every possibility through his mind and considered them all with incredible speed.

“...Three!”

No, nothing was coming. There were no options available. At least, nothing he

could think of in the three seconds he had left.

Maybe Kurama's countdown was a bluff. If he just stayed in hiding, the other man might just decide, "I guess he's not here after all. Maybe I was mistaken," and leave without killing Nami. No, that wasn't possible—When a man like Kurama said he was going to shoot, he would shoot. He would never go back on his word with others watching.

What do I do? Is there no other way? Some other way to—

"...Two!"

It was no use. He'd have to come out. Perhaps he could buy himself a little more than those two seconds. Even if there was basically no way to survive what was out there, he could still buy some time. Yes, he'd have to come—

"I've changed my mind." Kurama didn't bother to call out 'one.' Instead, he just shoved Nami away and fired ruthlessly at her back.

Sousuke recognized the gunshot; it was a .45-caliber. Three shots in a row. Each one of them hit, sending a slight convulsion through Nami's little body. The streaming searchlights illuminating the sprays of red fluid bursting from her back. Kurama wasn't intentionally avoiding her vital organs, at least as far as he could tell.

Nami didn't stagger. She didn't fly forward. Instead, she just sank in place, like a puppet with its strings cut. He couldn't see her face.

Sousuke sucked in a sharp breath. Only his extensive soldier's training kept him from crying out. It was instinctive, the honed physical and mental reflexes that prevented him from doing anything that might endanger a mission, no matter what.

Why? Why did he shoot her? Why didn't he say "one"?

I was going to step out. I was going to, just like that bastard asked. You can't do that to a person after he's made up his mind. Don't you understand how these things work?!

The rise of a scaldingly violent emotion, and the self-restraint to keep it locked down: these two contradictory impulses tore through him, leaving

Sousuke on the verge of exploding.

"I feel it! I can sense your anger!" Kurama cried as he slowly raised both hands to the sky, flanked by the chief and corrupt cops with their carbine rifles. They all looked shocked by the sudden event. "You're not even hiding it! I can tell you really are close. Your desire to kill fills every corner of this jungle. I can tell. Yes, this is what it means to be alive, right? It's like the air is vibrating around you, Sagara Sousuke!"

Damn you... Silently, Sousuke pointed his automatic pistol, the Glock 19, out from the underbrush at Kurama. Distance... about 100 meters. There was a chain-link fence between them, too.

Can I kill him right now? he wondered. No, it wasn't possible. It would have been one thing with a rifle, but Sousuke's weapon was a short-barreled pistol. There was no way he could hit at a hundred meters; pistols just weren't designed for it. Even if he did pull off a lucky hit, there was no way a 9mm bullet would be lethal at this distance. On top of that, the reason Kurama was wearing that black coat despite the tropical weather was probably because it was the same bulletproof one he'd been wearing the last time they faced off.

There's no point in shooting, Sousuke decided. *I can't kill him.* Plus, the enemy would hear his gunshot and send a few dozen soldiers his way. There was no way Sousuke could escape from that many, once they knew his general direction. He might take about ten soldiers out with him at most, but then he'd be dead. That was why he'd been paralyzed with indecision during the countdown.

"You want to kill me, don't you?" Kurama asked, louder this time. "You want to come out this instant, don't you?! No need to hold back. Do whatever you want! If you want to indulge your impressive self-restraint, I won't object to that either. You can sit and watch from this backwater jungle for the rest of your life! But... I'll tell you one thing: if you let me go now, I'll do the same thing to that girl you love so much!"

He meant Chidori Kaname. Kurama knew about her.

"That's right," he continued. "I know where she is! You keep coming out of the woodwork to foil my plans, so my first order of business will be to go back

there and fuck her brains out. I'll do what effeminate Leonard and dead Gauron can't! Then I'll murder her, like I did with this poor, sad little girl right here! Well, Sagara Sousuke?!"

Sousuke knew that this display was all just for show. Kurama wasn't some small-time crook; he was a professional, with a well-honed sense of calm, and he was only saying these things to get Sousuke to lose his own. And while Kurama ranted and raved, the enemy would be fanning out their search. Eventually, they'd find and surround him.

But still... Sousuke couldn't deny that the shooting of Nami and the references to Kaname did indeed affect him emotionally.

Kurama sniffed. "Yeah, I guess you wouldn't come out for that, would you? But watch this, and you'll see exactly how heartless I can be." Kurama moved to fire again into Nami, whose body was lying motionless on the wet ground below.

Sousuke gasped, unable to take anymore. But just as he was about to throw caution to the wind, bullets began to rain down on Kurama and his men from a completely different direction. Countless shots, from assault rifles and submachine guns. There were eight men in the jungle—no, more than that.

The rain of fire mowed down a few of the officers around Kurama, while snipers took out the searchlights. That cloaked the area around the gate in darkness, causing the confused enemy to shout and scream and begin firing in random directions. A grenade came flying from somewhere nearby and hit a parked police car, spreading even more explosions and chaos.

Who are they? Where did they come from? No, he didn't have time to think about that... Whoever they were, he just had to take advantage of the opportunity they'd created. He had to stop Kurama at once.

Sousuke leaped out of the underbrush and ran nimbly through the broadleaf trees. One of the chief's personal soldiers, holding a carbine, was standing between him and the fence. He was looking wildly in all directions, shaken by the sudden ambush. Sousuke was within five meters before the enemy even noticed him.

"Hey—"

He didn't give the man time to fight back. He just strode up, took aim, and fired. Just one shot, right between the man's eyes—it was easy, at this range. As the enemy slumped to the ground, Sousuke walked right up to him, pressed the Glock against the back of his head, and stole the man's carbine and spare ammo clips. Checking swiftly to make sure there was a bullet in the chamber, he swapped the rifle's selector from full automatic to semi.

Around the gate, it was pandemonium. Cries blended in with the gunshots, while clouds of dust from bullet impacts and smoke from burning police cars reduced visibility even more. Sousuke had just gotten around to the gate entrance when two enemy soldiers came running out in a panic. They, too, had let down their guard in all the chaos.

He took them both down skillfully with short two-shot bursts. The first died before he even knew what had hit him; the other died the instant he laid eyes on Sousuke. As he passed over the two dead men on the ground, Sousuke felt a sense of recognition; the first one he'd killed was the man who had struck him in the interrogation room. He didn't know his name, and would likely never learn it now.

Sousuke crouched behind the nearest obstacle—a police car full of bullet holes sitting at a diagonal—and considered his situation. The attackers seemed to have the overwhelming advantage, due to more than the element of surprise: they also seemed to have better training and tactics than the corrupt cops. They'd set up a perfect "kill zone" in the open space in front of the gate where Kurama and the others had been standing. By forming a semicircle and focusing all their fire in that area, they could take out the entire enemy force in a very short time. It was Tactics 101 for surprise attacks and ambushes.

Sousuke couldn't possibly approach. He didn't know if the attackers were friend or foe, but he knew that if he got any closer to the area where Kurama had been, they'd shoot him down indiscriminately.

Ironically, now that he was in the middle of this dangerous shootout, Sousuke's mind felt perfectly clear: he kept careful stock of the rounds remaining in the gun he'd taken from the enemy; he was able to keep on the alert 360 degrees around him; and he could anticipate the tactics, locations and remaining forces on both sides. All of this, even though just minutes ago, he had

felt so at the mercy of emotion.

He was surprised at himself. From the moment he'd come out of the brush until now, he hadn't given a single thought to Nami, the girl lying out there with a fatal wound as bullets flew around her...

He couldn't see Kurama from his current location. The man was a professional, and he'd probably realized from the first attack that they were in an ambush situation. He'd have recognized that he was standing in a kill zone, too. If he was still alive, he'd have either run into the crude tunnel behind the gate that led into the mountain, or...

Sousuke heard the roar of an engine and the squeal of tires. He turned and saw, through the thick black smoke, a police car racing down the road. He could just barely make out the back of the head of the tall man in the driver's seat—and the silhouette of the chief in the passenger seat, too.

Sousuke clicked his tongue. Rather than heading for the tunnel, Kurama had gone in the other direction. He'd found a car that still worked and was trying desperately to escape from this dangerous region. Sousuke spun around, propped his carbine on the hood of the car, moved the selector, and unloaded on full automatic at Kurama's police car. Holding down the recoiling barrel, he mercilessly kept his finger on the trigger. Past the flicker of the muzzle flash, he could see the shots spark against the enemy car, and the glass of the rear window shatter. Yet the car continued to drive, even picking up speed.

The brush along the road had made it hard to aim. Sousuke expended all his bullets in no time at all, and to no avail; the back of the patrol car receded in his vision, first becoming the size of his fist, then the size of his thumb. He pulled the clip out of his thigh pocket and reloaded quickly, then emptied the magazine once more. The bullets shot from the rifle's barrel chewed at the car, yet the target continued to grow further away. He loaded his final clip. The car kept on driving, now the size of a grain of rice, now disappearing over the hill...

"Dammit!" There was nothing more he could do. Sousuke let out a soft groan and, at last, relaxed his trigger finger. The patrol car that Kurama and the chief were in was out of range now. Biting back the anger he felt towards himself for having let the enemy get away, Sousuke took shelter behind the car again and

thought of his next move. Should he escape, or remain?

While he struggled with his decision, a figure entered his field of vision. It wasn't a member of the police; the battledress was different. Sousuke pointed his gun at him quickly, but the man held up a hand. "Don't, Sousuke!" he said. It was Michel Lemon, whom he'd last seen in a dirty cell in Namsac.

The battle was over soon enough. Several police cars were now on fire, spilling black smoke into the surrounding area. With all of the chief's men either escaped or dead, there was no one left in the kill zone. The attackers came out of the jungle to confirm the results, carefully and cautiously supporting one another as they went. They wore tactical vests with many pockets over black battledress, equipment allowing for the insertion of bulletproof plates. They also wore balaclavas and passive infrared night vision goggles, though these particular versions looked more like large sunglasses.

Their equipment told Sousuke that they were part of a national military or similar organization, and their movements told him that they were very well trained. They kept their guns pointed unwaveringly ahead of them, supported by their core muscles, and they stepped in a special way that kept upper halves perfectly still. The smallest unit was teams of two. Each kept guard in a different direction, and they moved forward with confidence and perfect coordination. When passing beside an ally on the alert, they clapped them on the shoulder. When confirming the body of an enemy on the ground, they approached with utmost caution— especially if they couldn't see both of the body's hands.

