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10

FULL METAL PANIC!

APPROACHING NICK OF TIME



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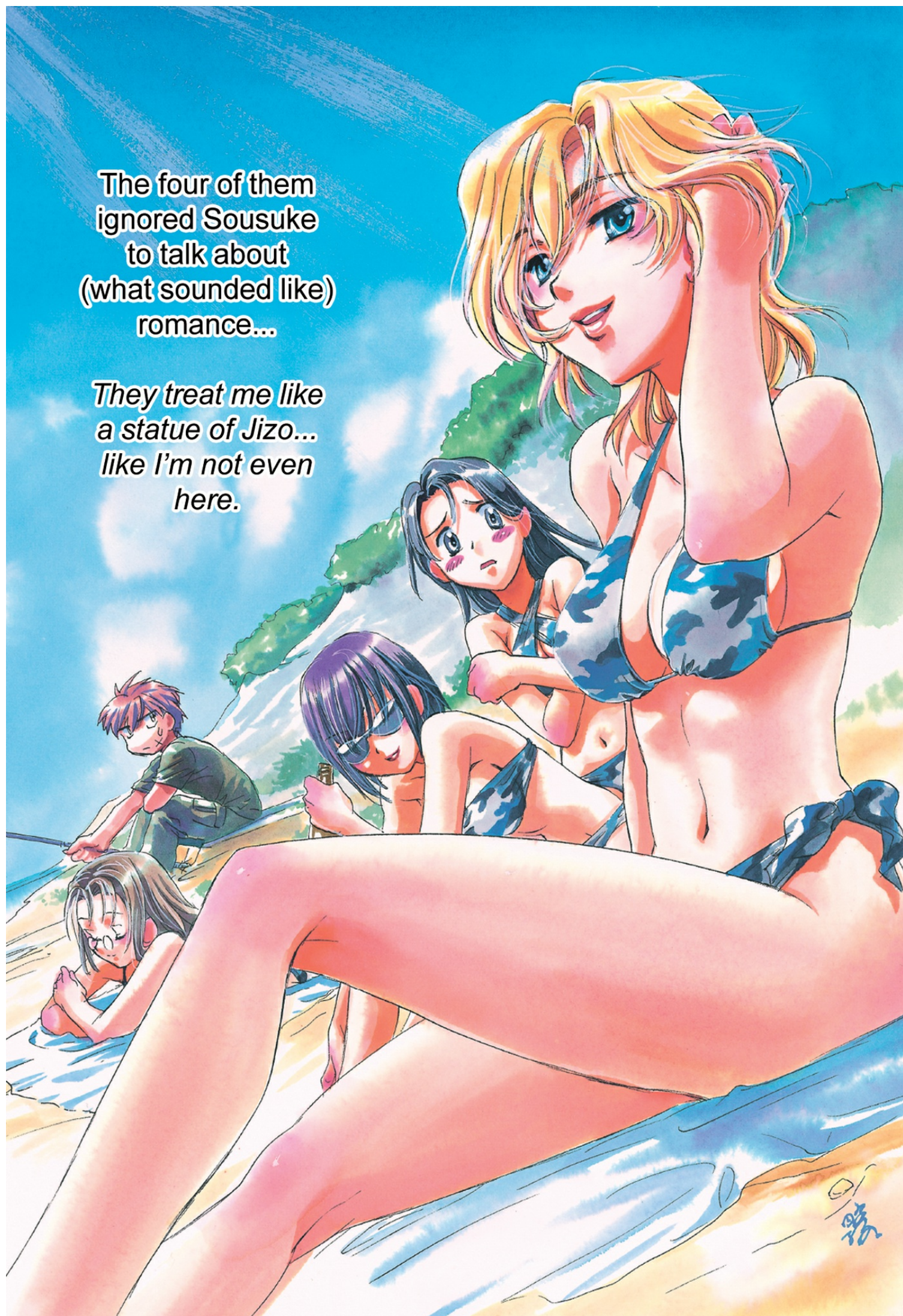
10

FULL METAL! PANIC!

APPROACHING NICK OF TIME

The four of them
ignored Sousuke
to talk about
(what sounded like)
romance...

*They treat me like
a statue of Jizo...
like I'm not even
here.*





Sousuke and Leonard noticed each other at the exact same time. They pointed their guns at one another, fingers on the trigger. His was aimed squarely at the other man's head—he wouldn't miss at this distance. One shot would finish it. But the same was true in reverse.

There's an
important job that
only I can do. It's
going to give me
the power to make
the world better.



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Prologue

Fourteen hours had passed since the battle at Niquelo, and the Amalgam executives were now on their third online conference.

“How is Mr. Silver doing?” asked Mr. Gold.

“His condition is critical.” The response came from Mr. Kalium—Kalinin—who stated the facts without a hint of emotion. The Russian had been attending their meetings for several months now, and he had never shown the slightest hint of sarcasm or jocularly in his tone. He was a talented commander and former special forces member, with immense battlefield experience. As a quintessential career soldier, he had no interest whatsoever in either money or politics.

He hadn’t mentioned anything about Mr. Gold’s forces attacking Leonard’s under the guise of “sending backup,” nor the fact that they’d been completely routed for their troubles. He probably knew that commenting on Gold’s deeds at the online conference wouldn’t accomplish anything. After all, Gold had brought most of the executives to his side through bribery and blackmail.

Mr. Kalium continued his report. “He’s in a hospital on the outskirts of Acapulco, and even if he pulls through, there will be severe aftereffects. He may never walk again on his own.”

“A pity. So young,” Mr. Gold whispered as he sat back in his chair in the online conference room. It was a sound-only conference, so he assumed nobody could see him, but he was careful not to smile regardless.

The executives attending the conference were spread out all over the world. Gold was in the Far East—specifically Tokyo, a skyscraper in Akasaka. Stepping out of the conference room would take him straight to a view (through bulletproof glass) of Nagata-cho at noon.

He himself was Japanese, and held tremendous power in both his public and secret lives. He was also a patriot. His votes at Amalgam were always against

local terrorism, and he kept tight control over the few incidents he did allow to occur. A Behemoth running rampant in Tokyo was acceptable; nuclear threats were not. He'd personally approved the gifting of the Behemoth to the A21 terrorists, but he'd included a fail-safe—a self-destruct switch he could activate when necessary. Gold's intention had been to let it run rampant through the Ariake region, but once it was en route to the central metropolis, he would remove it from the field.

These “minor” domestic incidents over the past year had in turn earned him greater influence over Japan's security. It was easy to pin the blame on variously capable and competent security officials, and to then replace them with people easier for him to manipulate. He fanned xenophobic sentiments and labeled those who tried to moderate him “traitors.”

Of course, they *were* traitors. Thievery and trickery were the way the world worked; to survive and carve out your own piece of the pie required dedication at least as strong as his. The fact that a mineral-poor island nation had spent over fifty years thriving without war was a miracle, and he had a responsibility to keep that miracle going. That was why he'd used Amalgam. Participating in their “fixed matches” and using them to expand his personal influence was simply an extension of his patriotism.

After finishing his report, Kalinin said, “I'm reorganizing my remaining forces to both guard him and track down the remnants of Mithril.”

“Good,” said Mr. Gold. “Where are you now, anyway?”

“The hospital in Mexico, still.”

“I see. Stay with him, then. We'll all pray for his swift recovery.” Several executives let out knowing snickers at this. “We're working on tracking down the remnants of Mithril, as well. Their submarine has slipped through the US Navy's patrol net and disappeared into the Pacific again, along with that white lambda driver-mounted arm slave. They're a troublesome bunch.”

“They'll show themselves again soon enough. I'm sure they mean to fight Amalgam to the end,” another executive, Mr. Natrium, interjected. “The issue is the white AS. Is it the same model as that Arbalest thing? I can't believe it took out three Behemoths in a few minutes.”

“Neither can I,” Gold said unhappily. “But it’s not too surprising. The Behemoth’s superiority crumbles in battle with a lambda driver-mounted opponent. We’ve known that for some time now.” The blitzkrieg was the Behemoth’s modus operandi, and its main strength was its overwhelming defenses. Once a lambda driver nullified that, even a machine of its immense size would fall quickly to a modern arsenal.

“That submarine and the white AS are both top priority. Having them lurking out there ties our hands. Our planning departments won’t stop nagging us about them, either. What can we do?” Mr. Natrium asked in annoyance.

“If reports are correct, that machine is the only one they have worth a damn,” said Mr. Gold. “Our Codarls can handle it, if we can just overwhelm it at the right moment.”

“You seem knowledgeable about military matters,” Kalinin said.

His words sounded like mockery of the militarily inexperienced Gold, who just let it go with a snort. “All fields are the same deep down, Mr. Kalium. Investments, elections, court proceedings... You and Mr. Silver just misjudged the situation.”

“I see. Perhaps you’re right.” For the first time, there was a hint of humor in Kalinin’s voice. It had a nuance of self-abasement, too, but the words themselves seemed dryly ironic. “We turned a blind eye to the treachery around us for far too long.”

Just then, Mr. Copper’s voice sounded out in a yelp. The holographic indicator for speech flickered frantically, accompanied by other sounds—rushed footsteps, then gunshots.

“What’s going on?” demanded Mr. Gold.

The holographic symbol for Mr. Tin’s channel also began to flicker. There was a spraying sound—the sound of a man being shot in the back of the head, and his brain matter splattering across the table in front of him?

Mr. Natrium’s death rattle followed. His indicator trembled as his panting, stammering, and screams painted an inhuman picture of his fate. *Wait. Don’t shoot. I wasn’t involved. Please, let’s talk—*

Another gunshot.

Just like that, three of Amalgam's executives were dead. Those remaining held their breath silently, panting or fidgeting, checking to make sure the same thing wasn't about to happen to them.

"Secured," said a man's voice over Copper's channel.

"Secured," said another man's voice over Tin's channel.

"Secured," said a young woman's voice over Natrium's channel.

Three executives, scattered all around the world, had been killed simultaneously—most likely by agents of Leonard Testarossa. Those particular men—along with Gold—were probably the ringleaders of the plot to kill Leonard.

"Wh-What are you—"

"I told you, Mr. Gold. We turned a blind eye for far too long," Kalinin said, his voice now coming from over Gold's shoulder. The Russian held the portable transceiver he'd been using until that moment in front of his eyes, shut it off with a press of his thumb, and tossed it carelessly onto the desk. "I've disposed of your security. No help is coming."

Even if Kalinin had figured out his identity and location, Mr. Gold still didn't know how he'd gotten here. He'd been in Mexico just twelve hours ago... It would take most planes twenty hours to reach Tokyo from there. To get from South America to the Far East in such a short time, then penetrate his security net... it was impossible, unheard of.

"Diet Member Kaneyama Takeshi was merely a decoy, your patsy. The real Mr. Gold—you—will be the headliner on tonight's news."

"Wait—"



Kalinin, an expert in the ways of destroying a human body, didn't even need a weapon. He simply slammed the man's face into his desk, then dropped an elbow on the back of his neck like a guillotine. The instant breaking of his spine severed all feeling in Gold's body and his control of all bodily functions, including breathing. He slumped onto the floor, gasping like a goldfish on land. In his state of dimming consciousness, he could only hear Kalinin's voice saying something to the remaining executives.

As expected of Amalgam's executives, the remaining dozen or so quickly regained their calm. Some of them even appeared to have anticipated this series of events.

Kalinin grabbed the microphone on the table and addressed the group. "Mr. Gold used his offer of 'support' to attack us," he said. "The plan was to kill Mr. Silver and steal his resources. I believe our actions were a justified reaction to this betrayal. Are there any objections?"

The entire group remained silent.

"Good... But I believe there is still one more approval we need to earn. Well?" Kalinin asked, then waited patiently for the reply.

The one to whom he was speaking didn't appear in the online conference roster. He rarely participated at all. But he was out there somewhere, listening in. A serious civil war between executives—one that could potentially escalate—would surely draw him out of hiding.

Amalgam had no official leader; it was a parliamentary system, woven together like the cords of a net. But they couldn't maintain order on their own. They needed a manager. This manager never voiced his own opinion, and never showed himself; he simply provided opportunities, as well as compromises. The "amalgam" that could combine with all the other elements...

"Mr. Mercury." Kalinin addressed him by name. "Come out, would you? To hold your tongue now would shatter our trust in you."

The online conference image blinked, and the symbol signifying participation turned yellow, a sign that the typically unused channel had gone active. "This

seems to be a problem,” said Mercury’s electronically altered voice.

1: Wall of Sand

Major Martin Estes received the bad news just after 1400 hours, at the peak of the desert heat: a large enemy force was approaching the ruins of the Marinid Sultanate-era structure they were using as a base. Thirty MBTs and four second-generation arm slaves had been confirmed, and a force of equal or greater size was expected to join them soon. It was Amalgam—more precisely, a Moroccan Armed Forces squadron in Amalgam’s employ.

Estes and the others, who had escaped the initial ambush on Mithril’s facilities, had been working for months to gather together the organization’s remaining resources and manpower. Their hope had been to eventually mount a counterattack, but now they would be crushed before they even got the chance.

“Goddammit,” he cursed, sucking in some of the simple tent’s dry air through his nostrils.

They were in North Africa, the desert region between Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania, and Western Sahara. There were no mountains for dozens of kilometers. The sun was blazing down on them, warping the horizon in a heat haze. At times, Estes thought he was in Arizona or Nevada.

Tents and barracks lay here and there, camouflaged among the lines of stone pillars, and they had a makeshift runway cleared out of cracked flat earth. It was disguised enough to avoid detection in satellite photographs, but it was barely a base to begin with. They had less than one hundred men and a handful of second-generation arm slaves. They had stocks of M6 parts as well, but in many cases they were useless: a leg without a hip joint, a torso without a cockpit. He was crushed that the enemy had found their resistance base, of course... but he was also shocked they were sending such an ostentatiously large force to crush them.

“Hell... It’s like sending a tank to roll over a doghouse,” Estes muttered.

At this, Master Sergeant Zimmer, who had made the report, shrugged. “It’s

unlikely that they know the full extent of our forces.”

“Oh, so they’re overestimating us?” Estes returned bitterly. “I’m honored.”

The small Central American country of Belize had once been home to a Mithril operations division personnel training camp. They’d trained mercenaries gathered from all over the world, screened them for aptitude, and sent those who qualified to front line squadrons. Estes had been the “principal” there, more or less, and with a few exceptions, most of the ground unit personnel in Mithril’s operations division came out of Estes’s camp. This included the West Pacific Battle Group trio: Melissa Mao, Kurz Weber, and “Sosuki Segal.”

When the massive Amalgam attack in January had destroyed Mithril bases all over the world, Estes and the others had gone into hiding in the jungles around Belize, entirely on foot. Tanks and armored cars couldn’t pursue them in a tropical forest, after all, and even ASes would have a hard time of it. Running on foot would put them at an advantage for evading enemy pursuit, and the heavy jungle cover even helped them avoid tracking by air.

After about three weeks of running, they’d made it to an airport in Honduras and escaped to Colombia from there. In the city of Medellín, most of those present had made the decision to give up and go home. Those who remained included a dozen or so Mithril instructors and four or five eccentric trainees. Knowing they stood no chance against Amalgam’s massive force at less than twenty strong, Estes and the others had decided to set up a private military company in North Africa and use that as cover while seeking information on the fates of their allies.

For the next few months, about all they’d had to show for their efforts had been reuniting with ten or so more former Mithril members. There seemed to be quite a few pockets of individuals like theirs out there, but tracking them down while they were in hiding had proved to be difficult. Most of those they did manage to contact were too pessimistic about their chances to rejoin. In time, Estes felt his own hope waning, and began to wonder if running a small PMC for the rest of his life might not be such a bad deal.

It was around that time that the incident in San Francisco occurred. The news reported it as an explosion near the harbor, but scattered photographs from

the scene suggested it was actually the aftermath of an AS battle.

Master Sergeant Zimmer flew to San Francisco with a few of his men and spent a day scouring eyewitness testimony, security camera footage, and police radio records. It didn't take long for them to work out that there had been a hand-to-hand fight between a black M9 and a Venom. What's more, during the battle, the black M9 had received support from a cruise missile, which had enabled it to dispatch the Venom solo.

The operator of the M9 had to be Ben Clouseau, formerly of the Mediterranean Battle Group. And the cruise missile... it had to have come from that submarine, the Tuatha de Danaan. He'd never met the woman who commanded it, but the rumors all said she was gutsy as hell.

The news had electrified Estes and the others. To think the members of the West Pacific Battle Group had hung on, survived... and even managed to give the enemy a bloody nose.

Word of the incident seemed to have spread far and wide among other Mithril remnants as well. Encouraged by the Tuatha de Danaan's resistance and deciding they'd like to stick it to Amalgam after all, they began to contact Estes again, in numbers he could never have imagined. A mere two months later, they'd tripled their meager roster and established a base on the edge of the Sahara. They'd even managed to recover their training camp's funds from overseas banks and had begun rounding up supplies. The hope was that they'd eventually get a real fighting force together, but...

Now the enemy was on its way.

Estes didn't know how Amalgam had found the base they'd worked so hard to hide, but it didn't matter now. Their forces were overwhelming. Estes wanted to withdraw on the double, but the enemy would overtake their ground vehicles easily, and the transport plane they used for personnel and supplies was 1200 kilometers away. It was on its way at top speed, but it would take it at least two hours to arrive, and there was no way they could hold out that long.

A hopeless battle was about to begin.

"Damn. I really thought we'd last a little longer," Estes whispered. He watched his subordinates scrambling around the baked earth outside the tent, making

their nigh-fruitless preparations for battle.

“Never thought I’d hear you give up so quickly,” said Zimmer. “It’s understandable against a force like that, though.”

“Hah, who’s giving up?” Estes retorted. “At least we’ll give them a fight to remember.”

“Right. Let’s really make a show out of it.” The two men exchanged genuine grins, untainted by any sense of grim heroism. Then Estes grabbed a nearby assault rifle, put on a desert camo hat, and came out of the tent, where he felt the glittering sunlight burning against his skin. A dry wind brushed against his cheek, but it carried only the stifling heat of a hand dryer. *How can the Saharan sun be so hot when it’s so cold at night?* he wondered.

After giving instructions to his subordinates, Estes trained his binoculars in the expected direction of the enemy’s approach. The white sand of the desert and the horizon heat haze was all he could see. But, no... there was a sand cloud. A 4WD vehicle was streaking towards them across the rolling sand dunes, traveling at top speed in spite of the unstable terrain. It was a little over a kilometer away.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Should I take the shot? I think I can hit it,” his subordinate in a nearby trench said, peering through his .50-caliber rifle scope.

“No,” Estes decided. “Look closer.” This wasn’t a suicide run; on a second glance, he could see that the driver was leaning out of the window and waving to them. At first, all he could tell was that the driver wore a khaki shirt and had black hair, but the closer he got, the better Estes was able to make out his face.

“I know him,” Zimmer said. He’d been one of the instructors in Belize with Estes, which suggested that the newcomer was one of their own.

“Who is it?”

“The Korean. The one who passed the test at the end of the year, two years ago. We sent him to the West Pacific Battle Group, I think.”

“I don’t remember him,” said Estes.

“Oh, come on!” scoffed Zimmer. “The one who didn’t want to be there but did everything flawlessly.”

“Oh, that one. I remember now. He never distinguished himself, but he still made it to a passing grade at some point...”

“Right. That guy.”

“What was his name again?” Estes mused.

“I don’t know why I can’t remember... Yong? Yung?”

“It would be a little awkward to ask now. Hmm...”

After ordering his men to hold their fire, Estes walked out in front of the trench. Zimmer and one other man followed after him with rifles in hand. The vehicle finally arrived at the base, stopping about thirty meters away from Zimmer. Its young East Asian driver left the engine running as he got out.

“Major Estes, great to see you! I’m so glad you’re safe!” said the young man who ran up to him breathlessly.

