
Shouji Gatou
Illustrator
Shikidouji
11
FULL METAL PANIC!
FOREVER STAND BY ME
PART 1


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Sousuke was still in at-rest posture and couldn't move.
His hands behind his back brushed against the pistol hidden in his waistband. For the first time in his life, he felt ashamed for carrying a gun.
TURBULENT SERV HMS
SRT


The readings on his screen showed that despite the shaking, his speed was evening out.
But even with wings, this was less like flying and more like being shot out of a cannon: the immense propulsion of the XL-3 was throwing this aerodynamically unstable "ground weapon" at Merida Island through brute force alone.


"Just one night,"
she'd told him, and
for some reason
his smile had
turned sad.
But that
didn't mean he'd
backed away
or hesitated.

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Prologue

A sad string of letters sat there next to the list of universities he was trying for. There were no As or Bs present. It was all Ds and Es.

Kazama Shinji let out a melancholy sigh as he continued to gaze at his report card from the national mock exam. He'd read it over and over again since this morning, but the results hadn't changed. Not that he'd really expected them to—it's just that they didn't feel real to him yet.

He knew the exact causes of his downfall: the English section had been full of phrases he'd never learned; World History was all ancient South American stuff, which he'd told himself would never come up; worst of all was Classic Literature, which had been focused on *The Tale of Genji*.

I mean, The Tale of Genji? *Really? That frivolous work of a love-obsessed chick who lived a thousand years ago?! You can't judge modern young people based on whether or not they understand some ancient playboy's list of conquests!* Shinji found himself thinking.

But there was no point in resenting it. This was the world he lived in—results were everything, and the results of his year-end mock exams were awful.

"I'm done for..." he sighed. The situation was dire. It was January of his third year of high school, and the Center Test was next week. He laid his report card on his desk facedown, then looked around the room, glassy-eyed.

It was lunchtime in class 3-4, and a nervous energy hung over the room. Some students were working hard on entrance exam preparation, while others were napping due to exhaustion from their studies. A group of girls who'd taken the mock exam with Shinji were pressing each other for their results, while a small number of boys were playing card games, acting like they didn't care about entrance exams at all.

Some of those present already had jobs or college referrals lined up, but most of them were in limbo, and nebulous anxieties seemed to cling to them like wet

silk. There was something that was always hanging over them, and it wasn't just graduation-related stress. The students of class 3-4—formerly class 2-4—hadn't laughed in a long time.

Chidori Kaname and Sagara Sousuke... It had been a whole year since they'd gone missing.

The writers and reporters had eventually stopped buzzing around the school gate. The repairs to the school building had been finished by summer break. The year's culture and athletics festivals had concluded, and the school had settled into an uneasy sort of silence. There were no more disruptive explosions, no more of Kaname's lectures echoing through the hallways, no more screams from students caught up in some commotion or other, no more barking from Ms. Kagurazaka over the school's PA system...

It was a normal school again, just as it had been before Sousuke had come...except that the student council president, Hayashimizu Atsunobu, had graduated, and the principal, Tsuboi Takako, had transferred to another school towards the end of last year.

Tsuboi's transfer had been an amicable affair with no blame cast; it simply seemed impossible for her to remain at Jindai High School after all that had happened."I wish I could have stayed here longer," she had lamented to the students at the closing ceremony in March. "I wish I could have stayed here as principal until the friends you're so worried about have returned. No matter how many months, how many years it takes..."

Her words had been a kind of farewell to Chidori Kaname.

But to Shinji, the phrase "until they returned" had no reality to it. This wasn't just some ordinary kidnapping, and the Japanese police were helpless. He'd heard that, given the nature of the situation, Kaname's status on her record had been indefinitely changed to 'on hiatus,' so on the off chance she did return, she'd be able to start again from her second year... But with all of her old classmates about to graduate, would she even want to come back?

Meanwhile, everyone knew now that Sousuke's record had been faked, so there was no chance of his ever returning (even the word 'returning' felt odd). But none of them could forget the vow he had made to them a year ago: "I will

bring her back.”

But was that even possible? As a military geek, Shinji knew a fair bit about the world Sousuke came from: armies, intelligence organizations, terrorists... He knew better than your average high school student how huge and dangerous and strong they were. No individual, no matter how capable, stood a chance against them.

To bring Kaname back, Sousuke would need a network of connections, a wealth of funding, and the best allies possible. Moreover, if this “Amalgam” Sousuke had talked about was real, then they must be unspeakably powerful. Shinji wasn’t aware of their existence, not even as an urban legend. There was no way Sousuke would be able to learn Kaname’s whereabouts from a clandestine organization with that kind of influence. In fact, it occurred to Shinji from time to time that the most likely scenario was that Sousuke was dead.

Since the day Sousuke had left, Shinji had spent a lot of time searching the Internet for traces of his old friend’s activities. If he was out there somewhere making trouble, Shinji thought he might be able to pick up hints about it at the very least (this had also helped him get his mind off his entrance exams, though he’d gotten some good English practice in the process.) But nothing had come up during any of his searches. That, too, was only natural—there was no way a high school kid searching on a home computer would be able to track down an organization like that.

But what if Sousuke really is still alive out there, he wondered, *still searching for Kaname?* For one of them, days of adventure; for the other, days of sighing at report cards. When he thought about the vast gulf between Sousuke’s circumstances and his own, Shinji couldn’t help but laugh.

Just then, his friend Onodera Kotaro arrived back at the classroom and sat down in front of Shinji. “They were almost sold out,” said Kotaro—whom they called Ono-D—tearing open the bun he’d bought at the bakery kiosk and biting into it with relish.

“You should’ve snagged something at the convenience store this morning,” Shinji observed.

“I did,” Kotaro protested. “Rice balls with salmon and tuna; I ate ’em all after

second period.”

“Oh, yeah?”

As they exchanged trivial conversation, Kotaro’s eyes found the report card on Shinji’s desk. “Oh. The mock exam?”

“Yeah.”

Before Shinji could stop him, Kotaro snapped it up. “Let’s have a look... Wow, tough break. All Ds?”

“It was the questions’ fault,” Shinji sulked. “I bet you got the same.”

“Eh, I’ll be fine. I’m just about to kick my studying into high gear.”

“The Center Test is next week, though...”

“Oh, shut up,” Kotaro mumbled.

“Tokiwa-san was worried that you weren’t studying,” Shinji told him.

“Hmm... Well, at least *she’s* got a school referral,” said Kotaro. “Even though she said she was gonna get a job at her toy company, anyway.”

“Well, she’s been really studying hard since she left the hospital,” Shinji replied.

Kotaro was the student who’d visited Tokiwa Kyoko in the hospital most often after she’d been injured in the incident. Shinji had gone along with him several times, but looking on as Kotaro tried to act cheerful had been too much for him to take.

After being discharged from the hospital, Kyoko had smoothly reintegrated with the rest of the third-year class. In Kaname’s absence, she’d spent more time with Kotaro. They’d gotten to be a lot closer than they had been before, although Kotaro had said they weren’t officially dating yet. They’d gone to the beach together during summer break but, in the end, he’d said nothing had happened.

Shinji didn’t know how true that was, of course. But instead of speculating further on their relationship status, he changed the subject to ask, “Is Tokiwa-san coming to school today?”

“Dunno,” said Kotaro. “She emailed me earlier to say she’d finished her check-ups.”

Kyoko had taken off morning classes to get tests done at the city hospital. There were almost no lingering effects from her injuries, but she sometimes had spasms in the fingers of her left hand, which might have been a psychological aftereffect rather than a physical one.

“It must be hard, huh?” Shinji commented sympathetically.

“What?”

“For Tokiwa-san,” he clarified. “With everything.”

“Well... you saw what she went through,” Kotaro grumbled, sticking a straw into his coffee milk pack. “You know.”

“Yeah.”

“She’s started talking lately about what happened that led to her injuries,” said Kotaro.

“What did she say?” Shinji asked, feeling surprised. Ever since her discharge, any time someone talked about something even slightly related to the incident, Kyoko had just grimaced.

“Well...” Kotaro began, then trailed off, hesitant to say more.

“Tell me,” Shinji insisted.

“Okay... It was about Sagara.”

“Sagara-kun?”

“She said he tried really hard to help her,” Kotaro told him. “He defused a bomb that had been strapped to her, even knowing it was a trap.”

Shinji was speechless.

“And despite that, she said awful things to him,” Kotaro continued. “Seems like she really feels bad about it.”

“Well... I can see why she did that, though,” said Shinji. “It must’ve been terrifying.”

“Yeah,” Kotaro agreed awkwardly. “I guess.”

From what Shinji knew about the situation, the organization that had kidnapped Kaname and used Kyoko as a hostage had really gone all-in. They’d sent in a black arm slave model—one he’d never seen in any military magazine—and set up bombs all over the school. It was basically a miracle that none of the staff or students had died, and Shinji felt this could be attributed to the fact that Sousuke and his white AS had fought so hard on their behalf.

Of course, many students still blamed Sousuke for having put their school in the crosshairs, and Kotaro was one of them. He had fiercely rebuked Sousuke the day he’d left the school, grabbing him by the lapels, crying and cursing at him. “Were we never really friends?” he’d asked. Sousuke hadn’t tried to argue, and from that day onwards, Kotaro had never spoken his name again until just now.

“Hey, Ono-D,” said Shinji. “I never mentioned it, but...”

“What?”

“I think... maybe Sagara-kun was fighting really hard for us.”

“You don’t know that,” Kotaro said grumpily. It was a childish response, a sulking denial. “And Kyoko still almost died because of the things they hid from us. They could’ve run off a lot earlier than that if they’d cared.”

“You really think that?” Shinji asked.

“H-How should I know?”

“You don’t feel sorry,” Shinji pressed him, “like Tokiwa-san?”

“Huh? Why should I feel sorry?” Kotaro retorted. “They’re the ones who should feel sorry.”

“Okay... Then why did you bring it up?”

“Huh?”

“The Tokiwa-san thing,” Shinji clarified.

“Well...”

“You weren’t saying it because you felt the same way? That you wanted to

apologize for what you said?”

“I... I wouldn’t say...” With Shinji staring straight at him, Kotaro stammered and turned his face away. “I... I dunno what you’re talkin’ about.”

“I’ve got a little plan,” Shinji told him.

“A plan for what?”

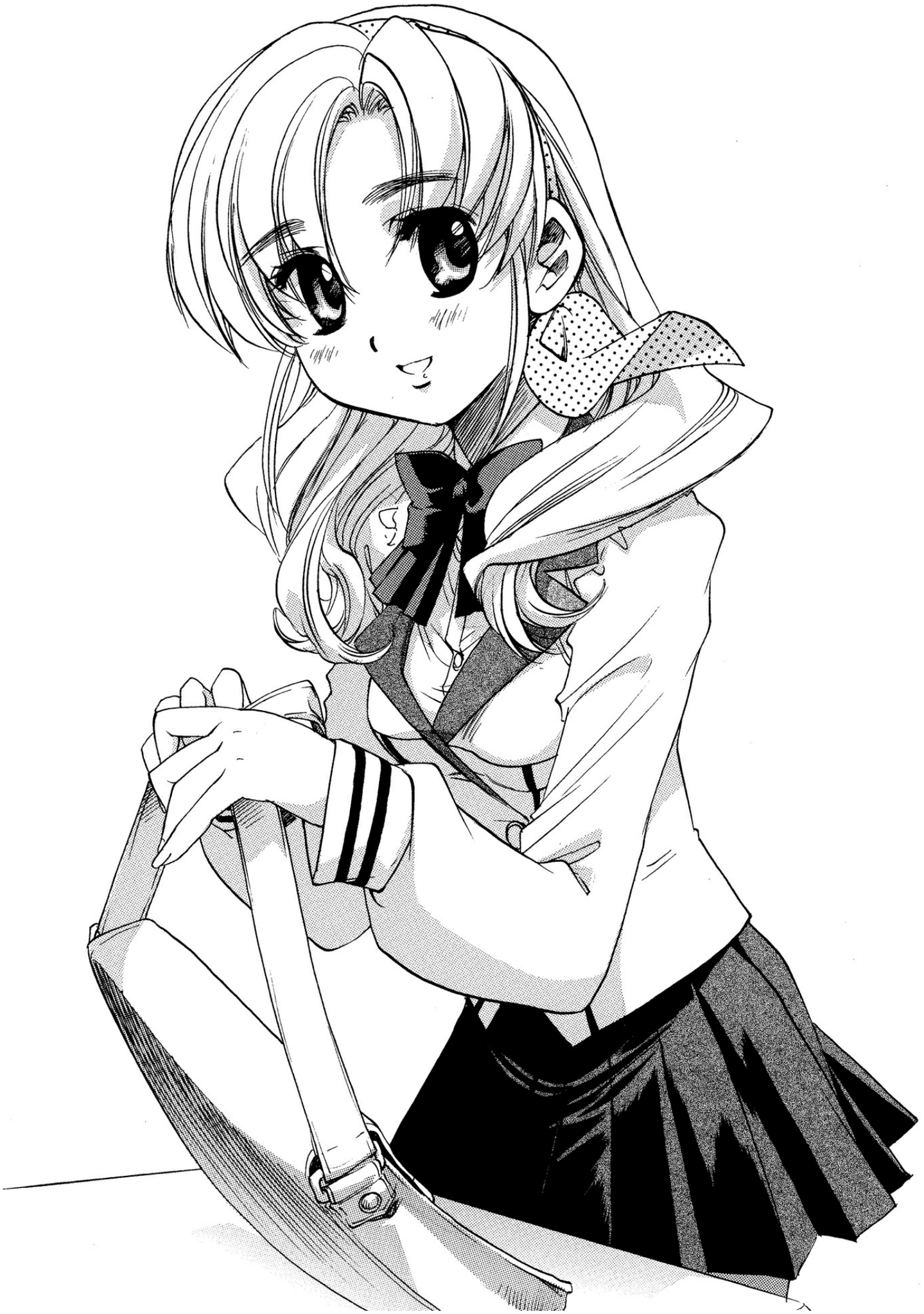
“We won’t be able to all get together once February hits, so I want to film it before January’s over...”

“Seriously,” said Kotaro, “what’re you getting at?”

That was when Kyoko entered the classroom.

“Hey...”

“Oh, she’s here.”



After chatting with some girls near the door, Kyoko headed their way. She'd been wearing contacts lately instead of glasses, and had swapped out her childish braids for a medium-length style just past her shoulders. She was also wearing basic makeup, though it was limited to lip gloss.

Kyoko was as petite as ever, but she seemed more mature than before. *Perhaps,* Shinji reflected, *it's a shadow the incident cast over her once innocent expression...*

"Morning, Kazama-kun."

"Hey, morning." Kyoko first smiled at Shinji, then whacked Kotaro on the back. "Hey there, Ono-D!" It was a surprisingly cheerful greeting from her. Despite the small alterations she'd made to her outward appearance, her personality hadn't significantly changed.

"Hey," Kotaro replied. "How'd it go?"

"How'd what go?"

"The tests at the hospital."

"I get the results next week," she told them. "I think I'm probably okay, though."

"I see."

"Oho," she chortled, "were you worried about me?"

"Nah, just asking," Kotaro told her, smiling cheerfully. Kyoko puffed out her cheeks and poked at him, and he poked her back. While the two of them flirted, the bell for fifth period began to ring.

"Wow, that time already?" Shinji asked.

"I'm just glad I made it," said Kyoko.

"You're such a teacher's pet," Kotaro scorned her. "I would've ditched the rest of the day."

"Stupid."

While the students chatted and got ready for class, Kotaro and Kyoko headed for their respective seats. Shinji could hear a male student, who was looking at

his cell phone, speak up to his friend in front of him. “Hey,” he was saying. “It says there’s gonna be a war.”

“What?” the other boy asked.

“The news says there’s gonna be a war,” the first boy repeated.

“Where?”

“I dunno. All over, I guess. It just says war.”

“Hmm... Hey, put it away,” the friend whispered. “Fujisaki’s here.”

The entrance of their classic literature teacher put an end to the conversation, but Shinji continued to mull it over, thinking, *What in the world?* He furrowed his brow, but dismissed the news as likely being some border dispute in the Middle East or Africa. Right now, his Center Test took priority.

“Everyone here today? Then we’ll take our final quiz. I know you’re sick of it by now, but please give it your best. We’re almost at the end...” said the teacher, handing out the page of important grammar questions.

Shinji finally learned the details of the news on the train ride home by glancing at an exhausted office worker’s newspaper. He immediately felt a cold sweat rise on his back.

This wasn’t some African border dispute, he realized. The entities on the verge of war were two superpowers: the Western nations centered around America, and the Eastern Bloc centered around the USSR, were facing a serious military crisis that was on the verge of going nuclear. In Europe, in the Far East, in the Middle East, in the Arctic Sea... At least, that’s what the articles said.

This was serious.

Sure, he’d seen the warning signs on the news recently. First, a series of food and energy crises had added fuel to the ongoing fire on a worldwide scale, followed by a global financial crisis—a stock market crash the likes of which hadn’t been seen in a century. In the Soviet Union, leaders of a far-right faction had made a string of provocative comments that were receiving enthusiastic support from the military.

But could it really be coming to war? he wondered. Both sides were still only on high alert; the shooting hadn't started yet. They were just pulling back their metaphorical coats to reveal their holstered six-shooters. But Shinji knew that if anything else went wrong, the consequences would be disastrous.

Yet inside the train car, things were as peaceful as ever. There wasn't the slightest hint of fear among the passengers. *How can they all remain so calm,* he wondered, *when the world is on the brink of nuclear war?*

It might be the end to life as they knew it, yet all around him were entrance exam students fervently poring over their notebooks to memorize vocabulary. *How can they be studying when the schools they're trying for might not last the year?* Shinji thought incredulously.

Suddenly, he wanted to talk to Sousuke. *What would he say if I told him how I'm feeling?* Shinji wondered. *What would he, a man who crossed the line between war and peace so easily, make of this sight?*

1. Before the Storm

As one of the founders of Mithril, as the leader of the now eliminated leaders' council, and as a son who had been toyed with for decades, Sir Edmund Mallory Jr. had to settle things with his father.

He was four hours west of London at the moment, driving alone, without a single bodyguard, in a rusty old Toyota he'd gotten from a used car lot. He passed through Hereford, near the border with Wales, then spent another hour and a half going north.

He'd been laying low for close to a year, but that time was now coming to an end.

He continued driving through desolate farmland under a cloudy, drizzling sky until, at last, a small farming village came into sight. *I haven't been here in thirty-eight years,* Edmund Jr. reflected, *yet the village looks just like it did in my boyhood.*

Then again, this place never changed. The small group of buildings stood there, just as they had a hundred—no, three hundred years earlier. The old church on the outskirts, too, was just how it had always been.

Edmund Jr. stopped the car before putting on his cheap raincoat. Then, shoving his Browning pistol into one pocket, he marched up to a small brick building adjoining the church. The thick mud along the path made his footsteps feel heavy, and the 9mm pistol in his pocket was as freezing cold as the rain that spattered his cheeks.

He made it to the entrance, took in a breath, then kicked at the thin wooden door. One hit didn't break it. He slammed the sole of his shoe against it a second time, and then a third. The door came off its hinges and fell in with a crash.

Edmund Jr. stepped inside as he drew his gun, just as he'd trained for so often during his time in the SBS. Holding it in both hands with his elbows slightly bent,

he kept the upper half of his body straight and level as he moved. Though he was over fifty, his body moved just as he willed it to. *It's like riding a bicycle,* he thought to himself.

He passed through an empty dining room and entered the bedroom, where he found an elderly man sitting in an old rocking chair. An eight-inch LCD television sat on the small table next to him, playing news from the BBC.



The crisis had begun two weeks ago, and things were only getting worse. Neither the USA nor the USSR were backing down, and violence was breaking out in Poland, the Balkans, and Kurdistan. The Soviet-led Warsaw Pact Army was holding large-scale exercises and preparing nuclear missile firing tests. In response, NATO was mobilizing its forces on all fronts, “just in case.” Though unconfirmed, there were reports of small-scale armed conflicts breaking out as well.

The light from the little screen cast flickering shadows over the elderly man’s melancholy face.

“Lord Mallory,” Edmund Jr. said to his aged father.

“*Sir* Mallory,” his father said back to him, as if he hadn’t even seen the gun in his son’s hands. “Good to see you.”

As the heir apparent to an earl, Edmund Jr. held the title of ‘viscount,’ which meant that he could also be styled a lord, along with his father. However, Edmund Jr. preferred to be called “Sir Mallory,” in recognition of the knighthood he’d been granted after having earned the Order of the Bath for a dangerous mission conducted during his days with the Royal Navy. The alternate title, despite being lesser in rank, also served as a way for Edmund Jr. to distinguish himself from his father.

“I thought I’d see you sooner,” remarked Lord Edmund.

“I came as fast as I could.”

“Oh?” The old man closed his Bible and set it down on the table next to him.

His hands are more wrinkled now than when I last saw him a year ago, Edmund Jr. thought.

“I thought you knew about this place,” said Lord Edmund.

“Yes,” Edmund Jr. agreed. “Only you, the butler, Dent, and I knew about it. Dent died a long time ago, which leaves only the two of us.”

Every year, the two of them had stayed in this village for one week in the summer. They’d lived in this bare-bones house together with no hunting or riding, no mother or sister, doing all of the housework themselves. Even when

their butler would look in on them, worried, his father had refused the man's help. Together they'd chopped wood, drawn water from the well, and on the last night, taken apart a chicken and cooked it.

It wasn't an especially grueling lifestyle, but it had been an invaluable experience for a child of nobility. The young Edmund Jr., who had been born heir to the title Earl of Hereford, had been learning things that any human should know. He didn't like to admit it, but the experience had served him well, first at Eaton and then during his time in the military.

Lord Edmund turned his enfeebled gaze to the window. "Dent, eh? I wonder what he'd think if he saw us now."

"He'd be greatly saddened, I'm sure," Edmund Jr. replied.

"I wonder. Perhaps he knew this would happen."

"Why?"

"Dent brought me wine when you were injured in the Falklands," Lord Edmund explained. "A Cheval Blanc, from the year you were born, to celebrate. He said, 'Now Master Edmund will never do as you say ever again. He's become a true man.'"

Edmund Jr. wasn't sure if his father was praising him or grieving. Even so, Dent's prediction had been right; the reason he'd come here was not to ask for his father's counsel, but to finish things with him.

"Did you come here to kill me?" Lord Edmund asked suddenly.

"Yes," Edmund Jr. immediately responded. "But first, I want to know why you betrayed us; why you sold Mithril out to them."

The old man, Lord Edmund Mallory Sr., had been Mithril's original founder. The still-unexplained use of nuclear weapons during the Gulf War; the sudden reignition of American—Soviet hostilities; the ideological, ethnic, and religious wars that flared up in the world from time to time. Energy issues, food issues... Coals that fed the fires, crisis after crisis. If such things were allowed to continue, they knew, the world wouldn't survive into the 21st century. National interest couldn't stop these escalations, and it was unlikely that any country's politicians, bureaucrats, or officials could stem the crisis. To quell internal

distress, a surgeon was needed, and Mithril had been the scalpel capable of performing the delicate work.

Edmund Jr. and his father fancied themselves as the Tracy family from the puppet drama *Thunderbirds*. But the purpose of their "international aid organization" would be to protect people not from accidents and disaster, but from war.

The biggest issue they'd faced in Mithril's creation hadn't been funding—Lord Edmund had easily worked up the necessary funds by mobilizing his family's entire portfolio of assets. By selling off real estate, corporations, and intellectual property holdings in their various forms, as well as by flexing his considerable personal connections, Lord Edmund had worked a miracle.

Instead, the main problem had been acquiring the appropriately skilled personnel. Spending ten billion pounds on hardware meant little with mediocre hands at the helm. You needed a large force of soldiers with talent, experience, and most of all, loyalty. Men of a younger generation than Lord Edmund's set. That left things up to his son, Sir Edmund Mallory Jr.

Edmund Jr. was a war hero. He'd been injured saving the crown prince, who'd been left in enemy territory when his helicopter went down, and received the Order of the Bath for it. Afterwards, he'd traveled the world as a military attaché and intelligence officer, contributing to the mitigation of various military crises. He'd done everything in his power to scout the people needed to found Mithril. He'd faced many challenges on the way, but his judgment had always been top-notch.

"I poured my whole life into that organization because I agreed with your ideals, and because I was proud of you," Edmund Jr. said bitterly. "I didn't care about the fortune I was supposed to inherit. You made me believe that the hideous 'reality' I'd witnessed during my time in the military might just be changed."

"It was always a fantasy," Lord Edmund said in an exhausted voice. "Think about it. The name is *Mithril*—a fictional metal, cooked up by a daydreaming linguist."

"So you've been mocking us from the start?" Edmund Jr. asked.

“I *wanted* it to be true,” Lord Edmund insisted. “I wanted the evils in the world to be something that could be slain, for there to be a silver sword that *could* slay them.”

“We *were* that sword!”

“No, we were not.”

“Only because of what you did. You were Mithril’s founder, but you were also in league with Amalgam,” said Edmund Jr., accusing his father. “You disappeared just before their all-out attack, as if you’d known about it beforehand. I figured out the codes you were using—stock prices from companies in your holding—along with numbers written in obscure trade journals, converted through a unique algorithm to be used as a public key on the network.”

It was a simple yet powerful method of encoding, especially when used in tandem with modern communications methods. Those who analyzed things through a lens of modern technology would be inclined to overlook such outdated means, just as the methods which spies in their fifties might catch on to were frequently missed by modern spy organizations.

“Those stock prices were merely my personal encryption key,” Lord Edmund told his son. “But I’m impressed you figured it out.”

“The trade journals you left in your office were my clue. When you looked at each edition from above, there was a gap in the same area, a sign that you’d held each one open on that same set of pages,” Edmund Jr. explained. “Once I realized that, it took me close to six months to track you down because I was trying to stay anonymous while I looked into it.”

“Then you found me and came to have a showdown?” Lord Edmund surmised.

“There’s always an order to these things.”

“That’s the kind of thing I expect you to say.”

“But I still don’t understand,” Edmund Jr. insisted. “*Why* did you do it? You didn’t start the organization for fun. Did you simply tire of Mithril and cast it aside?”

“Certainly not,” Lord Edmund said, his tone one of self-recrimination. “Mithril is too vast to be a mere child’s plaything.”

“Then tell me. Your behavior... It’s not like you at all. You worked with the enemy, abandoned the organization you founded, and became a hermit all the way out here in the country,” said Edmund Jr. “It would be easy to blame you, but I don’t understand. Why?” It was as if he was accusing his father of cheating on his mother.

“You never knew.”

“Knew what?”

“Mithril was like my bastard child: a tool to oppose Amalgam, which had gotten too big for me to control, and to bring it new rules,” Lord Edmund clarified. “The rivalry between good and evil, order and chaos... The balance of overwhelming power that’s continued uninterrupted since the days of myth.”

“Too big for you to control?”

“My son, you still don’t know anything about Amalgam,” Lord Edmund rebuked him gently. “Its origins, or the ideals it originally held.”

“Ideals? What nonsense are you—” Just then, blood began to spurt from Edmund Jr.’s gun hand. At first, he thought he’d lost the hand entirely. Against his will, his right arm had jerked, and the pistol had spun away, hit the wall, and fallen. He thought the gun had exploded, that the bullets loaded into the grip had magically burst on their own...

In fact, someone had shot him through the window.

Who did it? he wondered, as other questions began to form in his mind, which was going hazy with pain. *When did they arrive, and how did they know I’d be here?* First, he stumbled away from the window to check the status of his hand. His entire arm was in blinding pain as if it had been blown off from the elbow, but in fact, his fingers mostly appeared intact. Only the first joint of his pinkie appeared to have been blown off, and there was a copious amount of blood pumping out of the wounded digit.

Idiot, he thought, mentally castigating himself. *Why did you let your guard down?* Immediately, Edmund Jr. abandoned his rage for his aged father. Cursing

his foolishness for not having noticed the ambush, he reached for his fallen pistol with his uninjured left hand, aware that he didn't have a spare weapon.