"What's going on?" Sousuke asked.

"First things first," Lemon responded, his tone subdued. He was right, and so they both ran to the open space in front of the now-secured gate. They found Nami immediately, her body sunk into the black bloodstain that had spread across the dirt below her.

Sousuke had seen this sight many times before, but this time, he felt as though an invisible god of death was squeezing his heart. A chill raced up his spine, and goosebumps rose up on his arms: she wasn't moving. She wasn't even moaning in pain. She didn't cry, didn't blink, didn't even give him the

benefit of a glare or a curse. Nami had no final words to offer.

This wasn't unexpected. The shots that Kurama had fired had pierced several vital organs—heart, lungs, and aorta. With no more blood flowing to her brain, Nami would have lost consciousness in just a few seconds. Soon after, her body's functions would have irreversibly ceased. The bullets had probably been hollow points; the impact with which the high-caliber rounds had hit her might have caused her to lose consciousness instantly. He hoped they had, at least.

There was nothing Sousuke could do for her now. It had been over in an instant, that one moment in which he had hesitated...

"How could they..." Lemon whispered in a trembling voice. "How could they..." he repeated, and then, kneeling next to her, let out a low, hushed wail. He set his gun down in the mud, cradling Nami's limp head as his shoulders trembled. Before long, the trembling had spread to his arms and his head and his legs, until he was shuddering all over.

Sousuke didn't even make a sound. He just stood there, mulling over the simple words that tumbled and whirled in his disordered mind:

I let her die.

Nami.

I did this to her.

Just one second sooner.

Why didn't I go out?

Why wasn't I faster?

I did this to her.

She was innocent.

I let her die.

Nami.

School.

Have to move.

Just one second sooner.

The only option.

I did this to her.

My choice.

I brought this on her.

Unforgivable.

Nami.

I did this to her.

I let her die.

Sousuke wished that he could tremble and cry like Lemon. He wished he could at least lose his grip on the 3.5-kilogram gun in his hands and let it hit the ground. How should he react at a time like this? Rather... what was the natural reaction to have? He knew what it looked like, but none of it came to him naturally.

He could hear the voices of Ashe and the rest of the crew out of nowhere, crying and screaming and cursing at him: *Awful man. Why didn't you save her? Were you just using her this whole time? She was such a good girl. You monster. Say something already. Don't you feel anything?*

But all Sousuke did was stand there, expressionless and still.

Kurama drove the bullet-riddled car south along the winding road, heading towards Namsac. Both headlights were out and there was no lighting on the road itself, but he kept going nonetheless. The cracked windshield was also compromising his vision, so he just punched it out with a fist. The shattering glass flew into the passenger seat, where the chief let out a noise of distress.

"What happened back there?" the chief shouted, still unable to hide his confusion. There was nothing to protect the car from the rushing wind now, and the muffler was hanging on by a thread, so he had to shout to be heard. "My men... my men were all killed! Did Sagara have backup after all?!"

“I doubt it,” Kurama said, pulling out a metal fragment that had lodged itself in a shoulder of his bulletproof coat. “If he had allies, he would have tried to buy time in a more clever way. Besides, the response came too late. They couldn’t have been coordinating.”

“Then who was it?”

“I don’t know yet. They don’t appear to be remnants of Mithril.”

“This is outrageous. Was this all a setup from the beginning? You and your people gave me false information, to make me—” Before the chief could finish his accusation, Kurama grabbed his collar and roughly pulled him toward him. “...Guh?”

“You can’t prove that *you’re* not working with them, either,” he said in a quiet voice. “But I doubt a conspiracy is required. I’ll find out who those men are, and whether or not they’re working with Sagara, soon enough. It won’t be a serious issue. The reason for all this is much more basic. Absolutely simple. In other words...”

The chief choked out a scream as the powerful hand gripped his throat tightly. “C... Can’t breathe...”

“In other words... those officers that you hired were so incompetent that guard dogs would have been better. They let the enemy get that close? Were they standing around, scratching their asses and yawning? It’s almost impressive incompetence. They’re why I lost so easily in this backwater burg.”

“F-Forgive me, monsieur,” the chief stammered. “But...”

“Listen to me closely, now,” snarled Kurama. “It’s getting under my skin. I’m sick of that little brat showing up all the time, and I didn’t enjoy losing that M9. I didn’t enjoy shooting the girl, either. I’m sure the idea would get a pervert like you hard, but I’m a civilized man, and it nauseates me.”

“I didn’t understand that either. Why did you shoot that girl? It was such a wasteful—”

“It was enough, if it hurt him and made him angry. I’m not some incompetent villain in a cheap police drama. When I say I’m killing someone, I kill them. I’m not honor-bound to a countdown, either. I have a short fuse, as you can

probably tell. That's what I wanted to show him."

"But—"

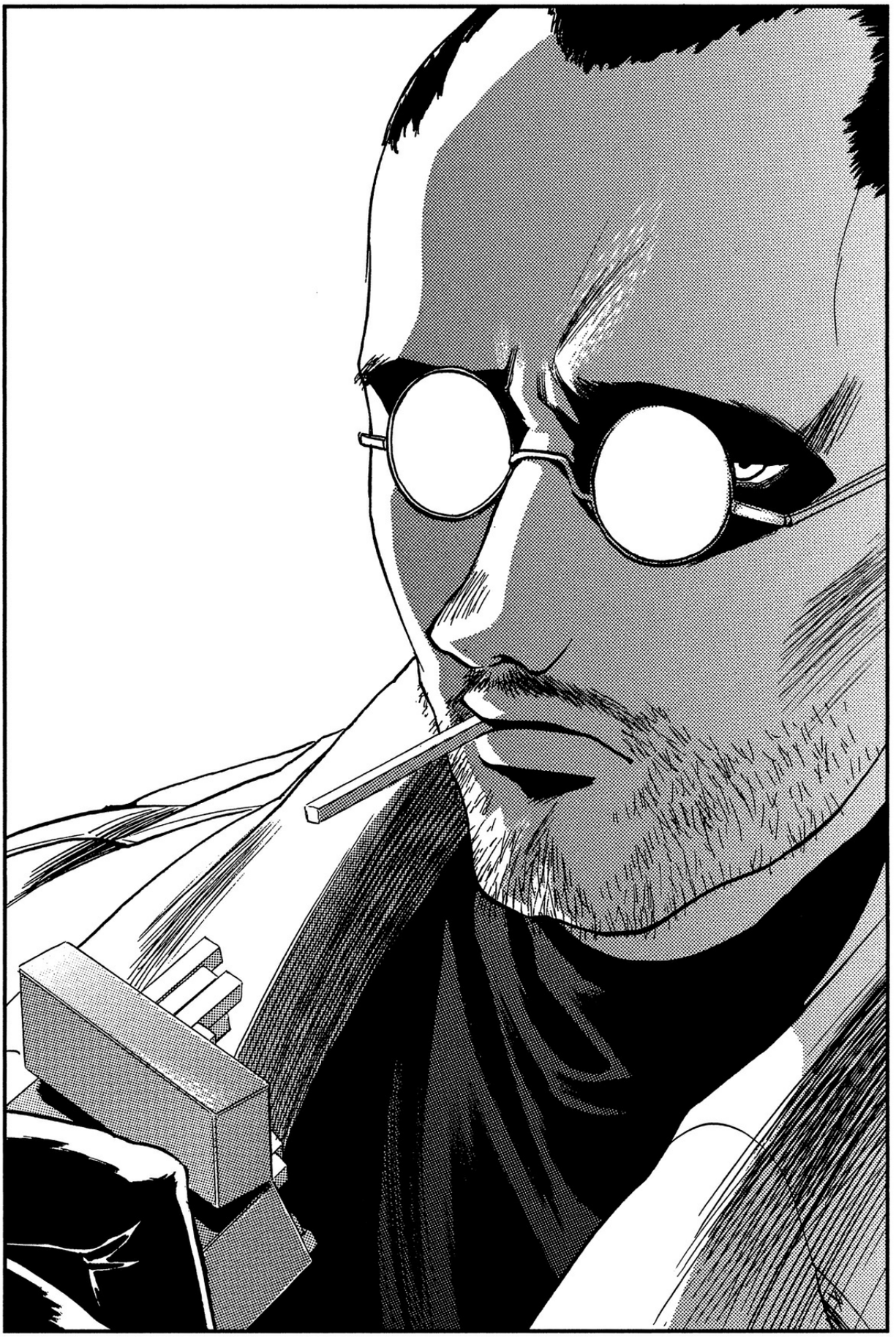
"It ensures that he'll come after me," Kurama said coldly. "He won't be able to bear the idea of leaving me alive and on the run. That will save us the trouble of looking for him."

The chief said nothing.

"We'll run for now, then make preparations once we're back in the city. Wherever I am, he'll be there soon enough. I'll give him a deadly welcome, and you'll help me. Understand?" The chief, no longer able to speak, just nodded a few times. Kurama relaxed his grip and released him.

The chief coughed for a few minutes, then glared at him. He wasn't bothering to hide his hatred now. "Monsieur," he objected vehemently. "This treatment is a bit harsh, really! I've contributed to the organization as well, and I'm in charge of things in Namsac. To treat me like—"

"I'm sorry about that. Your high-pitched squealing was getting on my nerves. And..." As Kurama spoke, he rooted around his coat's internal pocket, pulled out a cigarette case, and opened it. There he saw a neat line of carrot sticks cut into rectangles. He pulled out one that still seemed moist, and stuck it in his mouth like a cigarette. "...When you talk to a man who's trying to quit smoking, you need to be careful. We're always more annoyed than we look on the surface."



There was no telling if it was still worth chasing them. Kurama might have already left Namsac behind, and gone beyond Sousuke's reach. But every second that passed between now and his pursuit made it more and more likely that he would lose him.

The roads from the outskirts of Munamera to Namsac coiled like a snake with bowel pain, and the cars left behind wouldn't be fast enough to catch up to Kurama now. It wasn't particularly far as the crow flies, but following the roads there would triple the effective distance. The more efficient mode of travel would be to patch up the badly damaged Savage. An AS wouldn't be bound to the roads, and cutting straight across the treacherous terrain might offset the time for repairs and then some.