“Ah, yeah... good to see you, too,” Estes responded, in the vague manner unique to someone who’d forgotten the other person’s name.

“I figured the old encrypted channels were too risky, so I dropped by,” the young man confessed. “I can’t believe I made it in time!”

“Have a little decorum, soldier! Name, rank, and affiliation!” Zimmer suddenly barked, like a veteran NCO.

At this, the young man sprang to attention. “Excuse me, sir! Sergeant Yang Junkyu, West Pacific Battle Group, Special Response Team... assuming Mithril still exists, that is.”

That’s right, Yang, Estes thought. Nice job, Zimmer.

“Well, enough formality,” announced Zimmer. “I’m glad to see you alive and well, Yang.”

“Th-Thank you, sir.”

“So, what are you here for? You seem to know the enemy’s on its way.”

“Yes, actually—”

Just then, an ear-splitting sound cut through the air. It was a sound they all knew well—that of a falling artillery shell. *Close by, too...* The minute Estes thought that, the car Yang had come in burst into flame and rocketed into the air, ten meters up. Its tires arced through the air, hit the ground, and then rolled away.

“They’re here,” Estes commented.

They hadn’t been aiming at the car; that was just a test shot. The artillery beyond the horizon would fire off a few such shots, and adjust their aim before beginning proper FFE. They had no time to waste. Estes and Zimmer, lying flat on the ground, showered sand from their heads and backs as they stood up and began jogging back to the camp. Yang stared briefly in distress at his trashed vehicle, then quickly recovered and ran after them. “Wait, Major!”

“Battle stations!” Estes yelled. “There must be someone nearby spotting the artillery shots! Find them and crush them! Zimmer, eyes on the west!”

While Estes ran around the base giving orders, Yang followed him, shouting. “Major Estes, I still have to talk to you!”

“Later! I’m busy!”

Another shell landed. This one hit closer to the base than the last one, near to where they’d been talking. The base itself was in a flurry as they prepared for a serious bombardment. Some were hauling as much ammunition into the trenches as they could, others preparing to fire anti-tank missiles, others boarding their pitiful ASes...

“FFE incoming!” someone shouted. Estes’s men all leaped into the trenches. The shells whistled towards them in terrifying numbers. Ten shells—no, twenty...

“Major, I came here to—”

“Shut up!” With the shells closing in, Estes dove into a nearby trench. He thought about grabbing Yang and pulling him with him, but he didn’t need to; it wasn’t as if the other man was an amateur. He’d slid immediately into the rather narrow trench alongside Estes, covered his ears, opened his mouth, and prepared for the blast.

And so it came.

No matter how many years you spent on the battlefield, there was no getting used to that sensation. The shockwave hit you like a sandbag, burning your skin as it forced the air out of your lungs and pounded your eardrums. And now it was happening, over and over again.

“Dammit,” Estes cursed once the shelling was over. His first priority was to check for damage. The trenches had helped to keep injuries to a minimum, but the shelling had chewed through their infrastructure, vehicles, and supplies. Parts littered the area around them, spewing smoke. The camp echoed with cries for help and the panicked screams of men experiencing their first serious FFE. There was a report of the approach of enemy tanks, and a report of their number.

“The second wave is on the way. They’re clearly coordinated.”

“M-Major...” Yang crawled shakily out of the trench.

“We can talk later,” said Estes. “Take up arms, and do it quickly.” The approaching enemy tanks had opened fire from beyond the flickering heat haze. An explosive shell landed just outside of the base, kicking up a plume of sand. Two shots came, three... the fourth hit an unoccupied armored car and sent it flying into the air, now a burning lump of scrap metal.

It was relentless. At this rate, their numbers would be more than halved by the time the enemy reached firing range. He’d put up a brave front for the men, but inside, Estes was panicking. After considering the enemies’ movements, he ordered them to let the enemy get as close as possible. The tanks had split up to approach from a variety of directions. “Don’t lose heart!” he bellowed. “They can’t really aim from this distance! Draw them in, then fire!”

“Major!” Yang shouted, not giving up.

“Later!” Estes could feel the back of his neck burning as the enemy squad from the north opened fire. He narrowed his eyes and saw a horizontal line of tanks... modernized M60s, twelve or more. They might be able to cut that in half if they really worked for it, but no more. The camp would be crushed beneath their treads.

But wait...

That was when he saw it, beyond the heat haze and smoke: one of the enemy tanks suddenly caught fire and exploded.

It didn't stop at one, either. Another followed, then another. Someone was picking off the enemies on the horizon, using sniper cannons and superfast missiles. The shots were precise and efficient, aimed from far enough away that Estes couldn't make out the source.

"That's what I came to tell you," Yang said behind the wide-eyed Estes. "'Reinforcements are coming in fifteen minutes, so try to hold out.' I guess they arrived earlier than expected..."

"Why didn't you say that earlier, stupid?!" Estes screamed.

"You wouldn't let me!" said Yang in self-defense.

"I don't remember that. It's your fault!"

"Hey!"

"Well?! Who are the reinforcements?" Estes demanded. "Where are they?"

"One of them's right here!" said a woman's voice from overhead. Estes looked up to see the image of a large, human-shaped silhouette created by the negative space of the billowing smoke: an AS, rendered invisible with ECS. It was an M9 Gernsback, Mithril's cutting-edge third-generation machine.

"An M9?" he said wonderingly. "How long has that been here?"

"Just arrived now, Major. Glad we're in time."

"I know that voice!" said Estes, shocked. "Mao? Melissa Mao?!"

"Bingo!" The M9 disabled its ECS and came into view, then fired off the superfast K1 javelin missiles it held in both hands. The powerful rocket motors accelerated them to Mach 4.5 as they streaked for the enemy tanks on the horizon, and sent their turrets flying into the sky.



“This is Melissa Mao of the West Pacific Battle Group Tuatha de Danaan. But before we help you, there’s one thing I want to check: you guys got any beer on your base?”

“Up to the ceiling!” Estes told her.

“Stick it in the cooler!” Mao crowed. “Initiate combat!” With that, her M9 leaped over the camp and entered combat maneuvers. Heartened by her words, the other soldiers whooped with joy.

Behind them, Yang slumped over. “She gets all the good parts...” he muttered.

“Yang,” said Estes. “Are ASes our only support?”

“Yes. We have transport helicopters too, but they won’t offer much firepower.”

Estes quietly clicked his tongue. He was glad for the help, but the desert played against an AS’s strengths. They still had a hard fight ahead.

The battle is on, he observed, and the frequency of communications between his allies was increasing. Most of the units assigned to guard the base had already engaged the enemy.

“Uruz-2 here. We’re taking fire from tanks in the southwest. Returning fire now.”

“Uruz-6 here. I’ve taken down four. En route to Point Hotel.”

“Tiwarz-12 to all units. Reinforcements approaching 04-23. Six battle tanks and four IFVs en route to ‘Alamo’ from the north.”

“Uruz-1, roger. We’ll hold off the 04-23 enemy platoon. Uruz-2, how are you for ammo?”

“Uruz-2 here. Three javelins left. It’s about to get dicey.”

“Zeta-3 to Tuatha de Danaan. We’ll give you a little firepower support. Any requests where we send it?”

“Uruz-2 to Zeta-3. Forwarding coordinates now.”

“Roger, Uruz-2. You have a beautiful voice. If we live through this, I hope I can take you to dinner.”

“Better not, Zeta-3. She’s a real firecracker.”

“Nah, I’ll think about it. Ah! Two tanks down... But I’m trapped. The enemy shelling is too heavy, and if I’m not careful—”

Despite the severity of the situation, all of the voices were perfectly calm. This was how it always was: The greater the danger, the calmer they were, the less hesitation and shock they felt. *They’re almost like me*, he realized, *like machines*.

AI, the AI of the ARX-8 Laevatein, was listening in on their ally’s conversation carefully. Their electronics systems fed him far more information than their conversations did—locations of enemy and ally, movement speed, direction, condition, coordinates—all streaming in from radar, infrared, and optical sensors. This battle would be a purely two-dimensional affair. The theater was an endless span of desert, with dunes and rocks the only terrain.

The Laevatein remained on standby, squatting in the hangar of an invisibility ECS-enabled Pave Mare. It was maintaining its silence, sorting through the data sent to it by its allies. Its special machine interface, the TAROS, conveyed to AI its operator’s mental state: irritated. Sousuke didn’t seem to like hiding up here and watching the battle while his allies struggled. There was little chance that the psychological stress might drive him to make a careless mistake or to defy orders, but AI decided that it would be strategically beneficial to help him relax, so that he could reliably activate the lambda driver when the time came.

《Sergeant,》 he said.

“What?” The operator in the cockpit, Sagara Sousuke, responded. There was more strain in his voice than AI had expected.

《Shall I play some music?》

“No.”

《Right.》 That was the expected response. The chance that the operator would respond, ‘Sure thing, give me something with a beat,’ had been less than 0.1%. The offer was just a simple test of his communication functions. 《You

seem rather tense, » Al observed. «I was hoping to help.»

“Shut up, then,” Sousuke told him shortly. “That will help me plenty.”

«A fine joke.»

“It’s not a joke. Shut up.” Recently, Al had begun to interpret Sagara Sousuke’s ‘shut up’ as a kind of buffer phrase rather than a true demand.

«You’re worried about your allies? It’s a risky battle, but it’s important that we wait.»

A battle against tanks in a flat desert was the most disadvantageous situation possible for an arm slave. An AS might be packed to the gills with bleeding-edge tech, but it still couldn’t beat the armor and firepower of a tank. Its own armor couldn’t repel tank shells, and its standard armaments—assault rifles—couldn’t take them out in a fair fight.

Then there was its frontal projection area—in other words, the total area of the machine’s silhouette as seen from the front. Compared to a tank, which rolled along the ground, the bipedal AS was far easier to see and to target. The AS’s greatest asset—flexibility when moving through complex terrain—meant little in a desert, as well. In a head-on shootout with tanks, they’d be sitting ducks.

So their AS squadron’s plan was to run through the trenches of the allied base—codename ‘the Alamo’—while picking off their enemies one at a time. While using their limited stock of anti-tank missiles to its fullest, they would exploit smoke screens, radar jamming, and infrared jamming in order to move to other trenches. It was a simple strategy, but it was all they had.

«We are the ace in the hole,» Al said. «If we remain hidden even as the battle begins, we remain a ‘potential threat’ to the enemy, which will greatly limit their options.»

Amalgam had learned of the Laevatein’s incredible offensive capabilities from the battle in Mexico, and there was no way they’d leave an AS that could take out three Codarls and three Behemoths at large if they could help it. Sousuke and the Laevatein knew they would be their number one targets in every engagement where they appeared, which meant they couldn’t afford a

prolonged head-on encounter. Once they sortied, their only choices were total shock and awe or immediate retreat.

This meant that the most effective role for the Laevatein to play was actually that of a lurking phantom: able to appear anywhere, at any time. Its mere absence from a given battlefield, hiding in an ECS-equipped helicopter, kept the enemy from freely distributing their forces. They'd be forced to keep more forces in reserve in every engagement, just in case the Laevatein appeared.

"I know," Sousuke grumbled. "If the major is with them, a brute force offensive won't work anyway."

From his tone, Al could intuit to whom 'the major' likely referred. «You believe Andrey Kalinin is in command?»

"I don't know," said Sousuke. "What do you think?"

«An objective analysis suggests not. He would choose more cautious attack routes.»

"And what does your incredible instinct say?"

«That's a no as well.» Just then, Al received information from Tiwaz-12 that a new enemy squadron had appeared. Fifteen tanks, four IFVs, two combat helicopters. There were no ASes, but it was the largest force they'd sent yet. They were approaching from ten kilometers southwest of the Alamo.

"Here they come," Sousuke whispered.

These were clearly the reserve troops that the enemy had been keeping in store. The enemy commander had seen Sousuke's allies fighting the good fight and, at last, decided to send them into the battle. From the various data he'd collected, Al determined this to be the last wave of enemies.

He completed a discussion with the other units on the datalink instantaneously: Uruz-2's AI, Friday, and Uruz-1's AI, Dragonfly, supported Al's judgment, while Uruz-6's AI, Yukari, offered support with conditions. He cleaned up the data and passed it on to each of the operators.

Melissa Mao was the first to respond. "Uruz-2 here. We don't have anyone to spare to deal with the newcomers. Time to send out the 'stopper.'"

“Uruz-1, roger. Did you hear that, Uruz-7? You’re up. Deploy to 07-18—”

“Hey, wait a minute!” Uruz-6, Kurz Weber, interrupted.

“What’s wrong, Uruz-6?”

“Can you check the hills around 09-18 first? It smells fishy to me.”

“Fishy how? Explain.”

“Hmm... don’t know how. I hope I’m wrong. Just watch out for snipers.” That was Kurz Weber’s one strange request.

“Uruz-7 here. I’ll destroy the southwest enemy forces,” Sousuke responded, and gave the coordinates to the pilot of the transport helicopter carrying his machine. The turboshaft engine roared louder as the invisible helicopter sped towards the enemy reinforcements and opened up its cargo hatch.

Speed: 163 knots. Altitude: 39 feet. Sandy terrain below. The scenery picked up by his optical sensors was cast in purple-tinted monochrome by the helicopter’s ECS field.

The helicopter flew low over the dunes. The landing point was approaching.

Countdown. Five, four, three, two...

He felt a jolt. The hydraulic bolts holding the machine in place released on AI’s signal, and the Laevatein plunged from the helicopter. The locks on his joints came free during the 2.3 seconds of freefall.

The fiber-optic gyroscope and artificial semicircular canal readings whirled tumultuously. Ground speed started at ten knots, then slowed dramatically. *Speed vector anticipated. Attitude control engaged.* Sousuke oriented the legs downward and set the shock absorber and artificial cartilage units to maximum extension, increasing the machine’s length by 928 millimeters. After selecting ground hardness and friction modifiers from the terrain library in the databank, he moved the machine into the ideal landing posture.

The landing came with a force of 30g, causing shock absorbent in each joint damper to vaporize. To keep from toppling, he engaged semi-active joint control via the motion manager and let the full-body muscle package contract organically. The ARX-8 Laevatein’s legs sank knee-deep into the sand, kicking up

a dust cloud that dwarfed the machine's own height.

Despite the harsh landing, Sousuke immediately entered combat maneuvers, hiding the lower half of his machine's body in the swirling sand while turning to face the tank squadron approaching from ten o'clock. They seemed to have noticed the sand plume caused by his landing, and didn't hesitate to start peppering him with shells.

Al chose their weapon. He readied the extremely high caliber cannon, the 165mm demolition gun mounted on his machine's hardpoint, then used his support arm to attach the elongating muzzle. This "gun-howitzer mode" was designed to drastically increase the range and precision of the demolition gun, and the lambda driver even made it feasible for it to trade fire with a tank.

Despite this, the giant cannon itself was an extremely low-tech weapon. It had none of the independent ballistics computers of a cutting edge AS sniper cannon, and its targeting system's sensors were basic optical ones.

Sousuke could see the enemy's silhouette flickering in the distance across the white, burning desert. "Here we go," he said.

《Roger, Sarge,》 said Al.

Sousuke took aim and fired. The lambda driver activated to throttle the recoil, but the Laevatein's legs still dug deep into the sand as the machine's frame creaked eerily. The high-caliber shell missed the tank it was aimed at, exploding a bit to the right and behind it instead. He'd known his first shot would miss; the helicopter above him now provided him with data to adjust the shot.

Adjust windage left 1.5 millimeters, elevation up 1.2 millimeters. He integrated the drift and arc of the fired shot and recalculated. While he was reloading, the enemy tanks returned fire.

Sousuke fired again. Shells peppered the area around the Laevatein, seven meters away at four o'clock and six meters away at nine o'clock. The shockwave pounded the Laevatein's white armor from the side as the machine staggered and vibrated in a strange rhythm.

《It's not safe. Adjust firing point.》

"No, I'll meet them shot for shot."

《Roger.》 Al didn't argue.

There was less hesitation in Sousuke's decisions now than there had been during his time in the ARX-7. Not that he'd exactly been hesitant then... but now, his decisions were backed by an unflinching will. A normal AI probably wouldn't be able to pick up on such abstract notions, but Al could. He could read the mental state of his operator directly and adjust the machine's systems to match it.

Of course, Al knew he wasn't human. He remained conscious of his status as a glorified calculator designed for battle support. But... at the same time, he had begun to understand the complexities of human emotion on a deeper level.

He was also gaining an element of self-identity. A few days ago, on a whim, Kurz Weber and some of the maintenance crew had suggested changing Al's voice to that of a woman, insisting that it would make him more likable. Al strongly rejected the idea. He had no logical reason to object; it simply felt wrong to him. Sousuke backed him up by simply saying, "It's creepy," and Al agreed. In other words, his voice—a mere synthetic element of his human interaction interface—would feel wrong if it was changed to something else.

Besides, Al thought, a woman's voice hardly feels appropriate for a strategic support veteran like myself. It's practically an insult, in fact.

Smoke trailed from a shot fired four kilometers away. The enemy's aim was growing more accurate—Al issued a warning as the 120mm shell bore down on the Laevatein, and the TAROS reacted immediately. The operator's instinctive—but well controlled—defensive instincts activated the mechanism, and the air in front of it warped. The invisible power stopped both enemy shells in midair, pulverized them, and then sent the fragments flying easily.

《Success, 》 Al reported. 《Activation of lambda driver—》

"I know," Sousuke said shortly, and then pulled the trigger again. This time, his shot hit. The enemy tank at the center of the line was blown off its treads, and went spinning through the air like a papier-mâché replica.

Reload, fire: a second tank went flying. Slight change of position. Enemy shot incoming. Sousuke blocked that one, then fired the demolition gun again.

The gun's muzzle flared as he took out a third, a fourth, and a fifth. The tanks burst into pieces one after another. No ordinary AS could accomplish such a thing. Having apparently realized they were outmatched, the enemy platoon began to withdraw, firing checking shots as they went. Eventually they vanished behind the ridgeline of the dunes.

"Gebo-5 here. Enemy squad retreating to the northwest."

"Uruz-2, roger. You guys hear that? We're almost out of this!"

With their reserves having taken such serious losses, the enemy gave up on taking the Alamo. The forces from all directions began to withdraw, following the lead of the Laevatein's opponents. AI analyzed the tactical map and checked the condition of their machine, adjusting the output of the capacitor and cooling units appropriately.

They'd navigated the gauntlet. They were going to win this.

Data came in from his machine's sensors, sent from allied units' ADMs. All available information showed potential threats dropping. But just then, he detected something in a rocky area four kilometers away. Sagara Sousuke reacted before AI did, and threw the Laevatein to the ground.

The bullet came in from an unexpected angle, moving about a thousand meters per second. It broke through their lambda driver force field, but Sousuke had dodged it in such a way that it only grazed their left shoulder armor before kicking up a sand plume in the ground forty meters beyond.

The sniper shot had been aimed for their lambda driver generator. If Sousuke had moved just a millisecond later, it might have hit the Laevatein in the center mass, snapping it in half.

《Distance 40, ten o'clock. Lambda driver-mounted machine—》AI reported.

"Returning fire," said Sousuke. The enemy machine was out of sight range, but he fired at it anyway, over and over, weaving together randomized maneuvers. His allied machines' AIs, pulling information from AI via datalink, turned their ECS counter-sensors on the rocks in full force, and located the enemy immediately.

The Laevatein continued to fire based on their data, and at least one shot

must have landed in the right ballpark, because an allied machine with a lambda driver detector reported an impact between force fields. The shot probably hadn't dealt any damage, though it would have been fatal to an ordinary machine.

The enemy machine made its judgment call quickly, turning its ECS up to full before beating a high-speed retreat. Further attacks on it would be pointless; it was too dangerous for the normal ASes or helicopters to pursue, and too far away for the Laevatein. The other allied units and operators must have reached the same conclusion, because they focused instead on watching for new enemy arrivals.