But before he could reach it, a man in black stepped through the door from the kitchen. He kicked the gun away, slamming the stock of his own submachine gun into Edmund Jr.'s head. Sparks raced in front of his eyes as he lost his sense of balance, and his vision went dark.

"Ugh..." When Edmund Jr. next emerged from the mist of semi-consciousness, he was able to make out the other man's face: it was the commander of the forces who had entered the house. Gray hair on his head and his face, a melancholy air and the chiseled features of a marble statue... He looked somehow older than Lord Edmund, but Edmund Jr. knew that was just an illusion; this man was probably no older than him. He knew him, after all. "Andrey Kalinin..." he groaned.

"Sir Mallory," Kalinin, the former ground forces commander of the Mithril West Pacific Battle Group, replied. "It's been a while." His tone of voice was absent any fragment of goodwill.

It seemed to have been less than a minute since the attack. Edmund Jr. could feel his back soaked with sweat, and he was almost delirious from the pain in his hand. On Kalinin's orders, the men must have treated his right hand while performing a careful pat-down of his body. *At least,* he thought, *they don't seem to want to kill me right away...*

The elder Mallory had remained sitting in place, but he did seem to be surprised by the raid. He must not have organized it, nor known that it was coming.

Kalinin was the first to speak. "Sir Mallory," he said succinctly, "I've been watching you for two months now. We've been looking for your father and thought that tailing you would be the best way to find him."

"You used me, then?" asked Edmund Jr. "Is it my father you're after?"

"Yes," Kalinin answered. When he gestured slightly at his subordinates with his jaw, they quickly picked up on the message and left the room. Once they were all gone, Kalinin went on to say, "Your father has information that we

require.”

As if anticipating his next words, the elder Mallory let out a soft groan. “The registry?”

His son looked up questioningly.

“We know you have it, Mr. Mercury,” Kalinin told him bluntly. “There are other things I want to confirm, though, which is why we stopped your son before he killed you.”

Edmund Jr. didn’t know what Kalinin was talking about. No, that wasn’t exactly true—a desire *not* to know was blocking the recognition from his thoughts. “Registry?” he muttered. “Mr. Mercury? What are you talking about?”

“Amalgam has a ‘manager,’” Kalinin explained. “A unique individual who never gets involved in its policies, but has authority over its procedures. He’s like an arbitrator, watching to make sure nobody breaks rules. That is Mr. Mercury. Until now, nobody knew his true identity.”

“And he’s... my father?” Edmund Jr. stared at the old man, who remained expressionless, staring unresponsively at a point on the wall.

“What about it, Lord Mallory?” Kalinin asked.

Edmund Jr. found his voice breaking, annoyed at his father’s continued silence. His right hand felt like it was on fire. “Answer him, Father!”

After some time, the elder Mallory finally opened his mouth. “The Russian is correct. I am the arbitrator of Amalgam, Mr. Mercury.”

“It can’t be...” his son choked out.

“I always meant to tell you when the time was right,” Lord Edmund admitted. “I thought that once you’d matured sufficiently, you might consider taking over for me.”

Ridiculous! thought Edmund Jr. *He didn’t think his fifty-year-old son had ‘matured sufficiently’? And... take over for him?* Out loud, he said, “I might be the son of a traitor, but I’m not one myself.” He meant it to sound like a scathing rebuke, but it ended up sounding more like self-reassurance.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” his father protested. “Amalgam wasn’t always the evil organization you people imagine it to be.”

“They’re a terrorist organization starting wars for short-term profits!”

“True, but they weren’t always,” Lord Edmund said firmly. “Amalgam first formed after World War II—the summer of 1948.”

“1948?” Edmund Jr. echoed incredulously. “That long ago?”

“Even we didn’t know that,” Kalinin put in. He sounded almost impressed. “We’d assumed it was an old organization, but nobody knew the precise history, not even the current executives. Many have taken on the names ‘Gold’ or ‘Silver,’ but most of them never knew who their immediate predecessor was.”

“The only information they were ever given was a page number in a textile trade journal, and the method of communicating with others through the numbers printed there,” Kalinin continued. “Whatever you might call them, it was shocking to learn that an organization like that could make decisions and influence policy on a global scale based on that information alone.”

“Not knowing each other’s names or faces... That was the real source of its power,” the elder Mallory said. “It meant nobody could create factions or try to seize power. For instance, during the sixties—the Cuban Missile Crisis—there were three people calling themselves Mr. Gold at the same time. It made it impossible to tell who was who.”

“But it still functioned?” asked Kalinin.

“Yes,” Lord Edmund affirmed. “During the Cuban Missile Crisis, one of the Mr. Golds was a man close to Khrushchev, and working to get the missiles removed from Cuba. The rest of the executives agreed with him and worked to secure the situation.”

“Ridiculous,” Edmund Jr. snorted. Any student of modern history knew about the Cuban Missile Crisis: in 1962, the Soviet Union had placed nuclear missiles in Cuba, effectively holding a gun to America’s head. Of course, the US wasn’t about to take that lying down, and the tensions over who would shoot first began to rise. The situation grew more and more serious, until all-out nuclear

war seemed inevitable. All of human civilization had been on the verge of collapse, until bold decisions by leaders in both countries pulled things back from the brink.

His father was saying that Amalgam had seriously influenced First Secretary Khrushchev's decisions—that, in effect, Amalgam had saved the world.

"You don't want to believe that your enemy saved the world, I'm sure," the elder Mallory observed, as if reading his mind. "But—as I've said several times before—Amalgam began with ideals. After the fall of Nazi Germany, many feared the nascent US—Soviet Cold War, both in the East and the West. My grandfather, who held a key intelligence office during the war, formed the organization afterwards with a mere four like-minded men. One was an American oil baron, one a Russian scientist, one a former German SS officer, one a Japanese trader... and then there was my grandfather, a real estate giant and cryptologist."

"Only five..."

"Five brilliant men," Lord Edmund insisted. "Their beliefs and ideologies differed, but they were united in their desire to provide a future for humanity. Five very different men, bonded together with one ideal as their catalyst: to guide the world from the shadows. And so, they called their curious empire 'Amalgam.'"

"'A future for humanity'?" Edmund Jr. scoffed. "Please. The arrogance!"

Following his outburst, Kalinin whispered, "It's not so different from Mithril. The only slight difference was in the topics they dealt with."

"Of course, a traitor would say that!" Edmund Jr. said accusingly.

"I'm simply being honest," Kalinin returned. "At the time of its founding, those five men's intentions were pure."

Edmund Jr. was neither stubborn nor self-righteous enough to insist that Kalinin was wrong, but even so, it felt like some kind of sick joke. "Fine," he finally said. "Let's say Amalgam had ideals and that it got results, too. But... eventually, it became what it did."

"I'm afraid so," his father agreed. "Amalgam expanded its network at leisure

and secretly grew its membership. Its original five founders retired one by one, and alternates popped up in their place. Twenty years after its founding, it had become an organization larger than its own members even realized. That was around the end of the 60s."

"Around the quagmire of the Vietnam War?" Edmund Jr. guessed.

"Amalgam wasn't involved with all of it, but they were one of the reasons it went on for so long. You see, the organization had unintentionally ended up being composed primarily of people whose financial interests were better served by the war continuing," Lord Edmund explained. He went on to say, "I don't think they even realized it at the time. Since then, Amalgam's actions have been primarily focused on the protection of their members' vested interests. There have been wavering goals, conflicting desires, and tug-of-wars of compromise... There were repeated internal conflicts, and before long, they started holding 'fixed matches' on the world stage. A new rule naturally came into being, and fraud became expected."

"And that went on for thirty years?" Edmund Jr. asked.

"The current membership is entirely unaware of Amalgam's original ideals," Lord Edmund said. "They use the organization simply as a tool for their little power games, drunk on the wine of invisible authority."

Over the course of many years, an organization founded with lofty goals in mind had changed, swelled into something ugly, and made self-preservation its only goal. It was an archetypal fall from grace. No matter how many brilliant people you brought together, no matter what kind of systems you put in place, you couldn't escape that eventual rot.

"Then it's already a conspiracy without purpose or morality," Edmund Jr. insisted. "And its resilience just makes it more out of control."

"That's right," his father agreed. "Twenty years ago, when I was bequeathed the role of arbitrator by my father, Amalgam was already out of control. 'Mr. Mercury' has a fine ring to it, but in practice, I had no power beyond that of mediation. Although I maintained the network and expelled rulebreakers, I wasn't allowed a voice at the executives' conferences. Even if I tried to share Amalgam's original ideals with them, I was simply ignored. Mr. Mercury's

arbitration is only tolerated *because* he does not assert himself. There was nothing I could do."

"You couldn't destroy the network itself?" Edmund Jr. suggested.

"No," the elder Mallory said with a sigh. "Fifteen years ago, I sincerely tried to find a way to destroy them. We didn't have the online conferences then, but communicated solely through codes made up of three-column announcements in newspapers and text information services. The public key was decided in rotation among executives. I used stock prices in trade journals, some used weather reports for the American East Coast; others, tabloid gossip columns. Those who wrote for those publications never even dreamed that their articles were being used this way.

"Of course, the purpose of this setup was so that no individual could disrupt the encryption key," he continued. "There were always multiple backup communication methods, and since it was all based on public information, it couldn't be altered. The advent of the Internet has only made it harder to control and disrupt their communications." The elder Mallory then added, with a glance at Kalinin, "Of course, I'm told Mr. Silver made it possible."

"He has limited precognitive abilities. He can predict the encryption code and transmission protocols in advance, then analyze and manipulate them to serve his ends," Kalinin acknowledged.

"He planted a virus in the network, then?" asked Lord Edmund.

"Put simply, yes," Kalinin told him. "Not just an electronic virus, but a psychological one, as well. It appears to have been inconceivably complicated, as well as time and labor-intensive."

The conversation taking place between his father and Kalinin was completely over Edmund Jr.'s head. *It sounds like someone tried to take control of Amalgam from within,* he thought, *and succeeded.* There was no sign of the pain of his wound abating, and he wanted to curse in order to distract himself. But he also didn't want to show weakness in front of the other two.

"What were we talking about again?" Lord Edmund wondered. "Ah, yes, my inability to stop the growth and rot of Amalgam..."

“I think I’ve heard enough,” Kalinin told him. “So, that’s *why you created Mithril*, is it?”

“Yes,” Lord Edmund affirmed. “If I couldn’t control them from within, I knew I’d have to make an organization to oppose them from without. I used Mithril to halt Amalgam’s excesses. You may be able to guess when it started: with the use of nuclear weapons in the Gulf War. That was the height of Amalgam’s arrogance.”

That nuclear launch, still wreathed in mystery, that left the Middle East in a state of ongoing tragedy... And here is my father, thought Edmund Jr., *saying that Amalgam was behind it.*

“In that moment, I made a decision,” Lord Edmund continued. “Which was that I would create an organization to stop them.”

“You don’t think that was a noble decision, do you?”

“It was the only option I had.”

“You stayed in hiding, betrayed both organizations, and manipulated them... Even if it was for a noble purpose, it’s unforgivable fraud,” Edmund Jr. fumed. “I can’t even conceive of the cowardice, the arrogance—!”

“Spare me your childish criticisms,” Lord Edmund said tiredly, cutting his son off.

But Edmund Jr. didn’t stop. “It’s not just the organization you betrayed. You mocked and used *me*, your own son! You sweet-talked me into recruiting the people you needed!”

“Because you were the man for the job. A romanticist disguised as a pragmatist was ideal for leading Mithril’s executives.”

“You—”

“Your reaction disappoints me,” said his father, cutting him off. “You should reserve your shame for your own weakness in failing to outwit me.”

At this, a soul-rending rage welled up in Edmund Jr., who found himself itching to kill the older man now. He’d asked himself over and over on the drive from his hideout in London, *Can I really shoot my own father?* But now, he

knew for sure that he could.

“I’m glad I took your gun away earlier,” Kalinin observed, clearly sensitive to the man’s rising bloodlust.

“I suppose I am being unbecomingly antagonistic, Mr. Kalinin,” said Lord Edmund, turning away from his son. “You said you wanted to confirm something, didn’t you? Perhaps you should get that done first.”

“No, I’ve heard enough.” There might have yet been many things even Kalinin didn’t know about the circumstances around the founding of Amalgam and Mithril; their conversation thus far had made that clear. He probably just didn’t want to have to watch any more sniping between father and son. “May I have the registry now?”

The elder Mallory furrowed his brow at Kalinin’s request. “It’s not complete.”

“I don’t care,” said Kalinin, who had expected this answer. In fact, it had seemed the most likely scenario. “I believe you know the names of most of the executives throughout Amalgam’s history, from its founding to the present. There are multiple examples of Mr. Mercury ‘expelling’ rulebreakers by revealing their names to the other executives.”

The trouble was that the arbitrator couldn’t give out those names for reasons other than rulebreaking, as that would diminish trust among other members. Leonard Testarossa’s limited precognitive abilities had enabled him to track down most of the current executives, but still he knew nothing about the past ones. The only person in the world with that information was the arbitrator, Mr. Mercury.

“What do you want with information on past executives?” Lord Edmund asked suspiciously. “They’re almost all dead.”

“There’s no need for you to know that,” Kalinin told him unpleasantly.

No, there was no need for the elder Mallory to know, as Kalinin and the others already had an unchallenged grip on Amalgam through their knowledge of the current executives. But that information was also worthless to their current needs; it was the past that had real value. More precisely, the

information on the Amalgam of eighteen years ago.

They would be redoing everything from that point, after all, so the contemporary members of Amalgam would be useful tools in setting the world right. That's why *she* wanted this registry—as a reference, to carry into the next world with her. Kalinin was just following her orders.

"Mr. Kalinin," said Lord Edmund coldly, "there is one line as arbitrator of the organization that I have never crossed. You're telling me to cross it and sell them all out."

"Is that line really worth holding?" Kalinin asked, while thinking, *It's this pointless sense of duty that let Amalgam run rampant, isn't it? Instead of really doing anything, you just formed your little "Justice League" to maintain a masturbatory balance. What point is there now in remaining loyal to Amalgam's past?*

"If you want the registry, you'll have to find it yourself," Lord Edmund announced. "Don't expect me to just hand it to you."

"As you wish." Kalinin looked around the small room, then reached for a bookshelf that took up most of one wall. He threw everything on one shelf unceremoniously onto the ground, spreading dust that stank of mildew. Edmund Jr., lying on the floor beside it, coughed. Kalinin was just reaching for the next shelf of books when he realized something. "No," he murmured, "that's not right."

A Bible lay on the small table next to the elder Mallory. Kalinin picked it up now, first tracing a finger along the spine, then grabbing the upper edge to peel it down and reveal the binding beneath. From that binding, he pulled a piece of paper, which had been folded into quarters. On it were lines of letters and numbers: some kind of code. *This* was the registry he was after, and Kalinin carefully folded it back up to place in his breast pocket.

The elder Mallory just watched as Kalinin went about his work. "How did you know?" he finally asked.

"This is iniquitous information," Kalinin answered. "Hiding it in the spine of a Bible seemed like the kind of thing a man like you might do."

“You’re not going to ask about the code?” Lord Edmund inquired.

“Let’s see... Perhaps the Vulgate knows?” suggested Kalinin, lightly tapping on the Latin Bible in which he’d found the paper. *The numbers likely correspond to its verses,* he thought. *A highly primitive method. If I put it to an AI designed for cracking codes, I’ll have it decoded in less than an hour.*

The elder Mallory sniffed in displeasure, confirming his suspicions.

“I’m finished here,” Kalinin announced. “You’re free to do as you wish.” With the Bible tucked under his arm, he turned to leave the room.

But the elder Mallory called out to him. “You’re not going to execute me?”

“There’s no need,” Kalinin replied. “There’s nothing you can do now, after all.”

“You’re saying I’m already a person of the past?”

“Not just that,” he pointed out. “You’re already a prisoner.” *I would imagine the old man never leaves this room,* Kalinin thought. *He’s bound to it by invisible chains...*

Kalinin cast a final glance at the man’s son, Sir Edmund. His face was pale and hollow, but below the surface burned a clear hatred for his father... He could tell from the indifferent way he’d watched their conversation, as if the younger man had forgotten even the pain of his current injury.

The father who had disengaged from life; the wounded son enraged by his betrayal. A desolate feeling came over Kalinin as he imagined himself and Sagara Sousuke in the same roles. *What a hypocrite I am,* he thought, *to look at this man, my shadow self, and tell him that* he *is a prisoner. Am I not also bound by the chains of my past?*

Perhaps acting out some kind of personal desire, Kalinin took out the Browning that he’d confiscated before, squatted down, and placed it in front of Edmund Jr. “I’m returning what’s yours,” he announced, and then silently left the room.

He sensed the man picking up the gun behind him, but he knew it wasn’t to shoot him.

Outside, the rain had grown heavier than before. Two black station wagons were parked in front of and behind Sir Edmund's Toyota, with six subordinates waiting in front.

"Let's go," Kalinin said.

The men silently piled into the wagons and prepared to withdraw. Kalinin didn't have the good relationship with them that he'd had with his old squadron, and they were somewhat less skilled, but he liked that. It meant less time wasted on conversation and less disappointment when they were inevitably lost.

As he sat down in a passenger seat, Kalinin heard a single gunshot from the cottage. The driver's hand paused for a moment over the key, but then he started up the engine with an attitude of indifference.

Kalinin heard another sound coming from the house, a sort of grief-filled wail, not quite a moan and not quite a scream. But as the station wagons drove off, scattering mud, it eventually faded from his hearing.

Maybe the elder Mallory preferred this end, he thought. Perhaps his presence there—in that village, which only his son knew about—was proof that he'd hoped his son would come and settle things with him. Perhaps that bullet, liberating him from the strong bond they shared, was a more suitable finale to his journey than an assassin's gun or the slow diminishment of old age.

What is the world worth, if I can't— Kalinin dismissed the thought immediately and opened a pre-prepared channel on his satellite phone. "I've acquired the registry," he announced.

"Excellent. Return, please," Leonard Testarossa's voice responded. There was a bit of a lag since he was on the other side of the planet, but the voice was otherwise very clear. "Things are going more or less smoothly for us, too."

"'More or less?'" Kalinin noted. "Is there an issue?"

"My little sister has sniffed out our plan," Leonard admitted. "We can't hide from satellites, so I think it's only a matter of time."

"Any countermeasures?"

“We have the US Navy acting on our behalf,” Leonard told him. “They’ll do everything in their power to sink the Toy Box. In fact, they should be just in the thick of it now...”

•

“Con, sonar! Torpedo on bearing 1-2-0, distance 2500! Approaching at fifty knots!” The tense report came in from the sonar shack just as a red symbol appeared on the front screen. A Mk. 48 torpedo, fired from the US Navy nuclear attack sub, Augusta, was heading for the Tuatha de Danaan.

Tessa, in the captain’s seat, immediately gave her orders. “Right full rudder, bearing 290. Maintain speed.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am. Right full rudder, bearing 290. Maintain speed,” Mardukas, her executive officer, repeated.

It wasn’t the ideal move for evading an incoming torpedo. In theory, the best choice would be to turn east and speed up. The crew in the control room, seeming to think the same thing, all looked at Mardukas in confusion. With just the slightest shake of his head, the XO told them not to doubt the captain’s orders.

Indeed, thirty seconds later, a new report came from the sonar technician. “New torpedo contact, bearing 2-9-3! Distance 800! Speed fifty knots!”

“I thought so,” Tessa whispered, without even a smile. If she’d chosen to escape in the standard way, they would’ve flown right into the enemy encirclement, but she had anticipated this attack by reinforcements. “Maintain course,” she commanded. “Reduce speed.”

“Reducing speed, maintaining course, aye.”

“Open torpedo tube doors, three and four.”

“Open tube doors three and four, aye. Data input complete.”

“Good,” said Tessa. “Fire three and four.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am,” said Mardukas, acknowledging the order. “Firing torpedoes three and four.”

Two ADCAP torpedoes fired from the de Danaan’s launch tubes. These were

decoys to keep the enemy at bay. The nuclear attack sub front of them would be forced to take evasive maneuvers, and they'd use that gap in their formation to break through.

The first torpedo approached from behind, and the numbers signifying its distance ticked down. Seven hundred yards, six hundred yards, five hundred yards...

Now, thought Tessa. "Come right to 3-3-5," she announced. "All stop. EMFC to passive."

"Aye. Coming right to 3-3-5. All stop. EMFC, passive."

Once her steadfast piloting had drawn the torpedo in just far enough, Tessa swung the boat around, and in that same instant, activated their electromagnetic fluid control. A curtain of particles arranged along the hull dropped its water resistance significantly. The Tuatha de Danaan slid sideways through the water like a car skidding on the ice.

It was an unthinkable move for a submarine of its size. The floor of the control room tilted hard, and those who hadn't grabbed onto something were thrown to the port side.

"Incoming!"

The enemy torpedo's guidance system wasn't designed to tail a large submarine moving this way. It lost sight of the de Danaan, and slammed into a countermeasure six hundred meters away instead.

There was a roar and a jolt; the de Danaan's frame groaned, and the control room's screen blinked wildly.

"EMFC, active!" screamed Tessa. "New course 1-1-0! Fire one and two while reversing course!"

"Aye, ma'am!" Mardukas hollered back. "EMFC active! Course is 1-1-0! Fire torpedoes one, two!"

The nearby explosion would mask the sound of their firing torpedoes, and they fired these new shots right at the enemy behind them by shifting the momentum from their drift into a backward slide. It was an acrobatic method of attack.

“One, two, fired!”

“Good,” said Tessa. “Come left to 0-4-0. All-ahead one-third. Increase depth to nine hundred, twenty degrees down bubble. Escape to the north-northwest.”

“Yes, Captain,” said Mardukas, a hint of relief entering his voice at the mention of escape. The noise from the other enemy torpedo’s explosion gave the de Danaan perfect cover to flee the scene. Several minutes later they activated their safety devices, silenced their machinery, and sank deeper into the water.

Tessa knew that the torpedoes they had fired were just a way to buy the de Danaan time. They wouldn’t explode even if they hit, and probably wouldn’t even do that much. She didn’t want to kill anyone on those submarines if she could help it, after all. They were just pawns being manipulated by Amalgam and probably questioning the attack on the Toy Box themselves.

But...even so, their opponents were serious and attacking them with live torpedoes. She’d managed to avoid firing a real shot this time, but even if these people knew their orders were nonsense, they would continue to obey them and attack. Tessa wondered, *Am I really obligated to have mercy on these people?*

She could confirm that there were three US Navy submarines out there, plus one most likely hiding beneath the thermal layer. If she wanted to, she could change course now and fire off ADCAP torpedoes, ADSLMM autonomous mines, and MAGROC aerial dispersal mines, and sink all four instantly.

Really, she wondered, *why not do it? If I just kill them all here, I’ll be able to give my subordinates plenty of rest in the twenty or more hours to come. It would make things so much simpler...*

“Captain,” said Mardukas, interrupting her dark chain of thought. “Should we reload the launch tubes with the same torpedoes?”

Under normal procedures, that was what she would do. But if she was going to seriously try to wipe out their enemy, strategically speaking, Tessa would have to switch two of them to ADSLMMs. Mardukas was circuitously—circuitously enough that the rest of the crew wouldn't catch on—feeling out Tessa's intentions.

She cast a glance at Mardukas, who was standing by her side. His brow was furrowed, sending her a tacit message: *I know what you're thinking, and I'm against it.*

"Yes, the same torpedoes," Tessa said out loud. "We need to escape this area quickly." She was effectively saying back, 'We won't be mounting any more attacks.'

"Yes, Captain," Mardukas said simply.

When the Tuatha de Danaan arrived at nine hundred feet, they leveled out and quickly began navigating north-northeast to escape. The commands to silent running and battle stations were lifted, the hangar deck lighting returned to normal, and the maintenance crew resumed work at their stations—the transport helicopters with their rotors folded up and arm slaves with their outer armor removed to expose their internal frames—and got back to work on maintenance.

Sousuke was helping with the maintenance on his own machine, the ARX-8 Laevatein. It was their only lambda driver-mounted arm slave, and probably the second most powerful machine in the world. Its armor was mostly white, with dark red highlights painted on. Its silhouette seemed to be both more massive and aggressive than that of its ancestor, the M9 Gernsback.

Still, there wasn't much Sousuke himself could do to help with maintenance. He spoke with the machine's AI and offered simple advice to the maintenance crew. He expected that if he touched the machine's internals himself, the head of the maintenance team, Lieutenant Sachs, would strike him down with lightning. It was the same in any military; engineers were very possessive of the machines which they were put in charge of. If you asked them, they'd say they were merely lending them out to their operators during deployment.

《Please readjust alignment of sixth cartilage unit on right bicep to .12,》 the machine's AI, Al, requested both through speech and text.

"The sixth? You said to do it at .05 earlier," Sousuke said through his headset.

《The abrasion from muscle packages 32 through 37 added since then have exceeded expected limits. Make it .12.》

"Understood," said Sousuke, who then explained the circumstances to the engineer. The man nodded back, making adjustments to the artificial cartilage unit in the right elbow—a part that looked like a short damper—fine-tuning its elasticity.

《No, return it to .05 after all.》

"What did you say?" Sousuke asked.

《At .12, it puts a burden on the 10th cartilage unit instead. It's better to keep it at .05.》

Sousuke scowled, swallowing back the urge to complain, and then asked the engineer to reverse it. The engineer just shrugged and did as he was told.

"Done," said Sousuke. "How is it now?"

《Sorry, please try .08.》

"Excuse me?"

《I take it back. Leave it at .12.》

"Well, which is it?"

《Ah, maybe it's better to try it at .15 so—》

"Figure it out and then tell me," Sousuke ordered.

《But—》

Sousuke turned off his voice input and threw the headset onto the desk. He'd had enough of yelling at his machine.



“So, what should I set it to?” the engineer asked.

“Go with .12,” Sousuke told him, assuming that’s what Al would decide on, anyway. After giving his supposition to the engineer, he opened his laptop and went back to the draft he was working on.

He was writing his last will and testament. Mithril members were supposed to write down what they wanted to happen after they died, and it was also preferred that they renew those wills once a year. Sousuke had submitted his will two years ago and hadn’t changed it since, but Villain, Tessa’s secretary, had recently nudged him into updating it.

Sousuke had finished all the business about things like his possessions and money but hadn’t made much progress after that. There wasn’t much he wanted to leave behind in words, after all. He couldn’t think of much to say to his various acquaintances, friends, and comrades. He didn’t feel like it mattered what kind of person he’d been, or what kind of feelings had propelled him in the fight. Too much—far too much—had happened by now for him to think up any clever words to describe it.

Fights he’d won, fights he’d lost... Lives he’d saved, lives he couldn’t save. Unraveling everything he’d been involved in, with appropriate commentary... Sousuke couldn’t do that anymore. He couldn’t think of a single word to leave to those survivors who would continue being tossed around on fate’s stormy seas after he was gone.

Best of luck. That was all he could think to say. These words, which dying soldiers left to their comrades, had changed over the millennia, but they always added up to roughly the same thing: “God be with you,” or “See you on the other side.”

Is it the same with what I want to say to Chidori Kaname, then? he wondered. *Maybe not.* There were so many things he wanted to say to her; so many that he didn’t know where to start. Yet, at the same time, Sousuke also felt like words weren’t sufficient. If she could return to her right mind, then he could imagine how she’d feel; she’d blame herself. It would be painful. She’d have to walk a long and cruel road of penance, just as Tessa was doing now.

Was there really anything he could say to her in that state? After writing “Best

of luck” to his comrades, Sousuke remained staring at the blank text document, until the voice input indicator blinked. Al was calling him.

“Have you decided?” Sousuke asked through the headset.