They didn't even have enough time to share how they'd each ended up there. Sousuke proposed the idea to Lemon, and Lemon agreed to it.

Sousuke ran back to the Savage he had left in the jungle, and managed to run it back to the gate. Lemon and the others had already made the preparations and were waiting, and so they were able to speedily patch up the machine. Ashe of the maintenance crew was with them but didn't even try to help.

In reality, the "repairs" were more about wrangling the damaged hydraulic system back into place with tape, filling it with some unknown oil they'd found in the tunnel, then refilling the fuel tank with some likewise unknown diesel. This kind of reckless treatment wouldn't have worked in any other kind of AS.

He'd only found one weapon, too. Maybe they'd been bringing it in through the tunnel? He gave the relatively new-looking HEAT hammer an experimental swing, and decided that it would be more than enough. But the Savage, damaged in the brutal fight with the M9, could not be restored to its original best condition. It would be faster to buy a whole new machine than to scrounge up and replace all the parts it would need.

Nevertheless, Lemon and the others spoke up in surprise. "That was enough to get the thing moving again?"

"For a little while, at least," Sousuke responded listlessly. Under other circumstances, he would spend several minutes boasting about the Savage's toughness. And he wasn't the only one... If this machine's owner were here, she

would proudly rattle off a list of the machine's virtues herself.

But Nami wasn't here.

They finished the patch-up job quickly. Sousuke, still taciturn, climbed up the kneeling machine and slid into the cockpit. *Activate electronics system. Reactivate engine using power left in auxiliary generator. Hydraulics and drive systems, check. Optical sensors, tested. Fire control system... oh, who cares?*

"Sousuke." He heard Lemon calling him over the dicey communications system crackling with static.

"What?"

"I'll tell you now, while I still can: I'm with an intelligence agency. But meeting you and Nami wasn't part of my plan, and neither was the fun we had together."

"I'm sure," Sousuke agreed. He'd seen Lemon tremble and cry beside Nami's dead body. It was obvious enough that it hadn't been an act. But then, what did that say about him, who just stood there saying nothing?

"And I have to ask... are you with Mithril?"

"Former Mithril," Sousuke said, correcting him. "No longer." He continued moving his machine as he spoke, closing the cockpit block and locking it in. He began connecting the drive system while staring intently at the hydraulics meter. "I expect you're an agent with the DGSE or a similar agency. And your allies are the 29 SA or something like it. Am I right?"

The DGSE was France's Directorate-General for External Security. The 29 SA were the 29th Action Service, an elite special forces unit of the DGSE. They must have been attempting an infiltration on word that Amalgam was involved in Namsac.

"I'm surprised," Lemon told him. "You could tell all that?"

"Total conjecture. But it doesn't matter anyway." Sousuke felt consumed by despair. Apparently, Lemon had saved Ashe and the others from being killed on the police chief's orders. Sousuke hadn't expected that at all, although it wasn't out of nowhere. He'd expected that the chief and Kurama would try to kill

Sousuke himself, but he had never dreamed they'd try to kill Ashe and the others so soon.

He knew it would have been impossible for him to come up with a perfect plan without knowing the full scope of the enemy's motivations, but still felt like a fool for not seeing through their scheme. If not for Lemon's aid, it wouldn't have just been Nami; he would have gotten Ashe and the others killed, as well.

Sousuke had thought that he could handle everything by himself, but hadn't put in the necessary effort to ensure the safety of his companions. Or, one might say, he was so focused on getting clues about Amalgam that he'd grown impatient and arrogant.

The regret was a constant voice in Sousuke's ear, but still, he didn't stop moving. It wasn't lofty virtue or admirable determination that motivated him. He couldn't even recall the name of the girl he was supposed to be looking for at the moment. He couldn't even remember her smile. It was just that he just didn't know what else to do.

If he stopped here, he felt like he would spiral helplessly until he simply disappeared. He had to get Kurama: he had to capture him, torture him, extract information from him. Sousuke couldn't even remember what he was planning to ask him, or what good it would even do at this point.

Connection complete. Sousuke cautiously increased the engine output and slowly stood the machine upright. It was probably the last time the white Savage—Nami's beloved Crossbow—would ever stand again.

"Let's go," Sousuke whispered, a sad, dark fire burning in his chest.

5: Man on Fire

A strange energy hung over the city of Namsac that night. The temperature had been typical for that time of year, but in just a few hours it had dropped to about ten degrees Celsius. This was much colder than you'd expect to see in the tropics, and an oddity for the region in general. Thick, heavy clouds coiled in the night sky, and eerie thunder rumbled as if to intimidate the town below. Of course, the truth was that atmospheric pressure patterns in the Pacific had been unusual this year, and this was just one more effect of this phenomenon... but less knowledgeable people would interpret the cold as a bad omen.

It wasn't just the weather that was unusual, either. In the Arena, where things should have quieted down after the spectacle of the day, ten arm slaves stood, their generators active. The roar of diesel and gas turbine engines brought a tremble to the chilly night sky above. The mood that hung over them wasn't the rowdy, enthralling frenzy that came before a show; it was something darker, thick with animalistic rage.

Under the blinding lights, one by one, the machines came to life: A Soviet-made Rk-91 Savage; its successor model, an Rk-92 Savage; a North Chinese copy of the Rk-92; a French-made Mistral and its successor, the Mistral II; a German-made Drache A; an English Cyclone. There were machines made in Israel and South Africa, too. Rather than being painted military style in olive, khaki, and tan, they represented a rainbow of colors, like F1 racers. Many of them even had the names of corporate sponsors stenciled onto them.

All of them were ASes that had participated in arena fights, whose operators were on the take from the chief. They'd all been called to this urgent gathering to prepare for an unusual kind of job.

As the maintenance work proceeded, a police car carrying the chief arrived at the Arena. The vice chief, who'd been given his orders by radio in advance, had already explained the job to the operators in attendance. By the time the chief arrived, they were well into the stage of boasting and dirty jokes.

As the chief got out of the car—which was full of bullet holes with most of the glass broken—the vice chief addressed the men. “Atten-SHUN!!”

The chief puffed his chest out and scanned the men’s faces with pursed lips. It was an impressive show of gravitas from a man who had just run away, screaming, from the site of a violent gunbattle. “I believe the vice chief has explained most of the situation,” he began. “A man in an AS is approaching from the north, in the grips of a drug-induced persecution complex. He’s a dangerous terrorist who’s overdosed. I want you old soldiers to fight him, and finish him off before he infiltrates the city and harms the good citizens of Namsac. Make sure he doesn’t make it out alive. I want to see those skills you’ve mastered in the Arena on full display.”

The men gazed suspiciously at the chief’s detached manner of speaking.

“You mind if I ask a question, Chief?” one of the operators asked. It was Dao, the lowlife that Sousuke had fought in his first match.

“Go ahead.”

“If we’re all being honest here, none of us care if the guy you want us to murder is a terrorist or not. We just want the tit-for-tat. You ain’t mentioned a reward, or any support you’re givin’ us. So we’d like an explanation of that, if you please.”

“Very well. First, you’ll all receive three thousand dollars, regardless of your contributions,” the chief proclaimed grandly. The men assembled whistled and widened their eyes. “And I’ll give ten times that—thirty thousand—to whichever man takes down the terrorist. Ah, but that’s not all! You remember the raid on the warehouse district last month? The one where that Chinese dealer was shot? We confiscated fifty kilos of heroin then, which we’re officially planning to burn tomorrow as part of the disposal process. If an equal amount of white powder happened to end up in someone’s hands two days from now, I can’t say it would matter to me. Do you follow?”

Fifty kilograms of heroin—depending on its purity and the seller’s connections—could fetch over a million dollars on the black market. Of course, it would likely be less when handling fees were taken into account, but it was still an impressive reward. The chief was saying, in a roundabout way, that he would

give it to whoever buried the terrorist.

“That’s all pretty appealing... but are you sure you ain’t bein’ a little too generous, Chief?” Dao asked.

“Don’t you worry about that. All that matters now is killing the terrorist. I’m here to offer you plenty of high-quality equipment, oil, and fuel to make that happen. Also... look at this.”

Five trailers had just arrived in the Arena in a line. They drew a gentle curve as they approached, then stopped in front of the crowd, and opened up their beds. Each one was packed with AS-scale optional armaments: German-made 35mm rifles; 57mm sniper rifles, also German-made; 57mm shotcannons, Italian-made; 30mm Gatling guns, American-made. There were even a few 40mm Swiss-made Mini rifles, the latest model that used caseless ammunition and liquid propellant.

“Awesome,” one of the pilots exclaimed. “Those are from Oerlikon.”

“Some from OTO Melara and Mauser, too.”

“Bofors, too.”

Any one of them could blow a passenger car to smithereens in one blast.

After appraising the men’s excitement, the chief said, “None of them possess encrypted fire control systems. Choose whichever one you like and use it however you like; there’s plenty of ammunition, too.”

“This is great, Chief. But you sure it’s okay to go hog-wild with this stuff? Won’t we end up hitting the ‘good citizens of Namsac’?” The men cackled together.

It was then that a black-clad man, Kurama, got down out of the bullet-ridden police car and spoke up. “You heard the chief. Use them however you like.”



The AS pilots scrutinized Kurama and the chief each, and then the corners of their mouths curled up into grins. “Sounds like we don’t have to hold back, then.”

“I always wanted to use one of these things.”

“It’s the Crossbow we’re after, right? That too-big-for-his-breeches newbie...”

“Plus he ain’t got any real weapons. We’ll crush him, no problem.”

Dao and the other men scrambled back to their machines, each vying for first pick of the weapons on display. Once they had stocked up, the variegated giants moved to leave the Arena.

As they watched the ten ASes depart with earth-shaking footsteps, the chief said to Kurama, “I just received a report. A white AS was spotted passing a farm fifteen kilometers north of here, heading south. It seems he’s up for a fight after all.”

“What did I tell you?” Kurama asked, working out the cricks in his neck with his right hand. “Though I have my doubts that those hoodlums can really stop him.”

“Please,” the chief scoffed. “There are ten ASes in perfect condition, and the operators are far from newcomers to battle. He caught that M9 by surprise, but this time...”