"I knew it," Kurz Weber whispered over the radio. "Didn't I tell you? I could smell it in the air."

"Yeah," Sagara Sousuke responded. "I couldn't have dodged that without you." It was Kurz Weber's vague warning that had allowed him to react before AI could. He'd been keeping a fragment of his attention focused on 09-18, as directed... and indeed, the enemy sniper had appeared.

Kurz was something of a clown, and frequently said things that made no sense whatsoever. Telling his nonsense pronouncements apart from his important strategic advice—the ability to interpret instinct and gut feelings reliably—was beyond the capabilities of AI, who was still highly reliant on Bayesian statistics. Though maybe it was beyond most humans, as well...

"The question is why the enemy held its fire until then," said Belfangan Clouseau. "If he'd wanted to, he could have blown away at least one of our machines at the start..." The LD-mounted enemy AS had had more than half the battlefield in its firing range. Yet it had remained hidden and silent, even as its allied tank squadrons were being ripped apart.

"That's an easy one. It's because of the Laevatein, right?" Melissa Mao offered.

Even if it might have taken out a few M9s at the start, doing so would have revealed its location, making it vulnerable to the as-yet-unrevealed Laevatein. So, it had been forced to lie in wait, ECS activated, until the Laevatein appeared. It would normally have been able to finish it off in one shot then, but Sousuke

had dodged... which meant it had lost its one chance to shoot down the Laevatein. That was why they'd withdrawn immediately. In other words, the Laevatein Reserve Plan had worked just as designed.

《All enemy squadrons have withdrawn,》 Al announced after having analyzed data from all units.

“Great,” said Sousuke. “Master Mode 6. Monitor area with ECCS.”

《As I've told you, 》 Al retorted, 《we don't have one.》

“That's right,” sighed Sousuke. “I forgot what a hunk of junk this thing was.” The Laevatein's single-minded focus on generator output, agility, and attack power meant they'd had to omit all of the electronic warfare systems that came standard in M9-style ASes. Sousuke hated it.

《You're a hunk of junk, too, 》 Al muttered. 《I heard you have dietary limitations due to your injuries.》

“I was told to reduce my alcohol and salt intake,” Sousuke said. “None of which really bothers me.”

《I see. I've heard the saying that ‘humans who do not drink are missing out on life.’》

“I don't want that kind of life,” Sousuke insisted. “Now stop nitpicking.”

《I'm merely trying to give as good as I get.》

“Shut up.”

《Negative,》 Al replied stubbornly. 《I will now explain the thirty-eight reasons why this machine is not a hunk of junk. First, it integrates the experimental cutting-edge generator, the PRX—》

“Fine!” Sousuke exploded. “Just shut up!”

The Mithril squadron had withdrawn from the desert base within a few hours. They'd piled as much equipment and weapons as they could hold into ECS-enabled transports, and then disappeared off into the south or the west. All they'd left behind were cleaned-out containers, obsolete documents, and lots of empty beer bottles.

Gazing at the scene through the night vision sensors of his AS, the Eligore, Wilhelm Kaspar clicked his tongue. They were investigating a barracks for a platoon's worth of soldiers and the remains of their armored vehicles, but they hadn't found anything worthwhile. To the contrary...

An explosion rang out; one of the soldiers had carelessly touched an attache case on the ground and triggered a bomb trap. The soldiers nearby hit the deck, then looked around warily as the blast died down.

"Calm down. They left us a little gift, that's all," Kaspar said to them with an internal groan. Most Amalgam forces were recruited on-site. There was no guarantee of quality, which meant there was no way to keep them from falling for this kind of elementary trick.

The enemy was already thousands of kilometers away.

The commander of the clean-up squad, a bribed local official, shouted back at him, "This wasn't the deal!" He was getting paid quite handsomely, but his forces had taken serious losses from Mithril's unexpected resistance... and when they had finally taken the base, they'd found it stripped bare, with nothing to seize for profit. His dissatisfaction was only natural.

Still, there was something Kaspar had wanted to check before negotiations began. He moved his machine to a sand dune a few hundred meters away, opened his cockpit hatch, and disembarked with practiced movements. Perched atop the complicated red armor of the shoulders, he looked around the area with his naked eye. The blazing heat of noon was still present, despite the weak wind blowing past, and the afterglow in the western sky had turned a dusty purple.

He removed his headgear and narrowed his eyes. Kaspar had a square Aryan jaw and short blond hair darkened in places by a life spent outdoors. His age was hard to determine; he could have been in his 30s as easily as his 50s. There was a joviality in the light turn of the corner of his mouth, despite the hunter's glint in his blue eyes as they pierced the dark.

After surveying the area with a sniper's eye, Wilhelm Kaspar dropped from the kneeling machine to the ground and carefully investigated the traces left behind by the enemy AS: the footsteps and hollow left in the sand by an M9

lying in a sniper's posture. Tracing back the trail of shell casings buried here and there, he could estimate where the M9 that had been here had shot from, and how it had moved.

"My, my..." Kaspar whispered, calling to mind the face of the sniper he imagined to be the M9's operator. He had hardly moved with each shot taken, prioritizing effective, swift, and rapid fire—in other words, on eliminating as many enemies as possible. He let the distance between himself and his enemy be his sole defense, suggesting overconfidence in his sniper instincts.

"Ah, that child," Kaspar sighed. "He has a long way to go." Then again, he was probably also the one who had warned the white lambda driver-mounted AS about Wilhelm's position. He could give him credit for that one; thanks to him, it had been able to dodge what should have been a killing shot. Even a bullet that flew at 4300 kilometers per hour would take three seconds to fly four kilometers. An anticipated shot could be dodged easily enough.

Just then, Kaspar received a transmission via satellite. He put his ear to the headgear and acknowledged the call.

"Did you succeed, Mr. Tin?" the voice asked. It was the Amalgam executive Mr. Kalium, AKA Andrey Kalinin. He was a Russian who'd organized several of their missions at the direction of the currently convalescing Leonard Testarossa.

"No," Kaspar admitted. "I tried to take him out with my first shot, but he dodged it. That student of yours is very impressive."

"Do you think so?" Kalinin mused. "I wondered if it was because of your student, instead."

"Of course, there's that, too." Kaspar laughed.

"Weber was a fine sniper."

"Past tense? He's still alive."

"It'll be past tense eventually," Kalinin said with no particular emotion.

There was movement in the abandoned base: the voices of soldiers complaining about the losses they'd suffered for no real profit; the officers whispering to each other and pointing to his Eligore. Perhaps they intended to

take his machine as “compensation.”

“Hold on. Wait just a minute,” Kaspar said, and climbed up the back of the machine. He opened the weapons rack underneath the cockpit hatch and retrieved a .30-caliber rifle wrapped in thick cotton cloth. It was an old-fashioned bolt action hunting rifle, smelling of oil, its wooden frame darkened in places by years of use. It seemed almost out of place in such a high-tech machine.

He didn’t even have to adjust the scope. Two hundred meters was nothing. Kaspar pressed a cartridge into the chamber, slid the bolt forward, twisted it smoothly and locked it in. He aimed, then fired.



Two hundred meters away, the commander giving the order to attack Kaspar suddenly doubled over, hands to his crotch, with a truly undignified scream. The subordinates around him backed off, looking around wildly.

“Better not try it. The next one will take the other ball!” Kaspar said over the Eligore’s external speaker. Some ran to treat the commander, some just stood there dumbstruck, some ran off to take shelter—but none of them tried to fight back.

“Problems?” asked the radio voice.

“No, just had to tighten the reins on these fools,” Kaspar responded, then quietly wrapped the smoking gun back in its protective cloth. “Anyway, there’s nothing for us here. Returning now.”

Kaspar slid into the cockpit and ran his machine to the transport helicopter rendezvous point. He’d failed to take out his priority target, the Laevatein, and Amalgam’s primary opponent had escaped. There was no reason to remain here now. The plan was in motion, and they didn’t have an eternity to deal with Mithril. Nor his old student, now clearly on the enemy side...

No, they would surely face each other someday. And after they’d both enjoyed the thrill of the mutual hunt, he would bestow upon his former protege a magnificent death.



Her life in captivity had grown harder than before.

After Niquelo, Chidori Kaname had been moved around between various sites. She’d spent two weeks at a farm somewhere in Texas before being taken to Switzerland, where she’d spent a week at an old mountain lodge. These accommodations were all much shabbier than the mansion at Niquelo. She didn’t get much to eat, either—just canned goods and MREs.

After that, they moved her around once every few days. Belgium, Denmark, northern Italy; through Turkey to Libya, where she spent a week in a cheap hotel. The mode of transportation was mostly cars and helicopters, and she was exhausted from the long hours of travel. Sleeping in the same lousy beds, eating the same lousy food, she felt herself wasting away.

She stayed a month and a half in Europe, Central Asia, and North Africa, then returned to North America. There she spent a week in a luxury hotel in Las Vegas. She hadn't been allowed out of her room, but the chance to sleep in a proper bed, eat decent food, and take a shower whenever she wanted was a real comfort to her.

After that, though, she'd been abruptly flown to Sri Lanka. There, her condition had grown much worse, and she'd collapsed. Going from an air-conditioned neo-Gothic hotel to a tropical terrorist training camp where electric fans were a luxury... It was like they were intentionally throwing her into even more extreme conditions, just as she was beginning to relax. She'd caught a fever there, and it wasn't going down. In that camp deep in the jungle, on a folding bed in the best of bad huts, she slept and slept.

This was the worst location yet. The heat was bad; the humidity was worse. An awful smell hung over the camp, leaking into the hut where Kaname lay trapped. It was like the sickly odor of trash, cheap booze, and vomit mixed together with the harsh stinging scents of exhaust and oil.

Morning and night, she heard gunshots and explosions, departing helicopter and AS engine noises, and the rough shouting of male voices. There was no peace to be found.

And then there were the bugs. They came in from the floor, from the windows... all kinds of bugs crawling on the walls, flying around the light bulbs. And they were big, twice as big or larger than those she'd known in Japan, fluttering and crawling and making scary noises around her head.

At one point, a centipede at least half a meter long crawled into her clothing. She wanted to cry and scream, but she resisted the urge. It was a matter of pride; she didn't want to give them the pleasure of seeing her weakness. She refused to be known as the kind of spoiled brat who cried and screamed at the sight of a few bugs.

They're trying to wear me down, Kaname thought. She was sure of that now. She didn't know exactly why, but it was likely that they couldn't abuse her outright. Instead, they were tightening the thumbscrews, little by little. Spartan bedding, unappetizing food, unhygienic rooms... they were all real trials to a girl

who was accustomed to civilization. Shuttling her from one awful environment to another, they wanted to wear away at her slowly. Anyone's will could be chipped away in time. The hotel in Las Vegas had been part of the scheme to break her.

Leonard was apparently alive, but he hadn't shown himself since then. She didn't know if he was the one who had ordered this treatment of her or not. That Polish girl, Sabina Rechnio, was always with Kaname, but all she would tell her about Leonard's status was that he was alive.

Kaname had also met Kalinin a few times. Once at the ranch in Texas, once at a small airport in Belgium, once at the hotel in Vegas... but she wasn't able to have a substantial conversation during any of these encounters. He seemed less to be coming for a visit and more checking on the status of a prisoner. He'd walk up to her, study her face, make sure there was no sign of excessive thinness in her arms or neck, or any bruises or burn marks. Kaname didn't try to question or berate him, either. She knew that nothing she could say to him mattered now.

The fever brought her bad dreams.

One morning, she went to school like always, and then a silver AS destroyed the school building. Her classmate's bodies were piled high in the courtyard, burning. She tried to look away, but she couldn't. Tears poured from her eyes as she saw the blackened and burnt body of Tokiwa Kyoko.

One morning, she woke up in a mansion. Men she didn't recognize were standing in her room, grinning and looking down at her. She tried to leap up and run away, but she couldn't. The men grabbed her and held her down and stripped her, and their hands became the legs of a centipede. *Help me, Sousuke!* she screamed, but he didn't come. *He's dead*, the centipede cackled as it crawled its way around her body.

One morning, she was in middle school. So many indifferent eyes, so many sticky thin smiles... Her textbook was missing again. Her open notebook echoed with jeers. *Die. You stink. Piss off.* She felt nauseous and ran to the toilet, where filthy water rained down on her from above the stall. The girl who'd done it laughed at her, then walked off hand-in-hand with Sousuke. *Unforgivable. He's*

mine, she cried and raged. *You should die. You should all die!*

Countless awful mornings like that assaulted her.

“Ugh...” Suddenly, the light burned her eyes, and Kaname let out a groan. Sunlight was streaming through the window onto her cheek where she lay. Her sheets, her clothing and her hair were drenched, pasted to her skin.

What time is it? she wondered groggily. Probably noon, or just before... But she wasn't sure how many days she had spent passed out in this camp. Her fever at last seemed to have gone down.

Kaname tried to get out of bed, but lost her balance and collapsed again. As she grabbed the nearby desk, she ended up knocking an empty mug onto the floor. Someone must have heard the noise, because she immediately heard the sound of the door unlocking.

Sabina Rechnio entered. She wasn't wearing her suit, of course, but a plain black T-shirt with olive pants, and she wasn't sweating despite the heat. “You appear to be awake,” Sabina said. “You were tossing and turning quite a lot.”

“Can I have... water?” Kaname croaked.

“Later. I've come to take your temperature.”

“I'm parched.”

Ignoring Kaname's words, Sabina took a digital thermometer from the bag on the table and put it in her ear. As she got a reading, Kaname thought that the pleasant electronic beep felt out of place in this primitive hut.

“Hey...” she tried again. “Can I have water?”

“It's gone down.” Sabina showed her the digital reading on the thermometer. It read 37.30.

“I guess I should've realized it earlier,” Kaname muttered. “You really hate me, huh, Sabina?”

“What exactly do you expect me to say to that?” the other woman asked indifferently, poured some water into the still-dirty cup, and handed it to Kaname.

“Fine, I get it.” Kaname said, drinking down the cloudy water inside. It didn’t taste cold, or even tepid; it didn’t taste like anything at all. “Did Leonard order you to do this?”

“What do you mean?” Sabina asked.

“Shutting me into all these places to deplete my stamina,” Kaname clarified.

“There are many people who want you,” Sabina said simply, without answering her question. “If we want to ensure your safety, we can’t let you stay long in comfortable locations. This camp is much safer than the hotel in Las Vegas.”

“I see.”

“That’s the only reason. You’ll just have to get used to it.”

“Yeah, but Leonard sure is inconsiderate,” Kaname mused. “If he’s feeling better, he should really come to visit.”

“Do you want to see him?” Sabina asked.

“No. I mean, he should come to visit *you*.”

Sabina’s breathing stopped for a moment.

“You like him, right?” Kaname inquired.

“I don’t understand.”

“It would annoy me if I were in your shoes...” said Kaname. “Having the man I love order me to look after the very person who shot him. And then on top of that, he won’t even come to see you? Well, *I’d* sure want to take it out on me, at least...”

“You seem to be under a misapprehension.” Sabina’s voice was very quiet. “Leonard-sama only recovered very recently. I wasn’t able to receive instructions from him before then. There’s been no change in my orders now, so I’ve simply been caring for you as I did in the past.”

“I see. A loyal little doggy, aren’t you?” Kaname asked, now in a challenging tone. Her fogged brain was churning at full speed, trying to figure out how to make Sabina angry. “Boy, Leonard’s a real jerk, isn’t he? He’s got a girlfriend

who would do all this for him, but all he cares about is me. And then I go and put a bullet in his brain. He deserved it, I gotta say.” She knew it was an awful sentiment, but she also knew that guilt would get her nowhere. She had to be as nasty as possible for Sabina to rise to the provocation. “Ah, I get it. Is that why he won’t show himself? He’s not sure how to explain himself to you? He’s embarrassed about how stupid he looks—”

Suddenly, the glass Sabina was holding broke; she’d shattered it with her grip. With the fragments of the glass in one hand, she used the other to grab Kaname’s throat and throw her forcefully down to the bed.

“I won’t let anyone speak about him that way,” Sabina hissed as blood dripped from the glass onto Kaname’s face. “Especially not you, Chidori Kaname. He chose you, yet you refused him. You tried to kill him. Such arrogance *alone* is worthy of death, and yet you scorn him and mock him on top of all else. It cannot be forgiven. No matter what he thinks, I *will* make you pay.”

Kaname couldn’t even argue. Sabina wasn’t much larger than her, but she was incredibly strong. It was like a pro wrestler was sitting astride her.

“I grew up in Lodz, a town like a garbage dump,” Sabina continued. “The first person I killed was a policeman into S&M whose name I didn’t know. The next was my mother, who’d sold me to him. From that day on, my job became ‘killer.’ I was taken in by the Warsaw mafia and I killed many people for them. I never expected anyone to treat me as human, but he found me and took me in. *He is the one who can wipe all debts clean.* There’s something about him that makes me believe that,” Sabina insisted. “I don’t care if he loves me. All that matters is that I make myself useful to him.”

Kaname didn’t speak. She couldn’t.

“Do you know how many male guards I’ve thought about siccing on you?” Sabina asked. “I know that it would break a sheltered little girl like you. But I didn’t, because that’s not what *he* wanted. That you can only see his attitude as ‘creepy’ is proof that you’re a hopeless fool—an incorrigible, arrogant woman. I won’t let it continue. I’ll make you pay,” Sabina promised, and held up one of the glass fragments. An expression of pure joy lit up her pale face, and her eyes locked onto Kaname’s throat. These were the eyes of a killer, the eyes of

someone well used to this work, ready to finish their opponent in one stroke. Inhuman eyes. “Nothing else matters now but killing you.”

“Don’t—”

“It’s all your fault,” snarled Sabina, and then the glass pierced into Kaname’s throat. It dug in hard, sharp, cold, and deep, opening a hole in her windpipe. Instead of screams, wordless pants of breath came out as warm fluid flowed into her mouth.

Sabina dug into the wound, pulled out, then stabbed again. But apparently she wasn’t satisfied with the throat alone; she cut into Kaname’s face, too. She struck her cheeks as they twisted in despair, tore off her nose, slit her mouth, crushed her eyes... destroyed everything that made her recognizable as Chidori Kaname. Kaname’s arms and legs convulsed and her fingers grabbed at the blood-soaked sheets. She was now a lump of flesh breathing foam.

Sabina was laughing at her, and her cackles of glee blended together with the taunts of the centipede and the laughter of middle school students. Sabina, sitting astride her, transformed into another girl. A girl with long black hair, face enraptured and stained with blood spray. It was Kaname herself.

“Let’s trade places,” Chidori Kaname whispered to the lump of flesh that was once Chidori Kaname, drawing her face close. “Why don’t you let me out already?”

Kaname screamed and sprang up from the bed. She was in the Sri Lankan camp, in that spartan hut, where sunlight now streamed in through the window. Her breathing was ragged, and her head felt heavy. Sweat and humidity drenched her underwear.

The room’s one door opened and Sabina Rechnio came in. She was wearing a black tank top and olive-colored pants. She wasn’t sweating, even in this heat. “You appear to be awake,” she observed. “You were tossing and turning quite a lot.”

“Can I have... water?” Kaname croaked.

“Later. I’ve come to take your temperature.”

“I’m parched.”

Sabina took out a digital thermometer and put it in Kaname’s ear. There was a familiar beeping sound.

“Hey... Can I have...”

“It’s gone down,” Sabina observed. The digital reading was 37.30, the same as in her dream.

Kaname felt a chill up her spine. “Sabina,” she said.

“Yes?”

“Do you know a place called Lodz?”

Sabina was pouring water into the dirty cup. She stopped. “That’s the city where I used to live.”

“I see.”

“How did you know?”

“I don’t know,” Kaname admitted. She snatched the cup away from Sabina and gulped the water down.



With the roar of a turboprop engine, the C-130 transport landed on Rakan Island. On the kilometer-long strip of flat sand lay a runway made of layered sheet metal. It wasn’t long enough for takeoff, so they would have to employ disposable rocket boosters when it was time to leave.