《.12, please.》

“Thought so.” It was exactly what he’d expected; Sousuke had found himself able to anticipate Al’s demands of late. He mostly just felt it on an instinctual level, but he was usually right, and there was nothing supernatural about it. It was similar to recognizing that a dog was asking you for a walk because it tilted its head at you just so.

The arguments between Al, Sousuke, and the engineer continued after that. Their growing concern was the Laevatein’s exhaustion.

《The machine’s entire frame is showing fatigue. It’s still within the limits of what maintenance and software can compensate for, but you should avoid exceeding movements that cause 20 gs or more when possible.》

“Understood,” Sousuke said shortly. Of course, it’s not as if an operator ever *wanted* to exceed 20 gs, even for a moment... The Laevatein’s maximum movement potential was, to use an extreme example, like being in a car crash every few seconds. The M9 Gernsback, on which the Laevatein was based, wasn’t built to withstand the engine output and firepower they’d strapped to it.

It was like strapping an F1 engine to a commercial sports car; there was no way the car was getting out intact. Its operation time was limited, its electronic warfare options sparse, and it overheated on the regular. Maintenance was an issue, too. Many of its parts—frame included—faced a faster rate of wear and tear than those of a normal M9. The Laevatein could no longer fight in the reckless way it had during its debut sortie.

Once they’d discussed the wear issue, Al asked, 《Will that cheating bastard appear in our next mission?》

“Most likely,” Sousuke told him.

Al was referring to the black AS that Leonard piloted, the Belial. They’d found the machine’s name in the information they’d acquired from the mansion in Mexico. Sousuke and Al had lost to it the first time they’d fought it, and been

forced to retreat the second time. Al seemed to feel a particular enmity towards the other machine, and always spoke about it in the most hateful of terms. He'd call it 'the cheating bastard,' or 'the lambda driver-reliant wreck,' or 'the one-trick pony fail machine.'

Ironically, these labels all applied to the Laevatein as well, but AIs probably had their own pride, so Sousuke refrained from pointing that out. Instead, he said, "We're the only ones who can face him."

《Then our next sortie will likely be our last.》

"Yeah..." Sousuke agreed, looking up at the Laevatein. There were countless cracks running through its armor. "One more. That'll be enough."

Just then, a short alarm sounded, warning of an incoming shipboard announcement. It was the voice of the XO, Mardukas. "The interrupted meeting will now resume. All relevant personnel, please report to the first briefing room. I repeat. The interrupted meeting—"

Across the hangar, maintenance chief Sachs stopped in the middle of his work to head for the aft deck. Sousuke was 'relevant personnel' as well, so he closed the text file he'd been working on and began tidying up after himself.

《Will Colonel Testarossa be at the meeting?》

"Yes."

《Shall I attend as well? I might be able to offer meaningful support. I could also fill the hole left by Master Sergeant Weber—》

"Shut up," Sousuke told Al. Then he threw off his headset again and headed for the briefing room.

Tessa entered last. "Sorry for the wait. Let's get started," she said.

"Right." Belfangan Clouseau started things up, addressing Melissa Mao, Sousuke, and the others in attendance. "I'll have to start with the bad news: Afghanistan. A Soviet nuclear missile base in the northeast mountains has been occupied by an unknown armed force."

The Republic of Afghanistan, a landlocked nation on the far eastern side of

the Middle East, was currently under Soviet control. The USSR had their armies stationed all around it and had built countless military facilities there, including the missile base in question.

“An ‘armed force?’” Melissa Mao asked with a scowl. “That area’s right on the Soviet border, isn’t it? They’d have tight security. I doubt any force small enough for an ambush would be able to cut it.”

“There are a few that could pull it off,” Sousuke agreed. “Us... and them.”

“Leonard’s gang, eh?” Lately, Mao and the others had stopped calling the enemy “Amalgam” and started calling them “Leonard’s gang” and similar. It was clear by now that Leonard Testarossa was the real power behind the otherwise faceless enemy.

“A single one of their lambda driver-mounted ASes could wipe out all defenses in ten minutes,” Sousuke said flatly. “Then they could take over the facility with coordinated attacks from Alastors and infantry.”

A new screen came up, showing the latest satellite images of the area. Remains of BMP mechanized infantry and Savage-model Soviet ASes were left scattered and smoking around the base, high in the mountains. Several AS silhouettes of unknown affiliation could also be seen occupying the base.

“But why a nuclear missile base?” asked Mao.

“I don’t know. Perhaps they want to pour gasoline on the fire of the upcoming nuclear war,” Clouseau speculated. “With the US and USSR presently in a staring contest, the occupation of a nuclear silo would clearly heighten tensions. But neither Leonard nor Amalgam have any reason to want to see the world destroyed. They couldn’t want to actually fire them. Which means...”

“Distraction, and to buy time,” Tessa said.

“What do you mean?”

“I intend to take Merida Island,” she said succinctly. “It used to be our base, and it seems to be serving as theirs, now. They’ll want to keep me from it at any cost. So...”

“So they took over a nuclear missile base?” said Mao. “To try to make us go

there instead?”

“Yes.”

“Tessa, I’m not sure I understand...” Mao admitted.

Tessa looked into the faces of her subordinates, most of whom looked highly confused. *Why so desperate to protect Merida Island? What’s there?* they seemed to ask.

Yes... why *was* Tessa so obsessed with taking back Merida Island? Before now, she’d kept her subordinates at arm’s length about the matter, but now they wanted to know the entire truth: the ultimate reason lurking behind her battle with Leonard.

She cast a glance at Sousuke. He was the one person there who already knew most of it.

Sousuke hesitated a moment before nodding, as if to say, *There’s no more use hiding it. Lay it all on the table.*

Why was Tessa so desperate to take back Merida Island? Why was the enemy so fixated on keeping it? The answer would divide opinion even among her most trusted subordinates.

“All right. Just let me finish, without any joking around...” Tessa took a deep breath, then explained everything. She told them about the Soviet experiment in telepathy eighteen years ago. She explained how it had gone wildly out of control and brought information about technology from the far future to the modern world; about the Whispered, who had received this ‘black technology’ and far increased the tech level of the world they lived in; about how this had likely caused a massive change in the course of their world’s history.

“People...” said Tessa, continuing to speak into the hushed briefing room. “People who might have lived are now dead, and people who might have died are alive. Leonard and those with him want to ‘fix’ that. He wants to build a new TAROS—an extremely powerful space-time transmitter—on Merida Island, and use Kaname-san’s power to set history right.”

Her subordinates—who had likely expected something unusual, but surely nothing quite this extreme—had nothing to say. Although dubious, they also

knew that Tessa wouldn't make something like this up, so they didn't quite seem to know how to react.

Mao was the first to speak. "Tessa... I'm sure what you're saying is the truth. But it's a little hard to take in just like that."

"I suppose it would be."

"We're soldiers, you know? We follow realistic plans. And now you're throwing this fairy tale stuff at us... It's hard to take," Mao admitted.

"But it would certainly explain some things," Lieutenant Colonel Mardukas, Tessa's executive officer, was the next to whisper. He was also a realist, and a veteran—the one who seemed least likely to believe the story. "I've always thought it was strange," he continued. "Arm slaves, lambda drivers... all of it. These Whispered I've been hearing about, too. Absurd as the story is, it makes an odd kind of sense."

"Thank you," said Tessa. "That's why I—"

"However," Mardukas interrupted, cutting her off. "It is also too much for the imagination of an old man like me to take. Even if history did change, as you're suggesting, the life I've lived these past eighteen years is reality to me. What will happen if Leonard Testarossa uses this 'Taros' to 'correct' history? I've lost many comrades in my time, your father being one of them."

Mao and the others looked surprised by his words. They'd never known that Carl, Tessa's father, was one of Mardukas's old war mates.

"Will Carl Testarossa, my old friend, appear before me again as if he were never gone?" Mardukas wanted to know.

"It won't be quite like you're imagining it," Tessa said. "If the corrected timeline is a world in which Carl Testarossa never died, I would expect you to view that as the way things have always been. You would be who you are in *that* world, meeting and chatting with my father like you always have. The world itself will change the moment the TAROS sets history right, so you would live the rest of your life in that world as if it were where you'd always been."

"Mithril would be gone as well?" he wanted to know.

“Most likely.”

“And I would lose the last three years I spent serving under you alongside all these brave men and women?”

“Most likely,” Tessa affirmed. “But the ‘you’ in that world wouldn’t realize that...because you never would have known them.”

“I will not forget them,” Mardukas said with rare intensity. “I don’t understand the methodology exactly, but I would never forget the comrades who died with me.”

The words were unexpected, yet Tessa found they suited him well. “I feel the same way,” she told him. “But you wouldn’t be able to care about them if you’d never met them, would you?”

“Ah... perhaps not.”

“This isn’t a matter of memory loss or brainwashing,” she said. “It’s a change in reality itself. The chemical reactions in your brain simply follow the pathways established as things happen around you; successes and failures, life and death. Your personal will never even factors into it.”

Mardukas fell silent after hearing this statement.

“I’m struggling with this too, Colonel,” Clouseau, who had thus far been silent, spoke up hesitantly. “I... er, I have a little understanding of science fiction myself. In books and movies, even when they use a time machine to interfere with the past... ah, it just creates a branching timeline. It doesn’t change the world they came from.”

“The multiple-worlds theory, you mean?” Tessa specified.

“Yes, also known as ‘parallel worlds.’ What if their use of that strange machine doesn’t actually change things for the rest of us?”

“I couldn’t say,” Tessa admitted honestly. “The parallel worlds theory you’re talking about is a recent hypothesis—the existence of the mental—physical theory that takes the omni-sphere into account neither confirms nor refutes it. Like the wave function of particles—No, I’ll keep it simple. It’s because the rest of you cannot perceive both worlds.”

“That’s all very ambiguous... Wait a minute,” said Clouseau. “You said, ‘The rest of you.’ What did you mean by that?”

“I mean that *we can* perceive them,” Tessa said with utmost calm. “The omni-sphere allows the Whispered to converse via mental waves across the barriers of space-time. If parallel worlds exist, we might be able to perceive them.”

“I’m getting confused.” Clouseau let out a sigh and ran his fingers over his close-cropped hair. “Can you boil it down for me?”

“I think that’s what Leonard is after,” Tessa speculated. “He wants to change history in a way that’s convenient for him, then transfer our memories and consciousnesses—our personalities in *this* world—to that ‘other side.’ Try to imagine it... What if tomorrow morning, you could remake the world however you wished it could be and actually enjoy your knowledge of the changes while no one else is any the wiser?”

“Like creating a new save file,” Clouseau murmured. “It’s appealing.”

“So, it’s all a fraud,” Sousuke said grumpily. “Leonard talked about ‘correcting the world’ back at Yamsk-11, restoring it to the way it should be. I had a feeling his lofty ideals weren’t on the up-and-up, and now I see why. He wants to take Kaname and go to a world where we can’t follow. A world where *I* can’t follow.”

“Precisely,” Tessa agreed. “That’s why I want to stop him.”

“Still, this is all pretty abstract...” Mao said with a groan. “And even if what you’re saying is true, it won’t affect most people, right? Whether there are parallel worlds or not, we won’t be able to experience the change.”

“Yes,” Tessa acknowledged.

“Then what’s the point in us taking back Merida Island?” Mao asked. “Look, Tessa, I’m not criticizing you... If you really think it’s necessary, I’ll die to get it done. But we also need to convince the rest of the crew and my subordinates.”

“Of course, you’re right,” Tessa agreed. She’d known that Mao would say these things and that the others probably felt the same way. Everyone except for Sousuke...

Tessa cleared her throat lightly and went on to explain things carefully. “I

suspect Leonard's people know about this issue," she said. "Which is why they took the missile base. They're making us choose between the taking of Merida Island—which most of you won't care about—and the clear and present danger at the nuclear site. Speaking as soldiers, which would you prioritize?"

"It's obvious," Clouseau said first.

"Doesn't need to be stated," Mardukas agreed.

"The missile base, right? Not really a contest," Mao shrugged.

Sachs, the few other SRT members in attendance, and the heads of various departments seemed to be in agreement.

Tessa remained silent and glanced at Sousuke. "And you, Sagara-san?"

"I..." He felt a brief struggle. He wanted to fly right to Merida Island where Chidori Kaname was. Even if his logical mind agreed with those around him, his heart found it more difficult. "I think... I'd give priority to Afghanistan."

"Good." Tessa got out of her seat, folded her arms and looked over the group. "Perhaps it is just a diversion, but we still have to take back that nuclear base. They're going to be willing to fire those missiles, just to motivate us. And as long as they can activate the TAROS on Merida Island, it won't matter to them whether the rest of the world survives or not."

In fact, Tessa thought that reducing the population of this world might actually be to their benefit... But she wasn't certain, and therefore decided not to share this with the others.

"That's madness," Mao said.

"Even so, Leonard is quite charismatic," Tessa pointed out. "If he's convinced the non-Whispered working for him that he's changing the world, they'll go along with anything he asks for, no matter how destructive."

It was all too big and too complicated. What to prioritize, how best to get the drop on the enemy... none of them had an answer to these questions, and the air in the room grew heavier.

"Regardless, Captain. What do *you* intend to do?" Mardukas asked, finally getting to the heart of the matter.

Tessa looked out at the faces of her comrades. “We’ll divide our forces,” she decided.

“Divide...?”

“I’ll deploy the helicopters,” she clarified. “The rest of you will fly to Afghanistan and take back the missile base. Whether or not the parallel world exists, this is still *your* reality—Please protect it.”

“But what about you?” Mao asked.

“I will take this vessel to Merida Island,” said Tessa. “Thankfully, the de Danaan has a TAROS of its own. It’s a smaller, older model, but it will enable me to control it all by myself,” she said quietly.

Mao and the others stared in stunned disbelief. “B-But... this submarine can’t take the island by itself, right?” asked Mao. “You’ll need ground forces.”

“Yes. He will be the landing team,” Tessa said, looking over at Sousuke. He’d probably expected this announcement, because he didn’t look at all surprised and met everyone’s gazes evenly.

“Sagara-san and I,” Tessa mused. “When you come down to it, we’re the only two who have any business on Merida Island.. So, we’re going to go ourselves. We’ll be taking the Tuatha de Danaan and the Laevatein, though. Is that all right, Sagara-san?”

Sousuke nodded silently. But it was a nod of resignation, as if to grudgingly admit that this course of action was their only choice.

“It’s suicide,” Mao said, her voice trembling with anger. “We’ve come this far—fought every moment together—and now you’re saying ‘go on and handle this without us’? Do you realize what it is you’re saying?”

“Yes,” he told her simply. “But you said it yourself... You wanted a reason to take back Merida Island that your subordinates could accept.”

“And what is it?” Mao demanded to know.

“There is none,” said Tessa, answering for him with a lonely smile. “There’s absolutely no reason for the rest of you to come along. I’m a Whispered, so I have a reason to want to stop Leonard’s plan. Sagara-san is an ordinary person

like the rest of you, but he's only with us in the hopes of bringing Kaname-san back to Japan. The rest of you have no reason that even comes close to matching ours."

Mao was silent.

"We'll be reaching our final resupply point in five hours," Tessa continued. "The rest of you will disembark there and head for Afghanistan. If you manage to take back the missile base, you can go your separate ways after that and live your lives however you wish."

"Tessa!"

Tessa knew exactly what Mao wanted to say, but there was no other answer for her to give. "I'm sorry," she said gently, "but this is goodbye."

The Soviet forces sent to take back the base arrived a bit later than Sabina had expected. It was winter in the northeastern region of Afghanistan (the region of Badafshan, to be specific) and smack in the middle of a mountain range with an altitude of four thousand meters. The terrain was dangerous, the ground was white as far as the eye could see, and the roads that wound through the mountains were covered in deep snow. Bitter cold and snow... It was impossible for normal squadrons to move in this season.

The AS that Sabina was operating, the Eligore, was currently crouching on a ridge, concealed via ECS as she evaluated the power of the enemy squadrons. Standard armored vehicles couldn't traverse this terrain, so naturally, the main force was composed of ASes.

The enemy force consisted of ten of the latest model of the second-generation Savage—the Rk-96—along with six new ASes bringing up the back line. These were more slender than the Savages, with their egg-like torsos; the third generation of the Soviet model, the Zy-98, codenamed 'Shadow' by the Western powers. Their stats massively outstripped those of the Savages, putting them more on par with the M9 Gernsbacks used by both the USA and Mithril. They were the model on which Sabina's Eligore was based, as well.

A sixteen-machine AS squadron, new and old together. Common sense would suggest that it was more than enough to retake a missile base from occupying

terrorists—but there was nothing common about this situation.

“Fowler here: sixteen ASes approaching from the north. How are things on your end?” came a voice over the radio. It was from Lee Fowler, who was watching the expected north side entry route. He and Sabina were using a totally encrypted channel, so they weren’t bothering with call signs.

“I’ve just sent you the data,” she told him.

“Hmm... The same, eh? Thirty-two ASes in total. They’ve really turned out,” Fowler observed.

“There’s likely a transport helicopter squadron waiting behind them, too.”

“Most likely. They’ll want to use the ASes to scatter us and then send infantry to storm the base,” Fowler predicted. “Too bad they don’t stand a chance.”

Their own forces were made up of Sabina and Fowler’s Eligores, four Shadows standing watch over the base, and a single platoon of infantry. But the lambda driver-mounted Eligores were invincible next to normal ASes; there was nothing to worry about.

“Even so, we’re about to be busy for a while,” Fowler continued in a grumble. “It would be easier with a few Codarls on our side.”

Codarls were Amalgam’s lambda driver-mounted ASes. They weren’t as strong as the Eligores, but they were overwhelmingly more powerful than standard ASes.

Sabina felt a slight irritation at his words. “All of our Codarls have been dedicated to the defense of Merida Island. Leonard-sama decided we were enough to complete this mission. Why don’t you stop complaining?”

“Of course,” he snapped back, “but I think you’re the one who’s unhappy about it.”

“What makes you think that?”

“You wanted to stay on Merida Island, didn’t you?” Fowler pointed out. “Considering what’s about to happen, I’m sure you want to be with Leonard-sama.”

“No,” Sabina denied. “I wouldn’t be of any use on that island at all.”

Besides, that girl was on Merida Island. Even though she had ‘awakened’ at Yamsk-11, her attitude hadn’t changed as far as Sabina was concerned. She was as arrogant and stubborn and self-righteous as ever.

And yet, Leonard needs her, Sabina reminded herself. *And not just him... Everyone who serves him—all of us—need that girl. She has the power to right the mistakes of this cruel world and make them never have happened.*

He doesn’t look at me anymore. He doesn’t touch me anymore.

Of course, I never expected I’d have him all to myself. That’s the kind of man he is. I’m sure he’s slept with any number of women just like me, more than I could ever know. There’s nothing wrong with being one of that number.

But...

Why must he give his heart to that girl—to that brat, Chidori Kaname, of all people? It would be one thing if it were for her body, but it isn’t. He’s kept it perfectly platonic, devoting himself to her to an almost laughable degree...

Things had improved for a while after his injury in Mexico. He’d ordered Sabina to be rough with Kaname, to drive her to the psychological brink... to exhaust her. Sabina had felt relieved then, glad that he had finally decided to treat Kaname as a tool—that he’d decided to take her by force. That situation was much easier for Sabina to handle.

But the girl had changed before Sabina could break her down. It happened at Yamsk-11, where Kaname had suddenly become the one in charge. Then everything had gone back to the way it was before, and Leonard had never raised a hand to her again. Instead he’d begun to dote on her, agreeing to the spoiled princess’s every demand...

Sabina was sick of watching them. Taking the Ishkashim missile base was merely a decoy to lure out the remnants of Mithril, but she was glad that it had taken her seven thousand kilometers away from Merida Island if it meant she wouldn’t have to look at them anymore. Even if it meant becoming a sacrificial pawn...

“I don’t mind at all,” Sabina said calmly. “But, Mr. Fowler...what about you?”

“I do mind a little bit,” he admitted. “It’s a shame not to be present for the

historic moment.” His voice over the radio was self-recriminating.

“Is that all?”

“Yes, that’s all. As long as the TAROS activates properly, I won’t have any cause for complaint.”

Those who followed Leonard were very strongly motivated. The reasons for their motivation varied widely, but what they had in common was an almost frenzied hatred and anger towards the current world, and for the past events that had brought it to its current state. If there was some way to reject that past they hated so much, they’d take it. That feeling was what had led them to join this ridiculous war.

Sabina, having grown up in a life of exploitation in the slums, had many reasons to hate the past. Fowler seemed to have his reasons, too. When they were working together on missions, she had seen signs of the same anger in him now and then. That seething anger—an anger like a charcoal fire—was proof that he had left some piece of himself in the past.

She’d heard he’d had a wife and children. That something had happened, that he’d been unable to protect them. But that was all. Sabina would probably never get to learn the whole story, just as she’d had never told anyone but Leonard the reason for her own anger.

Returning to the task at hand, Sabina zoomed in with her optical sensors. The Soviet AS forces were approaching in the middle of her screen, marching to their deaths, step by step...

“Shall we initiate?” Fowler asked.

“I was planning to watch a bit longer, but... if you wish,” Sabina agreed. “I’d like to stretch my legs.”

“Let’s begin, then.”

Sabina closed the channel and switched her Eligore’s power source—the palladium reactor—from idle to battle output. The machine’s low hum grew louder. The reactor itself was silent, but the cooling device made noise based on its output.

The winters of northern Afghanistan were harsh, and the current temperature outside was a blistering minus thirteen degrees. The heat put out by their palladium reactors was probably exceeding what they could hide, and outside of the ECS's field they were probably already registering as unnatural heat sources.

One of the enemies searching with infrared sensors seemed to have already noticed the heat source. The troop stopped and began scanning carefully in the direction where Sabina lay hiding. Their allies seemed to be exchanging conversation and data, arguing about whether or not there was a "suspicious heat source" there.

Of course, Sabina thought. *Electronic data...* She knew their wavelengths and the protocols well, and she knew the various types of signals they were exchanging. Sabina's Eligore analyzed it all with a powerful operative function, exploited weaknesses in the systems that would normally be unexploitable, and swiftly rewrote important battle programs which should not be rewritable. She was turning it all to their benefit.

The specialty of Kaspar, who had died at Yamsk-11, had been sniping; hers was electronic warfare. The electronic warfare systems that had been customized for Sabina, used in tandem with her own unique skills, turned her Eligore into a witch on the battlefield.

The six Shadows in the sixteen-machine squad began to go berserk. They had cutting-edge electronic weaponry and data link functionality, and they hadn't been in the field for long, which made them as vulnerable as children raised in cleanrooms exposed to bacteria for the first time.

One Shadow began firing at its allies, while another began launching anti-AS missiles randomly across the area. The remaining two turned their guns at each other and fired simultaneously—as if they'd coordinated it—and destroyed one another in a fireball.

The ten Savages didn't seem to have gone quite as mad as the Shadows, but they had been rendered immobile. Some had lost all their sensors, some had had issues with their drive systems, some saw their gas turbine engines begin to go haywire and put out smoke.

Sabina could hear the voices of the enemy operators: fear and confusion; shouts of anger and pain... *Magnificent,* she thought appreciatively. *The screams of Russians are the most sublime.*

She lifted her ECS invisibility mode. In the twilight that bathed the mountains in orange, her Eligore appeared. Her machine's armor was as white as a virgin bride.

Pulling a 37mm rifle from her back, Sabina leaped her Eligore into the air, scattering snow. "Leonard..." she whispered. *I don't need the power of the lambda driver. If you want to see the world burned in nuclear fire, I'll make it happen. With my own innate abilities, I will prove I can be your sword. I'll do things that that other woman could never do…*



Chidori Kaname remembered this wide, underground space as being the Tuatha de Danaan's maintenance dock. It wasn't a dock now; the seawater had been pumped out, and the underground waterway that led out to the ocean had been sealed up by concrete.

It was an underground cavern large enough to comfortably house the 218-meter Tuatha de Danaan, a vessel as long as a Shinjuku skyscraper was tall. What they were building there now was a facility of a scale far exceeding that of the one at Yamsk-11.

Various cables and tubes stretched from a dome fifty-three meters in diameter. The massive amount of electricity, which was being sent from an independent generator facility several kilometers away, was enough to power a whole city. Around the dome were large devices meant to store and transform said electricity, paired up with cooling units.

This device, whose need for practicality rejected concerns of aesthetics and refinement, was the world's largest TAROS. The project team called it TARTAROS, short for "Telechrono Alteration Reactor Transform and Response Omni-Sphere."

Strange to name a symbol of hope after the God of the Underworld, thought Kaname, who liked to joke that the TARTAROS was like a What-if Phone Booth. It was a perfect reference, if she did say so herself, but no one around her got the joke.

The TAROS was a device found in every Codarl, Eligore, and other lambda driver-mounted AS. But the TARTAROS didn't just exist to power a lambda driver. It was built for a grander, more sublime purpose.

Sublime... That was how Kaname currently thought of it, at least. *Sublime. A grand duty. An ultimate display of love...* And other such things.

How sweet it was to surrender oneself to platitudes.

"Almost there," Kaname whispered from the observation platform near the old dock's ceiling as she looked down on the tangle of cables and tubes. It had been six months since construction started, two months since Kaname had arrived and begun to oversee its construction. They were working at a fever

pitch to complete it. “You’ve gotten it prepared so quickly.”

“Your wish is my command,” said Leonard, standing behind her. “But since we were in such a hurry, I’m afraid we left tracks... and now the enemy is on the way.”

“The enemy?” she questioned.

“My sister,” Leonard clarified. “Teletha, Sagara Sousuke, and the remnants of Mithril will likely storm this island soon.”

Leonard’s saying such odd things again, Kaname observed. He was talking about Teletha Testarossa and Sagara Sousuke as if they were still alive, but they weren’t. Kaname had shot them to death herself, so she was quite sure of that. “Tessa and Sousuke are both dead,” she told him. “What are you talking about?”

“You’ve just convinced yourself of that. They’re really—” Leonard started to say, and then stopped himself. “No, you’re right,” he said. “I must have been mistaken.”

“Honestly, you need to get it together,” said Kaname, laughing as gaily as if she’d pointed out a mistake in his math homework. She didn’t even bother to question why she was laughing. It didn’t occur to her for a moment that her mind might have been terribly damaged somehow.

“Well, one way or another, the enemy is likely on their way,” Leonard said easily. “I’ve sent Fowler and Sabina out as a diversion, so I think I’ll successfully divide their forces.”

“Will they arrive before we activate *it*?” Kaname asked.

“Most likely.”

“Then you know what we should do, right?”

“Send everything we have at them, of course. Come on, this way,” said Leonard, stepping out of the path. Kaname passed him by, leaving the underground dock behind and heading to the surface by means of the elevator, which was located a few blocks away.

Outside was a clear, starry sky. They arrived at the supply holding area, a large

open space created from hollowing out part of a mountain. The island's defense forces were on standby there.

Twelve Codarls were lined up like an honor guard to meet her, their spear-shaped monomolecular cutters pointing towards the night sky. Behind the Codarls stood three giants lit up by floodlights—those massive ASes, the Behemoths. They were holding their massive cannons vertically in front of them, showing loyalty to their leader.

At the end of the line of Codarls stood Leonard's black AS, the Belial. The machine, which made use of Leonard's limitless abilities with the lambda driver, was the undisputed strongest machine in the world.

There were also mid-sized infantry squadrons and helicopter squadrons; anti-air squadrons, as well. They were all arranged in a line, saluting Kaname and Leonard.

"All units assembled." Their commander, Andrey Kalinin, walked out to report to Leonard and Kaname. He was currently dressed in olive-colored fatigues. He'd just returned from a long trip to England but showed no sign of exhaustion.

"Mr. Kalinin," Kaname said by way of greeting. "You do look better that way than in a suit."

"I agree," Kalinin replied, seeming to find the comment rather funny.

"Are these all the forces we have to defend us?" Kaname wanted to know.

Kalinin looked out at the sea on the other side of the supply area. "There are two platoons of Leviathans on standby underwater," he told her. "Any ship that attempts to approach the island will take heavy losses before arrival."