“I hope you’re right. But I’m going to make a few preparations of my own.”

“Preparations?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll handle it. Just get me a radio channel. I need to give him the location of his finish line.”

“Finish line?” the chief asked suspiciously.

“Right here,” Kurama said, without so much as a backward glance.

Using every trick he knew to keep the hydraulics working, Sousuke ran the white Savage south through the thick foliage of the hills. He cut across the paved road several times, and the closer he got to Namsac, the more he saw of

low-income housing. To get from here to the city center, he'd have to cross the Shenton River, which snaked northwest of the city.

Savages were typically able to cross water, but only if they had a snorkel to keep the air intake clear. His machine had taken a lot of damage, and he hadn't tested the watertightness of the electrical system. Plus, he had no way of checking the depth of the water. Entering the river would be suicide.

There were two bridges sturdy enough to hold the twelve-ton Savage nearby: the Prinko Bridge along the main road, and the Wasalu Bridge a kilometer to the south. Both would probably have police blockades. Sousuke considered the terrain layout he'd memorized during his time living in Namsac and chose the Prinko Bridge, mainly because it would get him to the city center faster.

If Kurama was on the run, he might already be at the airport. But according to Michel Lemon's radio updates, he hadn't been spotted there yet. Lemon was still on his way back to Namsac, following Sousuke a few lengths behind, but he had a DGSE agent monitoring the airport.

That meant Kurama was still somewhere in Namsac. Either he hadn't expected to be followed back to town, or his escape had been delayed for some reason... No, that couldn't be it. He was waiting for Sousuke. He was preparing, mustering his forces, and awaiting a final showdown.

Sousuke also knew, clear as day, that Kurama was determined to kill him this time. There was nothing supernatural at play behind his knowledge; it was simply a natural inference. Kurama knew how angry Sousuke was. Sousuke was doing what he did, knowing that Kurama knew. Both were professionals. Both had lost allies to the other.

Maybe the real professional thing to do would be to step back for now and wait for another opportunity. Had this been anyone but Kurama, that's probably what Sousuke would have done. But this time was different. Beyond all of his logical planning lay a metamathematics propelled by illogic and irrationality; everyone knew that one plus one was two, but they didn't know that sometimes it could add up to something else. The only ones who could comprehend that were the men who skirted the lines of life and death behind the numbers, and they couldn't explain it to anyone else.

In a certain manner of speaking, Sousuke and Kurama were comrades. Of course, they burned with hatred for one another, yet there was a strange kind of understanding between them. Perhaps Gauron, in that room in Hong Kong, really had seen his true self.

Sousuke's machine approached the Prinko Bridge. The river was about six hundred meters across, and the dark surface of the water twinkled with the reflection of street lights. No, it wasn't just street lights—there were rotating blue lights, as well. Two police cars and one armored car had formed a checkpoint at the front of the bridge. Aside from the police officers—who were armed with shotguns and carbines—the only weapon Sousuke could see was a machine gun turret on the roof of the armored car.

Sousuke carefully adjusted his machine's engine output, with an unchanging facial expression. He moved forward firmly, although with caution, as if to gauge the broken-down engine's attitude. The hydraulics gauge trembled immediately, and the temperature needle, already in the danger zone, began to creep up further.

It's okay. It can handle it, he told himself. *Tonight is a cold night for the region.* The Savage's engine rumbled, and it began to accelerate with steps that pounded the ground below.

"Stop!" cried the officers.

He didn't stop. Gunfire rang out, but to the Savage, fire from human-sized rifles was little more than a drizzle. His machine continued to accelerate as it sent the armored truck flying with a single kick. *Perimeter: breached,* Sousuke thought as the armored car flew end-over-end, and the officers scattered. He sped up again and charged straight across the bridge, wanting to cross as quickly as he could while it remained free of obstacles.

He made it across, running the street among the low buildings, and then slammed on the emergency brakes. The Savage's heels scraped along the asphalt, raising up a cloud of dust.

Sousuke crouched down silently, keeping the engine's output level as low as he could in order to pay heed to his surroundings. Five or six locals had come out onto the street, pointing at him and screaming. In Namsac, an AS walking

around a paved street wasn't an unusual sight. But perhaps the residents had noticed the dangerous aura that wreathed his machine, because they were all giving him a wide berth.

He listened hard, but didn't learn much without the M9's highly advanced sensors at his disposal. Deciding that his best option was to keep moving, Sousuke readied his machine to go. It was then that he noticed the enemy machines coming around the corner four blocks down the road: two ASes, a Savage and a Mistral II.

These weren't military machines, as the Savage was a garish purple and the Mistral II was painted in red-and-yellow color blocks. One held a shotcannon, the other a rifle. They were from the Arena. The chief must have hired them. These were veteran operators with plenty of firepower—they'd be difficult opponents to deal with, especially when all he had was a single HEAT hammer.

The enemy machines noticed him and began to double back. Sousuke once again revved up his engine, then ran behind a building to hide from their aim. "Time to begin," he said in a low, cold voice, removing the safety pin from his HEAT hammer. In that same moment, it was like he was pulling the safety pin on himself.

The operator of the Mistral II—ring name Diamond Head—hadn't done much coordinating with his ally, the Savage running next to him. They'd happened to be holed up close to each other, so when they received the report from the police team at Prinko Bridge, they had run straight there together. But the Savage right next to him—ring name Superstar—had a mediocre record of two wins, five losses, one tie, and Diamond Head didn't want to be outshone.

"There he is. Right ahead."

"Wow, look at him just strolling, not a care in the world... The idiot!"

"Clear the way!" Diamond Head demanded. "He's mine!" Finishing off that white Savage—the Crossbow—would net him thirty thousand dollars and fifty kilos of cocaine. He'd shoot Superstar in the back to do it if he had to.

But that decision was quickly taken out of Diamond Head's hands. The Crossbow, which had temporarily disappeared behind a building, suddenly

appeared again, and it was moving fast. It wasn't carrying a gun, though, and it was still about two hundred meters away.

Still, before the two of them could even take aim, the enemy machine lifted its right arm and threw something with great force. There was a sharp spin on it, like a throwing ax. Diamond Head's operator didn't realize it was a HEAT hammer until it had slammed into Superstar's machine and blown its chest open. The shaped charge's explosive energy pierced the Savage's armor and slammed it with a wave of intense heat. It instantly burst into flames and toppled forward, dropping its shotcannon.

"Son of a bitch!" Diamond Head cursed. He staggered about, buffeted by the wind and flame, then knelt down in place and opened fire. His rifle spat 35mm shells, whose force of release drew concentric circles in the black smoke that covered the road.

"You after me, huh, you frog piece of shit?! You think a kid like you can take me on? I'll kill you and spit on your corpse!" Diamond Head continued firing, cursing malevolently with every shot. But the heat and the smoke had blurred his vision, and that made it hard for him to take proper aim. The bullets tore fruitlessly through the air, taking apart some old buildings and no more.

There was no sign he'd landed a hit. By the time he'd remembered his wits and gone back to searching for the enemy's position, the Crossbow was within just a few steps of him. It was approaching in a swift charge, low enough that its chest armor was nearly scraping the asphalt.

"You—"

It tackled him so hard that Diamond Head felt like he'd toppled over—No, he *had* toppled over! His screens flashed with static as the attitude gyros spun around and around, uncontrolled. The Mistral II's armor was stronger than a Savage's, but it didn't have the same stability under impact.

"Shit! Shit, shit, shit!"

Trying not to bite his tongue from the recoil of the shock absorbers, he used his arms and legs to try to right himself. But the minute his machine was properly horizontal again, with the scenery in his optical sensors returned to normal, he found that the white Savage was standing right in front of him with

a shotcannon pointed at his face.

The enemy must have picked up the weapon that Superstar had dropped when it was destroyed. The barrel glinted threateningly, and the Savage aimed it right at the Mistral II's cockpit. Then the Savage fired, hitting the Mistral II's crotch and taking out its anti-personnel machine guns.

The enemy machine's operator spoke. "Tell me. How many more of you are there?"

"I..." The Crossbow fired again, and Diamond Head's right arm flew off. "Stop it! E-Eight!"

"And have you seen a man in a black coat? Tall, short hair, East Asian?"

"Y-Yeah. He was with the chief in the Arena—" The enemy fired again. There was a deafening gunshot sound and a jolt of impact as his machine skidded several meters across the asphalt and came to a stop, putting out smoke. Now that the enemy had the information he needed, he had no reason to let him live. Diamond Head's operator, certain that he was finished this time, opened his tightly closed eyes and blinked several times, crying tears of fear.

But the enemy was already gone, having departed for the city center. For a second, his mind ordered him to follow, but he knew immediately that it was fruitless. Both of his machine's arms had been blasted off, and he couldn't even stand. "You... You bastard! What was that, compassion? Next time we meet, I'll kill you! No, we won't meet again, because you're already dead! You'll get what's coming to you! Rot in hell!" The man's curses echoed from his still-working external speakers into the chilly Namsac air.

Paying no heed to the man's verbal abuse, Sousuke hurried his machine towards the city center. It was fortunate that he could use the optional armament he'd stolen from the enemy right away. If these had been military machines, that wouldn't have been possible.

Unlike human-scale weapons, AS-scale weapons had encrypted firing systems to make sure that enemy armed forces couldn't pick them up and use them. Even for an M9 with a top-class AI, breaking that encryption to capture an enemy's weapon would take time. What was more...

“Is it fate?” Sousuke whispered as he realized the shotcannon he’d picked up was a Boxer 57mm made by OTO Melara. It had been his weapon of choice when piloting the Arbalest for Mithril.

Just then, he got a call on his radio’s open channel. “Do you read me, Sagara?” It was definitely Kurama’s voice.

“Five by five, I suppose,” he answered.

“I’m in the Arena. If you want me, come and get me.”

“You should have run away,” Sousuke warned him. “You’ll regret staying.”

“We’ll see.”

The radio signal cut off. There was nothing more for either of them to say. Kurama wanted Sousuke to come and try to kill him; Sousuke wanted to take him up on the offer. There was nothing to discuss further or compromise on.