Sousuke had been up working since the break of dawn, but the afternoon gave him his first break in a while.

Rakan Island was isolated and tucked away on the edge of the Caribbean. The amphibious assault submarine, Tuatha de Danaan, was currently using it as its resupply point in the Atlantic, as well as a provisional base. Of course, it had no dock upon which to moor a large submarine, so the de Danaan remained on standby two kilometers from the beach, with the hatch of its flight deck open to take in supplies from transport helicopters.

This was Sousuke’s first chance to go fishing in a year; the last had been the

time he'd spent with Chidori Kaname on Merida Island. That had been a mere thirty minutes—yet a wonderful thirty minutes. He tried hard not to dwell on the fact that she wasn't here now. Brooding would just wear him down.

Under the blue sky, he stuck the large reel pole into the ground and waited for a fish that would probably never come while paging leisurely through *Jane's Fighting Ships*. He'd borrowed the fishing pole from Private Falkowski in the infantry unit. He was sure they were making preparations to leave the island within the hour, but enduring the background roar of transport planes on the makeshift runway was a tolerable tradeoff for an indulgence like this one.

"Well, no one expected this to be a beach in Guam, after all," Melissa Mao said from where she lay next to Sousuke. "But still, a chance to sunbathe at all feels like progress, huh?" She was in a bathing suit, stretched out on a mat that had been spread out on the beach. Beside her were technical officer Nora Lemming, Tessa's secretary Jacqueline Villain, and communications officer Sachi Shinohara, who were all similarly sunning themselves. They were all wearing bikinis made from urban camouflage patterned cloth, and every movement caused their suntan oil-soaked skin to sparkle as beads of sweat rolled down their curves.

They'd had to leave Merida Island without much in the way of clothing, and they probably hadn't had time to buy swimsuits, so apparently they'd used their spare time on the boat to make some out of extra urban camo fabric. It seemed as though the thought that they might get to wear them someday had helped keep them motivated through those uncertain early days.

There were relatively few female officers in the Tuatha de Danaan battle group. Among them had formed a kind of solidarity that transcended rank, and the escape from Merida Island had only strengthened that bond. Learning about the pilot killed in action in Tokyo, Eva Santos, had probably helped.

"I see. It has been a long time," Lemming said, while fixing the lay of the bikini around her ample bust.

"See? Aren't you glad I made them?" replied Villain, putting the straw of her sports drink to her crimson lips.

"I'd... have preferred a less bold design, myself. Ahaha..." Shinohara laughed

nervously.

Shinohara was Japanese, like Sousuke. She typically wore minimal makeup and black-rimmed glasses, but today she appeared to be following the lead of Mao and the others, fashion-wise. He'd heard she was a college graduate who'd spent some years in the JASDF before joining Mithril, which meant she was probably in her late twenties... even though by appearance, she could easily have been the same age as Sousuke. On top of her youthful looks, Shinohara was a sergeant, the lowest rank of them all, and she had a shy demeanor. The result was that, even though she was probably the oldest of all of them, she was frequently treated as a little sister by Mao and the others, especially when Tessa wasn't around.

Shinohara's behavior got a laugh out of Mao and the others. "What are you talking about? We never get chances like this."

"You don't want to die before you get a tan, do you?"

"Yeah, you have to enjoy it while you can... hah. Look at the gazes on those louts!"

The soldiers working to load up the transport plane were whistling and clapping at them from afar.

"I don't like them looking!" Shinohara wailed.

I don't care how you dress, but why do you need to sunbathe next to me? Sousuke thought privately, and let out a small sigh.

No, he could surely guess the reason... There were three beaches on the island large enough to really stretch out on, and all of them were being taken up by the men. Some were goofing off while sunbathing or eating, and others did target practice to maintain their skill. Sousuke had left the men's group and found a place to enjoy some solitary fishing for the first time in forever (he'd only recently realized what an indulgence solitude was), when Mao and the others had forced their way into his private party. They didn't mind the gazes, they'd said, but having the men actually hitting on them constantly was a pain.

"Be grateful you get an eyeful like this," they told him. This had been accompanied by, "You already have a girl, so we're not worried." Ever since the

conversation between him and Chidori Kaname in Niquelo had made the rounds, the girls in the squad seemed to have become a lot more relaxed around Sousuke. In fact, they seemed even more likely to talk about (what sounded like) romantic entanglements in his presence.

For instance, a rather lengthy example...

“So, how are things with Bruiser lately?”

“Pretty good,” said Lemming. “He’s nice.”

“Wow, I figured he was the wild type.”

“He’s not! Though we’re not really there yet... Of course, he’s still a maintenance guy... heh heh.”

“Ohh!”

“Are you saying he’s good with his hands?! Nora-san!”

“I guess. We don’t get a lot of time together,” Lemming admitted. “He mainly hits on me a lot when we’re working on AI.”

“Oh, is that it?”

“What about Weber-kun, then? I hear snipers have soft hands. And he’s musical.”

“You know what they say about men who play the guitar...”

“That’s an urban legend.”

“Cut out the dirty jokes,” Mao scoffed. “Sousuke’s right here. Anyway, why are you asking me about Kurz?”

“Huh? You’re not hooking up?”

“Of course not! Don’t be stupid.”

“Oh, I see...”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“Hey! Wait a minute, are people saying that about us?!” Mao demanded.

“No, I just had my suspicions.”

“Me, too. He’s very handsome. I think you’d make a good couple.”

“Oh, please! Give me a break!”

“Just kidding, sorry. I know it wouldn’t work.”

“Then knock it off.”

“Sorry! Ahaha.”

“He’s more like a little brother, honestly,” said Mao. “There’s no way...”

“Aw... So what about the captain?”

“Which captain?”

“Stupid. You know which captain. Ben!”

“Oh, Ben... Well, he’s my superior,” Mao pointed out, “so it’s not really possible right now...”

“Well, he doesn’t seem like the ‘smooth operator’ type.”

“Yeah, he hasn’t made the slightest offer.”

“I see.”

“Aww... But he’s pretty attractive. He’s got that whole stoic thing down. He’s like a samurai.”

“Oh-ho. Is that what you’re into, Sachi?”

“Should we set you guys up?”

“Ohh! P-Please do! But oh... I couldn’t.”

“Pick one! You Japanese people, I swear...”

“But, but...”

That was about how it went. At this point, Sousuke didn’t even care who was saying what about whom. He was never going to tell anyone about what he’d heard, and he couldn’t even understand most of it. But Sousuke did understand one thing: *They treat me like a statue of Jizo... like I’m not even here.* He wouldn’t have given that a second thought before, but he was starting to get a vague realization of what an empty feeling that was.

Meanwhile, Mao adjusted her sunglasses and said, “By the way, where are Emilia and Yvette?”

“They couldn’t get away from work. They’ll probably miss this, poor things,” Lemming replied.

Sousuke recalled that Emilia was a communications officer from the control room, and Yvette was an engineer in the engine room. They’d probably wanted to take part in the sunbathing, but were so busy loading up the aircraft that they couldn’t slip away.

“I guess she couldn’t make it, either.”

“Who?”

“The colonel.”

“Oh, Tessa?” Mao whispered and fell silent. “She probably did have a lot to organize. It’s understandable that she couldn’t get away.”

“I guess that makes sense...”

“I even made a swimsuit for her...”

“I’m sure she’ll get another chance.”

The talk of Tessa seemed to bring a pall over the otherwise cheerful proceedings. They probably knew how hard things had been for her.

“You think she’s all right?” Shinohara asked.

“Hmm... Well, she insists she is.”

“Hasn’t she lost weight?” Lemming asked.

“Yeah. I guess it’s... like...” Mao paused, then shrugged.

“What is it?”

“Nothing. She says she’s fine. She’s just a little tired, like we all are.”

Lemming and the others probably didn’t realize it, but Sousuke picked up on the slight change in Mao’s tone in that moment. He recognized it as being that of a team leader in battle, telling her subordinates that reinforcements were on the way, whether or not they really were. Mao was close to Tessa outside of

work, so she'd probably been able to tell that something was weighing on her mind... Something the others couldn't pick up on.

Sousuke hadn't had a real conversation with Tessa since Mexico. He'd filled her in about the battle in Tokyo and his days in Namsac, as well as everything that had led him up to his reunion with them... but that conversation had taken place in the presence of Mardukas, Mao, Kurz, and Clouseau.

Due to their close personal relationship, Sousuke knew how vulnerable Tessa could be, and it was easy to imagine the burden on her shoulders right now. Mithril had been driven to the brink of destruction, but most of her battle group had survived, and now they were trying to bring the team back together.

When Sousuke had first been assigned to the Tuatha de Danaan battle group, Tessa hadn't yet earned the trust of her subordinates. But in the two years since, she'd made herself indispensable, not just militarily, but psychologically. She was brilliant, charismatic, and a terrific leader. Most of the officers simply assumed she was exceptional, and never gave her another thought beyond that.

But Teletha Testarossa was by no means superhuman. Staking the entire group's fate on the wits of a mere seventeen-year-old girl... how could that lead to anything but disaster? Those who knew her well—those few subordinates who had seen her laughter and her tears—couldn't talk about it with the others. *She* wouldn't want that.

It was at this time that the siren in the base began to ring, blaring over the beach from makeshift speakers in the tent erected at the center of the resupply area hundreds of meters away. Two short and one long, the signal to "withdraw completely ASAP."

They didn't know the specifics, but something must be approaching Rakan Island, probably a Pave Mare or a Super Harrier patrolling the area. The base personnel would stop their work and board the Tuatha de Danaan, which would do an emergency dive and disappear. The aircraft would take off, leaving the remaining supplies to be blown up or burned. They hated to lose the provisions, but it would be dangerous to let the enemy discover what they'd left and get an idea of what the de Danaan did and didn't have. The soldiers in the distance—

those relaxing on the beach, bored from target practice—quickly began preparations to withdraw.

“Vacation’s over, I guess.”

“A thirty-minute vacation. I wonder when we’ll get our next one...”

Mao and the others sulked as they put parkas and T-shirts on over their swimsuits and began cleaning up their provisions. Sousuke also cleaned up his fishing instruments. He quickly reeled in his line to find a lump of some kind of unrecognizable seaweed on the hook.

“Depth, 650. Speed, twenty-five knots. No pursuing ships within twenty miles,” XO Richard Mardukas relayed to Tessa.

She ran her eyes over the information on the front screen, checked the accuracy of her XO’s report, and told her sonar technicians which directions to watch out for. After receiving a few reports from the officer of the deck, she decided they were safe and let out a sigh of relief. “Set alert level to yellow three. Lift sound restrictions as well.”

“Aye, ma’am. Alert level, yellow three. Lift sound restrictions,” Mardukas repeated, and the OOD relayed the instruction shipwide.

It had been five hours since they’d detected the enemy approach, left Rakan Island and disappeared into the deep sea. Right now, in the hangar deck, the ground forces—who, up til now, had been holding their breath—began quickly sorting through their new supplies.

“Well within expectations,” Mardukas said.

“Indeed,” Tessa replied. “But it felt so fast...”

She’d known from the start that the enemy would eventually find and attack their Rakan Island base. They’d been forced to leave some supplies there, but most of what really mattered had made its way onto the de Danaan. Matters of crew morale aside, they could now remain at sea for up to four more months. As long as it could dive, the de Danaan would remain the world’s most powerful vessel. Only those in its control room knew where it was, where it was going, and where it might next appear.

Even so, something seemed off about the speed at which the enemy had been able to find and approach Rakan Island. It was just a little too fast... not in a way that Tessa could quantify in numbers, but in a way that she felt in her gut.

“You don’t think it’s just a sign of the enemy’s desperation?” Mardukas questioned.

“No,” said Tessa. “In Western Sahara, too, we just barely made it in time. Remember?”

“That’s true. In that case...” Mardukas didn’t say anything more, but Tessa knew exactly what he was thinking: something was afoot in Amalgam’s organizational structure. She’d considered it from several angles, and that was the most likely explanation she could think of; Amalgam’s movements had simultaneously become more efficient and more active.

This meant more strain on Tessa and the others to stay one step ahead, but it wasn’t all bad. It was also proof that something had changed in Amalgam’s decision-making structure. The organization that was once so sluggish was now nimble and quick to attack; did that mean they were shifting to more of a pyramidal hierarchy? No... probably nothing that radical, but something like it, perhaps? Though even if they were, Tessa had no idea who was at the top...

It was as if she had seen the smallest hint of a flaw in a towering giant. She still didn’t know exactly where that flaw, that weakness was... The Achilles tendon, the crotch, the heart? And did they need silver bullets to damage it? That much remained a mystery.

The battle ahead would still be painful and hard, but Tessa had noticed something in the enemy’s movements that she felt she could sink her teeth into. It was just the slightest tug on the fishing line in the water, but...

“It’s a good sign,” she decided, recrossing her porcelain knees in the captain’s chair. The enemy was coming into the ring with them. They couldn’t hope to compete punch for punch, but they might be able to deliver a hard sock to the nose. But in order to do that, they’d have to move on to the next step.

“Goddard-san, you have the bridge,” she announced. “Mardukas, come with me.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Having left command to the officer of the deck, Tessa got out of the captain’s chair. She began thinking about all the various preparations she had to do for what came next, but just as she was about to leave the control room, the communications officer stopped her.

“Captain, wait.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“A telegram. From Lemon in the DGSE.”

The encrypted message, taken in by the autonomous turtle craft that remained just below the surface to receive communications, showed itself on the console monitor. The communications officer bent over a little bit and waited for Tessa to read it.

The content of the telegram was very short. 《Yamsk-11 located. 60° 8’ 10.66”N 153° 5’20.60”E ／ File ed 1258-09-02》

So, it paid off, Tessa thought, almost exactly as I expected. And they managed it sooner than expected, as well. Michel Lemon was in Moscow with a comrade, on a dangerous infiltration mission to learn something she needed to know. They should be making preparations to withdraw around now, and reaching Hungary en route to Western Europe by tomorrow.

“Good,” she said shortly. “Now delete it.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Having confirmed the message’s subsequent deletion, Tessa left the control room.

In the eight months since the battle at Merida Island, Tessa and the others had more or less gotten things back under control. The former Merida Island staff had secured new supply routes and income sources, and also rebuilt their information network. Hunter, Wraith, and other intelligence division members were gathering information across the world, while men like Estes had dispersed, bringing their allies back into the fold, and rapidly expanding their

forces.

The top-class executives—operations division head Admiral Borda, intelligence division head General Amit, and research division head Dr. Panerose, as well as Lord Mallory—were still unaccounted for. Any one of them could be dead, or simply laying low.

According to Hunter, General Amit had moved most of the intelligence division functions elsewhere before the attack, so they were probably still out there, under the radar, collecting information. Nobody could contact them, and they couldn't be sure they were even still friendly towards Mithril. The general had forbidden Hunter to act, yet he'd gone against orders to help Tessa and the others, as had Wraith, bringing the scattered research division members together and spearheading the effort to build the Laevatein.

They'd initially undergone the construction in secret, and Tessa had heard the design was scrapped multiple times. They were on the verge of giving up completely when they'd decided to incorporate the secretly retrieved Arbalest core unit. With the help of the recovered Whispered, Mira, and the AI, Al (who was part of said core unit), they'd managed to get it done.

The Laevatein was a powerful lambda driver-mounted machine, but it was also a makeshift prototype based on recycled parts; not at all the balanced all-rounder machine aimed for in the original plans. There was a story that long ago, when Lockheed's engineers were designing the stealth fighter prototype, Have Blue, they mainly recycled existing parts. Sachs and the rest of the maintenance team had named the Laevatein "Have Red" after that legend.

They wanted to improve their other equipment in addition to the Laevatein, but unfortunately, their budget was limited. Just the money for supply restocks and personnel living expenses had to be paid for by selling off equipment, dummy corporations, and other distributed assets. Over two thousand personnel were working to put Mithril back together, and they were dealing small but real blows to Amalgam over time. The Tuatha de Danaan was like a mobile headquarters coordinating it all. This meant that in practice, the effort's commander in chief was its captain, Tessa.

More than a few of her subordinates seemed to be concerned about this. It

was natural for them to worry about a girl of her age having that much responsibility placed on her shoulders. But given the situation, Tessa was the only one who could take command. Mardukas was an incredible officer, and he had the intelligence to do the job as well as Tessa did, but he lacked her charisma. He knew as well as anyone that he was perceived as being fussy and bossy. And the fact was that aside from him, there just wasn't anyone else capable of leading Mithril.

Tessa often wished Kalinin were there. He was more cut out to be an aide than a true leader, but his presence would significantly reduce the burden on herself and her subordinates.

Andrey Kalinin... Learning that he had joined Amalgam had been a terrible psychological blow. He was a mercenary, and it wasn't unusual for mercenaries to switch sides to whichever was stronger or paid better. It made sense from that angle, but then... he had been so important to them in the past. He was a man of few words, and he rarely offered his personal thoughts or opinions, but everyone assumed that his most fundamental drivers were loyalty and pride.

Why would he join the enemy, then? It was hard to believe that anyone except Kalinin could have prepared the spare supplies for the de Danaan that they'd used upon escaping from Merida Island. That would suggest he had chosen to join the enemy only after the battle on Merida Island. Had he changed his mind after being taken prisoner? Thinking back now, he had shown a rare sense of hesitation during that battle... as if he'd known it would happen—or that someone had told him it would.

Or had Kalinin been brainwashed? Did they have a loved one of his held hostage? Was it possible he'd been in cahoots with Amalgam even before he had joined Mithril? Or was there some more complicated reason at play? The only thing Tessa knew for sure was that Amalgam had acquired a terribly powerful ally in Kalinin...

But, wait, maybe not... Maybe it wasn't Amalgam that Kalinin had joined, but her brother. That might explain it then. Could the reason he was helping her brother be—

"Captain?" Sachs's voice snapped Tessa out of her thoughts. "That's my

report. Is it sufficient?" He and the ten others gathered in the briefing room were all looking dubiously at Tessa. They were in the middle of one of their regular meetings, and maintenance chief Ed "Bruiser" Sachs was explaining about the state of the resupply.

Tessa nodded as if she'd been listening the whole time. "Yes. Anything else?"

"The M9s are in trouble," Sachs told her. "That includes the Falke and the other two E-types. The spare parts are easy to track, so we're having a hard time setting up secure routes to get them. The result is they haven't had a proper overhaul in over six months. Normally all three would need thorough testing in a dedicated facility, but we've just been doing patch-up jobs, and that's starting to show its limits."

Currently, the only ASes they had available were the black Falke, two E-types, and the Laevatein. The Laevatein was a comparatively new addition to their forces, so it hadn't lost much in the way of parts, but the remaining three machines were seriously depleted from the extreme conditions they'd been dealing with.

"How long will they hold out?" she asked next.

"Three battles, tops. After that, anything could happen. The palladium reactor could shut down in combat, the frame could snap, the joints could lock up... You name it, it's a possibility. If we break one up for spare parts, it could extend the life of the others, but—"

"Hold on. We can't afford to lose any more machines," Mao said. "Three machines plus one lets us more or less run operations we used to do with six or more, but if we lose another, that's all out the window."

"But all three will break down at this rate," Sachs argued back.

"Yeah, but—"

"That's all right," Tessa said confidently. "I think I can find a new route for securing supplies before that third battle comes. Keep things up as they are for now." In truth, she had no idea how to secure new M9 parts, but it was a waste of time to get everyone worried about something that was so out of their control. Estes or Hunter might eventually deliver them good news, but failing

that, the de Danaan's battle power was going to end up sharply reduced.

But either way... *I think things should be resolved within three battles.* Tessa truly felt there would be no need to send the M9s out a fourth or fifth time. If the battle dragged out any longer, they were most likely doomed anyway.

"So, where's our next operation?" Kurz asked. "We've gathered up almost all the allies we parted ways with previously. We've managed to resupply for now, and the information network is back in place. But we still don't know where Leonard is, or even if he's still alive. We need to know what he knows if we want to crush Amalgam, right?"