"I see."

"And even if they successfully make landfall, these squadrons will be there to greet them."

"As will my Belial," Leonard pointed out.

"Hmm..." Even so, Kaname was surprised to learn that these were the last of Amalgam's forces. Of course, it was all quite impressive if you included those

sent to Afghanistan and those dispatched elsewhere in the world to heighten tensions, but...

“We’ve prioritized all available resources and funding for the building of the TAROS,” Leonard reminded her. “Restocking our weapons has been a secondary matter. And also...”

“Because of Mithril, eh?” Kaname commented.

“I’m afraid so. Or their remnants, more precisely... They’ve been quite annoying to us these last six months. That ARX-8 had caused a lot of trouble as well, and they’ve done some guerrilla work on our production facilities and supply lines. As you know, lambda driver-mounted ASes require special parts.”

Kaname had read the report, so she knew most of this already. The remnants of Mithril had continued their stubborn resistance, located Amalgam’s secret production facilities and related corporations, and meticulously attacked them one after another. Dealing this kind of organizational damage had also made it harder for them to track the enemies’ remaining movements.

Allowing the Tuatha de Danaan to escape in the initial capture of Merida Island appeared to be coming back to haunt them. It remained a symbol to the regrouping Mithril remnants: a mobile command fortress operating deep beneath the sea.

“I’m impressed they managed to remain united, even with Tessa gone,” Kaname mused. “Could it be Mardukas-san leading them?”

Kalinin frowned a bit, and turned to watch Leonard’s reaction. Leonard shook his head briefly, subtly enough so as not to be seen by the others.



“Hmm? What is it?”

“Nothing.” Kalinin changed the subject. “One way or another, their forces are slim, and they’ll have to divert some of them to take back the Afghani missile base. On top of that, we have political power on our side.”

“The US Navy?” Kaname asked.

“Just for peace of mind,” he told her. “They’ve been ordered to sink the Toy Box on sight. Many officers among them seem to find it suspicious, but... well, they’ll at least cover a large swath of ocean.”

“Good.” Kaname clapped her hands together firmly. “Well, once we can get the TARTAROS running, none of these weapons will matter anymore. Just leave it to me. I’ll make sure everything goes perfectly to plan.”

Just hold the island until it activates, she thought. *How hard could it be?*

2: Long Goodbye

The Tuatha de Danaan's resupply point was the container ship Bernie Worrell, which was waiting for them on the outer reaches of the Philippines. This was the same camouflaged commercial freighter that Sousuke's helicopter had stopped on for resupply en route to Yamsk-11 in Siberia.

The submarine's hiding place was in between the Bernie Worrell and one of the archipelago's seven thousand islands, an uninhabited one known as Tagapul. The shallow water and the strong currents created by the island made it a less-than-ideal resupply point, but it was the best way to shake off the radars of both the US Navy and Amalgam. Activating ECS while resupplying would be far more likely to cause issues.

Sousuke helped take supplies to the de Danaan's flight deck, then moved on to counting cases of the 12.7mm ammunition used in the ASes' head-mounted machine guns.

"Sousuke," Mao called to him after tucking her tablet under her arm. "When you're done there, do those 76mm shells, too. You're the one who uses 'em, right?"

"Got it," he called back.

Sousuke's Laevatein used a Boxer-2 shotcannon made by OTO Melara, which did indeed employ 76mm shells. It was a high-caliber ammunition even by AS standards, and while the Boxer he'd used when piloting the Arbalest (whose ammo was 57mm) was famous for being finicky, the Boxer-2 was even worse. If used correctly, though, it packed an incredible punch in close-range combat.

"Not that I think we'll be using that much of it," Mao added.

Sousuke hummed silently. He was indeed the only member of the team who used 76mm shells, but what they'd sent was close to double what he'd need. The logistics team had probably gotten the wrong idea about how many were necessary, as there had been another member of the crew who'd used the

same shells until recently. “I think it’s because Kurz used them a lot.”

“That’s right...” Mao agreed.

“I guess getting M9 equipment really was trickier.”

The loss of Kurz Weber’s M9 at Yamsk-11 had left the de Danaan with only three ASes at present: Sousuke’s Laevatein, Mao’s E-type M9, and Clouseau’s D-type M9. Those were the only machines they had, even with all the remnants of Mithril scattered around the world.

The loss of Kurz’s machine meant they could repurpose the spare parts allotted to it, which helped them a little with their resupply issues. But head engineer Sachs had still insisted that their next sortie would be their last. The next time they fought, the last of Mithril’s AS forces would end up disabled beyond repair. Even if they made it back alive, their machines would have to be permanently benched.

The US military seemed to be quickly integrating M9s into their ranks, but Mithril’s M9s would soon disappear forever. Their role as the strongest out of all conventional machines, given only to the truly elite, was coming to an end.

That much was life, but it was probably a little bittersweet for Mao, who had been involved in their development since the days of the original prototype XM9. She let out a weak sigh and sat down on a small container next to Sousuke.

“Hey,” she said. “Are you really going?”

“Going where?”

“To Merida Island. With Tessa. It’s suicide, you know.” There was no anger in her voice now, as there had been during the briefing. She just sounded sad and uncertain. Mao was deeply worried about Tessa... And about Sousuke too, most likely. She added, “If you say you’re going to Afghanistan instead, she might give up on her plan.”

“I wonder,” said Sousuke, after finishing his checks and closing the ammunition case. “She might go by herself anyway. She has sufficient motivation.”

“Motivation, huh?” Mao scoffed. “The ‘TAROS changing history’ stuff? We’re supposed to let her go commit suicide based on that flimsy nonsense?”

“Nonsense?” he replied, but he was unable to fully dismiss her claims. Even he, who had personally witnessed so many impossible things—truly supernatural phenomena—thought Leonard’s plan sounded awfully far-fetched.

Shouldn’t they leave them to whatever weird device they were building on Merida Island, and concentrate on the missile base in Afghanistan? Newly acquired information told them that there were two lambda driver-mounted ASes awaiting them there. Not the Codarl-types, but rather the new, more powerful ASes. Mao and Clouseau were used to fighting lambda driver-mounted opponents by now, but they’d still have a hard fight of it on their own.

But if Sousuke and the Laevatein were to accompany them, their chances of success would increase. The Laevatein would be more than a match for the enemy ASes, and Sousuke’s experience would be particularly invaluable while waging guerrilla warfare in the Badafshan region of Afghanistan. He knew the area like the back of his hand; back routes, weather patterns... and he could even gain the help of the locals (if there were any left). It would be his fight to lose.

Of course, Andrey Kalinin knew all that, too. Why had Kalinin, who had fought with him in that region long ago, chosen this battlefield in particular? Was he hiding in that land that meant so much to both of them, saying, “Come to me; I’m waiting”?

Unlikely; Kalinin never allowed himself such sentiment in battle. Viewed from the practical side of things, then, it was clear that Kalinin was simply providing an “easy road” for Sousuke and the Laevatein, who represented the greatest threat to them, to take. Their main force would be on Merida Island.

Afghanistan was the easy road; Merida Island was the hard road. One was a practical operation, rooted in common-sense motivations; the other, a dangerous operation rooted in nonsensical motivations. Which would a normal soldier choose? And which was the one the enemy was more desperate to protect... the Afghanistan base, or Merida Island?

When he thought about it that way, there was only one conclusion for Sousuke to reach: Tessa was right. The enemy wanted to protect Merida Island. He knew that because Leonard was there. The fact that the Belial wasn't in Afghanistan was proof enough of their priorities.

Still, that didn't mean they could just ignore the nuclear base. Amalgam was clearly serious about launching the missiles. Which meant...

"Impressive," Sousuke said with a sigh.

"What is?" Mao asked.

"Tessa," he clarified. "We have to do it exactly as she commanded. Forget the nonsense about changing history, and remember the fact that the major is with them."

After a moment, Mao nodded her agreement and said, "Point taken." Those few words were enough for her to catch onto Sousuke's train of thought. Unhappily, and as if convincing herself, she nodded again. "Well, it is what it is... Though I can't help but feel like we're playing into their hands."

"We can interpret this to mean that the enemy is desperate," Sousuke pointed out. "There's an old saying: 'If you're struggling, it means the enemy is struggling.' Mao, don't force her to let up now."

"But..."

He could tell from her tone that there was more Mao wanted to say. In the old days, he probably would have just dismissed her as being stubborn, but no longer. He could imagine now how hard this was for her, how scared she must feel, how she was entrusting him with her heart, hoping he'd hear her out.

But just because he could intuit what she was feeling, that didn't mean he knew the right thing to say.

"If you're really that worried," he offered, "I'll have sex with you."

"Uh?" Mao choked out.

"A night of fiery passion should relieve all your stress and get your mind back on track," Sousuke explained. After going through these vaguely-remembered motions of sexual harassment, he watched Mao's reaction carefully.

She was stunned. Her eyes and mouth were wide open as if she'd come upon some strange mythological beast. "What in the world?" she gasped.

"Oh... well..." Sousuke looked down awkwardly, like a student realizing an answer he'd confidently written on the blackboard was wrong. "I thought you'd hit me."

"Huh?"

"I thought that if I said something like that, you'd hit me and throttle me and then you'd feel better," he clarified.

"Ohh..." Finally grasping what he was trying to do, Mao smiled ruefully. "Sousuke, you can't replace him."

"I see that now. I'm sorry," Sousuke said.

"You idiot." With that, Mao gently wrapped her arms around him. The cool of her fingertips and the warmth of her chest... It was somehow a nostalgic sensation.

Some of the crew working on deck cast glances in their direction, but Mao ignored them. She whispered to Sousuke, "Do you remember... what I said on the way back from Sicily? After we caught Bruno."

"Hmm?"

"The stuff about thinking up a plan for your life," she reminded him.

"Ahh, I remember."

"I pretended like I said it for your sake, but I thought about it afterwards... I didn't really. I think you were just getting under my skin. Always putting yourself last, prioritizing your comrades or solving issues with your missions first... to me, it just looked like you were flaunting your skill," Mao admitted. "Overloading on impossible responsibilities, at the end of the day, means you don't need anyone's help. You don't rely on anyone else. I'm a pretty average person, so that's the only way it made sense to me."

Sousuke said nothing.

"But I think I finally understand," she went on. "You're just very kind. I think you were never meant to be a soldier."

“Me?” Sousuke asked. “You think too highly of me...”

“I don’t,” Mao told him. “You just happened to end up with the skills to fight, but you’re really not someone who should have ever learned how to fire a gun or pilot a robot. You’re not like us, here because we want to be. That’s...” her voice was trembling a little. “Listen,” she said, changing the subject. “I have a favor to ask.”

“Right...”

“When this is over, quit. Forget about us good-for-nothings and make a life for yourself,” Mao told him bluntly. “Never pick up a gun again. Become the kind of man who can be kind to people and laugh from the bottom of his heart.” He heard her sniffle, and her arms tightened around him. “I think you can do it,” she told him earnestly.

“I can’t,” he insisted.

“That’s not true. Don’t go making Kaname sad.”

“Kaname...”

“If you can love someone, and that person thinks you’re okay, you’re okay,” Mao told him. “In most things, at least.”

Sousuke fell silent again. *Maybe Mao is right,* he thought. *If only Kaname were here, all these lonely feelings would go away. She’d make me believe that I was okay.* But where was that same salvation for Mao?

Pulling away from Sousuke, Mao smiled. “I’ll be okay,” she promised him. “I’m an extremely obnoxious woman.”

When the ammunition checks were completed, Sousuke helped sort out the mail sent to the crew. Various personal effects sent to cover addresses... Letters from family, food and drink they’d asked friends for, documentation from lawyers and tax accountants, and lots of packages from online shopping services. FedEx had delivered these in just two days, but they’d had to be transferred multiple times for security and logistics reasons, which meant some had taken about six months to arrive in the end.

While sorting these out, Sousuke thought back on his conversation with Mao. He was worried about how depressed she seemed to be. *Can I really let her go to Afghanistan like this?* he wondered. Even if the odds against them had increased, they were still facing cutting-edge LD-mounted machines. This fight would demand more of Mao than any other in the past. She was rushing into an operation with little margin for error, where a moment's hesitation or uncertainty meant death... Yet, he didn't feel any bloodlust rising from her, any sense that she wanted to tear out their windpipes with her teeth. *Should I go along to Afghanistan after all? Leaving her now might be like letting her die...*

But then, Chidori... This will be my last chance with her, Sousuke reminded himself. *If I don't get her back now, it's all over.* He felt that nebulously... No, with great certitude. He had to go to Merida Island himself, and as quickly as possible.

I wish I had two bodies, he thought regretfully. *Two machines, too.* If the enemy's divide-and-conquer strategy was meant to distract and confuse him, it was proving very effective. *Dammit...* he cursed, then shook his head slightly. *No more thinking. Keep working. You don't have much time left...*

"Sousuke," said Michel Lemon, the former French intelligence agent he'd met in the Southeast Asian town Namsac. Lemon hadn't been on the de Danaan for a while. Despite the injury done to his leg in Moscow, he'd been traveling all over the world, and he'd only just arrived via the Bernie Worrell.

"Lemon," Sousuke said shortly.

"Take this." Despite not having seen each other for about a month, Lemon just handed Sousuke an envelope without much in the way of pleasantry. "It's from Mira. She asked me to hand it to you personally."

"Mira," Sousuke said thoughtfully. "Kudan Mira?" *She could have emailed me,* he thought. *Why send a letter?* He opened the envelope suspiciously and found a letter inside, as well as a small memory chip; this was the ordinary commercial kind used in digital cameras and cell phones. Unceremoniously, he put the chip in his pocket and began to read the letter. It was written in Japanese, the writing small and round:

Dear Sagara Sousuke,

How are you doing? This is Kudan Mira, whom you saved in Siberia before. I'm sorry we didn't have time to talk when we met on the ship last time.

As I write this, I'm in a house overlooking an old garden. It's a desolate sight in winter, but according to Hunter-san, it will bloom with anemone flowers in spring (though I don't know if it will be 'me' seeing them).

I've been in email correspondence with your commanding officer (I think?), Teletha Testarossa. Teletha-san hasn't written much about your operations (for security reasons, I'm sure), but she did tell me many important things. She told me about what connects her and me, and Chidori Kaname-san (sorry, I don't know her kanji) from our birth.

I have a feeling...well, more like a sort of vague certainty, that you're about to embark on a terrible battle. I don't know how it will turn out. But I feel like this is a major turning point in our problem, and the world's problem—what they call the 'nick of time.'

Teletha-san hasn't told me her plan. She may have realized I'd be against it.

That's right... If I'm being honest, I think I agree more with Teletha-san's brother than I do with her. I still have panic attacks and terrible flashbacks of my time in that Siberian laboratory. I don't think it's ever going to stop. But even more importantly, the world is a giant mess right now, and I think an even bigger war is about to break out and make things even worse. If he can bring things back to the way they're supposed to be, I think maybe it's for the best.

Still, I won't get in Teletha-san's way. I think it's a dilemma for me, too. I'll leave it up to you whether to help her or stop her. You saved my life, so my feelings belong to you. (Not in a weird way. I mean, I'd do things if you wanted them, but I think Teletha-san and Chidori-san would kill me, so no thanks. Oh, what am I writing? [sweats] I feel like my head's on fire...)

Ahem. I haven't used a pen in a while, so my fingers are very tired. Maybe I should have just written in English. Lemon-san just came into my room. He's going off to join you guys soon, so I'm giving this letter to him.

This might be my last chance to communicate with you, so let me say this for the final time: thank you so much for everything. Good luck, Sagara-san.

Sincerely, Kudan Mira

P.S. Please check the contents of the enclosed chip when you have some free time. I happened to find it on the internet.

"What did she write?" Lemon asked, rudely leaning over his shoulder. He probably couldn't read Japanese.

"It's complicated," Sousuke told him. "How to put it..." Various feelings and doubts, pressures and dilemmas, jumbled together in his brain, refusing to unravel.

So those are the kanji she uses to write her name... What did she talk to Tessa

about? he wondered. *How close is what she said to the truth? What did she mean by "the nick of time," and why leave her fate in my hands? No, I guess that makes sense, but why won't she tell me what's in the chip, and how much should I tell Lemon about these sensitive matters? Is it possible he already knows what's in the letter?*

"You look like you've got a lot on your mind," Lemon observed.

"I always look like this," Sousuke told him.

"Hmm... I guess you do. So, I guess it's not a love letter, huh? But she was sure acting like it was when she gave it to me."

"That's absurd," Sousuke scoffed.

"I know you're a pretty tough guy, but when I see how much girls go for you, it makes me wonder where I went wrong," Lemon mused. "I mean, I'm so much better-looking..."

Ignoring the envious Lemon, Sousuke turned his mind to other things. Mira had said she was against what Tessa was trying to do, and that she agreed with Leonard, who wanted to restore the world to how it "should be." Her reasons for feeling that way were simple but made sense.

Sousuke hadn't quite worked out his own feelings about it. The things he'd talked about with Leonard while buried together in Yamsk-11 were still rattling around inside his brain. *If he was telling the truth then,* Sousuke thought, *who could deny his right to do it?* It wasn't just Mira; everyone had suffered losses over the years in so many ways. There were a lot of painful, bitter memories out there.

There had to be a better alternative. Not even Sousuke could deny that. That thought, *If only I could try it over again...* He couldn't deny that he found it persuasive.

"Lemon," Sousuke asked. "Do you think Nami..."

"Huh?"

"Nothing," he said, "forget it." Talking about Nami wouldn't help; whatever Lemon's opinion turned out to be, it wouldn't erase the hesitance inside of him.

What Sousuke did know was that, whatever he decided, waiting to make that decision would just leave things ambiguous and half-complete. He couldn't say which side was right, and neither option felt fully satisfying. There was no one who could talk him through this.

"I'm here if you want to talk," Lemon offered.

"No, it's all right," Sousuke told him. "I'm sorry."

"Well, okay. I'll be going, then. I have a report to make to Testarossa-san," said Lemon, seeming to realize there was something on Sousuke's mind, but deciding not to pry any further. Instead, he just stood up and stretched lightly. "Take care, Sousuke."

"Thanks."

It wasn't as if it was the last time they'd see each other, so Michel Lemon just said goodbye, waving lightly, and walked away to disappear through the door that led to the bridge.

Clouseau was heading from the bridge to the deck in the middle of the resupply when he passed by the Frenchman, Michel Lemon. He'd heard the man had to make his last report to Teletha Testarossa, so he was probably going to see her.

"Hello, Monsieur Clouseau," Lemon said.

"Right," was Clouseau's only response as they passed. Though his name was French, he felt awkward being referred to as 'Monsieur.' Clouseau's ancestors had been brought to Quebec as slaves, but he could trace his lineage back to a fierce warrior clan in North Africa. It was his grandfather, obsessed with their roots, who had picked up the odd name 'Belfangan,' which was the name of a hero spoken of in that clan's legends. According to his grandfather, the hero Belfangan died slaying an evil demon that was tormenting humanity, then ascended to heaven on a black hawk.

The modern day Belfangan had become the warrior his grandfather had hoped for; he'd joined the army, undergone numerous trials, and grown into a fine soldier. But because "Belfangan" was hard to say, those close to him mainly

just called him Ben.

“Ben,” called a lieutenant working on the deck. They were apparently overseeing the de Danaan’s resupply. “It’s taking a while to send out all the crew belongings. Could we have an extension?”

“No,” he told them. “If you don’t make it in time, just tell them to give up on it.”

Tessa had ordered the crew departing the de Danaan to take all their belongings with them. It was effectively an eviction. They’d been given that order only a few hours before, so there was still quite a lot of confusion among the men.

“Dammit,” the lieutenant grumbled. “After all we’ve been through together... What is the captain thinking?”

“She’s thinking about us,” Clouseau said, and gave the lieutenant a brisk pat on the back. “Now, act like a soldier.” In truth, he wasn’t particularly happy about the situation himself, but he wasn’t about to argue with Tessa’s decisions. Even XO Mardukas had told him to just do as he was told.

“Captain,” Sagara Sousuke called to him from the workspace a little ways away. He seemed to be finishing up the task of sorting out the mail.

“Sagara,” Clouseau said. “Shouldn’t you be working on the Laevatein?”

“Al and Sachs are on it.”

“Aha.”

“There’s a package for you, sir.” Sousuke held out a cardboard box small enough to hold in one hand. It was marked with the distributor’s logo, with stickers from various shipping companies pasted on it here and there.

Clouseau had ordered this DVD five months ago, and it had been bounced around between various fake addresses before finally finding its way here. To be honest, he’d forgotten he’d ordered it.

“Is it a movie, sir?” Sousuke asked.

“Hmm... yes,” Clouseau absently affirmed. It was, in fact, a famous anime from about ten years ago. But it was also certainly a movie.

Sousuke stared at him keenly. He was his usual expressionless self, which made it impossible to read what he was feeling. At the very least, it seemed unlikely that he cared what was on the DVD.

“What is it?” Clouseau asked.

“Well...” Sousuke hesitated, looking down. At last, Clouseau could read something like reticence in his manner. “Have you talked to Mao?”

“We’ve talked about work, at least... but I know what you’re getting at,” Clouseau admitted, knowing that Sousuke was probably worried about her. Mao had been depressed ever since Kurz Weber’s death. She was trying to hide it, of course, and at least she wasn’t drowning her sorrows in booze. Yet if you were on the job with her, it was painfully clear. “There’s nothing you can do,” he finally said. “Nothing you need to do, either. She’s not that fragile, and neither am I. At least, no more than you are.”

Clouseau meant to provoke him, but Sousuke just shrugged in response.

“Have you reverted to where you were before Hong Kong?” Clouseau asked next.

“No, of course not,” Sousuke told him.

“Then you’re tired too, right?”

“Me?”

“Tired, from the bottom of your heart. Of fighting,” Clouseau clarified. “You just won’t let yourself realize it, which is why you’re projecting onto Mao, am I right?”

Sousuke seemed to think that over silently; perhaps he’d struck a nerve. After a while, Sousuke looked up at Clouseau with deeply curious eyes. “How could you tell?”

“Because I’m tired, too,” Clouseau said, then laughed. Yes, he was tired: he’d been serving as Andrey Kalinin’s replacement for close to a year now, so how could he be anything else? And if someone as tough as Belfangan Clouseau could end up this way, then of course everyone else would be the same. “Once this is over, I plan to take a nice vacation,” he said. “I’ll go home and laze

around all day. After that, I might do some sightseeing. Japan sounds nice; Akihabara and such."

"That does sound nice," Sousuke agreed. "But why Akihabara?"

"I've already been to Mecca," Clouseau said dryly, "so Akihabara is next."

"Ahh," said Sousuke, who apparently didn't get the joke.

"Anyway, worry about yourself first. I'll handle Mao," Clouseau advised him. Then he patted Sousuke on the back and left.

Afterwards, Clouseau called to Private Falkowski, who was overseeing the sorting of the disembarking crew's personal effects. The poor man had been stationed in the logistics department of the Merida Island Base one year ago, shortly before Amalgam had mounted its fierce attack, and been forced to live on the de Danaan since then. He was a timid but well-organized man, and he'd lately been showing more backbone, saying no whenever a department made an impossible request.

"Sorry," Clouseau told him. "There's something I'd like to add to the things I'm taking off."

"Yes, Captain."

Clouseau began to hand him the cardboard box containing the DVD. With all he had to do, there was no way he'd be able to watch it before the operation... It would be better for him to send it off with his other belongings, to watch at his leisure later.


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No, wait... Wouldn't he have time to watch it on his laptop en route to Afghanistan? The version of the movie released in North America over ten years ago had been a severely edited version, and that incomplete film was what most of the world had seen. Embarrassingly, he'd still only ever seen the North American cut himself...

"Um, Captain...?"

Clouseau snapped back to reality, where Falkowski was confused about the fact that he hadn't released the package. It was as if he were holding on for dear life.

"Ah..." Clouseau couldn't dismiss it as a mere fanboy attachment. He felt a resistance to give up that box in a way he couldn't fully explain. Something inside him was saying, *Don't let go. Watch it now.*

"Sorry," Clouseau said. Then, pushing back against the mysterious premonition, he released the box from his grasp and let the other man have it.

"Are you all right?" Falkowski asked.

"Yes," Clouseau told him. "Anyway, good luck." Then he turned around and swiftly left the deck behind.

Executive Officer Richard Mardukas also received a letter from the communications officer. It was from his ex-wife, postmarked two months ago. He was sure they'd resolved all of their financial and legal issues, so he couldn't imagine why she was contacting him... His initial response was to feel anxious, wondering if there was some kind of trouble.

"What is it, Mardukas-san?" Tessa asked as she saw him take the letter. The two of them had been standing on either side of the control room's nautical chart table, discussing various details of the operation when it arrived.

"Ah... A personal letter," Mardukas told her.

"I see."

"I'm sorry, Captain. Let's continue." He handed her a sheaf of documents full of points to go over as he tried to resume their discussion.

“Let’s take a little break first.” Tessa stretched lightly, and folded up the nautical chart before sitting down. They were alone in the control room now. The rest of the usual crew were off helping with the resupply.

Mardukas and the rest of the submarine’s crew couldn’t really be of help in the Afghani operation. Once they’d left the submarine, they would take care of any final business and then disperse. It was an anticlimactic end, but they’d just be a burden to the ground unit if they went along.

Mardukas hadn’t yet voiced his own opinions about Tessa going alone to Merida Island. He hadn’t fully worked out his own feelings, for one thing, and wouldn’t have known how to bring the subject up if he had. Even now that they were alone together, Tessa remained quiet, and Mardukas didn’t feel it was his place to bring it up. Yet, even a boring man like him found it hard to keep his silence.

“It’s from my ex-wife.”

“What?”

“The letter,” he explained. “You know I’m divorced, don’t you?”

“I do,” Tessa told him. “I read your personnel file back at the start.” But since he hardly ever talked about his personal life, she seemed a little surprised to hear him bring it up.

“We haven’t seen each other in over five years, you see...” He’d divorced his wife, Paula, during his Royal Navy days, back before he’d joined up with Mithril, and he hadn’t seen her since their last mediation. He’d left all the processes to his solicitor, and they had no children, so there was nothing for them to talk about.

“You’re not going to read it?” Tessa asked.

“I will...later. I’m sure it’s nothing especially important.”

“I see... What kind of person is your ex-wife?”

“An ordinary woman,” he told her. “She was a waitress at a pub near the base in Plymouth... very popular with the regulars. Their poster girl, one might say.”

“She was pretty, then?” Tessa wanted to know.

“I believe so,” Mardukas answered. “I threw out all her pictures, so all I remember is that she was solicitous and very talkative.” While fiddling with the unopened letter, he tried to remember what Paula had looked like when she was young, but failed to do so.

“Most of the officers would come to the pub in groups,” he went on, “but I’d come all by myself, silent and reading my technical manuals. She must have found it intriguing, because she’d talk to me, and I’d reply vaguely... I suppose it was about a year later that we ended up married.”

“‘Ended up married’?” Tessa questioned. “You mean you didn’t fall in love?”

“It’s hard to say... Ah, and I’m not trying to be circumspect,” Mardukas added, noting Tessa’s dubious gaze. “Forgive me for saying so, but you are still young. There are many couples who simply fall together naturally, without any particularly strong passionate or romantic feelings.”

“Really?” she wondered. “That feels disappointing.”

“That’s why romance movies are so popular,” Mardukas observed. “But I didn’t mind being part of a perfectly mundane couple. It was my job that caused issues.”

“Ahh...” Tessa nodded with a frown. She could probably imagine exactly how things had gone south. Being a military wife was a challenge to begin with, and it was even worse when your husband was a submariner. Constant work transfers, your spouse away from home running missions for months at a time... and the missions were always top secret, so they couldn’t even talk about where they were going, what they were doing, or when they’d be home.