That’s right, Kurama. You’re spoiling for a fight, and so am I, thought Sousuke. *There’s no need to think about anything else now. Rage, hatred... ‘This is what it means to be alive,’ you said, and that’s one thing we can agree on. I will kill you.*

The sound of an alarm drew Sousuke’s mind back to more pressing matters: the temperature of his machine was still rising. The meter for his hydraulics was faltering. He could hear unpleasant noises from the drive system. The gyros he’d corrected just ten minutes ago were already giving out bizarre readings. It wouldn’t be long until his prolonged abuse did the Crossbow in; he had to hurry.

Just then, he encountered a new police car blockade. There were only two cars this time, and as before, they only had small arms. After deeming an exchange of fire unnecessary, Sousuke just ran past them. As he moved, he saw the buildings of the metropolis around him grow taller. There were more street lights, and more passersby now. The chief and his lackeys, despite knowing the area would become a battlefield, hadn’t bothered to evacuate the citizens.

Three ASes appeared, silhouetted by the streetlights and neon of the grid-shaped city center. Had they been waiting there from the start, or had they shown up when they heard he was coming? A Savage, a Drache, and a Cyclone... Soviet, German, and English. Even Sousuke, who’d been through the

Middle East and countless other war-torn regions, had never seen such a diverse lineup before.

The enemy opened fire. Explosive shells rocked the area around Sousuke's machine, and chunks of glass and concrete were blasted all around. Their aim was awful; Sousuke's fire control system was almost kaput, but theirs seemed to be in bad shape, too. They were on roughly even footing.

With a wordless exclamation and well-trained steps, he sent his machine into evasive maneuvers, then switched over to full manual to take aim himself. He pointed his shotcannon at the Drache in the center, and fired; it was a miss, with too much margin for error in his optical sensors and targeting system. Correcting his aim based on the course of that shot, Sousuke fired once more, and his machine shook with a 57mm recoil. His hit was successful this time, and the enemy AS went flying in a shower of sparks, plowing into an adult goods shop behind it and emitting white smoke.

Though slightly cowed by this initial encounter, the remaining enemies didn't let up, and Sousuke twisted his machine around to hide it behind a nearby building. Of course, it wouldn't serve as proper cover; the walls of a cheap structure like this one would crumble like sugar candy under 35mm rounds.

Piercing enemy bullets sent debris scattering, and several of them dug into Sousuke's Savage, too. He felt the powerful jolts through his body, but he wasn't finished yet. Hitting the building had caused the bullets to yaw, preventing them from doing major damage to his armor. While realigning his scrambled gyros, Sousuke set his machine into a run.

The Crossbow had taken so much punishment that a stiff wind should blow it over, yet it remained upright. Why? Sousuke realized, at last, that it was due to the machine's software; its operating system. Several creative layers had been added onto the old wreck's original programming, so that it could compensate no matter how fierce the battle. The Savage that Sousuke had used back in his Afghan days wouldn't have been capable of this. It would have toppled or lost reliable aim ages ago, and the enemy would have jumped on the opening.

Who upgraded the OS? he wondered. *Who looked after this machine?* As he remembered, a fire began to smolder in Sousuke's previously calm and

collected mind. No, not a fire—that term didn't do it justice. The violence of his emotions was far more intense, like an electric light bright enough to blind any onlooker.

Don't get in my way, Sousuke whispered, and he spurred the Crossbow on. He interpreted all the numbers on the screens and all the sensations he felt through the frame instantly, controlled his machine precisely to compensate, and guided it into the enemy's blind spot. *How will the enemy move if fired on from that position? And where should I move then?* Even if his sensors were lacking, Sousuke knew tactics like the back of his hand.

Running through a gap in the buildings that the enemy couldn't see from their current position, Sousuke's Savage quickly took the location he'd had in mind. The enemy machine, the Cyclone, was standing on the other side of a building across from him.

Stop. Aim. Judge the timing. Fire through the building. His shots pierced through the walls, and the 57mm blast hit the enemy in the side. The Cyclone toppled, burning. That made four.

The remaining enemy Savage fired at him in another poorly-planned attack. Rather than hitting Sousuke, the shot just gave away the operator's own position. Sousuke calmly crouched his machine down and fired a shell into the remaining Savage with his shotgun. The shot must have ignited the jet fuel within, because the enemy machine caught fire and then exploded. The force of it took out the glass in the nearby windows. That made five.

Don't get in my way... Sousuke repeated to himself, his gaze full of smoldering anger as he kept his machine running. Three more enemy machines appeared. He silently took two of them out.

Don't get in my way... The remaining machine bathed him in counter-fire, which hit his already torn-up chest armor. Fragments of the bullets that pierced through made it to his cockpit and cracked his left-hand screen. A piece of broken plastic ricocheted around and dug lightly into Sousuke's temple.

Don't get in my way!! He ignored the pain and checked his machine's status. Severe damage to the hydraulics system on his left side—nevertheless, the Savage could still move, although it was only a matter of seconds until it shut

down entirely. Sousuke took aim with his shotcannon and made a successful hit: target destroyed. That made eight.

He worked the Crossbow's systems to their limit and restored hydraulic power to the left leg. *It's not over yet,* he told himself. *This hunk of junk can still move.* His shotcannon had two rounds remaining. Sousuke fired one into another enemy, and then started running towards the Arena. That made nine.

The soccer stadium, visible in the light of the mercury lamps, came nearer. He saw armored cars and police cars waiting in front of it, but they seemed too confused to muster up a proper welcome. They must not have expected Sousuke to appear so soon.

Sousuke could see the chief scrambling to get into one of the police cars, desperately ordering the men around him to fire as he went. Even though it was nearly impossible for infantry rifles to harm an AS...

Suddenly, he heard a sound from above, and a war cry echoed out over external speakers. An M6, armed with a rifle with a monomolecular cutter bayonet, jumped down from the building it had been waiting on, straight at Sousuke. As shots rained down, the Crossbow swiftly—well, swiftly by a Savage's standards—rolled forward, barely dodging the M6's attacks. The fragments of broken asphalt kicked up dust, which swirled around the machine.

A slice from the bayonet came at almost the exact same time that Sousuke got the enemy machine in his shotcannon's sights. With a grunt of effort, Sousuke pulled the trigger, and a flash burst out near the Savage like an explosion. His shotcannon's final burst blew the M6's shoulder off as it flew down from above, and sent the arm spinning through the air, still holding its weapon. The bayonet-attached rifle stuck vertically down in the ground, vibrating violently as it fell onto a nearby police car, and crushed the back seat.

"God dammit! It's payback time!" Sousuke recognized the enemy's voice for the first time; it was Dao. Spitting filthy curses, the man drew another monomolecular cutter from his machine's hip with its still-working left arm and swung it at Sousuke's Savage. As the tip whistled wildly through the air, Sousuke brushed it aside with his now-empty shotgun. "Die, Sagara! Die!"

An alarm sounded as Sousuke's knees buckled beneath him. The Crossbow's

hydraulic system was losing power rapidly; the machine's damage and exhaustion had finally caught up with it. *Now is not the time!* Sousuke thought. He quickly gave up on the hydraulics, now relying entirely on the machine's muscle packages. With its back to the ground, his Savage reached out for the dropped bayonet-attached rifle. His machine's movements were agonizingly slow, but this was all he could do: every other option had run dry.

"Not happening, you piece of shit!" Dao's M6, seeming to realize what he was after, plunged its monomolecular cutter into the Savage's chest. The strike was aimed straight at the cockpit, trying to finish Sousuke off before his machine's hand reached the rifle.

Sousuke strained. While searching for the gun with his right hand, he was able to bring his just-barely-functional left arm up as a shield. Dao's monomolecular cutter dug into it, releasing a torrent of sparks. The knife tore through the arm's armor, muscle package, and frame, then at last reached his chest. "Hahaha! Die!" came Dao's hysterical scream.

Sousuke heard the clamor and vibration of RHA being torn apart. The knife was ripping through his chest armor, and had almost reached the cockpit. Just a few dozen centimeters more, and it was Sousuke's own body that would be cut in two. On top of that, more of his control system was being shredded every second. Almost all of his monitors were down, and he'd completely lost control of his legs. He was finished.

At this stage in a normal AS, the machine would have lost all control functions and the operator would have had no choice but to wait for death. That was true even for M9s, and even for the Arbalest. However, the Crossbow's right arm—its free manipulator—was still moving, and it stubbornly continued to search for the rifle on the ground. The system of the simple yet tough Savage still wasn't finished, even after all of this. This masterpiece from the annals of arm slave history wouldn't abandon its operator to the very, very end.

Sousuke exclaimed as he found the rifle with the right hand, and held the grip firmly. He tilted the barrel upwards. He didn't need to aim; rather, he stuck the rifle into the chest of the M6 leaning over him and activated the automatic firing device. A hail of 40mm bullets peppered Dao from below, and his machine trembled wildly as they hit.

Silence followed as the M6 fell still, lying on top of the supine Savage. The monomolecular cutter stopped on its path toward him, as well. Oil dripped like blood from the joints and damaged portions of both machines, while white steam billowed around them. Dao's screaming had stopped. That made ten.

Eventually, Sousuke let out a sigh and tried to push the frozen M6 over, but his machine wouldn't respond. His Savage had gone completely non-functional. The hydraulics were dead, of course, but now the electrical and drive systems had gone to join them. The engine itself had stalled at some point, as well. The Crossbow had completed its mission, and would never move again.

Sousuke silently pulled the machine's emergency escape lever, and explosive bolts blew its head off. He crawled out of the cockpit through the newly-made hole, and picked up the carbine and spare clips on the underside of the hatch.



The police, not being foolish enough to watch the AS wrestling match from up close, had long since fled. All he could hear were their cries and screams in the distance.

As he made his exit, Sousuke glanced over and saw a familiar face lying dead in the police car that had been crushed during his battle with Dao: it was the chief, who'd been caught up in the battle while escaping from the Arena. Bad luck for him. It was a pathetic end that didn't even rise to the level of karmic retribution. But the chief no longer held Sousuke's interest.

Instead, he walked down the rubble-strewn street, readying his carbine as he approached the stadium's entrance. Kurama was waiting for him there. No matter what traps might have been set for him, Sousuke had no choice but to go inside.

In the security office deep inside the Arena, Kurama was making his preparations to retaliate. Sousuke's arrival had come sooner than expected; ten ASes had barely slowed him down. "Worthless fools," he spat to himself, then rammed a clip he'd just loaded with 5.56mm rounds into his German-made rifle. He had two spares.