"We have no information on Leonard Testarossa's current status," said Tessa, "but I believe he's alive."

"Instinct?"

"Yes." It wasn't much to go on, but she *was* his twin sister. Since she was also a fellow Whispered, nobody was about to argue with her. The more experienced the soldier, the more they respected the power of instinct.

"Well, Kaname did say he *might* be dead," Kurz replied. "Let's assume he's alive."

"Still, we have no idea where he is," Clouseau said. "Our information is still hazy. It would be difficult to mount an effective attack at present."

"That's true," Tessa agreed. "I've had AI and Dana debating about the virus question for a while, but they haven't reached a conclusion."

"First I've heard of it. They debate?" Sachs said.

"In their spare time, yes. But it wasn't any use. AI's questions are too difficult for Dana to keep up."

"I thought Dana was the more powerful AI?"

"She is."

"And AI is terrible at chess," Sachs mused. "I put him up against Friday, Mao's M9's AI, and he lost nine out of ten."

Tessa hadn't heard this before, but the thought made her shoulders shake

with laughter. It fit perfectly into what she knew. “I see. AI is quite an AI.”

“Why? He sucks.”

“He’s not using tactics that would result in equal matches,” she explained. “He’s playing the way we do. And yet, he still managed to win once.”

“‘The way we do’?” Sachs furrowed his brow, and the previously silent Mardukas spoke.

“Instinct: chess players, mathematicians, tacticians... when facing a difficult problem, their first task is to form an image of the final result in their mind, then work the logic backwards from there. The thought of ‘how I want to win’ comes first, like a vision of the future. In simple games, a von Neumann-based computer will have the advantage, but reality is far more complicated.”

“Hm...”

“We can discuss the definition of intelligence another time. For now, let’s talk about next moves,” Tessa said, snapping the file case on her knees shut decisively. “I’ve noticed a slight change in Amalgam’s activities. Their decision-making has grown swifter, which is visible in how decisively they act. At the same time, they seem distracted as well... I think our guerrilla operations are having an effect.”

“You think they’re panicking? That’s good news.”

“Yes. But I don’t think we’re the only reason.”

“What do you mean?”

“Leonard. Or possibly Kalinin-san... What if one of them has taken on a leadership role in the organization?” Tessa questioned. “We’ve destroyed several of Amalgam’s bases in the past, and seen some signs of internal discord. If that’s the case, could there be a power struggle in play? It seems worth considering.”

“Sounds like there are still some secrets to root out,” Clouseau said, showing a rare pessimism.

“Regarding that, I’ve received some information thanks to Lemon-san, and I’m going to investigate it two days from now.”

Mardukas furrowed his brow at Tessa's words. "Investigate? Personally?"

"Yes," she said. "It's a place that would be difficult for anyone but me to investigate. I expect it to be dangerous, so I'll want an escort. It's quite far away."

"Where is it?"

"The Far East. A ruin in the Soviet Union."

The de Danaan was currently in the Atlantic. If she wanted to take ASes for support, it would be quite a long journey. They couldn't take them all, either—two, at most.

"Let's see... I'd like Weber-san and Sagara-san to be my escort," Tessa decided. "In the meantime, Clouseau-san, you gather information about the matter in the Ukraine and begin laying groundwork. Melissa, work with Courtney to take out the enemy base in South America. I know he can be difficult, but please try."

"Sure, sure," Mao mumbled.

"What was that?"

"Yes, Commander!"

"Better. Now, you have your assignments," Tessa told them. "I don't want to see any mistakes. Dismissed."

The morning after the meeting with Tessa and the others, Melissa Mao realized her terrible mistake. It was clear to her the minute she woke up. Compared to this mistake, friendly fire on an allied machine, stepping on your infantry escort, or leaking classified information over an open channel would have been preferable.

Mao was in a small officer's quarters, a room she'd been assigned now that she was serving as vice commander to the ground forces and had to do more paperwork. Private rooms were an extravagance when you were living on a submarine.

In that small bed, in that small room... Kurz was lying naked next to her,

snoozing blissfully, without a care in the world. He let out a long, weak sound, halfway between a sigh and a groan.

She checked again. It was inevitable that she didn't have a stitch on, either. Mao hadn't been in a drunken stupor or anything, so she remembered the night before clearly. It's just, when she woke up, she wished it had been a dream.



Yes, she remembered...

Last night, she had been going over the paperwork for their resupply when Kurz came by with some documents for her to sign. While he was there, he'd asked her for advice about some members of the PRT. Kurz often gave special attention to the less experienced PRT members. One thing led to another, and it became a long conversation.

Someone brought up alcohol, so she took some Perrier out of her fridge. Then her hand slipped, and she'd dropped it on the floor. That was her big mistake: If only she hadn't dropped the Perrier on the floor, this never would have happened.

After cleaning up the spilled beverage, they drank some ginger ale, and talked about how tired they were of this life, and how they wished they could have a little adventure on a resort somewhere. When the word 'adventure' came up, Kurz reacted with his usual arm-around-the-shoulders. "In that case, Sis, why don't we enjoy a little hot-and-heavy adventure right now? You know..."

She'd shoved him off as usual, but the room was so small, and the floor was wet—yes, the Perrier again—so she'd slipped and started to fall. Kurz reached out to catch her, but they just ended up on the floor together.

Mao seemed to have bumped her head on the wall when she fell, and felt a little dizzy. It was only for two or three seconds, but when she opened her eyes, his face was all she could see. In a serious voice, he'd said, "Hey, sorry. Are you okay?"

And then, for some reason, she'd started crying. No, she wasn't really crying... but she'd wanted to cry. Her thoughts were swimming. *What am I doing in this submarine? Why's he so worried about me?* Maybe it was all the stress of being shut up in a steel box, after the loss of Merida Island, coming to a head. Mao felt crushingly alone, and wanted the worried man in front of her to dote on her. He was stunned for a minute, but they looked at each other for a few seconds, and then...

Oh, right... She was the one who'd kissed him.

She just felt so... you know... Pathetic. Miserable. Court martial-worthy. It was

such a cliché; she couldn't possibly tell Nora and the others, out of pure embarrassment.

But if the other girls found out, their eyes would glitter in curiosity, and they'd surely ask her, "So, how was it?"

Well, you know... It was kind of... Okay, let's be real. It was incredible! Mao never would have imagined they'd be so compatible. She'd completely lost her mind. Her body was aching all over. In fact, while she was pretty sure the room was soundproofed, she was forced to wonder how thoroughly it was done...

Those were the thoughts about last night that swirled through her mind as she turned first red, and then pale. It was then that Kurz let out a moan and began to wake up. She knew it was pointless at this phase, but Mao instinctively covered her chest with a sheet.

"Ughn... mm... Mm?" Kurz looked up at her. His gaze was blank for a moment, but then he cringed as she had, covering his head with his hands. "Ahhhhhhh... Not good..."

Mao was shocked by his reaction... and on top of that, she was shocked that she was shocked. "Wh-What kind of attitude is that?" she asked.

Then Kurz peeked out at her from under the sheet, and grinned. "Just kidding. I wanted to tease you a little." Then he put an arm around Mao's shoulders and kissed her softly on the cheek. He used his free hand to gently trace around the nape of her neck.

"Huh? Hey... wait... stupid!"

"C'mon, I gotta tease you a little," he informed her.

"Hey, you! Cut it... ah..."

"You were adorable, Melissa."

"Mm... hey, stop it!" she protested. "Hey... knock it off already!" Learning from her mistake last night, Mao held tight to the edge of the bed to steady herself and kicked Kurz off with all her might.

"Wugh... what was that all about?!"

"Don't get full of yourself. And don't look at me." She hiked the dropped

sheets back up to her armpits and threw a pillow at Kurz's face.

"Huh? What's this all about? Last night, you were so—"

"That was then! This is now! Don't act like we're sweethearts over one time!"

"It was three times, actually," Kurz grumbled.

"Don't keep count! Besides, that's not the point," she added. "And don't call me Melissa."

"But you told me to!"

"Did not!"

"Did so! And you said it in the sweetest little voice..." Mao threw a mug at his face, and he tumbled off the bed.

"Ah... what will I do?" she moaned. "What's wrong with me? When did I get so soft?"

"Hmm... I guess you have gotten pretty soft..." Kurz said, and then cackled.

"Wait... did you *arrange* this?"

"Oh, come on," he scoffed. "Even I'm not that good."

"But you were nicer than normal last night..." Mao observed suspiciously.

"I was just worried about you. I didn't expect us to end up like this either... well..." Kurz sounded serious, and went silent for a moment, thinking. "Hmm. Well, I guess I can't say it *wasn't* on my mind..."

"Why, you...!" Mao snatched the pillow away from Kurz and slapped him with it as hard as she could. Apparently once wasn't enough, because she found herself hitting him with it again and again.

"Hey, cut it out already," he pleaded. "Ahaha... That tickles! C'mon..."

"How are you so calm about this? It's infuriating!"

"Come on, don't sweat it so much. Everything's fine." As Mao stomped him, kicked him, and wrung his neck, Kurz just kept smiling affably. At last she got tired and gave up, and while she was panting on the bed, he peered carefully into her face.

“Well, you’re looking better,” he said.

“Huh?”

“You feel better, right? You must be, if you’re acting this way.”

Kurz was right. That depression that had been hovering over her through yesterday was gone. The feeling she couldn’t shake off, even sunbathing on the beach—that another, gloomier version of her was gazing over her shoulder with hollow eyes—had vanished like early morning mist. To think that one night could leave her feeling so refreshed... Mao was disgusted by how basic she felt.

No... That usually *was* all it took, wasn’t it? One good meal, a single night of passion... Such things were enough to solve most human problems.

I wish Tessa could feel this too, she found herself thinking. *If only she had someone like this...* Sousuke would be the best choice, but unfortunately, he was devoted to Kaname. His single-mindedness was usually one of his more charming aspects, but it could also be annoying. It didn’t have to be anything so complicated and serious...

Noticing Kurz’s expectant gaze on her, she said, curtly, “Well, maybe I do feel better. The exit is that way.”

“Hey, c’mon!” he protested. “You don’t have to kick me out.”

“I told you it was just one night. I have a reputation to think about, you know? So, forget this ever happened. If you tell anyone, I kill you.”

This time, Kurz let out a genuine sigh and slumped over. “This is, like... a real blow to my ego. Good grief...”

“What?” she replied, stunned.

“Oh, um... Um... The way you’ve been acting. I guess it could’ve been anyone, huh? I really enjoyed it, but... Yeah, I get it.” Kurz stood up weakly and began to slowly put on his pants.

“Well... I... I didn’t mean it could’ve been *anyone*...” Mao said, floundering.

“Really? But it sounds like you didn’t enjoy it?”

“I didn’t say that, either.”

Kurz stole a glance at her. "Then it was good?"

"Well... er... That's not the point!" Mao declared. "I'm worried about everyone finding out what happened..." As she fiddled with the edge of her sheet, Kurz leaned forward suddenly, and stole a kiss. A long kiss. It was a simple kiss, but heavy and sweet.

"Mm..."

"You can be awful cute sometimes," he told her.

"Darn it... Did you even hear what I said?"

"It's okay. I won't tell anyone, and I'll pretend nothing's changed," Kurz said. "So no worries."

"Promise, okay? I really can't have it getting out."

Kurz cast a glance at the clock on the desk. "Shift starts at eight, right? Which means we've got an hour."

Mao hesitated. "What are you trying to say?"

"One more time?"

"Stupid."

"Is that a no?"

She thought for a second and then whispered into his ear, "Just once, okay?"

It ended up being twice. They just barely made it to their work shift on time.

2: On a Journey

Michel Dambier was an engineer, in his third year working at Renault. He was recently married, and had decided to pair up his honeymoon with a business trip to an international motor show at the Moskva River Expo Center. Unfortunately, his wife had found herself completely disgusted by Russian customer service. Though he'd tried his best to comfort her, his main priority was getting home, then maybe hitting up Paris for some good food and wine.

This was Lemon's cover identity, more or less. He was currently sitting in a corner of Sheremetyevo International Airport, stifling a yawn.

"How can you yawn at a time like this?" asked the 'wife' of his cover story, Wraith. She was sitting next to him on a bench, and though her words were blunt and cold, her expression and mannerisms were sweet and gentle, stroking the nape of his neck as her lips drew close to his ear. Those in the airport around them would just assume they were whispering sweet nothings to each other.

Wraith currently appeared as a brunette in a staid paisley dress, paired with a simple beige cardigan worn around her shoulders. She had a turned-up nose, a pointed chin, and dark gray eyes; she didn't look East Asian in the slightest. Wraith managed to apply such disguises in less than half an hour every morning, and she could probably look even less recognizable if she really wanted to.

Lemon whispered back to her, in the manner of a husband trying to cheer up his wife. "What do you expect? I've barely slept at all these past five days. My days are spent as a tourist, and my nights are spent sneaking into Moscow libraries."

"I'm the one who found the documents," she pointed out.

"And I helped," he answered. "But Russian's not exactly my first language." The investigation that Mithril's Teletha Testarossa had sent them on required them to sift through Soviet public documents and scientific journals in search of

records of an experiment done in Soviet territory eighteen years ago. Since the documents hadn't been digitized, they'd had to come all the way to Moscow to do it. "It's my first time in Moscow anyway. It seems like it's a second home to you, though?"

"I only lived here briefly," said Wraith.

"Study abroad, maybe?" Lemon suggested. "At the Peoples' Friendship University?"

"Not telling."

"Ah, I see." Lemon had managed to intuit that Wraith was a former North Korean agent, and the Peoples' Friendship University was known to take in students from third-world Communist countries. Those in the intelligence field, like Lemon, knew well that students who nominally transferred there for schooling typically ended up trained in espionage.

Lemon still didn't even know Wraith's real name. Of course, 'Lemon' was also a fake name, so he had no real right to complain there... But he'd asked her once during the journey, out of curiosity, and her response had been, "I'm not telling you. You have Japanese friends." Baffled, he'd pressed her further, but she'd just turned flushed and angry about it for some reason.

Her face behind her various masks was beautiful, and she was also elegant and refined. On top of that, she was far more physically capable than Lemon, who worked primarily on the "intelligence" side of the spy business. She was certainly his type, but unfortunately, even the five days they'd spent playing husband and wife hadn't done anything to close the gap between them.

On the plus side, their long journey had borne fruit. Wraith had located the documents they were after following two rough nights in the library of a science academy, and then conveyed the name of the place described there to the Tuatha de Danaan via satellite channel. Now, all they had to do was flee the country.

Their boarding time wasn't for a while yet, so Lemon stood up.

"Where are you going?" Wraith questioned.

"I'm a little hungry," he said. "I'm going to buy something. Want anything?"

“No. Whatever you— No, actually...” Wraith thought for a minute. “I’d like some chocolate. Hershey’s, if they have it.”

“What, you want to make chocolate explosives or something?”

“No, I want to eat it.”

“Oho. That’s a pretty cute choice for a formidable Mithril spy,” Lemon joked.

“Just shut up and go,” she said, still whispering gently, and then kissed his cheek. He didn’t know how much of it was an act, but— No, it was probably *entirely* an act. Lemon shrugged it off, then headed for the corner of the airport terminal.

He bought two piroshkis, a Volvic, and a random chocolate bar. Unfortunately, there was no Hershey’s. He tried to pay with his remaining rubles, but the middle-aged woman in the shop asked, in heavy accented English, “Don’t you have any dollars?” He did indeed have dollars, but he lied and said he didn’t, earning a sharp glare from her as he paid with Russian currency.

Lemon received his change and was about to leave the store when he noticed a commotion around the terminal entrance. Several men in suits were speaking with airport staff. Their haughty bearing and keen eyes suggested they were police. They were showing a photo to the staff and asking a lot of questions.

Upon seeing the picture, one of the staff members pointed into the lobby, at the bench where Lemon had just been sitting.

Not good, was Lemon’s first thought. He couldn’t think of any slip-ups they’d made that might have put the Soviets on their trail, and there’d been no sign of their cover being blown. But given the men’s behavior, Wraith and Lemon had to be their objective.

“I think they’re after us,” Wraith whispered, appearing behind him unannounced. Lemon almost yelped in shock, but she grabbed his collar and pulled him behind a decorative plant, taking them out of sight of the new arrivals. She must have noticed the presence of the security men before Lemon did.

“Looks like it,” he agreed. “Not sure how they found us, though.” The only

ones who should know they were here were Teletha Testarossa and Gavin Hunter.

“So, what do we do?” Wraith asked next.

“Good question... We’re going to end up in a rough situation no matter what,” Lemon concluded. “So...”

“I guess we’ll escape to the best of our abilities.” She took Lemon’s hand and began leading him towards a corner of the terminal, which had an employee entrance. The door there was locked, but Wraith hid behind Lemon as she picked it. It was just a basic cylinder lock, so it only took her five seconds. Nobody even seemed to notice. “It’s open.”

“Brilliant,” said Lemon.

Wraith slipped through the door and Lemon followed her, careful to make sure nobody was watching.

They jogged a little way down the employee hallway, turned the corner, walked down the stairs, then hid in a broom closet to let some staff members pass by. They hadn’t memorized the map, so any escape from the terminal building would purely come down to luck.

Inside the small closet, Wraith whispered, “Any ideas?”

“About what?” Lemon asked.

“The situation. Someone must have leaked the information. It can’t be Hunter.”

“I wonder. I don’t think Testarossa would make that kind of mistake, either—” Lemon’s speculation was interrupted by Wraith grabbing him by the collar and pressing something sharp against his neck—a shiv, made of reinforced plastic.

“Then the leak must have come from you,” she said coldly.

“Hey, hang on!”

“Who in the DGSE did you report to?” Wraith demanded. “Come to think of it, I don’t even know for sure that you *are* DGSE... Either way, it would be safer to kill you now and run off on my own.”

“Aha.” Lemon attempted to smile calmly but failed, as the knife digging into his skin forced him to wince. “I have no way to prove my innocence, so I guess that’s it for me,” he replied angrily. “Declared guilty and put to death with no lawyer, no jury of my peers. That’s the way your *uncivilized* country does it, right?”

A quiet rage appeared in Wraith’s eyes, but Lemon’s rage was greater. *Stupid woman*, he thought contemptuously. *You think now is the time for infighting? You should be working with me to escape, not issuing threats!* What was even worse was that in all these days they’d spent together, he could tell she hadn’t acquired even the slightest sense of feeling for him. *No interest at all in my gentlemanly, brilliant, sexy self?! Is she a lesbian or something?*

“You seem angry,” Wraith observed.

“I’m *very* angry!” said Lemon. “So, let me make my execution even easier for you: I know your secret.”

“What?”

“Yesterday, to kill time, I searched the internet for a list of North Korean women’s names,” Lemon explained. “Being a brilliant linguist, I figured it out in less than an hour... You know, your real name? I’ll bet your family name is Kim. That’s a reading for the kanji that means ‘gold.’ And your given name is going to be one that means ‘beauty,’ right? Yeah, your expression gave it away. Apparently that’s expressed with the kanji for ‘ball.’ It must be Ok-hui or something, the combination of ‘ball’ and ‘girl.’ We all know what lewd little word the ‘gold ball’ kanji pairing refers to in Japanese, so your full name, when written in kanji, would be the utterly laughable—”

“Stop!” Wraith cried out.

“Now, go ahead and kill me,” Lemon taunted. “I’ll tell everyone about it in Hell.”

Wraith’s arm tensed, but the crimson in her face didn’t appear to come from anger. She’d seemed genuinely about to rip his throat out, but that impulse seemed to fade as she let out a labored sigh. “This is absurd,” she admitted. “Fine, I’ll stop.”

“You shouldn’t even have started,” Lemon whispered, breathing heavily as he tried to sort out his thoughts.