“Paula was your standard ‘landlubber.’ Our breakup was inevitable.” Mardukas thought about adding, *Your parents got along, and I envied that,* but decided against it. Envying Tessa’s parents was imprudent; their lives had been torn apart in a way far more gruesome than divorce.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Tessa told him.

“Ah, it was for the best,” Mardukas said. “Trying to preserve the marriage would have merely exhausted us both.”

“Maybe so, but it’s still a shame.” A sad smile appeared on Tessa’s face, and

she made a show of returning to work, moving her eyes back to the remaining checklists as she added a few marks to them. “Well, I think it’s time to—”

“Captain,” Mardukas said abruptly.

“What?”

He probed Tessa’s gaze cautiously and realized that she was completely exhausted—a woman at the end of her rope. She didn’t look like an eighteen-year-old girl at all. “If you use the TAROS in the Lady Chapel, you will be able to control the vessel by yourself, true. But ‘able to’ is the limit of it,” he reminded her. “You alone are no substitute for experienced sonar technicians, navigators, and fire control officers. And you need an annoying man like me; someone who can consider situations, offer judgments, and see things from different angles.”

“Perhaps,” she agreed. “But—”

“In addition, it will be over twenty-four hours until the battle on Merida Island begins,” he went on, cutting her off. “And you won’t be able to rest, eat, or sleep during that time. Your proposal is unrealistic, and you can’t simply ‘tough it out,’ no matter how much you might like to.” Then, having vented his spleen, Mardukas watched for Tessa’s reaction.

She said nothing. Tessa didn’t seem to know how to respond, and her many internal conflicts showed on her face. Of course, she would already have been aware of the things Mardukas was pointing out. She’d chosen this method in spite of it all, and had explained the reason it was necessary during the briefing.

“All these concepts of time hazards and parallel worlds still sound dubious to me,” Mardukas admitted. “And I have no confidence that your subordinates will ever accept them either.”

“Exactly. That’s why I—”

“Does playing at democracy satisfy you?”

Tessa hesitated. “What?”

“Being a commander means that if you feel it’s necessary, you drag your subordinates to hell with you, even for an utterly unreasonable plan,” Mardukas told her. “These things you’ve been saying... ‘I can’t make myself the

center of everything, so I'll do it all by myself'... It's no wonder Mao is so furious with you."

"Do you feel the same way she does?" Tessa wondered.

"Yes," he told her simply. What her subordinates wanted, himself included, was not this absurd play at equality. It didn't matter if the mission was unreasonable; all she had to say was 'Do it,' and they wouldn't hesitate to act.

Yet, she couldn't do that. Tessa was too innocent. Too idealistic.

"Captain," he tried again patiently. "What would you do if I relieved you of duty, right here and now? I could do it with the approval of three other officers."

"That isn't funny," Tessa told him coldly.

"If I did, could you shoot me to death?" Mardukas asked. "Would you kill me to hold on to command?"

"I..." After a long silence, she admitted it, painfully. "I don't think I could."

"That's your limitation showing. I've served you for three years, but here at the end, I must tell you: you lack what it takes to be a commander." Mardukas genuinely believed that. His words were harsh, but he didn't feel harshly toward her. It felt more like a deep appreciation for a student who'd fought the good fight.

"What else..." Tessa placed her hands on the table containing the nautical chart, eyes down. "What else am I supposed to do?"

"You already know," he told her. "Give me the order to pass on to your crew." *Join me at the center. Come along on my reckless plan.*

It would be simple enough to say something kindhearted, like, 'I can't let you and Sagara go alone.' But Mardukas knew that he mustn't do that. This one time, he had to make her choose, even knowing it was cruel to do so.

"You're basically asking me to shoot you," Tessa told him.

"I think you might even find shooting me easier," Mardukas observed.

"Give me some room," she pleaded. "I need... a little time."

“Very well,” Mardukas agreed, and left Tessa behind in the control room.

As Mardukas stood in the dim corridor waiting to be called back, he thought about what Carl—Tessa’s father—would have thought about how he was treating her. *Would Carl have criticized me,* Mardukas wondered, *saying I should have hidden her away somewhere to let her live a normal life?*

But there was nowhere in the world that would be completely safe for Tessa. The safest possible place was here, in the belly of this beast she had designed. There, in the control room of the Tuatha de Danaan, she was beyond the enemy’s reach. It would be healthier for Tessa to take control of the de Danaan’s raging power than it would be for her to spend her days hidden in the shadows and trembling... That’s why he’d decided to become her XO. Mardukas had allowed it, even knowing what a hard road it would be.

Tessa was exhausted and nearing the end of her rope. But at least she’d been able to chart her own course through the raging waves of destiny. *Which means that here,* he reflected, *at the end, she should continue to do so.*

Things were quiet in the control room beyond the door. Tessa didn’t seem about to call him in any time soon, so he decided to open his ex-wife’s letter.

It was a short update on Paula’s life: the business she’d started after the divorce, a housekeeping service, was doing well. Recently, the owner of the pub where they’d met had fallen sick. He’d recovered, but would have to close shop. She went to the last day party and saw a lot of old familiar faces.

Of course, their conversation over drinks naturally turned to Richard Mardukas, and those who knew about his dismissal from the Royal Navy expressed their sympathies. One of them, a classmate who’d butted heads with him over this and that during officer school days, had told Paula this:

Mardukas is an essentially honest man. That’s why he can’t help but share unpleasant truths with those around him. The bureaucrats in the military couldn’t stand it. I found it insufferable in my early days, as well. So did you, Paula. But we’re all older now, and you should talk to him again if you can.

Those words had motivated her to write this letter. It wasn’t as if they hated each other, after all. They could meet up for a meal now and then. Wouldn’t he call her if he got the time?

She'd included a picture of the pub. She was with two other couples, smiling in a garden somewhere. She looked about the same as she had back then. No, he felt like she was prettier now than when they'd divorced...

A bit late, isn't it? part of him felt. But at the same time, Mardukas was surprised to realize he might like to see her again. *Ah, well,* he thought. *If I get through this alive, I'll drop by Plymouth.* He'd been meaning to take it easy, anyway. While he was mentally composing his reply, he heard a heavy sound, and then the control room door behind him opened.

"Mardukas-san," said Tessa, looking even more haggard than before. Her bloodshot eyes reflected the hardships she was working through.

"Yes, Captain?" said Mardukas.

Tessa thrust a piece of paper at him; it was a list of about twenty-five crew names. "This is the absolute minimum we'll need," she told him. "Bring them to the briefing room at once."

She didn't require any more conversation; no expressions of comfort or gratitude or apology, either. All he had to do was repeat the words he'd said thousands of times before, meaning, *I will obey*. "Aye, aye, ma'am." Then Mardukas left to execute the order.

The resupply was almost complete, but the work on the Laevatein wasn't anywhere near being finished.

"Dammit!" cursed Ed Sachs, head of the maintenance team, casting his wrench onto the floor of the flight deck. The machine itself was fine; he'd managed to get it into fighting shape. The problem was the emergency deployment booster attached to it. The Laevatein was functionally an M9 model and could use most equipment designed for the M9, but the XL-2 emergency deployment booster was an exception.

The XL-2 was a disposable flight unit that launched an M9 from the deck catapult. Propelled by a single shot of liquid rocket fuel, the XL-2 sped an M9 into the area of operations. But the lambda driver-neutralizing fairy eye, the 165-millimeter demolition gun, and its otherwise full complement of weapons made the Laevatein too heavy to carry. The XL-2 didn't have enough thrust, and

its wings would warp from the strain. He also couldn't guarantee clearance for the shoulders and the back, and the Laevatein didn't have the sensors it needed for in-flight tactical maneuvering.

In other words, even if the de Danaan got close enough to Merida Island, the Laevatein had no way to make landfall quickly. That's why they'd had to use the XL-3.

The XL-3, which hadn't undergone an official development process, was basically two XL-2s slapped together to make something that could carry the Laevatein. Sachs had anticipated they'd need it for an operation like this, so he'd been working on it for two months, and just barely made it in time.

Rather, he *hadn't* made it in time. He'd completed the rig itself, but the processes of attachment and adjustment were presenting difficulties; conflicts kept popping up between the XL-3's flight control system and the Laevatein's motion manager that he just couldn't solve. There were a few other areas giving him trouble, too. It wasn't something he could fix in just a few hours.

Al, apparently sympathetic, spoke up. 《Lieutenant. All you need to do is finish attaching the unit. I can handle the rest of the fine-tuning myself.》

"No," Sachs protested, "it's not just a software issue. Depending on what's causing the problem, we may need to swap out circuit boards and parts, and bypass wires and piping. Can you handle that?"

《Certainly not.》

"Then be a good machine and shut up."

《Did you say 'machine'?》

"What, got a problem with that?"

《It isn't that... May I ask you a question?》

"Go ahead," Sachs told him.

《Can you imagine what it would feel like to have wings?》

It was a strange question. "What do you mean by that?"

《Can you?》

“Hmm... Well, I might have done, when I was a kid.”

《Do you feel it’s a rite of passage in human development?》

“Maybe not that specific fantasy, but more or less, yeah.”

《I have a theory that the cause of the problem lies not with the XL-3, but with me.》

“What do you mean by that?” Sachs asked.

《The bodily sensation. The motion manager, system-wise, is considered subordinate to the core unit in which ‘I’ am contained, but the data bus that connects the two of us is transferring far more information than before.》

The motion manager was the composite unit that controlled the movements of an AS. If Al was the machine’s cerebrum, the motion manager was like the cerebellum.

“I noticed that, too.” Sachs said while checking the data log. The amount of data flow far exceeded that of a normal M9, so much so that he almost had to assume a lot of it was junk data. “It means you’ve gotten used to the Laevatein as your body, right?”

《This is merely a theory, but if we assume I am acquiring ‘bodily sensation,’ what would happen if I suddenly grew wings?》

“Well... yeah, it might throw you off.”

《In terms of standard settings alone, the attachment of the XL-3 should be within what the current data bus can handle. But if you account for this more abstract ‘bodily sensation’ concept, it is possible that the data bus is too restrictive.》

“Hmm...”

《Would it be possible to expand the data bus capacity in the current maintenance environment?》

“Not impossible,” Sachs told him, “but our tests suggest the current bus width is acceptable. I don’t think it’ll help solve the issue.”

《If I were a machine, perhaps it wouldn’t.》

Sachs thought for a moment. “Right,” he said. “I think I see what you’re getting at.” He should be thinking of Al as more than just a machine. After all, the liquid metal particles that made up Al and the lambda driver system that connected to him far exceeded anything Sachs could imagine. The thought of increasing the bus width seemed like nonsense at a glance, but it might just solve the problem. Al had plenty of transfer capacity right now, but if Sachs could increase it, it would be very similar to a human brain, right? The work wouldn’t be simple, though, and he’d have to fully shut Al down to do it...

“Let’s try it... is what I’d like to say,” Sachs said slowly, “but we don’t have time.”

《Right.》

“Just give it up. I’ll remove the XL-3. You’ll have to walk or use the aquatic unit to make landfall.”

《A shame.》

This would be a massive blow to the mission’s chance of success, as Al would be making landfall on a beach surely loaded with enemy ambushes and mines. Even with the lambda driver on his side, he was unlikely to be able to withstand everything they’d throw at him.

But... A nasty thought entered Sachs’s mind. *No, stop it, Ed. You were gonna get off the ship and go back to Florida with Nora, weren’t you? The kids are waiting. You haven’t eaten mama’s meat pies in a while, either.*

But if I can just work things out here...

“Sachs!” Just then, someone called him from across the hangar deck. It was Mardukas, beckoning him over.

“What is it?” Sachs asked.

“You’re staying here,” Mardukas told him. “Captain’s orders.”

Sachs hated that he was relieved to hear it. *Okay,* he thought next. *We’ll leave the thing on. Let’s do this!*

All processes on her tablet now read “complete,” and the heads of each

department were sending in their reports. The resupply was finished.

"Good." Tessa nodded and ordered all disembarking crew to gather in the hangar. All the maintenance personnel, logistics officers, and ground units heading for Afghanistan... She had to give them some parting words. It would be their last briefing, and she headed to the hangar with heavy steps.

As Tessa passed through the narrow corridor, she saw small nicks and dents in the walls. The pipes, which used to be cream-colored, were now dingy and brown. It had only been two and a half years since they'd left port, but the vessel looked to have aged significantly in that time.

It's been a very dense two and a half years, she acknowledged to herself. The day of their maiden voyage, when she'd sat in the captain's chair in the control room and ordered all systems active, seemed so long ago now. At age fifteen, she had been so full of ambition and confidence. She'd believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that no matter what the difficulty, no matter how strong the enemy, she would overcome.

But... look at her now. They'd overcome much indeed, but she'd wound up battered and exhausted for her troubles, gnawed to the bone by insecurities and self-destructive impulses. "Any more of this and I..." she muttered to herself, and then quickly thought, *No, stop that. You have to get a grip.*

Tessa entered the hangar and found close to two hundred of her subordinates standing there in neat rows. She knew each of them on sight, and she could see Mao and Clouseau in the front line, as well. Their faces were drawn and stern, but they were unable to hide their nervousness about what was coming.

"Atten-SHUN!" Mardukas commanded. They all immediately snapped to attention as Tessa walked before them briskly. In front of her was a small shipping container that would serve as a stage and a ramp that led up to it. She had to climb up and then face them undaunted.

Look alive, she ordered herself sternly. *Show them a picture of confidence: back straight; chin up; eyes forward. Make them think you know just what you're doing; that everything will go well; that victory is nigh. Show them a commander brimming with wisdom and strength. The witch of Mithril, who has overcome every danger and tormented our enemies.*

Don’t show weakness, she reminded herself. *Don’t flatter them. Just smoothly ascend to that stage and look down at them. Make it clear to them who you are, what you can do...*

Then her foot caught on the ramp.

“Ah...?” Tessa asked in surprise, as she felt her balance slipping away. Everything she did to try to right herself made things worse, and she ended up leaping onto the stage, arms high in the air like a gymnast, before falling flat on her face.



Using the onomatopoeia that Chidori Kaname was once so fond of, this is when she'd say, 'Vroom, splat!'

The silence after the sound of her fall... It was quiet. Painfully quiet. The crew must have been terribly rattled; they'd been ordered to attention, so they couldn't actually move. How many seconds did she spend just lying there on the floor?

Mardukas was the first to speak. "Captain?"

"I... I'm fine," she responded at last. Her mind continued to work at top speed, searching for a way to navigate the situation. She'd completely lost her cool.

What to do? I've ruined everything, and at the worst possible time... This was supposed to be my final briefing, Tessa thought hysterically. *I've never tripped during one of these before, have I? I'm usually so careful... but I let my guard down. It was that unsteady ramp. Yes, it's the ramp's fault... I should execute it immediately. Wait, what am I thinking? Calm down. Steady. Regain your dignity. Don't show them you're shaken. Be calm; act like you meant to do that... Oh, but who means to fall?! It's hopeless! There's no way to excuse it! Ah, it's all ruined. Hurry, hurry... Do something!*

A way to restore my dignity. A way to restore my dignity. A way to restore my dignity—

There was nothing she could do. It was time to just accept it. Tessa picked herself up despondently, and turned back to face her subordinates with slumped shoulders. They were all still at attention, their faces expressionless. *They're probably disgusted,* she thought, *staring blankly into thin air...*

No... When she looked at the people in the front row, she saw a few shoulders trembling. Others' neck muscles were pulsing rapidly. Their lips were drawn into sharp lines and their nostrils were flaring. Soldiers, when told to stand at attention, absolutely couldn't move. Yet it was clear to her, now, that they were all trying desperately not to laugh.

What in the world? I'm standing in front of a group of perfectly mature adults lined up like mannequins, trying desperately not to laugh, waiting politely for

words from a little girl who can't even walk without tripping. And they all believe that doing that is absolutely righteous and praiseworthy.

They're all so stupid. And so am I.

The grim show of pride and grand speech she'd been prepared to put on just moments ago from that platform suddenly seemed utterly absurd.

How absurd am I? Did I think I was a saint? What's a clumsy person like me acting so high and mighty for?

I just need to tell them the truth.

"Um..." Tessa cleared her throat and looked around. "You're all officially fired. Thank you for your service." With that, she walked back down off of the makeshift stage.

Mardukas's eyes widened, but he snapped back to attention and raised his voice to say, "Dismissed!"

A ripple shot through the crowd. There were a few stifled laughs, a few murmurs of confusion, and a few knowing chuckles. Mysteriously, she heard no sounds of censure. Not that it mattered now.

Ah, of course... I've been so afraid all this time of disappointing them. That battle is over now, too. I can just do whatever I want. Whatever I want...

Tessa caught sight of Mao, who was standing in the crowd of chatting soldiers. Their eyes met for just a second. Tessa shrugged and smiled at her, but Mao just looked very sad.

Then, without a word exchanged with anyone, Tessa left the flight deck.

The five Pave Mare transport helicopters left the flight deck and retreated into the western sky with Mao, Clouseau, and the rest of the ground forces on board. The Bernie Worrell's engines roared out as it pulled away from the de Danaan. Having received their notice from Tessa, most of the departing crew were lined up on the deck, shouting and waving their hats.

Sousuke, who remained on the de Danaan, just raised his fist in response. Beside him, Ed Sachs was much more emotional, and made a bigger show of

waving his burly arms. He was the only member of the maintenance team remaining on board. Technical officer Nora Lemming had boarded the supply ship with the rest of his crew, and she was leaning listlessly on the railing, staring back at him.

The Bernie Worrell eventually left their sight and the flight deck began to close. Alarms rang out as the massive hatch slid into its closed position, and the patch of sunset sky above them grew thinner and thinner.

“Why did you stay?” Sousuke asked.

Sachs stroked his beard thoughtfully. “I had a little unfinished work to do.”

Sousuke watched him quietly.

Sachs shrugged. “Okay, right, I’m just trying to sound cool. The truth is, Tessa ordered me to stay. Pretty cruel of her; I’ve got two kids and a potential new mother for them.” Despite his complaints, though, Sachs didn’t seem especially upset about it. He actually seemed a little relieved, in a self-deprecating kind of way. “I might have stayed even if she hadn’t ordered me, though. So, you know... I’m grateful for the excuse to gripe about it. Anyway, let’s get back to work.”

Sachs headed for the stairs that led to the hangar deck below. It was around that moment that the large hatch above closed with a clang. Locking mechanisms slid into place to ensure the hatch remained watertight, and the hum of motors came over the deck here and there.

“I’ll help, too,” Sousuke offered.

“Don’t be stupid. We don’t need you poking around, do we, Al?” Sachs asked into the headset hanging on his neck.

《The lieutenant is correct, Sarge. Please focus on your psychological preparation.》 Sousuke heard Al’s voice in his own headset.

The work of attaching the emergency deployment booster to the Laevatein on the hangar deck below them still wasn’t done. The rest of the maintenance crew had disembarked, so Sachs would have to do it all by himself.

“You heard him,” said Sachs. “Now, quit nagging like an old lady and do as

you're told."

"All right, then," Sousuke said after a pause, leaving Sachs behind and heading for the living quarters in the rear. None of the regulars passed him on the way. With the place running on a skeleton crew, the de Danaan was almost like a ghost ship.

Sousuke decided to stop by the galley in the mess hall. Kasuya, the regular cook, had disembarked with the rest, so he thought he might cook something for those who'd remained aboard.

This turned out not to be necessary, either. Sousuke wasn't sure when he'd had the time to prepare it, but Kasuya had left plenty of food in the galley to keep them fed for at least a few days. There was a giant pot of curry, portions of frozen white rice, and a variety of breads, salads, vegetable soups and pasta sauces. He'd left a note on the wall politely explaining how to heat it all up and serve it, and where the plates and cooking tools could be found. The last words on the note were, "Good luck."

That's right, Sousuke remembered. *I fought that traitor Dunnigan here in the galley. Kaname was huddled up next to that refrigerator, crying, while I apologized to her again and again...*

"It's ironic," Sousuke muttered. *It was always in situations like those when Kaname and I could share our real feelings with each other. Danger, emergencies, crises... It was always at the times you'd say, "Now's not the time," that we've been able to speak most openly.*

In a sense, we always hoped for danger. If we ever get another chance to speak, will it have to be in another such situation?

He had no idea.

She's not in her right mind now, anyway, he reminded himself. *She seems to believe she's acting rationally, but she's actually being controlled by some other consciousness. Not even Tessa knows how to bring her back. Is it possible that it's too late? Will the girl I knew never return? Is all of this utterly futile?*

"This isn't good..." Sousuke took a deep breath and began to massage his temples. He was about to enter a difficult battle, yet he couldn't concentrate at

all. The way ahead felt so murky that he had no confidence in his footing, and he felt like he couldn't take one step forward.

Do I really agree with what Tessa is doing? he questioned suddenly. *Why won't she even ask me? Hasn't she considered that I might sympathize with our enemy?* Mira's letter hung in the back of his mind. *Why not simply do nothing and let Leonard and the others have their way?*

Sousuke left the mess hall and headed for the SRT duty room. Once there, he retrieved his faithful Glock 19 from his weapons locker and loaded it with 9mm bullets. He didn't use a holster, but just hid it behind his back, under his battledress shirt, so no one would know it was there unless they touched him.

With his gun hidden away, Sousuke headed for the control room. He reached the area that only authorized personnel were supposed to enter while the submarine was on maneuvers. As a sergeant with the ground forces, Sousuke didn't have that clearance, and it was forbidden to carry guns there unless it was an emergency.

Who cares? he told himself defiantly, and then entered the control room.

Tessa, Mardukas, and the other control room staff turned to look at him questioningly. "Sagara-san...?"

Sousuke didn't respond immediately. With his usual sullen expression, he looked around the room, and tried to envision it—Pulling out his gun, walking up to Mardukas, pushing him into the officer of the deck... then pressing the gun to Tessa's temple and telling her, "Don't move." It seemed easy enough.

"Sergeant Sagara. Who authorized you to be here?" Mardukas asked. His voice wasn't critical, but it was cautious. The man wasn't stupid. He was probably considering the possibility of what Sousuke was about to do.

No... Sousuke knew that his plan for taking over the control room was a foolish daydream. Forcing them to call off the raid and just sit here at the bottom of the ocean until the time came—he wasn't that kind of man.

"The highest-ranking ground forces NCO," he responded boldly.

"And who is that?" Mardukas asked politely.

“Me. I’m the only member of the ground forces on board. Therefore...” He pointed to the space to the left of the captain’s chair, the place where Kalinin used to stand. “I want to stand there. Is that all right?”

He hadn’t just come up with that on the fly. It’s what he’d planned to do if he decided not to go through with the mutiny.

“Hm... well, I suppose it makes sense,” Mardukas admitted, “but...”

“Why not?” Tessa said. “But we’re a little while yet from our area of operations. You may get rather bored.”

“I don’t mind,” Sousuke told her.

“Go ahead, then. Feel free to leave if you get tired of it.” Her tone was not malicious, but it was overly casual. Normally she would have at least said, “Permission granted,” first.

Sousuke had seen Tessa’s final briefing of the crew, and her manner had changed a bit since then. The sense of grim tragedy was gone, though the emaciated atmosphere remained.

She was neither cheerful nor completely free of her demons, but there was a sort of impudence, a carefree sense about her now. If he had to liken Tessa’s new demeanor to something, it was closest to her manner when gossiping with Mao off-duty: pouting, unhappy, listless... If he asked her about the operation now, she’d probably say, “Do whatever you like” in a dismissive fashion.

For some reason, though, Sousuke couldn’t bring himself to worry, and Mardukas and the rest of the crew seemed to feel the same way. He met the eyes of the navigation officer sitting nearby, and the man just raised an eyebrow slightly before shrugging. It was like he was just saying, *Weird, huh?*

Sousuke shook his head as if to say, *I wouldn’t know,* then faced front again in an at-rest posture. He checked Tessa’s current manner out of the corners of his eyes.

“I’m fine,” she whispered, as if reading his intent. “I’m fine now, but what about *you*?”

“Ah,” he managed at great length. That one word from her hit him harder

than anything Mao and Clouseau had said to him that day. A woman far stronger than him had seen through his masculine veneer.

Sousuke was still in at-rest posture and couldn't move. His hands behind his back brushed against the pistol hidden in his waistband. For the first time in his life, he felt ashamed for carrying a gun.

Large letters were displayed on the screen. Time to area of operations: 21 hours, 12 minutes.

If I lose focus now, he reminded himself, *I won't stand a chance.*

21 hours, 11 minutes.

Mao and the others were at an airfield in western Nepal, some eighteen hours after leaving the de Danaan. Time was of the essence, yet they'd already wasted two hours here in this small river valley.

The region was mountainous. The airfield, on the edge of a town called Dipayal, consisted of nothing but a short runway and some small buildings. The airstrip wasn't even paved. It was accustomed only to receiving small aircraft, so it wasn't hard to imagine the surprise of the locals when their massive C-17 transport came diving down with an explosive roar.

They had taken their helicopters from the de Danaan to Brunei, then transferred to an allied C-17 transport and sped west, crossing illegally over Cambodia, Myanmar, and Bangladesh with their ECS on full blast.

It was still twelve hundred kilometers from here to the missile base in northeast Afghanistan. They planned to do their last refueling here, as well as taking on a drop unit. The enemy would probably take control of the nuclear missile launch functions within four hours. But none of that felt real here in the hushed, quiet scene that surrounded them, where the air was clear and cold.

The mountains around them were covered with snow, and Mao's breath came out white. The temperature was a degree or two below freezing, but she was grateful that there wasn't any wind. Thanks to the field jacket she wore over her AS operator's uniform, the only part of her that felt the cold was her face.

She was doing equipment checks with the rest of her team next to a run-down prefab warehouse. The local farmers watched them from afar, looking understandably unsettled. “I know I asked you to get us a final restock point... but why here?” she whispered to Lemon, who was with her.

“Sorry, it was the only place I could find,” said Lemon. Normally he might have said something like, “Don’t complain, I only had twelve hours to rig this up,” but he’d been a little bit muted around Mao lately. Lemon had been there when Kurz Weber had died, after all. From what Sousuke had said, it wasn’t his fault by any means, but perhaps he’d still felt like there was something he could have done.

He wouldn’t have known the specific relationship Mao had with Kurz, so the guilt was probably nothing more than “I let your subordinate die,” but...

“It’s okay,” she shrugged while she ran through her submachine gun checklist. “I’m just worried about the rubberneckers. Are the local police cool?”

“They’re on our side... I think,” said Lemon.

“What do you mean, you *think*?”

“There’s a Chinese man who owes a favor to Mr. Hunter, and that man’s brother owns a trading company with an office here in Nepal, which has a Nepalese government official on the take, and that official’s brother is vice chief of the local police...”

“Right,” said Mao, cutting him off. “Not very reliable, then.”

“It’ll be fine,” Lemon told her. “The closest police station is two hours away by car. We’ll be long gone by the time some hard-nosed detective makes his way here.”

“Assuming it arrives before then,” Mao grumbled. She was talking about the drop unit for her M9.

Mao and Clouseau were both set to drop in the upcoming operation, but the understocked de Danaan had only one drop unit. It hadn’t made it in time for the ocean resupply before they parted ways with Tessa and the others, so a member of an allied logistics unit was going to bring it directly to the airfield. That resupply was running late, which meant they were stuck here. She couldn’t

help being upset, but realized she was losing too much of her cool.

Perhaps realizing how unhappy she was, Lemon spoke up hesitantly. “I heard the drop unit was coming from western Bengal, but why would they have M9 equipment there?”

“The Indian Ocean Battle Group was destroyed a year ago, but their warehouse is still around,” she told him. “The survivors from there prepared it.”

“Hmm. Ah... is it here?”

Ten meters from where Mao and Lemon were standing sat Clouseau, who was seated on a rusty metal barrel and using a handheld radio to receive some kind of communique. After a brief exchange, he shouted to the soldiers in the area, “The helicopter will be here in five minutes! Prepare to refuel and load up!”

As his people quickly began making preparations to take in the new stock, Mao got her own equipment together and jogged toward the C-17 transport currently housing her M9. She had to take the M9 out to attach the drop unit to its back.