He hadn't had time to round up a stock of grenades, or set many traps. The best he'd done was to rig up a tiny bit of C4 on a remote detonator at one spot in the Arena. Still, it should be enough. If he could lure his enemy into the trap, he could finish him off with the push of a button. But would Sagara Sousuke be fooled? Only God knew.

Kurama still had time to run away. The consideration was tactical understanding rather than cowardice, and he gave it real thought while considering the best course of action. He concluded that there was no reason to run. He wasn't underestimating Sagara Sousuke's combat abilities; he just knew his own were more than a match.

Let's get him dead and buried already, he decided. *Snap that loose end and then leave this city behind. I'll transfer to a flight to North America at the international airport in the capital... hmm, on a first-class ticket. A glass of fine champagne after liftoff will taste all the sweeter for being rid of him.*

Kurama grabbed his rifle, then soundlessly left his staging room.

Sousuke kept his carbine in firing position as he moved swiftly through the Arena's first floor corridor. It had originally been built as a soccer stadium, so there was a single spacious hallway that ringed the center pitch. It was flanked by all kinds of stairwells, bathrooms, stalls and storage spaces. Kurama was out there somewhere, as were his traps, but Sousuke assumed that he hadn't had the time to set many.

There was a squishy wetness in his right boot that was making it hard to walk. One of the shards that had gone flying inside his cockpit had found a home in his right thigh, and it was bleeding profusely. Every step caused the wound to stretch and contract, sending a scorching wave of pain through his body. This pain made the already dark space seem even dimmer, and he was feeling lightheaded. His body, in a way, was in a similar state to that of the Crossbow.

The corridor had a high ceiling, and light from street lamps and fires burning outside came streaming in through the glass windows. The effect caused unusually long, tall shadows to be projected onto the interior wall of the corridor. Sousuke's own shadow flickered in and out of his peripheral vision, distorted and eerie. It was like a devil, a harbinger of death. A ghoul, pointing its boorish carbine straight as it walked, flickering in the flames.

He continued to search for any trace of his enemy, but that sight made him realize something. *Devil, harbinger of death... Is that what I really am? How many people have I killed to reach this corridor? Is my reason for doing all this really worth all the death it's brought?*

"To kill Kurama" isn't the reason, he told himself. *At least, it isn't supposed to be. I should be trying to corner him and extract information about Amalgam. That's why I built up that mountain of corpses.*

And now, Nami's body lies on top of that mountain. Nami, who just lived her life in pursuit of modest dreams...

Even if I do manage to see her again... after all I've done, what will I say? "I came to save you. I killed dozens of people, and let a young girl just like you die to do it, but don't let that bother you."

I can't do it. That truth would tear her apart. She couldn't be happy knowing

that people had died for her sake. She's quarrelsome and loud and she loves kicking me around, but fundamentally she's at the opposite end of the spectrum from war and death.

She's a symbol of peace and love. When I hurt and kill people out of hatred, it's an affront to her very existence.

Sousuke felt that he finally understood the meaning of the word "karma." *My karma is too heavy,* he realized. *Lives lost can't be brought back, and the seams of the world can't be mended. It's the second law of thermodynamics. Even if I meet her again, we can never... never be happy. We'll never return to that school again. Things were never going to work out that way.*

These weren't thoughts made out of self-pity, or despair, or pessimism. He regarded them as simple truths; as hard facts. The natural end result of the violent churning of the currents of fate, objectively perceived. But even so, he didn't stop. He still wanted to fight Kurama and bring Amalgam to its knees.

No, even if those urges faded, he wouldn't stop moving—his cellular structure wouldn't allow it. This had gone beyond petty concerns like strong will and burning rage. Something much more fundamental, much more automatic, was spurring him on. Moving him forward.

Dragging that twisted shadow of the reaper along with him, he finished a half revolution around the Arena corridor. There were no traps, and no signs of people.

Wait—He'd just been passing in front of a large staircase to the second floor when he sensed a person at the top. He moved and, an instant later, a gunbarrel at the top of the stairs flashed with fire. Sousuke dove around the corner of the corridor as ear-splitting gunshots and bullets pierced the air. He glanced cautiously in the direction opposite the fire, then crouched down.

His mind, hazy from exhaustion and injury, was able to regain some degree of acuity: it was Kurama firing at him. He hadn't seen his face, but he could identify him from his movements and vague silhouette in the darkness.

I'll counter, he decided, peeking around the corner before firing with his rifle. He knew he couldn't hit his enemy, but he could force him to seek cover. Then Sousuke came out from around the corner, still firing, and tried moving to a

more advantageous position.

But Kurama fired a few checking shots while receding farther up the stairs. His manner of retreat was all too suspicious; it would be dangerous to pursue him straight out. Sousuke searched with his eyes for other ways up and spotted an entrance to a small emergency stairway, used by employees, about fifteen meters to his left. This was even more suspicious. The employee stairway was all too inviting. Perhaps Kurama had planned his tactics in order to move Sousuke in that direction...

Or maybe he hadn't. Maybe he was just buying time, or Sousuke was overthinking it. Figuring the chance was about fifty-fifty, Sousuke decided to choose the closer route. He flew up the first staircase, making it all the way to the top in one dash. His right boot, slick with blood, made a pathetic-sounding squish with every step.

When Sousuke arrived on the second floor, he found Kurama lying in wait for him behind a graffiti-covered pillar further down the corridor, already shooting. Sousuke had anticipated this; he hid behind an obstacle he'd planned for in advance and quickly returned fire. Sparks flew nearby and he could hear shards of concrete, broken from the gunfire, scattering across the floor.

There was no pithy exchange of conversation. This was real combat.

Sousuke waited out the persistent fire until his enemy moved to change clips, then used that moment to run for his next position. He just made it in time; Kurama's shots started up again a second later, firing from a space between a large pillar and a potted plant. Kurama would hide, moving between Sousuke's blind spots as he retreated farther and farther away.

Sousuke secured the best angle he could manage and returned fire, with no sign of a hit. Kurama retreated. Sousuke pursued. With each shot, the muzzle flash projected their shadows onto the wall of the corridor. They were distorted, like grotesque monsters moving in millisecond flashes.

Kurama retreated farther. As Sousuke noticed him running for a thin hallway off the corridor that led to the spectator seats, he felt a sense of confirmation: he was being lured. Continued pursuit would be dangerous. The spectator seats were open territory, and he'd be vulnerable to snipers the second he stepped

out. If he wanted to corner Kurama, he had to go somewhere else, some place where he could see the entire arena...

The broadcast booth, he thought, where the announcer and color commentator described the goings-on of a fight. Sousuke made the judgment instantly, then ran to the door of the employee hallway, a metal door marked "Authorized personnel only." He grabbed the knob, turned it, and found that it wasn't unlocked. He was about to open the door and move through it when—

Just then, Sousuke realized that he'd made the choice too easily. This was Kurama he was dealing with; he would have known, when he retreated that way, that Sousuke wouldn't just follow him out. This wasn't like the stairway from before, either. This was the way he'd need to go if he wanted to finish him. And what was the only door that he would take, if he was on guard for a trap? This door.

The instinct shot up his spine as an electric signal, and he jumped back from the door he'd started to open. In that same instant, a plastic explosive set behind it detonated. It sent Sousuke flying, along with the door itself.

White sparks flew as a shockwave rushed through his body. The door slammed into Sousuke's left shoulder, knocking him toward the opposite wall with overwhelming force. The room spun around him in all different directions. He hit the floor hard, but that wasn't enough to stop his momentum. He kept on rolling, upending several trash cans along the way, and only coming to a stop when he hit the opposite wall.

Everything was moving in slow motion—the flames and smoke billowing from the explosion site, even the tumbling of the plastic bottles and empty cans that were spilled when he knocked over the trash can.

He got me. Despite that thought, Sousuke immediately tried to pick himself up. Waves of pain surged through his body, but he was still in one piece. He probably owed that fact purely to the heat-and shockwave-resistant Mithril AS operator's uniform he was wearing.

Still, his left arm was being uncooperative, and also burned with pain. Was it dislocated? Broken? Sousuke felt weak. He forced his trembling knees to straighten and got to his feet, using the gun still held in his right hand for

support. He looked up silently and pointed his rifle forward, uncertain as to whether it would even work properly. His vision was hazy. The noise of the explosion continued to ring in his head.

Beyond the fire and smoke, he could see Kurama. He'd assumed a perfect firing posture, taking aim at Sousuke's chest. Meanwhile, it was taking Sousuke everything he had just to point his gun in his opponent's direction.

Kurama opened fire, and Sousuke felt a dull impact through the middle of his torso; the bullet had gone in and out. His operator's uniform was bulletproof, but it couldn't stop a rifle shot. Blood splattered onto the wall behind him as Kurama kept firing. He was too woozy to tell if the shots had hit him. He couldn't check right now, either.

Is this the end? Sousuke wondered. As the world went dark around him, he crumpled forward.

He hadn't expected him to survive the trap, and he certainly hadn't expected him to be standing and holding a gun when he came out. It didn't matter, though. Kurama slowly approached after shooting Sagara Sousuke multiple times, cautiously at the ready. He needed a headshot to make sure, and the flames and smoke from the explosion made that impossible to perform from his current position.

Anyway, that first shot should have been fatal, Kurama reasoned. *He'll bleed out eventually if I just let him go. He must be unconscious already.* But just then, Kurama sensed a new presence. Not just one. Two, three—no, four. Maybe more. He could hear the faint rustle of clothing and clink of equipment. They were moving so quietly that he probably wouldn't have heard them without significant concentration.

Them again, eh? It was that special forces from somewhere-or-other that had ambushed him and the chief in the mountains near Munamera. They must have finally caught up with him. Kurama didn't particularly feel like dealing with them, but he still needed to secure an escape route. Unfortunately, he didn't have a moment to spare, and he couldn't afford to make noise.

He decided to put Sousuke on the backburner while he got to work. First, he

fired his rifle at the shoulder of a man who'd carelessly poked his upper half out from the top of the stairs. A scream echoed through the hall along with the gunshot. He ignored a second enemy, who was crouching down to try and save his wounded comrade, and wordlessly ran to the opposite side of the corridor—the south side.