Wraith just turned away, pulling out an airport map pamphlet as she began to consider escape routes. “If we can make it to the bottom level, there should be a service corridor for fuel and sewer pipelines. It will take us out of the terminal building.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Lemon. “But is that all you’ve got to say?”

“What else would there be?”

“‘I’m sorry,’ maybe?”

“Oh, shut up,” Wraith said with a scowl, then hurried on ahead. They climbed down a barebones service staircase, then passed through the loading dock to go deeper. It was a gloomy place; the signs in the passage and guides were all in Russian and difficult to read from long years of wear.

“Over there,” said Wraith, running up to the hatch at the end of the narrow hall, which was chained and padlocked shut. Above them they could hear distant footsteps—the quick gait unique to well-trained men—and officers shouting, “Davai! Davai!” It was accompanied by some kind of panting...

Police dogs, thought Lemon. It was only a matter of time before they were found. “Not good,” he said to Wraith. “They brought dogs.”

“I know. There, it’s open.” She removed the padlock and the two of them pried the heavy hatch open. There was probably no way she’d be able to open it by herself.

“See, you couldn’t have gotten away without me,” Lemon boasted. “Aren’t you glad you let me live?”

“I could still kill you now, you petty little man.”

“Hey...”

“I’m just kidding. Let’s go,” said Wraith, slipping through the hatch into the basement. Lemon followed after her, then tore some of the silver paper from the chocolate bar he’d bought at the kiosk earlier, subtly slipping it into the hatch as he closed it.

“What are you doing?”

“Buying us time.” When their pursuers found the hatch, they’d see the silver strip, assume it was some kind of trap, and be on their guard.

“If we take too long, they’ll surround us,” Wraith reminded him. “Hurry.”

“I am.”

The underground passage was dimly lit, with half of the space taken up by cables and pipes both large and small. Maintenance there seemed poor; water dripped from the pipes, creating a faint mist, and the smell of jet fuel stung their noses.

They ran for about three minutes. Visibility was poor, and the next thing Lemon knew, Wraith had gotten far ahead of him. From what he could tell by counting his steps, they’d already gone over five hundred meters. Positioning-wise, they should be outside the terminal building by now, but...

“Let’s head out,” Wraith told him, and immediately began climbing the nearby staircase. She didn’t seem out of breath at all. Lemon, however, was completely exhausted. He was a frequent jogger, so he’d assumed he could run this far easily... but now he was heaving for breath. Maybe it was the stress.

They climbed up several landings and unlocked the door at the end of the hall. This led them to a small concrete room full of stacks of aircraft guidance and fire prevention equipment, next to a number of traffic cones.

Leaving the little building took them out onto the taxiway for international flights. A hundred meters away in the dark, amidst blinking blue guide lights, a large passenger jet was passing with a deafening roar. Behind them was the airport’s outer fence.

Wraith grabbed Lemon’s arm as he stood there, hypnotized by the jumbo jet’s passage. “What are you doing?” she yelled. “Hurry!”

They broke into a run and saw the now-distant jumbo jet putting on the emergency brake; the control tower must have ordered them to stop. Beyond it, several cars were approaching from a corner of the terminal building, sirens wailing. They were coming after them.

“Damn,” Lemon cursed. So, they had sniffed them out after all... The effort to buy time had proved fruitless. *End of the line*, he wanted to say to Wraith, but he knew it wouldn’t help, so he stopped himself. Besides, she probably knew it as well as he did.

The fence that blocked their way was over two meters tall. It wouldn’t be easy to climb. He’d have to let her stand on his shoulders to escape. He didn’t want to do that dressed this way, but...

“What should—” Wraith started to say, then stopped short as he saw a man step out from an embankment just before the fence.

This new man was young; a boy, even, with silver hair and a red coat—the thick, dark red of blood—that billowed in the night wind. He was slender, and the blue-tinted illumination of the guide lights revealed well-proportioned features and dewy, almond-shaped eyes. For a second, Lemon almost mistook him for a woman.

Wraith seemed to know this boy. “Leonard... Testarossa?” she whispered haltingly. She then lowered her voice further, and Lemon heard her say, “What is he doing... here, of all places? How did he find us?”

So, this is Leonard Testarossa, Lemon thought. *The Amalgam executive of condition unknown, and Teletha Testarossa’s older brother.*

“It’s been some time, agent of Mithril,” Leonard said by way of greeting. He took one step towards her, and then another. There was a malicious smile upon his handsome face. No... a venomous smile. A smile that seemed to see through the truth of the world, and forsake it.



“I came here to Moscow on a little errand,” he said. “And I was keeping an eye on those documents, you see. You seemed to be doing a very interesting investigation, so I wanted to ask you the details while I was here. Fortunately, the local security chief was willing to help me.”

So, it wasn't a leak, Lemon realized. He wasn't sure how, but this man had sniffed them out...

There was a large scar on Leonard's forehead, located beneath his elegantly curled bangs. It was a clear, vertical line, like a third eye tightly shut.

“You're the one who tipped them off?” Lemon asked.

“Yes,” Leonard agreed easily. “I asked them to bring you in discreetly, but you went and ran... I thought you might come this way, so I decided to head you off.”

“Get out of our way,” Wraith demanded.

Leonard scoffed. “And if I don't, what then? You'll stab me with your little shiv?”

Wraith grunted in frustration, but held her position. She'd probably learned from experience that she couldn't intimidate him. She whispered to Lemon, “I'll throw myself at him. While I do, you run away.”

“What?”

“You need to get away and let our comrades know,” she insisted.

The cars out on the terminal were almost there. Lemon didn't know if they were KGB or what, but they seemed raring to arrest them. They didn't have another second to lose.

“Wait a minute,” he said. “I can't—”

“Just go,” Wraith told him, then charged.

He didn't know if her desperate plan would work. He didn't know if he'd be able to climb a barbed wire fence by himself. He didn't know if he could allow a woman to sacrifice herself so that he could escape. But he didn't have time to wonder. Lemon clicked his tongue and took off in a run, charging straight for

the fence.

Meanwhile, Wraith lunged at their enemy, the shiv in her hand... and let out a yelp as she found herself being thrown. It wasn't that her attack was weak, and there was no magic or sleight-of-hand involved... but Leonard had moved just an inch, and the tip of her knife had found empty air; then, in the next instant, she was spinning through the space on her own momentum. Wraith let out a muffled groan, face-down, her wrist in a lock. "Don't worry about me!" she cried. "Go!"

Lemon kept running. The fence was just ahead. He leaped... And then suddenly, his right leg went limp. He felt a burning pain run through his thigh in the exact same moment a gunshot rang out.

Leonard had fired with his free left hand while holding Wraith on the ground with his right, and the shot had hit Lemon's leg precisely.

Lemon grunted and pitched forward, slamming his head into the fence. He grabbed desperately for the chain links and tried to climb, but his right leg just dangled there like dead weight.

"Lemon... ngh!" Wraith moaned with pain as Leonard further twisted her wrist.

"You both appear to be under a misapprehension," Leonard said, whispering into Wraith's ear. "It's because you know my sister, I assume? She's brilliant, but clumsy, weak, and incompetent with a gun."

"L-Let me go..."

"And so, I assume, you imagine I'm the same way. I'm disappointed, if so. Very disappointed." Leonard shifted his weight onto her body, and Lemon heard the chilling sound of Wraith's shoulder popping out of joint.

Wraith's ensuing scream of agony was the first feminine sound Lemon had ever heard from her. He wanted to run at them and punch Leonard out, but his body wouldn't listen.

"A surprisingly charming voice. Sexy, almost," Leonard said. He bit her ear softly, and traced his tongue over her cheek.

The blinding light of headlights washed over them. The police cars had arrived, and the security forces poured out, submachine guns at the ready. “What are you doing here?” A man in a military uniform shouted in strongly accented English. He was speaking to Leonard.

Leonard answered in fluent Russian. “As you can see, I’m bringing them in alive.”

“I thought you were leaving this to me,” the man replied sternly. “Now hand them over. And drop your weapon, too.”

“Hmm. And why would I do that?”

“You’re wanted for assault and criminal trespass. Come with me.” Lemon didn’t know the two men’s relationship, but it didn’t seem to be especially friendly.

“I see. A change of heart, eh?” Leonard observed. “I can imagine who put that idea into your head...”

“Arrest him! If he resists, kill him!” the officer ordered in Russian. Close to ten men rushed forward, their weapons at the ready. No matter how good Leonard’s aim, there was no way he could take out that many gunmen. Two armored cars were also approaching from beyond the runway.

But Leonard showed no signs of panic; he just shrugged and sighed. “Goodness me...” The distance between him and the officers was about ten meters. The space between them warped, and a large object wreathed in blue and white light appeared. It was an AS, rendered invisible with ECS technology, forming a barricade between them as it appeared.

Black armor, sharp angles, slender yet strong, with an inverted triangle silhouette... Lemon had never seen this machine before. It was similar to the Codarl, yet seemed fundamentally different. It wasn’t a military weapon, but a demon.

“Y-You!” The officer spluttered. “Where did you get that—”

Releasing Wraith’s arm and standing up, Leonard thrust his right hand forward. The black AS mirrored his movement. “Enough,” he said dismissively. “Begone.” Like an orchestra conductor, he elegantly lowered his proffered right

hand. The black AS pointed its right arm at the men below. Its upper arm slid open to reveal a machine cannon...

It fired.

What happened next was less like a gunshot and more like an explosion. Machine cannon rounds large enough to shred a car blasted through the ground around the gunmen... a dozen of them each second. The officers were literally splattered against the pavement before they even had time to scream. Lemon watched silently as the cars they'd come in also burst into flames and went flying. Fragments of concrete flew into the air, some traveling far enough to shower down on him. The reverberations were deafening.

Soon, the sound died down enough that Lemon could hear laughter... It was coming from Leonard, he realized. The flames illuminated his silhouette: shoulders shaking, one hand over his face... He looked like someone fighting hard to restrain himself, but watching something so hilarious that he just couldn't stop. It wasn't a mad cackle; he'd just killed a dozen men, yet he was laughing like he was watching a sports blooper reel.

The black AS knelt down and placed its palms on the ground. Without a single glance back at the trembling Lemon, Leonard took a practiced leap onto the machine's chest, then slid into the hatch behind the head into the cockpit.

The two armored cars opened fire, but the machine guns protruding from their turrets were like pea-shooters against the AS. When the AS returned fire, it tore one armored car in half, sending it skidding down the runway in flames. The other promptly streaked through the air like a fireball.

"It's insane..." Lemon managed to whisper at last. To see a battle like this unfold in Moscow, much less at an international airport... it really did feel like madness itself.

"Lemon!" Wraith screamed. Cradling her paralyzed right arm, she managed to stand up. A part of the fence just a short distance away from him had collapsed, knocked down by some flying scrap from one of the cars. She used her free left arm to beckon to him. She seemed to be saying, "Let's escape through the fence while we can."

Lemon looked down at his right leg, where his pants were pasted to his thigh

with blood. His toes were numb, and his ankle ached. He was glad the nerve was intact, but there was no way he could get to safety like this. The bleeding had made him lightheaded, too.

He shook his head slightly, and pleaded with his eyes, *I can't. Go without me.* Wraith showed a second or two of hesitation, but quickly seemed to change her mind. She nodded at him shortly, then ran through the hole in the fence. Every breath must have been a jolt of pain through her body, yet Wraith still ran quickly. She leaped over the embankment, passed through the hole in the fence, and disappeared into the darkness.

Leonard's black AS was currently engaged with two police ASes that had come running—Rk-92 Savages, which had been painted blue. Invisible force fields turned the Savage's shells back against them. It was that lambda driver again... Lemon had seen Sousuke's Laevatein use it in Mexico, but it was his first time witnessing it up close. Its counterattack blew the two opposing machines instantly to bits.

The airport had become an inferno. Buildings and passenger planes had taken stray fire; burning remains of vehicles and ASes littered the area, and a siren droned all around them.

The black AS turned back, walked up to the fallen Lemon, and picked him up roughly.

"Ngh...!" Lemon groaned.

"Missing one... Where's the woman?" Leonard's voice asked over the AS's external speakers, while its head's sensors scanned the airport. If Wraith was just hiding in the brush, Leonard's infrared sensors should pick her up... But he didn't seem to detect anything. "Ah, well. Let's go." Holding Lemon in one hand, the machine began to rise.

It was flying without a helicopter, without jet engines, without lift fans... Without any propulsion method Lemon knew of whatsoever, the machine ascended quietly to an altitude of a hundred meters and took off, heading west.

The wind was cold. His wound was burning. He didn't know how Wraith had escaped Leonard's detection. He wondered if she could possibly get away while nursing a dislocated shoulder. She probably still knew the area well enough,

but...

I think I'm going to die, Lemon realized, as the face of a girl he'd never meet again flashed into his waning consciousness.



Sousuke was taking part in Tessa's so-called "investigation," en route to some ruins in the Soviet Far East. They'd had to stop several times to refuel, but the two Pave Mare transport helicopters had basically flown them the whole way for forty hours.

It was an unavoidably long journey, as they had to take off from the de Danaan in the Atlantic, cut across the American continent, then cross the Pacific Ocean via Alaska on their way to Magadan Oblast in the Far East... They were effectively traveling halfway around the globe. A fixed-wing transport could have gotten them there in a third of the time, but they needed helicopters to transport her two escort ASes, the Laevatein and the M9.

Right now, Mithril had no transport plane network and no convenient stopover bases. When transporting ASes such a long way, they'd normally take them and the helicopters apart, load the parts onto a transport plane, then reassemble them at a secret base closer to the site. But they couldn't do that now; a few resupply routes were the best they could muster at the moment.

It seemed to Sousuke that this long journey would be a perfect chance for Tessa to rest and recuperate. But even in the helicopter, she didn't stop working. She was constantly hunched over her laptop screen, reading something, typing something, giving orders to the de Danaan's AI, and having serious conversations with someone over satellite transceiver.

She didn't seem to be sleeping much, either. The worried helicopter crew encouraged her to rest, and Tessa did as she was told and curled up in a blanket in her seat. But they could see her open eyes in the window's reflection, gazing out into the expansive darkness outside the craft.

Sousuke didn't know what to do. He tried talking to her several times, but when he asked how she was, she simply smiled and said, "I'm fine." He tried asking her about her work, but she'd answer the question and no more. She didn't initiate conversation on her own. She'd just look at him gently and ask, in

a roundabout way, “Is there anything else?”

Sousuke couldn’t do anything but say, “No,” and fall silent. After that, he didn’t try to say anything else to her.

The last refuel point on their flight path was a cargo ship named the Bernie Worrell, out on the Bering Sea near the Kamchatka Peninsula. On the surface it looked like a container ship flying the flag of Liberia, but it was actually a disguised resupply ship that the former Merida Island base personnel had managed to acquire. With cargo containers out of the way, it could probably host about five large helicopters at the same time.

The two Pave Mares that had come all the way from the Atlantic landed, and the pilots suggested they do machine inspections before refueling. It was understandable that the pilots would want to be cautious; they still had a 2000-kilometer round trip ahead of them, and they’d have to have their ECS on the entire time while in Soviet territory.

It would take over an hour to perform the helicopter inspections, so Sousuke decided to do some light stretches and exercise. He wanted to jog three laps around the deck of the 300-meter-long container ship, but he kept passing members of the crew whom he knew from the Merida Island days, and ended up stopping to talk to each one... So he cut off his jogging at two laps, then walked up to the railing near the bridge to gaze out over the sea.

It was dawn. The typically rough stretch of sea was unusually calm, and the light from the sunrise reflected blindingly off of the water. The cold but gentle sea breeze was very pleasant.

“The inspection’s gonna take a while,” Kurz said upon arrival. He had been in the other Pave Mare, which was also carrying his M9 on board. Theirs were the only two ASes on this mission; Mao and Clouseau had each been assigned separately.

“That’s not very specific,” Sousuke complained. “How many minutes?”

“I dunno. Just a while. Ah, now there’s a view...” Kurz sighed as he observed the scenery from the deck. Sousuke side-eyed him, finding something off about his demeanor. There was something kind of sparkling... almost joyous about his expression.

“What’s going on?” Sousuke demanded suspiciously. “What are you staring at?”

“Well...”

Sousuke remembered now that Kurz had been acting strangely before they shipped out, too... Sousuke had had to talk to Mao and Clouseau about various AS-related things then, and Mao and Kurz had barely spoken to each other at that time. It was as if a rift had developed between them.

“Did you have a fight?” he asked.

“With who?” Kurz wanted to know.

“With Mao.”

“Urk...” Another curious reaction. Kurz froze up for some reason, eyes focused on the distance. Then he looked down at his feet and back up at the bridge behind him. “What makes you think that?” he asked innocently.

“You were acting differently together,” Sousuke pointed out. Clouseau didn’t seem to have noticed, and neither had the others. But Sousuke’s finely honed senses had picked up on the change in atmosphere between them.

“Okay, yeah,” Kurz grumbled. “Makes sense that you’d notice...”

“So, what happened?”

“W-Well... It wasn’t a fight or anything, so no worries there... Seriously, it’s fine! Quit looking at me like that!”

“If you insist.” He still didn’t really buy it, but if Kurz didn’t want to talk about it, then Sousuke wouldn’t pry.

But Kurz seemed to have changed his mind nevertheless, as he spent a few seconds muttering to himself before clapping his hands together as if arriving at a conclusion. “Hmm. Yeah, okay, that’s no good. I think it’s okay if I tell you.”

Sousuke looked at him curiously.

Kurz leaned in and spoke in hushed tones. “You know, Sousuke. You’re the densest person I know.”

“Am I?”

“Yeah. So there’s a chance that in a fit of stupidity—not maliciously, mind you—you could end up revealing a secret. I’m telling you this despite that risk, because I know we’re the ultimate trio. Okay, so ‘ultimate’ might be going a little too far... but we really do make a great team. I don’t think it’s right for us to keep secrets from each other. That’s why I’m telling you. I need you to understand that.”

“I don’t really follow, but all right.”

“You can just say, ‘All right.’”

“All right,” Sousuke parroted dutifully.

“Okay. The point is, don’t tell anyone,” Kurz emphasized again. “No matter what.”

“Understood.” Sousuke nodded solemnly. It sounded like something very important, so he wanted to be attentive. Was Mao seriously ill? Had a relative gone on a killing spree? Had she spotted a rare cryptid on a mission?

“Anyway, the truth is...” Kurz cleared his throat awkwardly and twiddled his thumbs nervously. “Um, so... The truth is...”

It must be a serious secret indeed, Sousuke thought, and tensed up in anticipation. “The truth is...?”

“The truth is... recently... Mao and I slept together,” Kurz finished.

“I see. What then?” Sousuke asked seriously, and leaned forward.

Kurz scowled. “What when? That’s it.”

Sousuke looked confused.

“You’re not surprised?” Kurz demanded.

“By what?”

“By the fact that we slept together! That’s the secret!”

It was Sousuke’s turn to look confused. “I don’t understand. Why does it matter if you slept together?”

“Because it’s pretty serious!” Kurz exploded.

“Did you have to cohabit while on a mission?” Sousuke asked.

“That’s not the kind of ‘sleep with’ I meant. Um, let’s see... what, you’re really not getting this? Sheesh, man...” Kurz mussed up his blond hair with both hands and muttered to himself, mixing German, Japanese, and English together.

Sousuke felt himself to be completely in the dark. “Please, just put it in terms I can understand.”

Perhaps annoyed by Sousuke’s wording, Kurz shouted out in desperation, “I’m talking about us having sex!” His voice rang out at almost the same second that Tessa appeared from the door that led to the nearby bridge.

Tessa stopped immediately, freezing up, her eyes wide. Kurz and Sousuke froze up, too. She must have been using the showers on board, because she was dressed in damp fatigues and wore a bath towel around her neck.

“Um... er...” Kurz’s eyes darted around as he tried to pick his words.

Sousuke, though finally catching on, was further thrown off by Tessa’s appearance. He began shedding sweat, unable to say anything.