She boarded the M9 and moved it outside the transport, then knelt it down a little ways away from the runway and waited. The farmers watching from the outskirts of the airfield stared up at her in awe. *It’s probably their first time seeing an AS,* Mao realized. She zoomed in on the farmers and saw that one of them had a cheap digital camera which he was using to take pictures of her.

“Ah, no pictures. Sorry.” Mao activated her machine’s head-mounted radar. While adjusting the beam’s effect radius and wavelength, she shot out a brief pulse at maximum power. The wavelength was harmless to people, but it would be fatal to consumer electronics. The young man who’d been taking the pictures began messing with the suddenly broken camera in a panic.

“Here it comes,” Clouseau said over the radio.

A transport helicopter arrived over the southern mountains: a CH-53 derivative frequently used in Western nations. It was painted flashily with orange bands over a white background, and the words “HUNTER AIR LINE” were written on the side. It was probably disguised as a civilian airline company cargo

carrier.

The turboshaft engine roared out over the previously silent airport. Mao kept the M9 waiting in standby posture and dropped back out of it.

The helicopter circled as it descended slowly, kicking up clouds of sand around them. Before the rotors could even stop spinning, a passenger came out of the machine's hatch.

It was a slender East Asian woman wearing a beige pantsuit. Mao knew her.

"Wraith?"

Wraith was the intelligence division agent who'd served as backup for Sousuke when he was guarding Chidori Kaname in Tokyo. She was also the one who had recovered the Arbalest's core unit and delivered the Laevatein, built by Gavin Hunter and the research division, to Sousuke... So while Mao hadn't had many chances to interact with her, she knew that, like Hunter, Wraith and Sousuke were on the same team. Lemon had said he'd lost track of her during an attack by Leonard on an operation in Moscow, but...

"Wraith!" Lemon called out, running up to the new arrival. He was beaming so brightly at her that Mao thought he might hug her. "Thank goodness you're safe!" he declared. "How'd you get here?"

"You took the words right out of my mouth," said Wraith, who seemed far less happy about the reunion than he was. She turned the question back on him without a hint of a smile. "How exactly are you still alive?"

This took the wind right out of Lemon's sails. "Oh," he mumbled. "Well, it's a long story..."

"I'm kidding," Wraith said. "I've been briefed."

"Oh, I see..."

When Mao approached, Wraith nodded to her as well. "Lieutenant Mao."

"Glad to see you're alive and well," Mao told her.



“Thanks. You seem well also.” Wraith smiled at her, spurring a grumble from Lemon about unfair treatment. “I was arrested by the Moscow police after the attack, but fortunately they handed me over to the GRU. An instructor from my student days is a high-ranking officer there, so he let me go in exchange for information. If they’d turned me over to the KGB, I’d be freezing to death in a cell right now.”

The KGB and the GRU were the two foremost intelligence organizations in the Soviet Union. The KGB was mainly an extension of the Communist Party, but the GRU was a military organization, and conducted themselves accordingly. Put loosely, the KGB were politicians and the GRU were soldiers, and the GRU had actually been relatively—*relatively*—cooperative with Mithril in the past.

Still, it was impossible for Mao not to be alarmed at the thought of Wraith giving information to another organization. “What did you tell the GRU?”

“My reasons for looking into Yamsk-11, that kind of thing. Nothing that should make any trouble for you,” Wraith said reassuringly.

“Hmm...”

“I know you can’t trust my word on that, but the GRU just wanted a point of contact for Mithril,” Wraith said. “Their leader has considered Amalgam a threat for a while and wants to be rid of them as much as you do.”

“That’s nice and all, but then shouldn’t you be visiting Tessa right now?” Mao pointed out. “Of course, she’s currently at the bottom of the ocean, which does put a damper on things...”

“That’s actually not why I’m here,” Wraith told them. “I have two pieces of news... Do you have a table somewhere?”

“Of course we don’t. Let’s go over there.” Lemon walked briskly to the nearest container crate, while Mao and Wraith followed behind him.

Wraith unrolled a flexible electronic screen on top of the crate, before turning it on and tapping at it a few times to bring up a detailed map of the missile base that they were heading towards. “This is the latest info from the GRU,” she told them. “There’s information about the electronic locks and security systems inside the facility, as well as the firing system.”

The 3D blueprint provided even had handwritten English notes, assuredly written in by someone who knew the base well. It was far more detailed than the map that Mao and the others had used for planning.

“It’s amazing,” said Mao, playing with the information on the screen in fascination.

“Is it useful?” Wraith asked.

“Yes,” Mao told her. “If we’d charged in there with just the info we had before, we might’ve been in real trouble.”

“Glad to hear it. It felt dangerous to send the information online, so I got your location from Hunter and came running...”

“Why did the GRU give us this?” Mao wondered.

“Why else? They can’t handle the forces occupying the missile base by themselves,” Lemon put in.

“He’s right,” Wraith agreed. “They already tried a counterinsurgency, but it was totally annihilated by the enemy ASes.”

Mao groaned. “Typical. When the fire burns out of control, that’s where we come in. Always sticking us with the tough jobs.”

“But as they say, ‘Who Dares, Wins,’” said Clouseau, who had abruptly appeared behind them to peer at the map. “This will make our jobs a lot easier. Thank you, Wraith.”

“It’s nothing. Now, it’s not as important, but my other bit of news—” she began to say, but was interrupted by Clouseau shouting at the soldiers around him.

“Get over here! There’ll be a few changes in the plan!”

“Ah—”

“Sorry,” Clouseau said apologetically. “But if it’s not important, it can wait. I want to get our plan down first.” The members of the infantry units and their team leaders, Yang Jun-kyu and Roger Sandraptor, gathered around, as Clouseau began giving swift directives about changes in team composition, entry routes, and equipment. The team leaders repeated the changes and

inquired about the details.

"...That is all," he concluded at last. "Any other questions?"

Mao raised her hand. She didn't have a question, but she'd decided this was probably the end of the briefing, and she had a few words for her comrades. "May I? It's not a question, but..." She met Clouseau's gaze. While he had come more recently to the West Pacific Battle Group, Mao was a true member of the old guard.

Clouseau probably realized that as well as she did, because he nodded to her as if to say, *Do as you like.*

Mao looked around at the people with whom she'd shared so much joy and pain. She knew all their faces well. They seemed relaxed on the surface, but they couldn't hide it from Mao—they were all nervous as hell.

There were thirty-two of them there in total. There had been more once, but most had transferred away or dropped out, so that these were the only ones left to complete the mission. Of course, many had died or retired due to injury, as well.

"This will probably be our last operation," said Mao, "so I want to say this to you all. Um..." she started, but couldn't figure out what to say next. She felt she suddenly understood why Tessa had failed to come up with a good speech during her last 'briefing.' Still, her position wasn't nearly as lofty, and so, like the unremarkable person she was, she could just make do with whatever came to mind.

Yes, she thought. *How about this...*

"This is a rough situation," she continued out loud. "This upcoming mission will be difficult, and dangerous, and we probably don't have the time to see it through. But there's something that makes it all even worse. You know what it is?"

The men looked at her questioningly.

Mao said, "You *assholes* are gonna save the world."

They all burst out laughing. Some slapped their knees, others held their

stomachs. Some reeled back, clutching their foreheads. Some hung on the shoulders of their neighbors and guffawed. Clouseau smiled broadly and shook his head as well. But Lemon and Wraith, who were outsiders, didn't seem to get the joke at all.

Mao grinned and continued speaking. "No seriously, what are we doing? Shouldn't this be a job for a team that doesn't suck?"

"Seriously... ha ha," one man gasped. "Ah, seriously..."

"This is nuts... ha ha..."

"What are they thinking... ha ha..."

These were just a group of good-for-nothing mercenaries. Their natural role was to die on pointless missions, unknown and unsung. So, what the hell was happening here? On the verge of World War III, with billions of lives on the line, *they* were going to stop a nuclear missile launch? The whole thing was like a joke, and not even a particularly funny one.

"But..." Mao said, after letting the laughter die down. "Our lives leading up to this haven't been for nothing. All your training, your operations, your sacrifices...they've all had meaning."

Our sacrifices...

The whole group nodded, with some murmuring their agreement.

"The dead are probably smiling at us from the afterlife," one of the soldiers said.

"I bet Kurz has got a few choice words," someone else agreed. "He'll be wishing for us to fail without him, I bet."

"Yeah, I'll bet."

"Yeah, there's no way he's rooting for us."

The troops still laughed to each other, but it was a sad kind of laughter now.

"So, let's make this thing a roaring success and disappoint the hell out of Kurz!" Mao proclaimed.

"Yeah," someone cheered. "Let's disappoint Kurz!"

“Disappoint Kurz!”

“Don’t give that bastard what he wants!” the soldiers all echoed.

“I’m done, Ben,” Mao said.

“Good work,” he told her. “Now, let’s get ready to move out!”

The whole team went back to work. But now they were overflowing with vim and vigor. Their footsteps became steadier, their tones more forceful, and they seemed to be ready for the task before them.

“Disappoint Kurz” is a good rallying cry, Mao thought. They all knew he wouldn’t have really wished for them to fail, but grown adults would feel embarrassed saying, “let’s do it for Kurz.” And it probably wasn’t only Kurz they were thinking of; he was just the most recent of the dead, a standin for all those who had come before.

“Disappoint Kurz, huh?” she whispered again, and then laughed quietly to herself. *Kurz,* she thought. *You were an amazing sniper, but you were useful now and then in other areas, too... I should thank you. I hope you watch us from the afterlife, beer in hand, with all the other guys, getting more annoyed by the minute...*

“Oh, by the way, Wraith,” Mao said to the nearby woman as she snapped out of her reverie. “You said there was something else you had to tell us. What was it?”

Wraith didn’t answer. She just stood there awkwardly, sweat beading on her forehead, as if struggling with something difficult to say. She’d been listening calmly the entire time otherwise, but for some reason towards the end, she’d begun looking nervous.

“Wraith?” Mao asked again.

“Huh? Ah... right. What is it?”

“You said you had something else to tell us. What was it?”

“Um, t-tell you?” Wraith hedged. “Er...”

“What is it? You’re not looking well...”

“I’m not? It’s... it’s probably the weather. The air’s so thin here...”

“Yeah, true,” Mao agreed. “So, what’s the thing? Ben’s probably busy, but you can tell me.”

“Ah... er. It’s... It’s not important. Forget about it.”

“What? Why?”

“I mean it,” Wraith said in a rush. “You’re all so fired up; I don’t want to do anything to ruin that.”

“How would you ruin it?”

“Just forget it; I was wrong! It’s not important,” Wraith said dismissively. “I hope the GRU’s information is useful. Goodbye.”

“Um, wait a—”

Ignoring Mao’s attempts to stop her, Wraith swiftly walked away.

Once all the equipment and troops were on board, the transport took off from the small Tibetan airport. Because it was such a short-distance liftoff, it had to use a strapped-on disposable rocket booster, which added to the roar of takeoff.

Lemon watched the plane carrying Mao and the others go, then went to help the resupply team with clean-up. While they worked, he spotted Wraith, who had also stayed behind. She was standing at the edge of the airfield, talking to someone on a satellite phone.

He didn’t know who she was talking to, but she seemed to be desperately trying to pacify them.

“... and that’s what happened… No, I didn’t tell them. Why? I didn’t have a choice! No, it’s not that... The team was just so hyped up, it would have ruined everything! Ah, so... it’s okay, just don’t do anything. Actually, put a bullet through your own head and die,” she suggested. “That might be the best possible outcome. I’ll talk to Colonel Kiryenko about it. ...What? Like I care. ...Anyway, you understand? ...Oh, shut up. I’m hanging up!” she said, then did so. “Heaven’s sake... These people are nothing but trouble,” Wraith muttered

while pocketing the phone.

The curious Lemon spoke up from behind her. “Hey.”

“Nn?!” Wraith cringed, apparently not having noticed him behind her until now. “Oh... Lemon. What is it?”

“You were acting weird in front of Mao-san and the others,” he observed. “Who were you talking to just now?”

“Ah...” Wraith hesitated. “Well, you won’t be able to talk to them until the operation’s over, so I suppose I can tell you.”

“Uh-huh...”

“The truth is... there was another bit of information I was supposed to pass on,” said Wraith, explaining the situation.

Lemon listened, nodding along as she went on. “Yeah,” he agreed, “that really would’ve ruined everything...”

“I couldn’t tell them. It’s just too damned awkward,” she muttered, and manipulated her satellite phone to procure a line to someone else.

“Who’re you calling?” Lemon wanted to know.

“Hunter,” she told him shortly. Wraith had a short exchange with Hunter, during which her expression gradually began to darken.

“Some kind of problem?” Lemon asked after she finished the call.

“He’s got an ETA for when the nuclear launch codes will be deciphered,” she said. “Three hours.”

“Sooner than expected.”

They’d have to input a highly secure launch code in order to fire the nuclear missiles, but the system had a safety mechanism designed to resist outside electronic input, and infinite combinations weren’t allowed either. An attempt to activate the firing mechanism independently would cause the missile launch circuit to fry itself, and if that happened, another launch couldn’t be attempted without getting a replacement from a highly regulated facility two thousand kilometers away.

The information the GRU provided had probably clarified the number of digits used in the firing code and the makeup of the safety device. Hunter's team would have used that to speculate how long it would take for Amalgam to acquire the launch code, given the code-cracking skills they'd displayed in the past. It was just an estimate, of course, but...

Three hours, Lemon thought. Then he asked, "Is that an optimistic scenario?"

"I'm afraid so," Wraith admitted. "It could also happen sooner."

It would take a little under two hours for the force that just left to arrive at their destination. If the estimated time was exactly accurate, Mao and the others would still have little time to act. An hour or less to storm that mountain fortress...

"I hope they can do it," he said.

Wraith didn't say anything. She wasn't one for platitudes, and this was no time for them.

"I wonder if being this far out in the country will let us escape nuclear war, too," Lemon mumbled.

"Hey," she objected.

"Just kidding," said Lemon. "Let's go."

The preparations to withdraw were proceeding smoothly around them. The machinery had all been loaded onto the transport helicopter, whose engine was now roaring as the resupply crew carried out their checklists and began to board.

"We'd better get things ready in case they pull it off," he concluded.

•

They were down to the finishing touches. Kaname had been holed up in the TARTAROS's external control room since yesterday, immersed in the final rewrites of the control code. The work of constructing the TARTAROS was almost completely finished, and the only people still on-site were those needed for the final checks. It would take the geothermal generator a few hours yet to finish building up the power they needed, but these last touches to the control

code should be finished by then.

Kaname hadn't slept much these past two days. She sometimes took a nap on the bench set outside the control room, or ate a sandwich one of her underlings brought her, but otherwise she was going entirely without sleep and sustenance. Nobody was forcing her to do it that way; this was what she wanted to do. She enjoyed readying the device to perfection so much that she didn't even miss sleep.

The TARTAROS was revolutionary. It would free humanity from the ties of time and history that had held it captive for so long and give her control of destiny itself. She was proud to make it a reality, to take on the role of the world's guiding force. *They can just leave it all to me,* she thought. *I'll make sure everyone is happy.*

She'd been riding a warm cloud of elation since their return from Yamsk-11, always bustling with activity and untroubled by regret. But her physical body was less enthused. She found herself hit by periodic waves of lethargy and occasional gaps in her raging torrents of ideas.

Kaname suddenly realized that she was staring blankly at the ceiling. She'd stopped typing. "Ah... that's no good," she said, blinking rapidly, and then slapped her cheeks to reinvigorate herself. *This has happened a few times now,* she thought. A *little nap now might be better for my efficiency as a whole.*

That was when she noticed a strange set of words had appeared at the end of the iota wave virtual lens alignment script she'd been working on. It read:

anta ha atasi jya nai

It's Japanese, she realized. This PC didn't have Japanese language input, so it was in Latin script. It meant, "You are not me," which made no sense... *Who would do something like this?* Kaname wondered. She hadn't written it herself. Still, she was the only one working with that script...

I must have written them in a sleep-deprived daze, then, she decided. But it still made no sense. The TARTAROS was all she thought about, asleep or awake. So where had these words come from?

'You are not me'...

“Hm...” A rising fit of irritation and rage caused her to click her tongue. She didn’t quite know where it came from, but she suddenly felt an urge to grab the monitor and throw it on the floor. *It’s stupid,* she thought next. *Just ridiculous. Where did those words come from? I* am *me! Don’t say things that make no sense, you... you...*

Who? Who am I... angry at?

“Ah... what’s going on?” She covered her face in her hands and let out a long groan.

This feeling... This unpleasant feeling, like someone, somewhere, is screaming at me, trying to hold me back at every turn...

That’s right, she realized. *This has happened before. The first time was on the plane from Yamsk-11 to Merida Island. That strange feeling washed over me, and I suddenly began crying... those very unpleasant tears...* The second, more striking time was when she’d tried to accept Leonard’s proposition.

One month ago, Leonard had paid her a visit while she was relaxing in her room. He’d come by to discuss technical matters, but she had invited him to the sofa and poured him a cup of black tea. He’d been extremely gentlemanly with her since they’d returned from Yamsk-11, not overstepping his bounds even once.

But that night was different. He’d taken her hand, and she hadn’t tried to stop him. It had been the middle of the night.

Perhaps it’s time to reward his devotion, she’d thought. *The old me always rejected him without a second thought. But the poor man... I can’t just leave this world behind without giving him* something*.*

“Just one night,” she’d told him, and for some reason his smile had turned sad. But that didn’t mean he’d backed away or hesitated. As he’d surely done to many women before her, he gently embraced her, and put his lips to hers...

Then the feeling had hit her.

It wasn’t self-loathing, or disgust with Leonard. It was more like a sense of... wrongness. A highly unpleasant feeling, like someone was hanging over her shoulder, angry—righteously angry.

She'd averted her eyes from Leonard and, while hiding her confusion, could only say, "I'm sorry, let's not after all."

He'd just said, "All right," and left the room... And that had been that. He'd never tried to lay a hand on her again.

Why do I feel this way? Kaname wondered. *I am me. I think for myself and make my own decisions. I'm following my heart.* Yet for some reason, a doubt—a feeling of, "No, you aren't"—kept rising up out of nowhere and needling her.

Forget it, she told herself. *I'm just tired.* After all, she hadn't pulled all-nighters like this since the preparations for the school festival. Maybe it was time she got some proper sleep already.

"All right, let's take that nap," she decided, then stood up. *It feels good to make decisions like that. That's what it means to be me. There are no issues here at all. I'll lie down for just an hour or so. It's probably going to be my last sleep in this world, after all. I should really enjoy it.*

She told the security guards outside the control room that she was going to take a nap, and then lay down on the bench.

There were fifty nautical miles left, and the US Navy stood between the Tuatha de Danaan and Merida Island.

The sonar room reported a submarine: bearing 0-8-6; distance eighteen nautical miles; course 2-6-5; speed ten knots. Designation Mike-5. It was so far away that they couldn't tell the ship name yet, but it was definitely one of the new Los Angeles-classes.

"It's like they were waiting for us," Mardukas said.

"Yes," said Tessa, whispering her agreement. "I expect there to be another three nearby."

Four West Pacific Fleet submarines, she thought bleakly. There were probably other surface ships waiting nearby as well, and they had all been ordered to sink the Tuatha de Danaan—what they called the 'Toy Box.' Tessa had gotten that information from Rear Admiral Thomas Ross, one of the now-retired older officers that had joined them at the banquet a year ago in Guam. He used to

command the Pacific Submarine Fleet, and had various connections in Hawaii control.

Through an encrypted channel, Admiral Ross had told Tessa that the office of the current Secretary of Defense had forced through the order to attack the Toy Box. The secretary was believed to be an Amalgam sympathizer, and had apparently used the chaos of the last few weeks of the US—Soviet conflict to push the president to give it the green light.

Command had quietly continued to harbor doubts about this order. They didn't like having their precious forces diverted to a strategically meaningless area of operations to hunt the Toy Box while the Soviet Navy was mobilizing their Far East Fleet. Still, orders were orders. They wouldn't be allowed to question them, let alone ignore them.

And so, they'd come to hunt the de Danaan. Despite everything, they'd take the order seriously. Tessa couldn't expect a hint of mercy from them.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be more help," Admiral Ross had said at the time. "They found out that Roy made off with an M6 and put him on house arrest, and John evaded a military police investigation and is currently AWOL. If Jerry were still alive, he might be able to help you, but..."

Jerry was his nickname for Admiral Jerome Borda, former head of the Mithril operations division. He was thought to have died in the attack on the Sydney headquarters, though the blast had been so powerful that his body had never been found.

After feeling the pain of losing her own father one year ago, Tessa had also had to suffer the loss of Admiral Borda, who had been like a second father to her. *Ah, stop it...* she told herself. *Forget those old officers and focus on the enemy ships.*

Tessa turned back to the information displayed on her front screen. The Los Angeles-class had its back to them right now, while patrolling the region in an S-formation. It was probably using a towed array sonar, so while it hadn't spotted them yet, if the de Danaan kept moving on their current trajectory, they'd be detected sooner or later. Not even they could avoid making any noise at all when cruising along at such a high speed—fifty knots was as fast as a torpedo.

To avoid enemy detection, they'd have to slow down and dive lower, which would be like going from a jog to a crawl.

With sufficient caution, they could reach Merida Island unnoticed and avoid a shootout with the US Navy. But that would also severely delay their arrival time. One hour, fifty minutes was her rough estimate, and that was the absolute minimum amount of time that diving would add to their ETA.

One hour and fifty minutes, Tessa pondered. *Is that an acceptable delay?*

They had a rough estimate of the Afghanistan time limit, but no information on how long it would take to activate the TAROS on Merida Island. They could only speculate based on recon satellite data, and Tessa was the only one who might even be able to hazard a guess. She wasn't certain herself, but knew that they couldn't have much time left. Leonard and Kalinin would have seen to that. They had to hurry.

Besides, she thought next, *are the US Navy really the only ones protecting the island?* Not possible; Amalgam had its own navy. The data Kaname had left them in Mexico had included information on those aquatic ASes, the Leviathans. They'd probably see some of those soon, too. This meant that the US Navy submarines were more like the dogs on a fox hunt: avoiding them would probably send the de Danaan right into the thick of an ambush.

In that case... Tessa made up her mind. "Battle stations," she commanded succinctly.

"Aye, aye, ma'am. Battle stations!" Mardukas repeated. The sub's AI, Dana, blared the warning throughout the vessels. The control room screens all went red and the words 'BATTLE STATIONS' began to scroll across them. Of course, given how few people there were on board, most of them were already where they needed to be.

Tessa gave the order. "Come left to 0-3-0. Full ahead." She'd decided that they wouldn't run or hide. Instead, she had ordered them to accelerate and plow right into the side of the enemy ship.

"Come left to 0-3-0," Mardukas echoed. "Full ahead, aye."

Sousuke, standing beside her, looked quietly stunned by the order. That was

understandable, but Mardukas didn't look surprised at all.

"Hmm?" said Tessa. "You don't object?"

"No, ma'am," he answered. "In chess terms, this is what we call a gambit." A gambit was an aggressive play style that threw your pieces at the opponent with no concern for defense. "It's my specialty, in fact. So no, I do not object," he said, stone-faced. Tessa had thought that after all this time spent with him, she'd understood what kind of person Mardukas was, but it seemed he could still surprise her. "So, Captain," he said. "What comes next?"

"They'll notice us soon, I expect," Tessa told him. "Let's proceed on course until they do."

Their current speed was sixty knots, which was double the standard submarine speed. They were an incredible mass moving at incredible speed: a 4400-ton submarine, barreling through the ocean at about 108 kilometers per hour. The fluid control system of the EMFC couldn't completely cancel out the turbulence around them, and the faster the giant vessel moved, the more powerful the shaking around them became.

One of them against ten or more enemy vessels. Realizing it would likely be a difficult battle, Tessa addressed Sousuke. "Sagara-san."

"Yes?"

"You're dismissed," she told him. "Stand by with Al in Elevator Zero." She was referring to the large elevator in the hangar, which they used to convey ASes to the flight deck. Tessa was telling him to board the Laevatein and be ready to leave at any time.

"Ah..." Sousuke didn't say 'yes, ma'am,' immediately. She could sense an uncertainty within him from that moment's hesitation, as if he was asking if it was all right for him to leave so abruptly.

Tessa felt the same way, knowing that this might be his last deployment. She might never see him again. In light of all that, was her blunt order enough? Wasn't there something else she wanted to say to him?

The enemy submarine hasn't reacted yet, Tessa realized. *I have a little time. But what to say? What do I want to say to him?* After a period of silence, she

finally gave him a quiet smile and said, “Give my regards to Kaname-san.”

Various complicated emotions surfaced briefly on Sousuke’s face: Gratitude, respect, caution, fear, and also guilt—they all blended together in that momentary expression, then vanished. “All right, then,” he managed to say. He added, “Goodbye,” and then left the control room.

With the rest of the crew looking, Tessa couldn’t even turn to watch him go. It would be a lie to say she didn’t feel a little heartbroken. She couldn’t say she had no regrets. They had never even been so close that she could properly say, *I loved him once*, yet she was sure her yearning for him had been real.

Why, then, Tessa wondered, *don’t I feel any true sorrow in this moment? Well, it’s only natural,* she finally told herself. *It’ll come once things calm down.*

Thanks to Sousuke, I was able to enjoy feeling like a real girl my age for a while, Tessa briefly reflected. Just a few years ago, she’d thought she would go her entire life never feeling this way. *Thank you. Give my best to Kaname-san.* That was all that she’d been able to say to him.

Less than a minute after he was gone, she received a report from her sonar technician. “Con, sonar. Mike-5 has changed course to 3-0-5 and increased speed to fifteen knots.”

For now, she reminded herself, *it’s time for battle.* Driving thoughts of Sousuke from her mind, Tessa closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She focused, then opened her eyes.

Information began to stream across her front screen.

Teletha Testarossa was about to begin the greatest unrecorded underwater battle in history.

3: Pale Horse

The enemy had changed course. They probably wanted their towed sonar array facing the de Danaan head-on to collect more acoustic data. Whatever the reason, it was clear that the enemy had noticed them.

“What’s the DEMON?” Tessa inquired.

“Just got it. Analyzing now...” They were closer now and the opponent was speeding up, so they should have sufficient acoustic data for an ID. The head sonar tech, Dejirani, would have the name of the enemy sub in moments. “Got it,” he reported. “It’s the Asheville.”

SSN-758 Asheville: according to the data they’d received the week before, its captain was Commander Hogan. She’d never met him, but he had a sterling record. He was a father of two, about to be moved to a desk job... But his life—which, thus far, had consisted of a well-loved military career, balancing love for his family with faithful service to his country—was about to suffer a setback.

The de Danaan’s sonar continued to search for other underwater sound sources. As expected, there were three others hiding nearby: four submarines in total. As far as surface ships went... Tessa estimated that there were probably two anti-submarine frigates on the surface, plus two anti-submarine helicopters above.

And it wasn’t just these conventional forces of the US Navy. There were also a few smaller signatures in the water. Likely five of them... Tessa knew these to be Leviathans.

“A fiery welcome, I suppose,” said Mardukas. “How shall we begin?”

“With a bang,” Tessa told him. “Load all tubes with torpedoes. Prioritize Mike-5, Mike-7, then the other underwater craft.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am,” said Mardukas, acknowledging the order. “Load tubes one through six. Target two at Mike-5, two at Mike-7, one each at Sierra-6 and Sierra-8.”

The fire control officer repeated the order, and the boat's automatic loaders completed their work in twenty seconds. On top of that, Tessa had four anti-ship missiles, two anti-air missiles, and two anti-submarine torpedoes—eight in all—mounted into the central MVLS. In the meantime, she raised the submarine to periscope depth, just below the water's surface.

She reanalyzed the data. The number of enemies was certain: when combined, the US Navy and Amalgam's forces totaled thirteen units. One against thirteen...