Here he found two more enemy soldiers, coming up in an attempt to surround him. Deciding that simple brute force should be enough, he took aim before his enemy could, and fired. One fell immediately, while another returned fire with a submachine gun. Kurama's bulletproof coat blocked most of the gun's pistol rounds. He didn't even flinch as he shot the man to death.

Before the fallen man's back could even touch the floor, Kurama ran up to him and snatched a hand grenade from his chest. He bit out the pin and threw the grenade around the far corner, where more enemies would surely be hiding. With a clink of metal, the hand grenade rolled around the corner. He heard cursing and screams, followed by an explosion. Smoke billowed in the dark, and Kurama mercilessly fired his rifle into the two enemies fallen in the narrow corridor.

"Hmm." His poker face remained in place, but he was deeply annoyed at these enemies for getting in his way again. Part of him wanted to keep going, to slaughter them all and force them to reveal their organization... but he was out of time. It was dangerous to linger when he didn't know how many more might be out there.

Kurama's heavy bulletproof coat whipped around him as he withdrew to the place from which he had come—the corridor where he had detonated the plastic explosives. His plan was to finish off the mortally wounded and immobilized Sagara Sousuke, then leave.

But Sousuke wasn't there. All he saw in the wafting, fading smoke was a pool of blood on the floor. The man himself was gone. No, there were bloody footprints there, too... The footprints suggested he had moved, tottering unsteadily, behind a large fallen trash can in a corner of the corridor... "Sh—"

A white-as-a-sheet Sousuke popped out from behind the trash can and fired his carbine straight at Kurama, who felt a hard impact in his side and buckled

over. More shots followed, piercing the bulletproof coat and running through his chest. Unable to stay upright any longer, Kurama staggered back in the other direction before he fell to one knee, dropping his rifle and collapsing into a pool of Sousuke's blood.

Sousuke labored back to his feet, then walked the ten meters or so to where Kurama had fallen. He hadn't tricked his enemy, or taken advantage of the situation, or anything clever like that. He'd simply failed to die, maintained the energy to move, and found the will to pull the trigger. That was all.

His left arm was limp. Every breath brought a fresh wave of agony coursing through him, and he was losing blood from multiple wounds. The hole in his stomach was especially large. The fact that he was able to stand meant his spinal cord was still intact, at least. But Sousuke knew he wasn't going to last much longer.

Still... before he died...

"Kurama," Sousuke said, wringing out what was left of the air in his lungs. With right hand trembling, he pointed the muzzle of his carbine at his enemy, but even that began to tremble and sag unreliably. "Tell me. Where is Chidori?"

"Why... do you want to know?" Kurama whispered, without the slightest stirring from where he lay. There was bloody foam dribbling out of his mouth.

"I'm going to save her."

"What are you, stupid?" There was disgust in Kurama's voice, despite his own mortal wounds.

"Tell me."

"No. I want you to die, denied that satisfaction."

That was expected. Understandable, even. But regardless, Sousuke repeated, "Tell me."

Kurama did not respond. Instead, he said, in a weak and low voice: "I don't understand. How did we end up in... a draw?"

"It was her," Sousuke responded, though he didn't even know exactly what he

was saying.

"What, the power of love? Don't make me laugh." Kurama poured what little remained of his strength into a mocking smile. The tone of his voice suggested he'd rather spend an eternity in hell than acknowledge that shallow idea.

"What's wrong with that?" Sousuke asked. It wasn't meant as sarcasm or argument; he was simply asking the question. *That's how it turned out, isn't it? I'm standing here, and you're on the ground. Coincidences happened; there were uncontrollable elements in play. But the fact is I'm the one standing here, asking you the questions.*

I don't know what love really means. But there must be a reason why we're both here in this condition, a clear intervening will that cannot be denied. Can you reject even that reality in front of you?

"Tell me," he asked again.

"San Carlos," Kurama said indifferently. "If not there, then Niquelo, or Granada. One of those. That's all I know."

"I see."

"It's all so stupid. Who even cares anymore?"

"I do."

"I wish I'd never quit smoking," were Kurama's final words.

Sousuke fell to his knees. "San Carlos." He'd dropped the carbine at some point. Blood continued to pool at his feet. The hole in his stomach was too large to close. His vision was fading, and his consciousness grew distant. "Niquelo. Or Granada..." He muttered the words over and over.

I need to tell someone. But who will fight in my place? Who else will bring her back, if not me? I don't know... Nothing made sense anymore. He didn't know what he was asking, or what he was trying to convey. His mind had gone blank. He fell back, supine, but he couldn't even see the ceiling above anymore.

Michel Lemon ran up to him and stared down at him, as white as a sheet. What was he shouting? Sousuke knew these words: medic; syringe; epinephrine; atropine. He'd known them well for so long, but they didn't matter

anymore. The last thought in the back of his mind was of a girl. Her. He'd thought it was Nami, but it wasn't. She was angry for some reason. She was glaring at him, scowling, her fists clenched at her sides.

But then the next moment, her face became a smile. "Get a grip already!" she proclaimed. The face of the girl he'd begun to forget during his life in Namsac came back to him as clear as if it were yesterday. How had he ever thought that he could be happy here, instead?

"Chidori..." he groaned. *I miss you so much. I know it's not possible, but... I want to see you. Be with me. Thump me on the back and say something. That's all... that's all I want in life.* "Chidori..."

I'm so lonely. So cold. Just one more time, please...

●

She heard a voice. It was coming from far away, a sky distant from her current location, and it nagged at her as she drifted in and out of a doze. It seemed to come from just beyond the waves rushing in and crashing in the distance—that's how faint the voice was.

The dim lights around her blurred together, and the even-more-faint fragments of information drifted around, converting into various colors and sounds. The voice, spinning round and round beyond those fragments, threatened to disappear, but she worked hard to keep it where it was.

This kind of thing had become routine. She'd heard many voices like this, then shut them away in a drawer somewhere, and forgotten them as if nothing had happened. She'd heard this voice before, too.

I met him, the voice told her.

At first, she didn't understand what it meant. But a second later, she realized. "Him" in this context had to mean *him*. She had vaguely worked out whose voice it was, too. She'd never met its owner... and now, she never would.

She was with him in a different world, a different fragment of space-time, Kaname thought. *She was with him the way I was. That's how we're connected.*

Connected. If not for the omnisphere, neither of them would ever have

known about it.

And then the voice told her, *But we're parted now.*

Strictly speaking, the voice did not use traditional tense. "We're parted now" simultaneously meant, "we are parting" and "we are about to part."

Parted? Why? Kaname asked.

Because I'm dead. This, too, had the nuance of "am dying" and "am about to die." *It's a shame. I feel sad that I couldn't replace you.*

Is he okay? Where is he?

I don't know. Namsac. He's badly wounded. The voice knew many other things: that he was fighting; that he was all alone now; and that he was probably searching for her.

Something squeezed at Kaname's heart. She wanted it to stop, but she didn't want it to stop. She didn't know what to do.

The fact that he met you... Do you think he's special somehow?

I don't think so. You know he's completely normal, don't you?

But he met me, and he met you. And her, and him...

That's not so strange. He was mine first. Him meeting you was the real anomaly.

Maybe so.

No point in apologizing, right?

Yeah. But I'm still sorry.

That's okay. Different situations yield different results. But I'd better go now... that *whisper is coming.*

Sure thing.

Goodbye. But one last thing...

What?

If you ever meet him again, forgive him. Take him in your arms, like you should.

I can't promise that.

I know. But I think that's okay. Just as long as you remember.

And then the voice grew more and more distant, until she couldn't hear it any longer.

"Mm..." She woke up and felt the warm sunlight streaming on her eyelids. *Too bright.* Chidori Kaname furrowed her brow, eyes still closed, and turned over on her crisp white sheets. She could hear the sound of the waves. The cool, peaceful salt wind drifted in from the open window and rustled the lace canopy over her king-size bed.

She'd fallen asleep at some point. She'd been dreaming about something, but she couldn't remember what. It was always like this. It had felt like an important conversation, yet it was all gone in an instant. What kind of dream might it have been? Nostalgic remnants of sorrow and loneliness drove Kaname into an air of melancholy.

It wasn't evening yet. She was in a mansion somewhere, on a hill near the beach. Outside the window, she could see the sea sparkling green in the sunlight. Feeling a little cold, Kaname pulled her sheets up to her chin. All she was wearing right now was a light camisole and her underwear.

Someone was knocking on the door of her bedroom, which was decorated in a luxurious but not ostentatious style. "Come in," she invited.

"Excuse me." A girl entered. She was wearing a suit, but her age and build were about the same as Kaname's. Her hair was brown, done in a short bob cut, and she wore unfashionable glasses. She cast a glance at Kaname, who was sitting listlessly up in her bed, and gave her a small bow. "Did you rest well?"

"Doesn't matter. What do you want?"

"It's your three o'clock tea," the girl responded politely. "And I wished to ask if you had finished evaluating the 'Behemoth-i' data that was delivered to you this morning."

"It's on the desk," Kaname told her. "In the USB drive."

"Thank you." The girl poured some Darjeeling into a cup, and set it onto the

table with a small dish of cookies. “Are you tired?”

“I’m fine. Just dozed off, is all.”

“You must have been having sad dreams,” the other girl observed.