“I... I seem to have interrupted something,” Tessa said, and backed away in confusion.

“Uh, you didn’t, Tessa...” Kurz trailed off.

“He’s right, Colonel, ma’am. We were just discussing how many pounds of explosives would be required to sink a ship like this.”

“Shut up.”

“That is to say, we were talking about *semtex*,” Sousuke insisted. “As in, plastic explosives.”

“Yeah, that’s right, semtex! ...Ah, she’s not listening!” While Sousuke and Kurz argued, Tessa had whipped around and returned to the bridge... hurt, or disappointed, or both. Either way, it was a supremely awkward moment.

“Ahh...” Kurz sighed, sagging in disappointment.

“It’s all right, Kurz,” Sousuke reassured him. “She didn’t hear the part about Mao.”

“That’s not the problem,” said Kurz. “I think we put an awful image into her mind.”

“What’s done is done. Let’s get back to the subject.”

But Kurz just waved at him, exhausted. “You get it now, right? The point is, we’re hooking up.”

“I see.”

“You don’t seem too surprised.”

“But I am,” Sousuke insisted.

Kurz peered closely into Sousuke’s face, which just looked as sullen as ever. “Doesn’t look like it to me.”

“How am I supposed to look?”

“You really never change...”

“Indeed.”

“And here I thought you’d made some progress after everything with Kaname...” Kurz lamented.

This gave Sousuke pause, as the mention of Kaname’s name caused a twinge in his heart. He still hadn’t found much in the way of clues as to her location... He’d thought about breaking away from his allies on the de Danaan to search for her himself, but he didn’t think that would get him any closer. *Right now*, he thought, *I should focus on fighting with my friends against Amalgam*. There was no need to complicate matters. Kalinin was with them, and when he found Kalinin, he’d find her.

“What, did I just trash your mood?” Kurz asked.

“Not an issue,” Sousuke told him. “So, when’s the ceremony?”

“Huh?”

“The wedding ceremony. If you deflower a woman, you should take responsibility,” Sousuke reminded him. “Mao is quite wealthy, so you’ll need at least a hundred sheep to pay her family off.”

“Talking to you is so exhausting...” Kurz said.

“You’re not getting married?”

“No way!” He paused. “Actually, I dunno. It doesn’t really feel like it’s just fun and games... Before we set out two days ago, she called me out right after the briefing...”

“Hmm.” Sousuke remembered that. The briefing had ended, they were getting ready to head back, and Mao had called abruptly to Kurz. She immediately began laying into him about sloppy paperwork and ammunition expenditure reports... so Sousuke and the others just assumed it was another lecture, and left the room indifferently.

“Once you guys were all gone, she told me to take care on my trip, then put her arms around my neck and kissed me,” Kurz reminisced. “It got me kinda hot, so we had a little tête-à-tête in the storage room next door... We knew it was a risky place to do it, but that also made it hot as hell.”

Sousuke didn’t respond to this. Something was happening to him that he couldn’t quite understand. *Why is it that, for the last few minutes, I’ve been thinking so strongly about strangling my comrade? It doesn’t feel quite like jealousy,* he mused. *It’s more like watching someone smacking their lips at a feast while I’m standing by, starving.*

Ahh. So this was “irritation.”

“But she still won’t say ‘I love you’ or anything,” Kurz went on. “What do you think it means?”

“It means she doesn’t love you, most likely.”

“Hey!”

“You shouldn’t be asking me anyway,” Sousuke said with a shrug.

“Yeah, okay, maybe... But there’s no one else I can talk to,” Kurz lamented. “Mao told me not to tell anyone.”

“You told me.”

“You’re different. Mao will understand that.”

“Why am I the only one you can tell?” Sousuke wanted to know.

“I told you before. We’re partners. And when you’re a team—”

“—You shouldn’t have secrets?”

“Right.” Kurz slapped him on the back, then grabbed the top of his head and shook it back and forth. For some reason, Sousuke didn’t find the gesture unpleasant.

Just then, they heard a sound of distant rotors. A helicopter was approaching from the southeast; it was an old UH-46. The tandem-rotor transport descended slowly, dropped its discharge cable onto the deck, and then landed next to the Pave Mares. After the cargo was unloaded, a familiar, plump man wearing glasses disembarked. It was Gavin Hunter, of the intelligence division.

When Hunter noticed Sousuke, he shouted to him over the roaring turboshaft engine, “Looks like I made it in time! I have a present for you, from a beautiful girl!”

“A present?”

“The fairy wing! It’s finally finished.”

The crew of the helicopter came out, attached the “fairy wing” to the shoulder of the Laevatein, and quickly double-checked the status of the attachment. Hunter, who was in charge of the work, kept walking back and forth between the deck and the bridge, coordinating between the ship and helicopter crews. Sousuke managed to chat with him during this time, though the main subject of their conversation was Kalinin.

“Yeah, he shot me,” Hunter admitted when Sousuke asked about their encounter. “I almost died. But I can’t say for sure he was trying to kill me.”

“He could have shot you in the head, you mean?”

“Yeah. But maybe he just didn’t care one way or another.”

Sousuke fell silent.

Hunter must have known about Sousuke’s relationship to Kalinin, because he quickly changed the subject. “Anyway, how’s the Laevatein treating you?”

“Well enough,” Sousuke said. Then, remembering the reason for Hunter’s near-death experience, he quickly added, “Thank you.”

Hunter laughed. “Seems you’ve picked up a few manners, kid. But she’s the one you should thank.” He pointed to a girl standing next to the power unit on the other side of the heliport. Sousuke had never seen her before. She wore an olive-colored flight jacket over an orange jumpsuit, and her hair, black tinged with red, streamed in the salt wind. “That’s the ‘surgeon’ who saved Al. You remember Matt Shade?”

“Yes,” Sousuke answered. Matt Shade was an intelligence division agent Sousuke had failed to save in Siberia, over a year ago in April, before he’d even met Chidori Kaname. Shade had saved a girl from a KGB lab, but he’d died before Sousuke and the others could come to the rescue in their M9s.

“That’s her. She’s all recovered.” Hunter patted Sousuke’s arm lightly and returned to the work.

Her...? It took Sousuke a minute to recognize her because, the last time he’d seen her, she’d been gaunt to the point of catatonia. The drugs had left her barely even able to walk.

She was currently chatting with Tessa. It looked like small talk, but there was something curious about the atmosphere between them... Their body language displayed the sort of awkwardness you’d expect from two total strangers, yet the conversation flowed easily, as if they were old friends. Sousuke felt like he’d seen something similar somewhere before. Then it came to him: this was the way Kaname and Tessa talked to each other, as well.

Tessa noticed him first, and the girl also turned to face him. Tessa beckoned to Sousuke, and he jogged up to join them. “What can I do?” he asked, standing at attention.

Tessa just smiled wryly and told him, “at ease,” so he took an at-ease posture as she made the introductions. “This is Kudan Mira-san. Mira-san, this is—”

“I know.” The girl, introduced as Mira, smiled at him. “Sagara Sousuke-san. You told me your name a long time ago. A long, long time ago...”

“Right,” he agreed uncertainly. Sousuke remembered her, but their exchange that day felt like something from a past life. It had only been a year and a half ago, but it made him realize how much had changed in that time. Not in Mira... In himself.

As Sousuke and Mira started up their awkward conversation, Tessa headed for the bridge to check a few final things with Hunter, who was waiting to speak with her. “I’m sure Mira told you,” he said, “we won’t know if the fairy wing will work until we activate it. We’ve done all we can, but there’s no guarantee.”

“That’s typical,” Tessa told him. “I don’t expect to get to use it this time, anyway.”

“We’ll see. And I have some bad news for you.”

Just from his words and his tone, Tessa knew what Hunter was about to say. “The explosion at the airport in Moscow?”

“Yes,” he said, confirming her suspicions. “Lemon and Wraith were there at the time. It’s been over thirty hours with no contact.”

“I see...”

“There’s a very good chance they know where you’re going,” he added pointedly.

Tessa knew what Hunter was implying: he wanted her to call it off. But she wasn’t going to turn back now.



Sousuke and the others took off from the Bernie Worrell in their transport helicopters, and headed further east across the Bering Sea. It was midday, but the ECS gave the outside scenery a purple-tinged sepia tone.

It had gotten even harder for Sousuke to talk to Tessa. He knew that trying to relitigate the foolish incident that had happened on the ship was pointless, though he doubted it had anything to do with what was really bothering her.

“Could I talk to you?” Tessa suddenly addressed him, much to his shock. She’d gotten up behind him some point, peering at him through the space between the seats.

“Yes, Colonel, ma’am.” He still felt hesitant to call her “Tessa,” even though he’d more than earned the privilege. It just felt wrong to him; he was used to addressing her by her rank, and trying to change it now would just throw

everything off.

“When will you board your AS?” she asked.

“Thirty minutes before landing.”

“Not for a while, then. May I join you?”

“Certainly.” Sousuke threw the documents piled up in the seat next to him haphazardly into his bag on the floor. Tessa thanked him and sat down. She’d always had a diminutive frame, but somehow, she seemed smaller than usual today.

Sousuke waited for her to speak. Tessa remained silent for over a minute, just gazing at the seat before her. He tried to imagine what might be going through that mind of hers, which could move a mile a minute if needed... but nothing came to him.

“How are your injuries?” she finally asked.

“What?”

“Your injuries. I heard you were badly injured in a city called Namsac.”

“Ah... right,” Sousuke replied. “Not an issue.”

“I see. I’m glad.” Then Tessa fell silent. It was possible she didn’t quite know what to say.

Unable to bear the awkwardness of the silence, though, Sousuke decided to change the subject. “Colonel,” he said. “I’m extremely sorry about what happened before.”

“What do you mean?” asked Tessa.

“With Kurz, on the freighter...”

She shook her head slightly. “Oh, that. Please don’t worry about it. It just caught me by surprise.”

“Oh, well...”

“I’m quite used to it, really,” she went on. “When I first took command of the Tuatha de Danaan, there were people who would speak of such things as loudly as they could, even knowing I was nearby. It was their way of spiting me, I think.

But I don't mind it anymore."

"Ahh..."

"I suppose such things are on your mind now, too?"

"No," Sousuke said quickly. "Kurz just—"

"I know. It's about Melissa, right?" she said. Sousuke was even more surprised, and Tessa gave him a shy smile. It was the smile of someone who wanted to smile even more, but perhaps thought she didn't have the right to do so. "She told me. She said not to tell anyone else. I suppose I am to Melissa what Weber-san is to you."

"I see."

"Still, I'm surprised. Those two together..."

"Yes," Sousuke agreed. "It surprised me, too."

"I don't know if they really plan to go steady," Tessa mused. "Melissa seems very self-conscious about it. Particularly the age difference, and the possibility of him cheating."

"I see..." Sousuke mustered all the imagination he had to try to draw up an image of them 'going steady.' None of the results seemed especially positive. "But we're on the same team, so it might not be possible," Sousuke said.

Tessa nodded, as if she expected that. "May I ask why you think that?"

"It's all right to care for your teammates," Sousuke explained, "but it can't go too far. Mao's job requires her to make split-second decisions about whether to sacrifice Kurz or me. A romantic relationship could cloud her judgment."

"I see," Tessa observed. "I doubt Melissa would be happy to hear that."

"I'm not calling her ability or impartiality into question. But if it were me..." Sousuke got that far before something occurred to him. In that moment, he'd realized something that a normal man would have figured out ages ago.

This was the dilemma that Tessa had once struggled with in regards to him. Tessa cared for him, but the reason she had never crossed a line wasn't just out of fear that he wouldn't return her feelings: she was also bound by her position.

It was so obvious, he couldn't believe he had never realized it sooner...

And upon realizing again the impossibility of Tessa's position, he also found himself thinking, *She really shouldn't have had to torture herself like that.* In that issue, as in many others, she was just too hidebound by the rules.

The realization brought a new thought to Sousuke's mind: *Maybe I'm being too inflexible about Kurz and Mao, too.* He wasn't wrong about the issues it might cause with their functionality as a team, of course. A half-second's delay in decision-making was how tragedies were born. But so what? Even the helicopter they were in right now had a hundredth of a percent chance of crashing and killing them all at any moment. It was pointless to get too hung up on what *might* happen.

"What's wrong?" Tessa asked curiously, unaware of the sluggish progress his mind was making.

"Well," Sousuke said slowly, "I was just thinking... 'que sera, sera.'"

"What?"

He shrugged in an exaggerated fashion. "It's not healthy to run yourself ragged over every little possibility. Let them go on on the way they're going, and if it causes issues, we can worry about it then."

"That contradicts what you said before," Tessa pointed out.

"Yeah, it does. I changed my mind."

"That's very strange..."

"You think so?"

"I've never heard you say something so easygoing before," she admitted.

"I see." *Maybe she's right,* he thought. "Is being easygoing an issue?"

"If it results in people getting killed, yes. I wish you'd take this a bit more seriously."

"Hmm..." Sousuke stared boldly into Tessa's eyes. Aside from a slight perplexity, all he could see there was deep exhaustion and irritation. It stung at his heart. "I'm always serious," he told her. "I always was, and I remain so."

“Do you?” she asked.

“The real problem is you,” said Sousuke. “You think that you can change the world. You think that, with enough thought and effort, by just ‘taking things seriously’ enough, you can make the impossible possible.”

A slight furrow appeared on Tessa’s brow. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t take this as a diminishment of what you do,” he told her. “I think you’re utterly incredible. You do things effortlessly that an ordinary person like me couldn’t conceive of in a million years, and with the most ironclad determination I’ve ever seen. You manage to seize victory in the most difficult situations.”

“I certainly intend to,” Tessa retorted. “That’s why I’ve—”

“You’ve fought, you’ve worked hard, you’ve planned scrupulously, and you’ve altered those plans as needed. I know.” He cut her off and continued, determinedly. “It’s all right to challenge fate. But you can’t *control* fate. Can you change the weather? Cause earthquakes?”

“I could try, if it were necessary,” she said firmly. “It’s possible to cause similar effects with enough data and careful planning.”

“This is just the issue.”

“What is, exactly?”

“You aren’t God,” Sousuke said bluntly. “You’re a human being, weak and flawed. It’s natural to feel responsible for the lives of your subordinates, but you can’t completely control their fates. I’ve survived multiple life-or-death situations, but tomorrow I could trip and crack my skull open on a rock. That’s what you need to stop worrying about.”

“I don’t understand,” said Tessa, her hands gripping tighter at her sleeves.

“No, I think you do. Every time someone dies, you blame yourself,” Sousuke reminded her. “You decide you should be punished. Then you swear vengeance against the enemy, and burn yourself out even harder trying to see that vengeance through.”

“I can’t deny that that’s true,” she admitted. “But what else can I do?”

It was a difficult question, and one Sousuke had a hard time answering. He was the same way, after all. He blamed himself for most of the things that went wrong in his life. And so, he decided to lie.

He didn't know if it was the right thing to say, but he decided to go with the most extreme response possible. "Quit," he said shortly.

"What?"

"Disband Mithril. Sell the de Danaan off and spend the money giving everyone on it a comfortable retirement," he told her. "It's not as if Amalgam's trying to destroy the world, after all. Let them have their little intrigues."

Tessa stared at him, baffled. "And what about Kaname-san?"

"Forget her. I feel bad for her, but I will forget her. Then I'll invite you on a date," he promised. "We can go back to Guam and hang out with Colonel Courtney."

"Sagara-san!" Tessa shouted, her face turning red.

But Sousuke was unfazed. "I'm just kidding."

"You had better be!"

"It wasn't funny?" he questioned.

"No, it was not!"

"I see. I have a hard time with jokes." Sousuke's first-ever true attempt to be funny had apparently exploded on the launchpad.

"You're a very strange person," Tessa grumbled.

"I hear that quite often. But... that's what you should do when it's over," he advised her.

She looked at him questioningly.

"Once you've done all you can, sell off the submarine and the ASes, enjoy your life, and enable the others to do the same. As for me, I intend to go back to school with Chidori," Sousuke speculated. "I'll keep studying, and eventually, I'll become an ordinary man; a man who doesn't need weapons." Tessa was surprised by this, and even Sousuke was surprised by the words that came out

of his mouth.

“An ordinary...” she repeated.

“You should try to do the same,” Sousuke specified. “Become a woman who doesn’t need weapons.”

Tessa fell silent.

“I’m sure that’s what the dead would want for you,” he tried again.

Tessa tried to argue, but couldn’t. She gazed at the hands on her lap and whispered, weakly, “Perhaps.”

“It’s true.”

She let out a long sigh, then sat back deeply in her seat. “Sagara-san, you’ve changed.”

“We all have,” he agreed. “You need to change, too.”

Tessa didn’t respond, but pulled the brim of her military cap down deep over her eyes. “I’m tired now. It’s your fault, Sagara-san.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Underneath the flight jacket she’d placed over her knees, Tessa quietly reached out and took Sousuke’s hand. The others shouldn’t be able to see, but Sousuke still felt his heart race. Her slender fingers. Her smooth, cool skin... “I know,” she said in a whisper, preempting an objection. “But just leave me this, please. This is enough. Just this...” And then she fell silent.



He waited three minutes, but she made no further move. When he tried to speak to her, the only response he received was the peaceful sound of sleep.

A man who doesn't need weapons... Recalling his own words, Sousuke felt a sense of gloom overtake him. He hoped he could achieve that... but it probably wasn't possible. He'd killed so many people. Maybe what he'd said to Tessa was just a fleeting hope. Maybe he was just trying to convince himself it was true.



Well, I guess I survived, somehow... Lemon sighed in relief as he gazed up at the fluorescent lights of the low ceiling above him. It was cold, and he was lying on top of a stretcher. He saw a swaying IV bag, felt the bandages wrapped tight around his leg. On the dingy white walls were racks, loaded up with medical supplies.

It was a small room... no, an ambulance, he realized. It was rattling and swaying around him, but very lightly so. They must be driving along a paved road.

Lemon could see someone moving in the corner of his eye; it was a man he didn't recognize. The man realized Lemon was awake, and leaned over him with a mask-covered face.

"Any pain?" the man asked. The voice was indifferent; apparently, this was someone who saw looking after patients as a job rather than a passion. Lemon was reminded of a dentist from his student days.

"I'm going to start scraping, Jean. It might hurt, but just hang in there."

"No, doctor! I'm not Jean, I'm Paul!"

"I hate dentists... ahh!" Lemon's scream came as the man pressed down on his wound. He remembered it was a gunshot inflicted by Leonard Testarossa, and that reminded him of what job he'd been on. The man checked his blood pressure and heart rate, pulled down the lower lid of his right eye with his thumb, and flashed a bright light in his face.

"Can you say your name?" the doctor asked.

"Where am I?"

“Say your name.”

“I could, but I won’t,” Lemon snarled. “Where am I?”

“Hm.” The man patted Lemon’s cheek and then disappeared from sight. Lemon could hear the rear doors slide open, and soon, he was alone in the car. Strange... Wasn’t the ambulance in motion?

Nothing happened for a while after the man left. Several minutes—no, several hours passed. As Lemon’s muddled consciousness cleared, the background sound of a turboprop engine caused him to realize what was going on. The ambulance was inside the cargo hold of a transport plane.

About thirty minutes later, he felt a jolt that confirmed his suspicions: the plane had landed. The ambulance inside rattled back and forth, and then the vibrations calmed. It didn’t seem like a very well-maintained runway.

After the plane slowed to a stop, Lemon heard the sound of the hydraulic hatch opening. Then the ambulance’s engine revved up and drove them outside. After a short while, it stopped, and the sliding doors opened again. A beam of white light assailed his face, along with a stinging cold wind.

Lemon grunted as two men stepped in and began to pull his stretcher out. But then they stopped, as someone outside the car shouted, “Wait!” It was a woman’s voice, young.

“What do you mean, just throw him out?!” the woman continued.

Is that a Japanese accent? Lemon wondered. *It sounds a little bit like Wraith’s or Sousuke’s...*

“On this freezing mountain?” asked the voice. “You’ll kill him! Don’t be ridiculous!”