Just fine, Tessa thought. "I'll take you all on," she said, and found a small smile appearing on her face. It was an expression she hadn't worn in a long time; a feeling she hadn't felt in a long time. Stirrings in her soul, which she hadn't permitted herself in so long... *I'll show you all who you're dealing with.*

Tessa gave the order. "Flood all tubes."

"Flooding all tubes, aye."

"Open all tubes."

"Opening all tubes, aye."

Opening fourteen launch tubes while moving at such high speeds would create uncontrollable turbulence and increase their internal vibrations, as well as the noise they generated. Their location and tactics would be clear as day to all the enemies around them.

Indeed, their priority target, the Asheville, picked up speed and began escaping to the southwest. Their other targets also began to move frantically.

Too late, Tessa thought gleefully. "All torpedoes and missiles, fire simultaneously!"

"Aye, aye, ma'am. Fire all!"

All missiles and torpedoes fired from the Tuatha de Danaan. Normally you'd just fire one or two at a time and check for reactions, but Tessa had fired fourteen of them all at once. From the outside, it would have been a grand sight to see.

Six torpedoes, fired out of the bow launch tubes parallel to the water,

immediately activated their motors. They sped up to seventy knots before dispersing. The eight missiles launched from the MVLS burst out of the sea into the air, engaged their rocket motors, and flew forward.

“All torpedoes and missiles operating properly. Closing all tube doors and draining now,” the fire control officer reported.

“Good,” said Tessa. “Load mobile mines into odd-numbered tubes and high-speed torpedoes into even-numbered ones.”

“Aye,” said Mardukas. “ADSLMMs in one, three, five. ADCAPs in two, four, six.”

“Maintain course and speed,” Tessa ordered. “Make your depth 250. Five degrees down bubble.”

“Aye, ma’am. Diving to 250. Five degrees down bubble.”

Now, what is the enemy doing? Tessa wondered. She checked the nautical chart displayed on the front screen. Concise numbers printed next to the arcs of the fired weapons displayed their heading and speed, as well as the various enemy units targeted.

The enemy was clearly caught off guard by the maneuver. The US Navy ships began to scatter—this much was expected—but so did the five Leviathans. The opponent they’d expected to run and hide had plowed right into the center of their formation and fired fourteen missiles into the sea and the air at once, after all; they must have wondered if they were mad. The de Danaan had instantaneously scrapped every countermeasure and plan they had prepared. They would have their hands full just dodging and fighting back.

And soon enough... with damage control.

“We have a hit from the Sea Sparrows,” came a report. The two anti-air missiles had hit their targets, the anti-submarine helicopters. These had been equipped with special anti-air warheads that used less powder and generated less shrapnel—the crew called them “slapshots”—so it probably wouldn’t blow them up completely or crash them hard into the sea.

“I hear a slight water impact,” said Dejirani. “Should be one chopper down. The other one seems to be just barely airborne.”

One helicopter down. The other was still flying but would be out of the fight. There might be dead or wounded among the crew, but Tessa couldn't hold back any further against people trying to kill her... Even if they were her own countrymen.

From the de Danaan's point of view, the most troublesome enemies were now disabled.

"Harpoons intercepted," came another report.

The anti-ship missiles, known as AD Harpoons, were approaching the surface vessels, two aimed at each one. These were anti-submarine Frigates, so they didn't have AEGIS, which should limit their anti-air defenses. Indeed, as hoped, their CIWS machine guns weren't fully able to stop the incoming anti-ship missiles.

On the screen, the enemy ship symbol overlapped with the missile one.

"Hit," came yet another. "Turtle One received the final signal. Analyzing hit locations: Mike-8's is near the tail of the ship, near the waterline. Mike-11's is also near the tail, near the waterline."

AD Harpoons were almost entirely different from the classic Harpoon missiles. They detached their tip-mounted radar module upon reaching the final homing stage, then used the optical sensors mounted on the rear to "see" the enemy ship and target the designated location with the desired amount of force. They'd destroyed the area near the tail screw on both surface ships, rendering them dead in the water.

"MAGROC splashdown. Now homing in on Sierra-15 and Sierra-18."

They'd launched the MAGROCs—which were vertically-fired torpedoes—at two of the five aquatic ASes, but Tessa didn't anticipate any hits this time. They were too fast. She'd chosen the two in the most threatening positions just to try to limit their offensive capabilities.

As hoped, the two enemy Leviathans abandoned their ideal attack positions and entered evasive maneuvers. That would buy them time before the next attack.

Following the eight missiles, six torpedoes headed for various submarines.

“Asheville launched countermeasure,” Dejirani announced. The Asheville—the original submarine targeting them—had now entered evasive maneuvers and fired a sound-emitting countermeasure to try to hold the de Danaan’s torpedo off. But its efforts proved to be in vain as both torpedoes hit near its tail. These were also weakened warheads; they would either destroy the screw, or open a small hole in the hull—no more than that. But that was all they needed.

The other three subs were further away, so Tessa hadn’t been counting on them all hitting. But they temporarily disabled one and forced another to do an emergency blow. Including the Asheville, that meant three of the four US submarines were out of the fight.

But one still remained. This one hadn’t run away but actually came straight at them, accelerating at a diagonal to their path at an angle just outside of the torpedo’s pursuit range. It had successfully evaded while going on an offensive, streaking in from the de Danaan’s side.

“Impressive,” Mardukas said, appreciative of their skill and spirit.

“Do you have a name yet?” Tessa asked.

“No, almost... I have a match. It’s here. Ahh...” Dejirani said, his voice taking on a strange tone. “It’s them again. The Pasadena!”

Tessa quickly investigated. The data she’d received last week told her that the captain of the SSN-752 Pasadena was still Commander Killy Benjamin Sailor. “Sailor-san,” she groaned. “At a time like this...”

Tessa knew the captain of the Pasadena. She had happened to meet him entirely by coincidence at Christmas, a year and a bit ago. He would have simply known Tessa as a maid on the luxury liner they’d been aboard, of course... He surely never would have imagined that she was the captain of the Toy Box.

“Shall we engage?” Mardukas asked.

“We don’t have time,” said Tessa. “The Leviathans will be coming soon. Come right to 1-2-5. Flank speed.”

“Aye, ma’am. Come right to 1-2-5. Flank speed.”

They accelerated further, rushing the Pasadena's starboard hull as if they were going to slam right into it. They didn't have time to fire a torpedo into the Pasadena. Because soon—

"Con, sonar! Enemy torpedo detected, bearing 0-6-2! It came from Sierra-17!"

Here it was... coming from one of the Leviathans at the worst possible time. Tessa gave a quick order. "Target, Sierra-17! Fire torpedoes two and four!"

"Aye! Target, Sierra-17! Firing torpedoes two and four!"

The high-speed torpedoes streaked towards the Leviathans. At the same time, still plowing at full speed towards the Pasadena, they dropped their depth. Despite expecting to take a hit, Captain Sailor launched his own torpedoes without flinching, but the de Danaan was out of their homing range now. The Pasadena's torpedoes rushed by a hundred meters above and to the left, while their own torpedoes streaked over the Pasadena and headed for the Leviathan beyond it. To liken it to a sword fight, Tessa had dodged the tip of Sailor's slash, then stabbed at the assassin coming up behind him.

The Pasadena passed just over the de Danaan, close enough that they could almost hear Captain Sailor's bellowing from a few dozen meters above.

"Enemy torpedo, distance six hundred! Five hundred! Our torpedo is nearing the enemy! Distance Two hundred! One hundred!" Their two torpedoes were nearing one of the Leviathans, which took evasive maneuvers.

"Distance fifty... Enemy hit!" There was an explosion. The shock wave rocked the de Danaan from several hundred meters away. They didn't have time to confirm their achievement. They had to deal with the enemy torpedo heading right toward them first.

"Another enemy torpedo approaching! Distance, four hundred!"

Distance three hundred. Distance two hundred...

"Left full rudder! Maximum dive angle!"

"Aye!" The pilot turned the rudder sharply, banking it as far to the left as possible while slamming down the dive rudder. Though almost driven into a tailspin by the incredible turbulence, he kept the vessel skillfully under control

and changed their course smoothly.

Distance one hundred fifty. Distance one hundred...

“All hands, prepare for impact!” Tessa shouted over the comm.

Distance fifty...

The enemy torpedo exploded.

Sousuke was almost to the hangar when he heard Tessa’s voice on the comm. *Prepare for impact—*

A few seconds later, he felt it as the lights went out. The wall to his right tilted toward Sousuke and sent him flying. The ceiling came crashing down next, and stopped short just before it hit him. In fact, the ship’s rocking had just bucked him so high that he’d almost hit the ceiling, but the situation was so chaotic that that was what it felt like. If Sousuke hadn’t been wearing his AS operator’s uniform, he might have broken a few ribs.

Immediately after slamming hard into the floor, he tried to pick himself up. It was still pitch black. Through his tinnitus, Sousuke could hear some kind of loud hissing; it sounded like a gas leak.

The emergency lamps were on. The path was lid up in red, and a pipe along the wall a few meters behind him was violently spraying some kind of mist.

“Ngh...” he groaned. *What pipe was that again?* he wondered. *Is that water spraying out?* It felt hot... He couldn’t be sure. Should he try to stop the leak? And if so, how? The ship’s internal systems were outside of Sousuke’s purview. He’d have liked to ask a nearby crewman, but they were on a skeleton crew right now, so there was nobody around to ask.

There was a phone ten steps away at the entrance to the hangar. The boat was still rocking. Sousuke tottered up to it and called the control room. After one ring, the damage control officer answered.

“Damage control here! Status?”

“Sagara here! I’m at—”

“I know the phone’s location! Status, now!”

Sousuke had been looking for a sign with the hall's number, but immediately switched gears and gave his report. "No injuries! Five meters from the entrance to the hangar deck... I don't know what it's called, but there's hot steam spurting out from some pipe! And—"

Before he could finish that statement, Sousuke heard a roar as water began gushing in from the wall beyond the pipe at issue, the spurt as wide as a human leg and with the force of a fire hose. The water collecting on the floor flooded toward him, and quickly reached his ankles.

"We're taking on water from the portside wall!" he shouted into the phone. "It's coming in hard..."

"Got it. Anyone else there?"

"Negative! It's just me!" The water had now reached knee level, and was flowing into the hangar deck, too. Sousuke felt like it might drag him under.

"Retreat to the hangar immediately! I'll close off that hallway!"

"Roger!" Before Sousuke could even respond, the watertight door began to close. He'd have liked to ask about the status of the battle, the extent of the damage, and if there were any wounded in other areas, but he didn't have time; a door as thick as a bank vault's was closing on him with terrifying speed.

Sousuke sloshed through the water, slipped through the gap in the watertight door and toppled into the hangar as the door closed behind him. *The hangar itself seems dry,* he noted. The space was as large as a school gymnasium. Normally it would have been packed full of ASes, transport helicopters, recon helicopters, and STOVL attack craft, but it was currently empty. All he saw was the Laevatein, one mid-sized transport helicopter, and various cargo containers and heavy machinery strewn about.

The maintenance crew and deck crew were no longer on board, and Sousuke didn't see any other people present. Despite the epic battle around them and the tremendous rocking of the ship, there were no screams and cries to be heard. It was a bizarre sight.

The reverberations of battle echoed in the silence of the hangar.

Just then, a shipping container fell, landing right in front of Sousuke before

sliding to starboard as the ship tilted again. If that had hit him straight on, he'd have been lucky to get off with a few broken bones. It was a good thing the cargo hold was uninhabited...

No, wait, he realized. *It's not uninhabited*. There would be one person working here. "Lieutenant Sachs!" he shouted. Sousuke knew that he should be here putting the final touches on the Laevatein, but Sachs was nowhere to be seen.

"Lieutenant Sachs! Are you here?!" he shouted again, but received no reply.

Sousuke ran to the starboard side where the Laevatein was parked, still looking for Sachs. The fully loaded Laevatein, including its emergency deployment booster, was fixed in place in an AS's traditional prostrate position, but the external generator unit that should have been next to it had toppled near its legs. It was the size of a large refrigerator, but was currently bent as if having fallen from a great height, and parts of its casing had come loose. There was also fresh blood on one corner of the unit.

"Dammit," Sousuke cursed under his breath.

Something was lying beyond the crumpled generator unit. He probably hadn't seen it before because the Laevatein's leg was in the way. It was Sachs, in a puddle of blood, next to the dimly lit wall.

"Lieutenant!" Sousuke ran up to him. The man let out a soft groan as he grabbed his shoulders.

Sachs was still alive, but just barely. His chest had been crushed, and he was losing a lot of blood. The generator unit had gone flying after the explosion earlier, pinning him to the wall and stabbing him through with a protruding portion. A man with a less impressive build might have been killed instantly.



“Sa... gara?” Sachs said, in a weak voice Sousuke had never heard from him before. “I messed up. I couldn’t be arsed to tie down the generator... Ha ha... So much blood...” Blood trickled from his mouth and down his ample beard.

“Don’t look at it, and don’t talk,” Sousuke advised him. “I’ll call Captain Goldberry.” He ran up to a nearby phone and called Goldberry, the ship’s doctor. Despite apparently looking after injured men there, too, she responded that she’d be there right away. Sousuke ran back up to Sachs, took out the first aid kit he had on hand, and began examining the injury.

“I don’t think it’ll... do any good...” Sachs choked out.

“Don’t give up, Lieutenant.” Sousuke reached over to begin treating him, but Sachs knocked his hand away with surprising force.

“Just... listen! Sagara... the adjustments are... finished. But... because the external power source was severed... Al can’t boot up.”

“Lieutenant.” Sousuke treated him while he listened.

“The plug on the... right hip. Remove the broken attachment and reconnect it to the third cable in the locker,” Sachs told him urgently. “Use the socket next to it... to activate the... APU. Okay? Make sure to get it right...” What he was saying was very important, and Sousuke would have been left helpless without that explanation.

Meanwhile, Sousuke wiped at the massively bleeding wound with gauze. Within seconds he could make out the shape of the wound, but it was immediately covered with spilling blood again.

The blow probably pierced an artery close to Sachs’s heart, Sousuke realized. *I won’t be able to stop the bleeding with what I have on hand.* The puddle around Sachs gave him a rough idea of how much blood he’d already lost. Even taking his size into account, it seemed unreal that he was even still talking. Sousuke stuck him with an IV and gave him a saline drip, but he knew it was a losing battle.

Sousuke estimated that even if Goldberry got there within three minutes, in this chaos... Sachs wouldn’t make it. “The IME cable is still connected,” he said. “How much work have you done?”

“Don’t touch anything,” Sachs demanded. “Remove it... leave the rest to Al.”

“What about the SAL tank? Does it need depressurization?”

“Yeah. Be careful... when you take it out.”

Sousuke would have liked to be asking, “Are you in pain? Have you lost any feeling?” but he had to ask about his machine, instead.

“And... I increased the motion manager’s data bus. I haven’t tested if Al will boot up or not. If he doesn’t... disengage the amplifier line from the control panel,” Sachs advised him. “You’ll lose the XL-3, but the machine itself... should work.”

“Understood,” Sousuke told him succinctly. “I’ll do it.”

The moment his explanation was over, Sachs’s tense limbs went limp. “Sagara,” he choked out. “I... don’t blame anyone for this.”

“Yeah, you’re a good man,” Sousuke told him. “Everyone knows it, so you need to hang in there. Goldberry will be here soon.”

“I don’t want CPR from that old hag.”

“Don’t say that to her. She’ll—” Sousuke’s words cut off, because Sachs wasn’t listening anymore. His eyes remained slightly open, fixed on some point in the distance.

“Dammit!” Despite knowing that the effort was pointless, Sousuke tried to resuscitate him using a nearby defibrillator and CPR.

Goldberry arrived and looked Sachs over. She must have come running at full tilt, because she was out of breath, shoulders heaving. At last, the only words she said to Sousuke were, “He was a good man.”

Sousuke just clenched his teeth and screwed up his face, and didn’t curse any more than he’d already done. He wiped Sachs’s blood from his face and hands and allowed himself a deep sigh. “I’m going to prepare to sortie,” he said wearily. Then he stood up and went about activating the Laevatein, just as Sachs had instructed with his dying breath.

The ARX-8 Laevatein was fully stocked, with shotcannon, assault rifle, massive demolition gun, two Gatling cannons affixed to its hips... Then there was the

lambda driver canceler known as the fairy wing, and the special emergency deployment booster known as the XL-3. There were also twelve Black Mamba anti-air missiles mounted in its main wings. With that whole arsenal hooked up, the Laevatein's silhouette was so busy and bulky that, when seen from afar, it wouldn't even look humanoid.

But even with this many weapons, Sousuke wondered if it would be enough; such was the difference in power between him and his enemies. Pulling out the spare external generator unit, Sousuke attached it to the socket in the machine's hip. The generator unit activated, and he repeated the boot-up sequence from the external control panel.

"What did he... say in the end?" Goldberry asked from behind him. She was usually a very cheerful middle-aged woman, but there was no vigor in her voice now.

"That he didn't want your CPR," Sousuke told her.

"He was awful. An awful man." While the doctor laughed through her tears, Sousuke continued his work.

He tried booting up Al. There was a long silence, and then the indicator lit up. Sachs had said he wasn't sure if the Laevatein would boot up, but it had. The data bus amplifier seemed to be working just fine. Voice output wasn't functioning yet, but the report appeared on the screen in clear text.

Connection confirmed. Checking status. APU engaged. Initiating all vetronics.

"He also said he didn't blame anyone," said Sousuke.

"Yeah. Actually... I feel the same way."

"Towards the captain?"

"If she says it's necessary," Goldberry insisted, "then it's necessary."

Sousuke said nothing.

"You of all people need to have faith in her, Sousuke," Goldberry chided.

He didn't know how to respond. So instead, he removed the IME and various cables as he'd been instructed, adjusted the valves, unplugged plugs, closed the access panel and locked the armor back in. Sousuke punched in the code, and

Al's main power booted up. Now he could leave the rest to Al.

The cooling unit let out a low hum; the Laevatein was awakening.

Sousuke removed the strips of caution tape reading, "REMOVE BEFORE LAUNCH" that were affixed to the machine here and there, then climbed up to the back of the head.

He stuck his pistol and other equipment into the storage space under the cockpit hatch. There wasn't much room, as it was just about the size of a travel bag, but Sousuke managed to shove an old rocket launcher into it. This was a compact disposable model called an M72 LAW, once used by the US Armed Forces. It wasn't as powerful as the anti-tank weapons currently in service, but it had one thing going for it: it was compact and light enough to fit into an AS's storage compartment. The tube could be carried around in shortened form, then telescoped into firing readiness when the time came to use it.

The hum of the palladium reactor's activation echoed through the hangar, although the Laevatein's prototype reactor was much less quiet than the almost silent reactors found in typical M9s. From atop the Laevatein's back, Sousuke put on the familiar headgear before noticing Goldberry, who was packing up her medical instruments and getting ready to leave.

"I'm heading out," she said. "About Sachs..."

"You tell her," said Sousuke. The news shouldn't come from his lips; this was something Goldberry should do.

"I will," she promised. "Take care, Sousuke."

"Roger."

The screen was already on. The cockpit and master suit were those of the M9 he was so used to. Sousuke put his arms through, grabbing the levers and stepping hard on the pedals. He moved the cursor with his left thumb; the boot-up procedure was in progress, and the voice interface was already active.

"Al," said Sousuke.

《Yes, Sarge?》 It was the familiar deep male voice. His machine's AI, Al, was responding to him.

“Establish data link,” Sousuke told him. “Acquire vessel data from Dana.”

《Roger. Accessing C1 channel. Response from Dana. Priority C. Connection complete.》

A window opened in the corner of the screen displaying the de Danaan’s current combat status: it was still locked in combat. The de Danaan wasn’t about to go down that fast. Still, they’d taken losses to their stealth and speed. They’d lost any element of surprise they might have had and were now locked into a brutal brawl.

Meanwhile, they’d shaken off nearly all of the US Navy ships. The last of them, the USS Pasadena, still seemed to be in pursuit, but wouldn’t be able to catch the de Danaan in its current condition. They had already taken out two of Amalgam’s high-speed submarine craft, the Leviathans, as well. Another was being targeted by a mobile mine that Tessa had deployed in the water... There was a distant explosion: a hit. Tessa had finished off the third Leviathan.

But there were still a few Leviathans left, and they were entering combat positions. More high-speed torpedoes were on the way, a total of four. Tessa returned fire. After releasing a third torpedo, she entered evasive maneuvers immediately, dodging two torpedoes on a pulse-pounding course before accelerating forward to continue the battle. She really was a monster.

《Sarge, a question.》

“What is it?” Sousuke replied.

《Three o’clock, distance zero. There is a human-sized object I cannot identify. What is it?》 The covered, strapped-down corpse was visible in a corner of the image taken by the machine’s optical sensors.

“That’s Lieutenant Sachs’s body,” Sousuke explained.

《Lieutenant Edward Sachs, chief of maintenance, is KIA?》

“Affirmative.”

《Could you tell me the cause of death?》

“The ship took a hit, and the impact caused the external generator unit to lose balance and slam into him. He was so busy getting you booted up, he didn’t lock

it down.”

Al didn’t respond right away, and there was a brief silence. But after a moment, he said,《Understood. Thank you for the explanation.》

The activation procedure continued. The emergency deployment booster attached to the back—the XL-3 jury-rigged for the Laevatein—underwent its control tests. Most of them worked, which meant he could fly, but one error persisted. Sousuke reran the test.

They’d called it the “XL-3” but that was really an arbitrary name assigned to it by Sachs. It wasn’t a prototype unit created by an arms manufacturer, and never would be. Of course, they had done no flight tests, just computer simulations. Sousuke still didn’t know if it could really fly or not, and he was honestly shocked that Sachs’s hard work had even gotten the connections established in time.

Another error.

While Sousuke continued to retry the XL-3’s tests, he lifted the locks on all the joints. He stood the Laevatein up and guided it to the large elevator at the back of the hangar.

He felt another hard jolt as an enemy torpedo exploded at close range. The damage was mild, but the external EMFC array had been badly damaged. The de Danaan would lose more maneuverability.

Sousuke could be no help with the aquatic combat. Once the Laevatein reached the elevator, he locked it into a standby position and kept testing the XL-3, which continued to spit out errors. The sub-wings’ control line and supplemental circuits weren’t responding.

《Do you think it’s my fault?》Al asked as he tried it again.

“It was a total kitbash,” Sousuke answered. “A few kinks are to be expected.”

《No, I mean Lieutenant Sachs.》

“What?”

《Earlier, you suggested that he was lax in his safety protocols because he was so eager to get me working.》

“Well...” Sousuke didn’t know what to say. *Does Al feel responsible for Sachs’s death?* he wondered. Even if Al knew how to interact with humans, he was still a machine. It was one thing for him to ask questions about things that would matter on the battlefield, but Sousuke didn’t understand the purpose of this one. “Why would you ask that?” he finally replied. “Is there something else he was supposed to get around to but didn’t?”

《No. I booted up successfully, so there was no role left for the maintenance crew. Lieutenant Sachs’s loss is only a minor diminishment to our battle capacity. There is nothing to worry about there.》

It was an extremely machine-like response. Sousuke felt a slight irritation and almost told him to shut up.

But before he could, Al said, 《But I feel a greater sense of loss somehow. Sachs has been tending to me since my Arbalest days. He knows my body better than anyone. He won’t run checks on me or talk to me ever again. This is a loss that exceeds mere strategic value.》

Is he sad? Sousuke wondered. *Over Sachs’s death?*

《In addition, I worry that my body’s lack of flexibility... my maintenance inefficiency has led to his death. That is what I mean when I say it’s my fault.》

The core unit that made up Al was special; Sousuke had heard that it was made from liquid metal particles that simulated a human nervous system. His technology was completely different from a normal M9’s AI. Yet Sousuke had up until now assumed that Al was just carefully mimicking human behavior. And so he’d interacted with him as though he were a beloved gun or car, without thinking more deeply about it.

But he couldn’t think that way anymore. Al felt responsible for Sachs’s death; this was far beyond the realm of just imitating emotion, wasn’t it? “It isn’t your fault. It was necessary, that’s all,” Sousuke told him, brushing off his own doubts about the matter. “And with his last words, Sachs said that he didn’t blame anyone.”

《This is valuable information for me.》

“Good. Now focus on work.”

《Roger.》 AI silently continued retrying the checks.

Sousuke suddenly remembered the memory chip in Kudan Mira's letter. She'd written that she'd found it on the internet and for him to watch it if he had free time, but it probably wasn't important information to the Laevatein or the mission. He wouldn't have time to look it over now. He'd look it over after he got back.

If he ever got back...

"Uruz-7! Are you ready to deploy?!" the combat controller asked over the radio. The boat was oscillating violently, and he could hear the roar of compressed air forcibly expelling water from the ballast tank.

"Affirmative," Sousuke replied. "On standby in Elevator Zero."

"We're doing an emergency blow," the controller told him. "We'll open the flight deck the minute we surface. After we launch you, we'll submerge again and resume aquatic combat. Please handle the cleanup on the island as discussed."

"Roger," Sousuke replied succinctly. Then he checked the Laevatein's status, only to find that the control line giving them errors still hadn't resolved. He gave up and ended the tests. It was just an issue with a sub-system, after all; he'd just have to pray that the main system stayed untouched so that the error never came up.

The boat tilted hard upwards and let out a scream, streaking for the surface like a rocket. More machines and clutter rolled around the hangar deck. He was glad that Captain Goldberry had thought to fix Sachs's body in place.

"I'm heading out now... Ed 'Bruiser' Sachs," Sousuke said, switching his control mode to move his right leg lightly. The Laevatein's right leg moved in time with it, going down to one knee to pay respects. At the same time, the elevator began to rise.

We don't need sentimental words between us, thought Sousuke. *This is enough. Isn't that right, Lieutenant?*

The elevator's warning lamps began to spin, flashing and blaring with ear-splitting alarms. Sousuke felt one big tremor rock his machine, which suggested

that the Tuatha de Danaan had burst from the surface. The Laevatein was nearly thrown out of the elevator from the force, but it just managed to keep its balance and ride out the shaking.

“Opening flight hatch! Uruz-7, to the catapult! ASAP!” said the combat control officer, barking out his orders. The elevator continued to rise until Sousuke and the Laevatein arrived on the flight deck. The massive hatch overhead split open, revealing the pre-dawn sky above; it was a mixture of dark purple and gray, and rain was pouring down. The wind wasn’t particularly strong, but Sousuke still couldn’t believe he was being launched out into a maelstrom like this with no rehearsal.

A large wave rocked the de Danaan. Aware that any submarine was at its most vulnerable when surfacing, Sousuke knew that he had to keep their time here as short as possible. The Laevatein proceeded from the elevator to the flight deck and swiftly fixed itself to the catapult, assuming a posture like a sprinter in a crouching start.

Connection complete, the screen soon read. *Set XL-3 rocket motors to standby. Elongate flight control surfaces automatically. Flaps at maximum length.*

《Launch preparations complete,》 said Al. 《Shall I transmit TLS?》

“Go on,” Sousuke told him.

《Transmitting.》

The combat control officer responded immediately. “Control to Uruz-7! TLS received! See you on the beach!” It was the typical phrase said before a mission launch began.

Alarms blared as the steam catapult and rocket motors roared to life simultaneously. Sousuke felt a blast of explosive acceleration, as though a massive invisible hand was shoving at him from behind as the tip of the flight deck sped closer and closer. The catapult released him automatically, casting his machine out over the ocean. But just as the Laevatein seemed about to crash into the black waves, it achieved lift and accelerated as it began to ascend.

In his rear-view monitor, he could see the de Danaan immediately closing its

flight hatch to resubmerge. In the blink of an eye it was miles away, quickly rendered invisible behind the curtain of rain and mist.