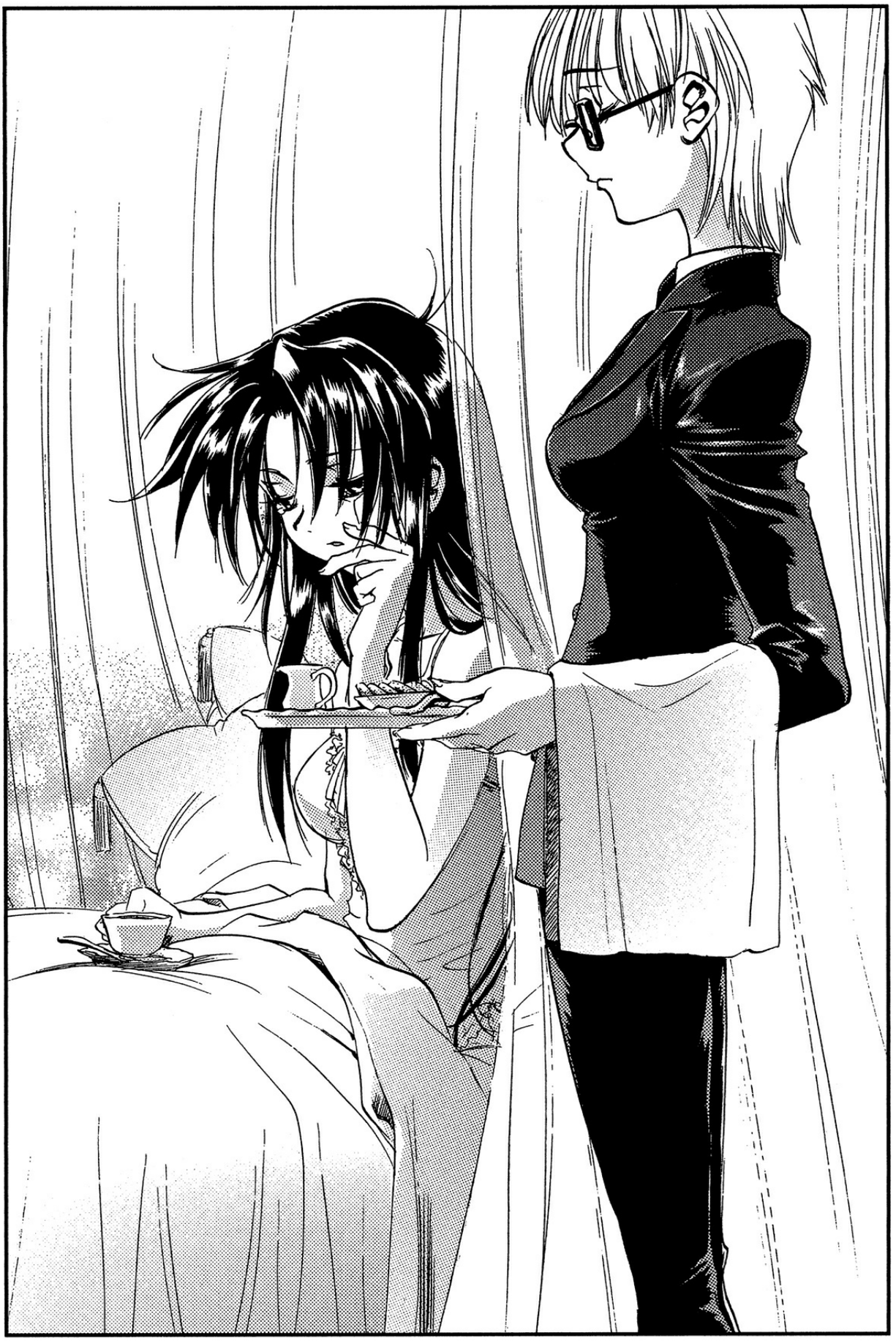
“What makes you say that?”

Looking at Kaname, the girl tapped the corner of her own eye with her index finger. “You were crying.”

Kaname turned to gaze into the mirror in the back of the bedroom. The girl was right. “I guess I was,” she whispered, wiping at the corners of her eyes. “It was a sad dream. I bet everyone had it, not just me.”

Why can’t I be with him? The feeling, apropos of nothing, welled up inside her again, and caused the tears to stream from her eyes once more.

She took the teacup and had a sip. It was delicious, but it didn’t stop her crying.



Epilogue

Snow danced in the streetlights. It was the middle of the night, and the port town had gone to sleep, letting snow pile high on the boats and merchant ships moored there. In one corner of the harbor sat an old, run-down warehouse. Its exterior was made of poorly-maintained brick, which was cracked here and there. Its metal door was about five meters high and covered in rust.

The woman once known as Wraith stopped her vehicle—a beat-up, used flatbed truck—in front of that warehouse. She left the engine idling as she got out, then headed for the building's staff entrance.

A man in a coat was waiting for her there. He was short and heavyset, and from a distance, looked a little like a barrel. "Right on time. You're very punctual," he said.

She surveyed the warehouses around her cautiously in lieu of responding. There was no sign of onlookers. He must have done careful checks before she'd arrived.

"Were you followed?" he asked.

"If I were, I'd have stayed away."

"Fair enough. Bring the truck inside." The man went back in through the staff entrance, then pressed a button for the warehouse's metal front door. The motor rumbled as it opened. The track must have been rusty, too, because the sound of grinding metal echoed out all around the area.

The woman returned to the driver's seat, then drove the truck into the warehouse. This time, she shut off the engine before getting out. The metal door closed again behind her, causing the beam of light streaming in from the street lamps to gradually narrow. Once the door clinked shut, everything was pitch black.

A red emergency light came on, but the only stock visible in the warehouse was a large transport truck. The short man who had greeted her initially

seemed to have a few allies about, too: three men holding assault rifles. A minimum of caution.

“Show me the cargo,” said the man, opening the back of the truck she’d brought. On top of its bed stood a wooden box the size of a large refrigerator. “Is this it?”

“Yes,” she answered succinctly.

“I’m impressed that you retrieved it.”

“The police were in chaos, after all. The really hard part was getting it out of Japan.”

“Hmm.” The man didn’t even bother to confirm what was inside; apparently her word was enough for him. He would have no reason to doubt her.

“Mr. Hunter. Before I give this to you, there’s something I wanted to ask,” she said.

“Go ahead.”

“Does the general know about this?”

“I don’t think so. If he did, we’d both be dead.”

“Why *are* you doing this?” she wanted to know. “I can’t understand why you’d go this far.”

“The same reason as you, I’d say. We’re both abandoned,” the man said with a faint smile. “And if I see a puzzle on the verge of completion, I can’t help but want to finish it. I think that’s just human nature.”

“Is that your only motivation?”

“I also want to give them a bit of payback,” he admitted. “And that girl... Despite what you say, you like her too, don’t you?”

The former spy didn’t answer.

“Anyway... would you like to have a look? Bearing in mind that it’s not complete, of course.”

She nodded.

Hunter got around behind the transport truck and opened the trailer door. There was a large object inside—some kind of machine, sitting there, covered in a black waterproof tarp. “Here we go,” he said, slowly removing the cover.

What she saw first was a head—the head of an arm slave. The trailer contained a full AS, slumped over as if it were napping. In the darkness, she couldn’t make all of it out from her current position. What she could make out told her it was a third-generation machine, and no more. But it wasn’t an M9. It was a model she’d never seen before.

She couldn’t see all of it. She didn’t know its abilities, either. But... was it just her imagination? The freezing air that hung over the room seemed to be absent only in the area around that machine. Some kind of unknown heat was leaking from the trailer.

It was that machine, burning with anger, hungry for combat. It had sworn a revenge that could only be sated by the blood of its enemies. She wasn’t sure why, but that was the impression she got. “What’s its name?” she asked.

“It doesn’t seem to have one. I hear it never even had blueprints. But if I had to give it a number, I’d call it...” Hunter narrowed his eyes as he looked up at the machine. “The ARX-8.”

To be continued



Afterword

Hey, there. This is *Burning One-Man Force*, which has had quite a few additions and corrections since it was first serialized in *Dragon Magazine*. Regarding the content... well, after a great deal of back-and-forth, I feel like I have the rest of the series figured out. I was losing focus on the character relationships, so I decided to leave Sousuke all alone. Poor guy. Sob.

I adore Savages and ponytail girls, so I'm writing this afterward in a mood of genuine mourning. I want to drink my troubles away. Alcohol, tears, man, and woman... and a Savage. Some enka music would complete the picture. (I put on the radio and the song that came up was *Michinoku Hitoritabi.*) Sob.

Next issue should take us to the climax. We should also return to the de Danaan crew. The depressing stuff is almost over, so let's get ready to roll! I'm writing down what comes to mind, but it's not going the way I planned it... Sob.

Okay, crying time is over.

By the way, Mr. Lemon says some very unfair things about Akihabara during the story, and that's not me being mean. It's actually something I overheard once. There are still foreigners who assume it's all about porn. I'm sure they're the exception, of course... but I can't blame people for thinking that, having seen what's become of it the last seven or eight years. (Not saying that's a bad thing, okay?)

When I was a kid, I had an electronics geek period, and I would go to Akihabara to buy parts. They didn't sell transistors and capacitors and diodes near my house, after all. At the time, it was a town for adult geeks. Watching a little kid in short pants poking around with a notebook in one hand, the hard-faced old man in the shop would find me the best parts and say, "Back again, huh?"

He was so cool. I bet guys like that still keep the solder they use for making circuits wound up in an unused film case. He'd poke it out and get the solder in place with tiny, practiced movements. He looked like a master to a child's eyes.

By the way, I went back to that building recently and it was gone, replaced by a porno doujin shop (weeps). I mean, the new place was pretty okay too, right? It just hit me that the passage of time can be a cruel thing. But, hey. Passing is what time does, you know?

Okay, three pages left. This is tricky. Not much to write about (I know, I always say that).

By the way, last night, *The Second Raid* anime finished up safe and sound. This is the result of your support as well. All thanks to Kyoto Animation, its staff, and its cast. It's coming out on DVD, too. If you haven't watched it yet, go do that. The first printing has some goofy talk between me and Director Takemoto.

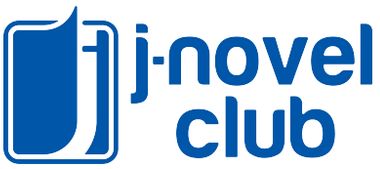
Hiroshi Ueda's *Full Metal Panic Sigma*, serialized in *Monthly Dragon Age*, is also seeing its second volume released next month. The art and pacing are great. Amazing. Fascinating. Go for it.

And sorry for pitching for another company, but I'm also releasing a work called *Dragonet Mirage* under the Takeshobo label. It's a cop drama type of thing. It has a fantasy flavor, but all the sweet, standard police action is there. I hope you'll all read it.

I said in the last afterword that I wouldn't start another series, but, um... well, stuff happened, okay? I'm sorry. I thought it would be okay just to make a rough draft. Of course, I'll keep working on *FMP*. Please stick with me.

I had a lot of help from other people this time. Thank you very much.

I hope you'll kindly join me next time for another round of Sousuke in hell (assuming he's not dead).



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