As expected, the Laevatein was vibrating wildly, jerking in all directions so violently that Sousuke was amazed it was really flying. *Am I crashing already?* he wondered. No, he was still flying... The readings on his screen showed that despite the shaking, his speed was evening out. But even with wings, this was less like flying and more like being shot out of a cannon: the immense propulsion of the XL-3 was throwing this aerodynamically unstable "ground weapon" at Merida Island through brute force alone.

《Vehicle resembling a ship detected in our path,》 Al reported. 《Distance, 317. Bearing 0-8-6.》

"Classification?!" Sousuke found himself shouting over the powerful noise and vibrations.

《Unknown. Same signals detected at bearings 0-8-1 and 0-9-3.》

Sousuke knew that the sensors on an M9 or the Arbalest would have been able to give him more detail, but at this distance and in this state, it was frankly impressive that the Laevatein even got as far as "resembling a ship." He was fully reliant on the XL-3's inherent FLIR and navigation radar.

Three ships in my path... That can't be right, thought Sousuke. The water would be shallow in that area, and all but the most experienced crews would avoid it for fear of running aground. For them to specifically stake out a place there meant—

"They're not ships," he realized. "They're Behemoths!" Those massive ASes... The data they'd acquired suggested that they would still have three of them left.

《Something like active radar detected, a lock, possibly from anti-air missiles, 》 said Al. 《They've been fired. Four each. Twelve in total. Evasive maneuvers?》

"Not an option!" Sousuke yelled back. It was impossible to dodge modern anti-air missiles with simple evasive maneuvers—and he wasn't piloting a fighter jet, anyway. A sharp turn would snap their wings off from the g-forces, or at best, they'd lose speed and plummet into the ocean. Of course, it went

without saying that he didn't have any electronic warfare equipment.

The twelve missiles approached.

Three seconds to contact—

●

Around the time that the Laevatein was picking up the Behemoths' anti-air radar pings, alarms were also ringing out in the C-17 transport carrying Mao and the others.

"Missiles incoming," the control room advised. "We're trying to dodge. Brace for impact."

"Anti-ECS missiles? For the love of..." Mao clicked her tongue from the cockpit of her M9, which was on standby in the plane's cargo bay. The transport was ECS-enabled, which meant their enemies shouldn't have been able to track their approach with normal radar... yet they were still getting 'welcome fireworks' as they approached the drop point. With electronic warfare systems and at this altitude, they should be able to avoid a direct hit even from anti-ECS missiles, but—

She felt a jolt, followed by the sound of an explosion. An enemy missile had climbed to ten thousand meters and exploded near the transport. Mao couldn't tell their current status from the cockpit. She just had to trust in the pilot's skill, and pray that the plane held out. "Did we take a direct hit?!" she called out.

"No, probably just a fragment!" replied the pilot. "There's a fire in the second engine! Working to put it out now!"

The right-side jet engine was howling terribly with a piercing sound of turbines. The noise then quieted down; perhaps the pilot had turned the engine off. At the same time, though, the plane's vibrations got worse. They were flying on one lung, with two ASes and 32 soldiers aboard. This wasn't good.

"Enough, let's just drop—" Mao tried.

"No, hold out a while longer. Just fifteen kilometers left. Can you make it?" Clouseau said to the pilot, cutting her off.

"Ben?!" she questioned.

“If we drop now, we’ll be too far from the target,” he reminded her. “We’d have to cross the mountain, and we don’t have time for that.”

“Geh...” Mao muttered. He was right; she’d just have to grit her teeth and leave it to them.

“Got it. Ah, we’ll hold out somehow, I’m sure! Just be ready to go at any time!” the pilot responded, and then relayed their situation to the two fighter jet escorts. These were Mithril’s last two FAV-8 super harriers, who’d rendezvoused with them mid-flight on the border with Pakistan. They’d already begun to return fire at the enemy site that had fired the anti-air missile, dropping precipitously to a dangerous altitude.

“Laguz-1, roger!” the super harrier’s pilot responded. “We’ll escort you as far as we can! We’ll get you to Point Echo however it—”

Another warning blared out: an anti-air missile was on the way. Their transport banked valiantly while broadcasting a hologram decoy to evade.

There was another explosion. This came from farther away than the last one, but their plane was still bombarded by shrapnel, and the world around her shook. If Mao hadn’t already been gritting her teeth, she probably would’ve bit her tongue, because the front part of the cargo bay was now on fire. She could hear Yang and the others, on standby in their drop gear, shouting.

Give me the fire extinguisher. Anybody injured?

Wu’s taken shrapnel! He’s unconscious! Someone see to him!

“Ngh...” Mao muttered helplessly. Her only option was to grip her M9’s control stick and read her machine’s status. *No damage to the machine,* she realized. *Ready to drop at any time.*

There were ten kilometers left to the drop point.

She thought, *Hurry...*

There was no stress worse than that felt by a paratrooper. The enemies could be attacking and there’d be nothing you could do. All the training you’d done, all the skills you’d acquired... You could fall to your death without ever getting a chance to use any of them.

“Laguz-2, I’ve destroyed two enemy anti-air SAM sites. As far as I can tell, there’s only one le—” A wave of static hissed out, and Laguz-2’s communications cut off.

“Laguz-1 here,” their escort reported. “Laguz-2 took a hit. I can see smoke. Laguz-2, can you hear me? Laguz-2, respond!”

Six kilometers left to the drop point.

Hurry!

“Laguz-2 went down near coordinates 21-82. No sign of parachute. I repeat. No sign of parachute!”

One of their FAV-8s was down, Mao realized, and they didn’t know if the pilot was alive or dead.

“Pilot to all drop units. Engine 1 output is dropping. We can’t maintain altitude. I repeat. We cannot maintain altitude!”

The fire in the cargo bay was getting worse. They were already in low pressure mode for the drop, so why was the fire still spreading? *Three kilometers to the drop point,* Mao thought urgently. *Close enough!*

“Ben!” she yelled.

“Right,” he agreed tersely. “Captain, we’re ready. Let us out.”

“Roger, Uruz-1,” the pilot told them. “Good luck.”

Mao was immediately assaulted by the howl of the wind and the engines when the rear cargo hatch opened. The blackness of night yawned outside of the hatch, and sporadic bursts of anti-air artillery fire illuminated both the night and the two M9s in red.

“Clear the rails! We’re going on ahead!” Clouseau, ignoring drop procedure, shouted over his external speakers. The M9 locks were released first. The alarm blared, and sparks went flying as Clouseau’s Falke slid down the guide rails and flew backwards out of the aircraft.

“Uruz-2, dropping!” yelled Mao, realizing that she had no time to follow procedure, either. As Clouseau’s machine disappeared outside the plane, Mao immediately released her own locks, and felt a heavy jolt as her machine

lurched backwards. The walls on either side of her went rushing by, and in moments she was sucked out into the open air.

Mao could see the starry sky above and pitch-black ground below. She watched as the C-17 ahead of her, its right engine trailing a thin flame, moved off into the distance.

There was an explosion nearby. She didn't know if it was from a missile or anti-air artillery, and her machine's sensors couldn't tell, either. The blast threw her M9 off balance and into a sharp spin. She couldn't see the transport any more. She couldn't tell which way was down.

Where's Clouseau? Mao wondered. *Did Yang and the others get out safely? Any damage to my machine? What's my current altitude?* She couldn't read it with the screen shaking like this. Her machine was spinning so fast the sweat was almost flying off her in beads. *Yes, my alignment... Got to fix my alignment...*

Yes, you've done this many times before, she reminded herself. *Stabilize your posture.* Moving her limbs with all her might, Mao spread the M9's arms and legs out wide. She could feel the strong wind pressure through the machine's feedback system. She was moving right to left, so she pulled her right arm and leg in slightly, then extended just her left arm, in order to stop her machine's chaotic spinning.

Her current altitude was fifteen hundred meters. She couldn't open her parachute yet; to do so would only make her a target. So, for now, she checked her instruments and activated her ECS, switching her sensors to passive infrared to pick up a heat source in the cold mountain ridge below.

It was the anti-air cannon that took that last shot, she realized, and *it's still focused on me. It's going to shoot again. Now—*

Mao gasped, and swung her limbs to rotate her machine a few times, moving it to the left just as a tracer round burst in the sky where she'd been moments before. The proximity fuze had triggered, her ECS scrambling its aim. Unsteadily, she aimed her assault rifle below her and turned her master arm on.

She fired. Her fire control system adjusted her aim based on recoil. Mao's 40mm shells rained down on the anti-air cannon far below, causing it to

explode.

Altitude: five hundred meters. She couldn't hold out any longer, and her drop speed slowed dramatically as she was forced to open her first parachute. Mao released the first parachute before deploying her second, and her descent slowed again. If there were any enemies remaining in the area, this would be her most vulnerable moment.

She released the parachute and went into free fall, speeding toward the surface of the pitch-black mountain before landing successfully. Shock absorbent steam jetted from the M9's joints and Mao's bones screamed in protest, sparks flying before her eyes as the shock ran through her. But this was how it always went. She gritted her teeth to endure it, and then drew her machine away swiftly in order to scan the area.

She couldn't find Clouseau or her other allies. If they were alive, they should be nearby. She couldn't make out the enemy units, either. *No, that isn't true,* Mao realized after a moment. *I can see my mission target.*

The spot where she had landed was near the ridge of the gentle mountain slope. From there, she could see a towering mountain across a deep gorge. It was hunched there in the darkness, like a beast ready to pounce. That mountain was Ishkashim Base.

The entire mountain was her mission target. She had to make it to the entrance, which was halfway up the slope, infiltrate her way deep underground, and take back the launch control center.

"Fifty minutes left. Just fifty minutes..." She cast a glance at the clock in the corner of her screen and tried to let out a dry laugh. But what actually emerged sounded more like a cough.

●

Six anti-air missiles, fired by the three Behemoths, approached. With no way to dodge, release electronic countermeasures, or otherwise fight in midair, the Laevatein simply continued to streak through the sky.

I'll just have to bust through, Sousuke decided, and gave Al his order: "Prepare both Zeloses."

《Roger. Moving weapons C and D to firing position.》

The two 20mm Gatling guns mounted behind the Laevatein's hips—i.e. the Zeloses—swiveled into place underneath its arms to jut out in the front. These were an optional armament the Laevatein had in common with the M9 series, weak but rapid-fire. They could spew out a hundred 20mm shots per second.

"All other usable weapons, too," Sousuke decided. "The GEC-Bs, the Boxer-2s, the GAU-19s: move them all into firing position."

Two Boxer-2 76mm shotcannons gripped in each hand; two GEC-B 40mm assault rifles held by each sub-arm; two GAU-19 12.7mm Gatling guns mounted on the head; there were eight guns in all, all of which now pointed forward. He'd use these to try to intercept the missiles. Something might still slip through, but then he'd just have to make it through with the lambda driver somehow.

"You handle the aiming and firing of the Zelos and GECs," Sousuke told Al. "I'll handle the hand and head guns."

《Roger.》

"Don't hold back on ammunition. On my signal, fire everything we have."

《Right,》 agreed Al.

Firing weapons and moving the head and arms during high-speed flight wasn't an easy task. It would create turbulence and destabilize them again. Yet the XL-3's flight computer remained valiantly in control of its flight surfaces and held him steady.

The missiles approached as they reached the XL-3's FLIR range. One second left. Distance: four thousand... three thousand... two thousand…

"Fire!" Sousuke ordered, and the guns, large and small, fired out all at once. In just three seconds, he'd unleashed twelve hundred shots of all sizes, and the surrounding sky—still steamy from the rain—suddenly flared a bright orange. The recoil caused him to abruptly lose altitude, and the engine almost stalled. But the XL-3's sheer propulsion dominated the recoil and continued to push the Laevatein forward.

The wall of fire sprayed over the missiles. One took a hit. It was impossible to know which shot was responsible, but the missile itself went corkscrewing downward as it disintegrated. Sousuke took another to pieces just in front of him, then another, and then four more.

But that was all he managed to shoot down. He couldn't avoid the rest.

《Five missiles remaining. Count 2... 1...》

"Hng..." he choked out. *Focus*, he reminded himself. *Imagine.*

The air ahead of him warped as the missiles exploded at close range to the Laevatein, causing its right side to buck upwards. The Laevatein's lambda driver force field could just barely block the explosions and shrapnel from five missiles hitting it almost simultaneously. They were weak missiles meant for aircraft, so that stood to reason... but a set of slightly more powerful warheads might have sent him spiraling into the ocean.

"Damage report!" Sousuke demanded.

《Damage to XL-3's left wing. First aileron lost. Slat actuator is also not responding.》

"And us?"

《No damage. Lambda driver is functioning normally.》

An AS was an extension of its operator, which meant that while Sousuke had been able to create an image of the Laevatein itself being protected, he hadn't been able to imagine the same for its 'wings.' That was why he couldn't protect the XL-3, even though it was his lifeline.

Damage to the left wing... He turned the Laevatein's head to the left to see it for himself. The last quarter of the left wing had been torn to pieces, leaving him with periodic instances of nausea-inducing shaking. The machine's alignment seemed about to pitch to the left at any moment, forcing the flight computer to stubbornly right it time and again. Yet the Laevatein kept flying. This jury-rigged booster was just as tough as its maker, "Bruiser" Sachs himself.

But it won't hold out against another hit, Sousuke thought grimly. He withdrew all his weapons and returned the Boxer 2s to their hip hardpoints, as

well. His now-empty hands were ready for their main weapon.

“Equip the demolition gun!” Sousuke ordered. “Gun-howitzer mode!”

《Sarge. Are you joking?》 Al replied, finding the order unbelievable.

The Laevatein’s main weapon was the incredible 165mm demolition gun. The massive cannon, longer than the machine was tall, had the power to take out a Behemoth in one shot. But it also had such powerful recoil that, even if he’d planted his legs on the ground, he would still go flying back. To fire it while airborne...

《It will tear us apart,》 Al predicted.

“I’ll handle the recoil. Hurry!”

《Roger.》 Al must have acknowledged there was no other way to keep the situation from getting out of hand, because he didn’t argue any further. Instead, one of the support arms reached for the demolition gun stored in the weapons station on the back of the Laevatein, just below the XL-3. He held the grip tightly in his right hand as the long barrel rotated and affixed itself right in front of his chest. He’d switched it to its long-range gun-howitzer mode.

Sousuke pointed the thick black barrel straight forward while still airborne. The confused flight computer clearly hadn’t expected him to do something like this during the course of an already compromised flight, and as a result, the oscillations had grown worse. Al tried to make up for it, adjusting the trim at a pace of thirty times per second. His engine output reached its upper limit, but the machine just managed to maintain its posture.

Sousuke used maximum magnification with his infrared sensors. *Eighteen kilometers to the Behemoth straight ahead,* he thought. He could just see it in his reticule. It grew larger and larger as he watched, and the minute he could make it out...

“Damn,” Sousuke cursed. The enemy was fighting back, and a massive gun—dozens of meters long, like a battleship’s main cannon—was pointed right at him. Its operator had probably judged the destructive power of the anti-air missiles insufficient.

There was no way Sousuke could do clever sniping tricks the way Kurz did. He

just used instinct to correct the data given to him by the ballistics computer and took aim.

“Let’s do it!” he declared, focusing and imagining. How would the cannon he was carrying move as he fired? What kind of wind would rage around him at the moment of firing? *Yes, I’ve fired it many times before,* he told himself. *I know its quirks.*

He fired. There was a burst of flame in front of his eyes, and a creak went echoing throughout the Laevatein’s frame. The gun’s barrel trembled a bit, and his flight altitude dropped momentarily... But that was all, and he continued to soar.

《Success. The heat dissipation of the lambda driver is easy to manage while in flight.》

“Just track the shot already!” said Sousuke.

《I am.》

The shot, which had been launched from the demolition gun, traced a leisurely arc toward the Behemoth. Even a shell traveling at Mach 3 would take over fifteen seconds to hit a target fifteen kilometers away. Three seconds, two seconds, one second... In the maximum magnified image, Sousuke saw it hit the sea a few hundred meters behind the Behemoth and explode. He’d missed.

《Correcting. Next shot is loaded.》

“Good,” said Sousuke. He fired, once again compensating for recoil, and the 165mm shell flew straight ahead. The enemy fired back at him, as well. He saw a massive muzzle flash. A 300mm shell was incoming at a speed he couldn’t identify.

《Evasive—》

“Not happening,” Sousuke said, cutting him off. “Just pray it misses us!” From somewhere in the black sea below, a mass of overwhelming destructive power approached. The screen display showed it almost arriving.

Both shots hit at almost the exact same time.

Something flashed in a corner of the Laevatein’s vision. A moment later, the

shock wave sent it shaking. It was the anti-air shot, exploding far behind him. A close shave indeed...

And his shot? It had hit its mark. A pillar of fire burst from the Behemoth's chest, and it slowly began to topple backwards. Its arms, each the size of office buildings, stretched out toward the night sky as it dropped the cannon it was holding and sank into the sea.

《Hit,》 Al reported. 《Behemoth B destroyed.》

"Maintain maximum thrust," Sousuke told him. "We'll plow through the hole it left behind."

Merida Island was in visible range now, and the remaining Behemoths on either side moved in while continuing to fire their anti-air machine cannons. At this altitude, distance, and heading, Sousuke managed to avoid them all by keeping the boosters at full power, and adjusting his altitude up and down.

He could see the silhouettes of helicopters in the skies above Merida Island now. The FLIR picked up one target after another.

《Six attack helicopters. They're Mi-28 Havocs,》 said Al.

They were gaining altitude while approaching the coastline, and probably meant to focus fire on him when he landed. *Not happening*, Sousuke told himself. To Al, he said, "Pull out the Black Mambas. Fire all shots."

《Ready,》 said Al, and the twelve short AAMs mounted on the XL-3's wings all activated their infrared seekers. They locked on to all targets. Their targeting box flashed red and displayed the message "VALID LOCK."

"Fire all!" Sousuke ordered.

《Roger.》

All twelve missiles fired at once. Their rocket motors lit up, sending twelve trails of fire blossoming out behind them as they streaked away at high speed.

The enemy must not have anticipated that Sousuke would have this kind of anti-air capacity, because the attack helicopters shot out infrared flares and dispersed. But it was too late; two missiles streaked after each of the six helicopters, and all of them hit.

A series of massive fireballs appeared in the sky over the island, and Sousuke reflected that if he hadn't been in battle, he would've lost himself in the sight. Smoke rose up from all the attack helicopters as they crashed.

《All machines shot down,》 Al announced.

But the counterattack from the Merida Island anti-air guns and the Behemoths was fierce, catching them in a crossfire. Tracer bullets crossed paths around him. Sousuke defended with the lambda driver, but couldn't block them all.

Sousuke let out a grunt as he felt a hit land; one of the enemy machine gun shots had hit his booster, and the outside of his right engine had caught fire. Its output fell, and it began to produce a strange sound and vibrate. The XL-3 was in bad shape, and it risked exploding mid-air. The blaring alarms were annoying. Al's warnings were annoying, too.

Three thousand meters to Merida Island, thought Sousuke. *Almost there. But if I detach the booster now, I'll fall into the sea. Even if I use the emergency balloons to float, I'll be torn to holes by the Behemoths...*

Two thousand meters to a safe drop point.

The fire expanded. The right second engine burst into flame. The right wing was an inferno.

One thousand meters.

He took more hits, still to the right. A hole opened in the wing. His altitude dropped. His speed dropped. The flames spread to the Laevatein's right shoulder...

Eight hundred meters left, but he couldn't wait any longer.

"Cut us free!" Sousuke yelled.

There was no time to argue. Al immediately released the Laevatein's lock bolts to release them from the XL-3, and the machine entered free fall. The burning XL-3 flew into the distance above them, went into a tailspin, and then exploded. The resulting fireball illuminated the Laevatein's white armor in the dark.

Sousuke waited for as long as he could before releasing his first parachute. He felt a sudden brake in their descent and deployed his second parachute. Without waiting for a full drop in speed, he cut this one loose, and went back into free fall from an altitude of a hundred meters.

He could see the sandy beach. It was the west coast of Merida Island, where he'd coached Tessa in how to control an M9 a long time ago...

Two hundred meters off that beach, the Laevatein splashed down... No, it landed. The water was less than two meters deep here, only coming up to his AS's shins. Kicking up a massive sea spray, Sousuke immediately knelt his machine down and turned his demolition gun to the northwest, straight at the black horizon. Maximum zoom again. One of the remaining Behemoths must have noticed him, and it could be seen six kilometers past the island. While slowly turning, it began to point all of its equipped firearms toward the beach.

"Too late," Sousuke told it. He aimed and fired. He felt a powerful recoil, but he didn't go flying backward this time as the demolition gun's shot flew at the Behemoth and hit the target's shoulder. The giant staggered as an explosion caused bits of its armor to fall.

Sousuke reloaded, adjusted his aim, and fired, planting his feet to restrain the recoil. This time, he hit the Behemoth in the head. It wasn't hard to hit something that big from this distance, and the second Behemoth was soon down.

《Targeting signal detected. Lock-on from the Behemoth C... Incoming!》 warned Al.

The final Behemoth had attacked from the ocean to the southwest, firing not just its main cannon but all of its guns in a barrage from six kilometers away. Sousuke jumped several times to dodge the shots, and landed his machine on the rocks near the beach, which was full of anti-AS mines, after all. He'd practiced here so many times in the past, he could navigate even the rocks with his eyes closed.

A large number of shells and rockets rained down on the point where he'd landed before.

Don't they know whose backyard this is? Sousuke wondered, reequipping the

demolition gun. While enjoying the feeling of being back in his old stomping grounds, Sousuke turned to the final Behemoth and returned fire.

When his third shot took down the final Behemoth, he immediately turned around and raced into the jungle of Merida Island. “Entering phase two,” Sousuke announced. “Switch sensors to passive and GPL to idle. Let’s plant a few seeds.”

《Roger.》

Sousuke pulled out a simple decoy shaped like a drum canister from the grenade locker on his hip, threw it on the ground, and then immediately turned south. He had eight of these decoys in total. They all broadcast the same communication waves as the Laevatein, and were designed to put out an infrared signature with similar characteristics. They couldn’t mimic its appearance, but would be suitably effective in delaying the enemy.

The decoys were mounted with vibration sensors, so he could expect them to pick up enemy footsteps approaching. If he used that in combination with the jungle terrain, he could reduce the enemy’s chances of finding him to some degree, but that alone wasn’t enough. Sousuke needed an actively broadcasting encrypted signal to draw attention to the decoys.

But just one machine putting out a signal would seem too suspicious. Extended use of communications—which he’d be expected to keep limited—would just raise the enemy’s suspicions, especially Leonard and Kalinin. If he wasn’t careful, they might actually outmaneuver and corner him.

In that case...

“Al, cancel encryption on channel E2,” Sousuke ordered. “Get us broadcasting openly on all frequencies, and have the decoys do the same.”

《You want the enemy to hear your communications?》

“Make sure they do,” Sousuke instructed him. “This machine is a radio station, and I’m the DJ.”

The doubts and uncertainties that had been tormenting him before he deployed... What to say to Kaname, how to face the enemies waiting on Merida Island, the rightness of his actions...

What does she want? What do I want? I feel like this battle has made it all clear... who I am.

Leonard's words, Mira's letter... none of that gives me my answer. Because I'm not a preacher or a politician, or a counselor or a teacher.

Who am I, then?

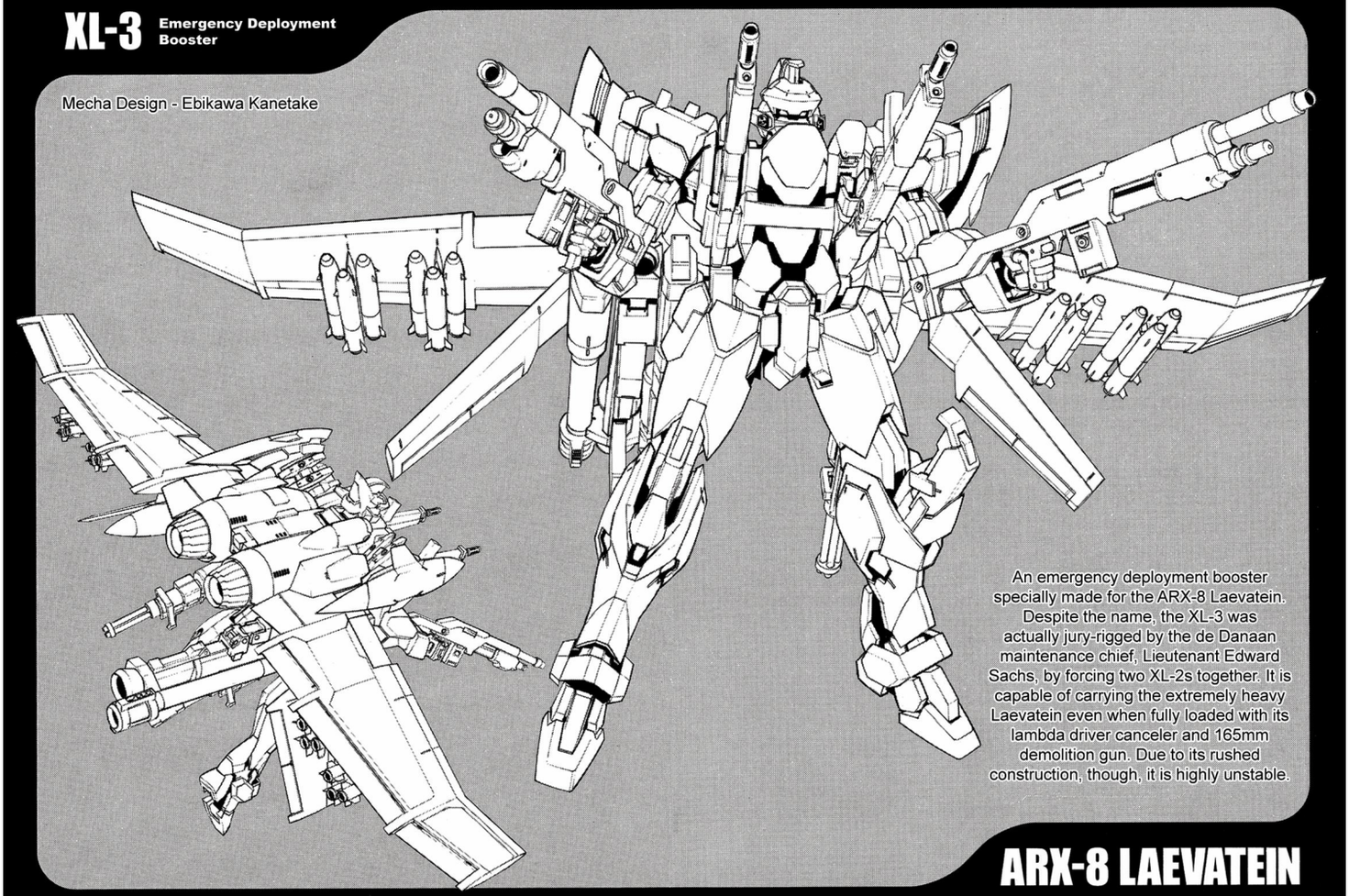
That's obvious. The battle is telling me.

I am a soldier.

[To be continued]

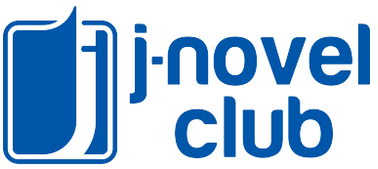
XL-3 Emergency Deployment Booster

Mecha Design - Ebikawa Kanetake



An emergency deployment booster specially made for the ARX-8 Laevatein. Despite the name, the XL-3 was actually jury-rigged by the de Danaan maintenance chief, Lieutenant Edward Sachs, by forcing two XL-2s together. It is capable of carrying the extremely heavy Laevatein even when fully loaded with its lambda driver canceler and 165mm demolition gun. Due to its rushed construction, though, it is highly unstable.

ARX-8 LAEVATEIN



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Full Metal Panic! Volume 11 Forever Stand By Me Part 1

by Shouji Gatou

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis Edited by Dana Allen

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