“We were ordered to look after you in the ambulance,” the man who’d been looking after Lemon before answered haughtily.

“I don’t need medical treatment,” the voice insisted. “I was just laid up with a fever for a while.”

“Look, we didn’t ask for this either,” said the man. “Now do what we say, or else—”

“Is there some kind of trouble?” a new voice asked, accompanied by the crunch of boots on snow. Lemon recognized this one as belonging to Leonard Testarossa.

“Ah...” The woman’s voice suddenly lost its fire and became hushed.

“It’s been a while,” said Leonard. “You seem surprisingly well.”

“You... You’re looking pretty healthy for someone who almost died,” the woman told him.

“Your concern is appreciated, but I’m feeling much better than before. I’m sorry to call you here so soon after your recovery... but!” A slap rang out, followed by a moan. The woman must have fallen to her knees in the snow.

“Wh...What are you...” She sounded openly shocked, less over the treatment itself and more that it was coming from Leonard.

“That’s to inform you about my change in my policy,” he told her coldly. “I’ve become more determined than before, and I’m tired of playing nice. And... most importantly, we’re running out of time.”

“S-So this is the real you, huh?” she asked shakily. “You’re twisted.”

“Say whatever you like. From now on, we... Oh, close that,” Leonard said, and one of the men closed the doors of the ambulance. Lemon was glad to no longer be exposed to the freezing wind, but now he couldn’t hear much of what they were saying. The thick doors and idling engine meant all he could hear was muffled voices.

He could hear Leonard saying something... The girl fervently arguing... Leonard’s voice growing angrier... The woman screwing up her courage to assert herself again...

The argument continued between them for a while, and Lemon vaguely got the idea that they were arguing about his fate. *Just who is that woman?* he wondered, noting that he still hadn’t seen her face. *And, where am I? Where are we going?* Questions churned in his mind without answers, until suddenly, the ambulance doors opened again. A group of men stepped in and grabbed the stretcher he was lying on. Were they going to throw him out now? Almost naked?

“Wait...” Lemon started to say, but in fact, it was the opposite. The men pushed the stretcher further back into the ambulance, affixed it to the floor, then left the car again. From behind him, several people entered: the medic from earlier, a large man who seemed like a bodyguard, and a girl. She was probably the one who’d been arguing with Leonard and his men.

She was beautiful and East Asian, dressed in tight jeans and a red down jacket, with long, sleek black hair that came down to her waist. Her most notable features were her delicate eyebrows, which seemed to have been drawn on with an Impressionist’s brush. *And those curves, well... whoever calculated those should be nominated for a Fields Medal*, Lemon thought appreciatively.

Unfortunately, she didn’t look well. He’d picked up from their earlier conversation that she’d recently recovered from an illness, and on top of that, her right cheek looked red and swollen from the slap. Eyes that should have been clear and beautiful were bloodshot and tear-stained.

The girl sat down next to the bedridden Lemon, scrubbing at her mouth with the sleeve of her jacket. She was doing it so hard he worried she would cut her lips open.

“Let me at least take your temperature—”

“I don’t need your help.” She slapped away the medic’s hand, then slumped down in her seat. As the ambulance drove off again, the car sank into an awkward silence.

“Um...” Lemon started, hesitantly. The girl didn’t respond. “Excuse me, miss?”

“Are you talking to me?” the girl asked, seeming to have only just noticed Lemon’s existence.

“Well, yes...”

“What is it?”

“Well... I don’t know much of what’s going on, but can I assume you saved my life?” Lemon reasoned, hazarding a guess.

“No. They were going to throw you into the snow before they changed

planes, and I just asked them not to,” she told him. “I don’t know who you are, but apparently, they’re done with you now that you’ve been interrogated.”

Lemon realized that was probably true: the administration of a truth serum would explain why he still felt groggy after waking up. Modern truth serums made it impossible to resist questioning, no matter how strong your will. He’d probably given up everything they needed without even realizing it.

Lemon prayed that Hunter and the others swiftly disposed of all the codes, hideouts, and escape routes that he knew about. Actually, those were probably all right... The real issue was the ruins in Moscow he’d been investigating. He didn’t remember doing it, but he was certain he’d confessed about those, too. They might be heading to those ruins now, even... and if so, then Tessa and the others were the ones really in danger.

Hiding these concerns, Lemon said to the woman, “So you did save my life. Thanks.”

“I just did it to suit myself. It’s not like I even know you,” she said curtly, turning away.

“Then let’s get to know each other,” he suggested. “I’m Michel Lemon. A pleasure.” He reached out from under his blanket, hoping to shake her hand.

Seeing Lemon introducing himself, the medic let out a snort.

The girl sighed, and took his hand with her own. It was stained with dried blood. “Yeah, sure, pleasure to meet you. Satisfied, now?”

“I have to wonder... You’re Chidori Kaname, aren’t you?” Lemon speculated.

“Huh?” Her eyes widened, and she stared at him in disbelief.

“You don’t have to hide it. I’m a friend of Sousuke’s.” Lemon knew about Chidori Kaname from Sousuke. He’d never seen a picture, but he knew her age and defining features, and he knew that she’d been kidnapped by Leonard. In a field dominated by dangerous spies and mercenaries, there weren’t a lot of other candidates for who this unremarkable Japanese girl might be.

Kaname looked even more surprised by the mention of Sousuke. “You know Sousuke? Where is—” she started, then stopped, realizing the men sitting next

to her were watching.

“It doesn’t matter. We’re in their hands, anyway,” he told her with a sarcastic smile, but the men showed no reaction.

“Is he okay?”

“Oh, he’s just fine. He’s tearing into everything, with Al at his side. He says he’ll bring you back for sure.”

Apparently, this hit some kind of button for her, as she immediately covered her face with her hands. She whispered something he couldn’t really make out, something in Japanese. It sounded like ‘yokatta.’ Lemon didn’t know what it meant, but he could imagine.

Okay, so this *was* her... This sobbing and trembling girl. Lemon felt an indescribable melancholy wash over him as he looked up at her. *She seems like a nice girl*, he reflected. *Pretty, too. I bet she’s normally energetic, cheerful, and courageous, driving everyone around her to be their best selves. And she also loves Sousuke... Just like Nami did.*

Isn’t this too cruel, Sousuke?

No, no, stop that... Lemon felt ashamed of his moment’s dark impulse—the feeling that this girl deserved to feel some fraction of Nami’s pain. *She’s done nothing wrong*, he told himself. *She didn’t cause any of it.* He couldn’t tell her the circumstances of how he and Sousuke met. After reminding himself of that, he forced a cheerful tone into his voice. “I’m jealous. I can tell how in love you are.”

“Yeah.” Kaname wiped away her tears and gave him a slight smile.

Leonard had asked one of his subordinates to leave a radio channel open, so he could hear their entire conversation. But they must have realized that was a possibility, and kept their conversation trivial.

His head hurt.

Listening to the laid-back drama unfolding in the ambulance wasn’t helping to relieve his boredom, so he tossed aside his earphones and began a bit of off-key

humming. His song of choice was *The Real Me*, by The Who.

Can you see the real me, preacher? Can you see the real me, doctor? Can you see the real me, mother?

His head hurt.

They were in the Tuva Republic, in the south part of Siberia, four thousand kilometers from Moscow. They'd changed transport planes, rendezvoused with Chidori Kaname (who'd been brought in from Sri Lanka), then proceeded further east. The shredded wrapping paper of the pesky Christmas present given out eighteen years ago... Oh, she would definitely be there.

His head was killing him.

He'd heard everything he needed to know from that man, Michel Lemon. *Needed?* Leonard reflected. No, maybe he didn't need it... What he'd gained was a mere confirmation of something he'd already known, and knowing what they were investigating in Moscow—or rather, what his sister had learned—would make things go much smoother, overall.

The man called Lemon had no more value to them, which was why he'd ordered his men to abandon him. But the man's life could still be a bargaining chip for bringing Chidori Kaname into line. *How much longer will she cooperate, he wondered, to protect the life of a complete stranger?* It would be worth seeing.

Leonard smiled blissfully, meditating on the taste of her lips he'd gotten to savor for the first time in so long. He couldn't believe how long he'd spent engaging her in good faith, hoping that it would earn her affections. Utterly gentlemanly, never forceful... If he kept it up long enough, then someday, someday— Ah, but he'd been a fool. He should have done things this way from the start.

Yes, that was right. It was his first time ever striking a woman. He'd killed or arrested women who opposed him, but this would be the first time he'd ever hit one.

Long ago, he'd spent time in a poor region of Austin, watching the prostitutes on the street with their pimps. He'd been like one of those pimps just now: the

men who skimmed money off the top and slapped their whores around when they cursed and fought back. Then, after these displays of violence, the men would always show remorse, cooing, “I’m sorry I hit you. I love you, baby.”

He’d always found it a disgusting cycle, but he couldn’t pretend that that world didn’t run smoothly. That garbage dump of a world, driven by the basest of feelings and urges. A world where intelligence had no place. It was one of the things that reminded Leonard that humans were no more than animals. He’d been a fool for believing Chidori Kaname was different.

No, she was exactly the same way: an animal. That realization had come to him one night after recovering from his injury, and rather than leaving him despondent, it had caused many things to snap into place. *Why not simply act the way those men did?* he’d wondered. *This world isn’t going to last much longer anyway. What harm would it do to throw off my restraints now?*

The pain in his head wasn’t going away.

It was strange, though... Leonard felt like he was forgetting something, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t remember what it was. Something he’d known in the past that he was eluding him now...

Nothing to worry about, said a voice in his head. *What you’re trying to remember doesn’t matter; it will only burden you. What does a plane that never lands need with landing gear? You’ve already taken flight...*



Wraith had managed to escape the carnage at the airport with her life, but she wasn’t able to restore her dislocated arm on her own. She wanted to contact Hunter, but had no way to do it, and she was on the verge of passing out from pain and fever.

She’d ended up hiding in an apartment complex garage five kilometers from the airport, where she finally passed out. Wraith didn’t know how many hours she’d spent unconscious, but she’d probably been found and reported by some civilians in that time. She’d woken up surrounded by police. They had their guns pointed at her, and she didn’t have it in her to try to resist.

They took her to the local precinct and, after realizing the extent of her

injuries, sent her to a hospital under surveillance. They popped her shoulder back into its socket and injected her with some cheap tranquilizer and antipyretic. After that, she lay motionless in the hospital room until a uniformed officer arrived. He wasn't from the KGB who had chased them at the airport, but the army's intelligence branch—the GRU.

Will they hand me over to Leonard, Wraith wondered, or execute me straight away? Either way, she was prepared for it all to be over.

But when the GRU officer's words came, they defied her expectations. "I always thought you were an excellent student," he told her. "This is very disappointing."

She knew him. In his forties, eyes a deep gray, with a smooth, hairless head, and a distinctive aquiline nose. He had been one of her teachers during her 'study abroad' in Moscow, back when she was a bright-eyed little girl who believed fully in the righteousness of her homeland.

"Captain Kiriyenko..." Wraith whispered.

He smiled, tapping the rank badge on his uniform. "That's 'Lieutenant Colonel' now, Ok-hui. If I'd arrived three minutes later, you'd be in a Chekist car right now."



They let Kurz's M9 off first, two kilometers from their drop site, near an 800-meter-tall mountain peak. With ECS activated, he took a sniper position, then checked the area for threats. The Gebo-4 Pave Mare, lighter now without the burden of his machine, flew over the drop point, scanning for threats with its sensors. While it did, Kurz remained on guard for any possible enemy attack.

Five minutes later, Gebo-4 and Kurz both reported that no enemies had been sighted.

"Good. Take us to our destination," Tessa instructed over their internal channel to the captain, and Sousuke heard it, too. The other Pave Mare, Gebo-6, was carrying Sousuke's Laevatein and Tessa as they flew over the low mountainous region.

The images picked up by the helicopter's optical sensors were relayed to the

Laevatein's cockpit, as well, and the sight they depicted was a chilling one: it was like they'd reached the end of the world. The ground beneath them was orange, covered in tall grass with barely any trees. Autumn was just beginning, yet Sousuke imagined the whole area would soon be encased in deep snow. It must be terribly cold here for most of the year.

The local time was 1632 hours, the red sun sinking over the horizon in the west. They couldn't see any man-made structures other than those at their destination, just the remains of a road and power lines.

Through the mountains they could see a residential area, built in a mountain valley of about three kilometers' radius. Rows of single-story houses seemed to wreath the city, and beyond them lay a smattering of tall buildings. There was a plaza at the center of the city, and they could see a large bronze statue within it. As the helicopter got closer, it became clear it was a statue of Lenin.

Yamsk-11 was the name of this city, one of several "secret towns" within the Soviet Union. Researchers with their families in tow would have moved to these towns—which wouldn't be found on any maps—to conduct research on top secret projects like nuclear and ballistic missiles. The name "Yamsk-11" even seemed to be there for convenience as well, as it was just the name of the nearest major city with an administrative postal number attached. Security was strict, and nobody was allowed to leave or enter without permission.

But no security was present in the city below them now. It was a total ruin, abandoned long ago.

There were no people in sight. The remains of cars, broken down and covered in rust, littered the roads here and there. Grass grew through gaps in the asphalt, and road signs lay toppled and covered in moss. The buildings were in a bad state, as well: a closer look revealed that most of them were falling apart. The walls had collapsed, and the roofs had large holes in them. Some were even flattened, as if they'd gone into a press. *Probably crushed by heavy winter snowfalls*, Sousuke reflected, *and then never repaired*.

A city built in secret, abandoned in secret, and simply forgotten... It wasn't even in Mithril's databases. Tessa had only learned about it the other day, with the help of Lemon and Wraith.

It wasn't just the enemy that was absent, either. Nobody seemed to have come here in over ten years. It was such a wasteland that searching for threats seemed almost pointless.

"Damn, what a creepy place," whispered the pilot of the Gebo-6. "There was a ruin like this near the town I lived in, in Nevada, as a kid. They said all five thousand residents disappeared overnight. Rumors say they were all killed... Like some soldiers went mad in an experiment and attacked them. The adults all laughed it off, but even though the town was right next to ours, nobody knew anyone who'd moved from there."

"Wow, scary," Kurz laughed over the radio.

"Well, the actual truth is that the only auto plant in the town closed," the pilot admitted sheepishly, "so everyone moved away."

"Oh, that's boring."

Listening to their discussion, Sousuke found a strange sense overtaking him: déjà vu. He felt like he'd seen this sight somewhere before. In fact... he'd heard that conversation somewhere before, too. *What a strange feeling*, he thought. *Then after this, Tessa will say—*

《A curious sensation.》

He was wrong. It wasn't Tessa who spoke, but Al.

《I feel as though I've been here before.》

"What?" Sousuke asked, surprised that Al seemed to be feeling the same thing he was.

《The coordinates and terrain don't match up to any previous operations data, but I feel as though I've seen this all before.》

"Yeah, it's definitely weird. I feel like I've been here before too," Kurz agreed.

"Same here. Maybe I saw it on the news somewhere," said the pilot of the Gebo-4.

One after another, the rest of the crew chimed in to agree.

"I know you're all tired from the journey, but please try to get it together. And

keep your distance from the city's main plant," Tessa said, as she heard a note of fear come into the voices of all present.

"Can't you fill us in already, Tessa? What're we looking for in these ruins? I mean—"

"I'm sorry, but I can't say yet," She cut off Kurz's complaint, then gave another order: "I'm going down into the ruins now. Sagara-san will be my bodyguard. Leave the Laevatein on the helicopter."

3: Yamsk-11

The transport helicopter dropped off Sousuke and Tessa before it took off again, leaving them in eerie silence. The two Pave Mares and Kurz's M9 would be waiting at three separate points five kilometers away, and would come the moment Tessa called for them. Gebo-6's pilot had asked if they could wait on-site, but Tessa had denied the request, knowing that if the enemy did come, it would be easier to take countermeasures if they were hidden some ways away.

It was dusk. A cold wind whispered through the dry grass. A support in a nearby house collapsed abruptly with an unsettling scream, perhaps due to pressure created by the downdraft.

"Here," said Tessa, manipulating a digital map on her tablet before heading northwest. She was wearing hiking boots and shorts, together with a thick sweatshirt and baggy flight jacket. A bag of explosives hung from her shoulder, but she carried no gun. She might have looked as if she was going on a picnic, had there been any scenery worth appreciating in the area.

Meanwhile, Sousuke wore a tactical vest over his black AS operator's uniform. He had a 5.56mm carbine with six spare clips, plus two each of hand, smoke, and incendiary grenades. He'd also brought as much C4 as he could carry. On top of that, he had his usual Glock 19, which one of Lemon's colleagues had found and returned to him after his near-death experience in Namsac. There was nothing particularly special about the pistol, but he'd been using it for close to two years and had formed an attachment to it.

"What's our destination?" he asked.

"The plant on the north side," Tessa answered, squinting thoughtfully down the road as she walked.

Sousuke followed after her wordlessly. It was true that there had been no sign of the enemy, but it still seemed strange to him that he was her only bodyguard. *If she wants an escort in case of trouble, he thought, why not arm the helicopter crew and bring them along?*

It seemed that Tessa had anticipated this question, as she now said, “Are you thinking it’s strange that you’re the only person I brought?”

“Yes.”

“The truth is, I’d have preferred to come alone... But if I had to choose one person to come with me, I thought you were the most suitable.”

Sousuke looked at her questioningly.

“This is where the secret of the Whispered lies.” Sousuke’s eyes widened in surprise at that admission, but Tessa wasn’t done. “You’re the operator of the one and only Laevatein,” she continued. “It was made by Mira-san, but it integrates AI and the basic system of the Arbalest, which were both created by a man named Bani Morauta. You also saved Mira-san in Siberia, and you’ve saved me as well, many times. Then there’s Kaname-san, whom you’re trying to save at any cost. I don’t think anyone in the world has a stronger connection to the Whispered than you.”

Tessa had a point, but her list was incomplete—while Sousuke had no real confirmation of it, he still believed that Nami, the girl he’d met in Namsac, might have been a Whispered, as well. Then there was Leonard... Sousuke wasn’t certain, but Tessa’s twin also seemed to be one. All in all, he had significant connections to six members of that supposedly rare breed. Sousuke still didn’t understand what the Whispered were, but felt it was all too much to be a coincidence; the smell of destiny hung thick over his connections with these people.

“I don’t understand it either,” Tessa admitted. “Whether it’s a coincidence, or some kind of destiny... Despite how I may seem, I do believe in God. And if it’s true that someone’s watching over us, in some form or other... Sagara-san, you are like the Messiah, sent by God to save us.”

“Oh, come on...” he scoffed. ‘Messiah’? It sounded like a joke. Maybe he did have some kind of karmic connection to the Whispered, but he was still just a soldier, a man whose only skill was being pretty good with a gun. He had failed to save Nami, and his chances of saving Kaname also seemed slim.

But then he remembered that the girl, Mira, had said something similar to him back on the ship... It hadn’t been a lengthy chat, exactly. She’d thanked him

for what he'd done in Siberia, and he'd thanked her for Ai and the Laevatein. Mira had explained about her recovery, and how she was now working with Hunter and other members of the intelligence division; in turn, Sousuke had given a summary of his own recent history. And when they'd parted ways, she had said with a smile, "I don't know why, but... I think you might just save us all."

"I'm not trying to put pressure on you," Tessa said kindly, here in the moment. "But the things you're capable of... They give me the most curious feeling. There's an old Chinese saying, 'Before God gives you a great mission, he puts you through trials to see what you can do.' You've faced nothing but trials in your life, but they've made you extremely capable. And you have the kindness to deal with an awful woman like me," she added. "How is it that you haven't lost your kindness, despite a life spent in the madness of battle? I feel like it has to mean something. Perhaps it just means you're here to bear witness to our destruction, but..."

Sousuke was surprised at Tessa's mention of 'an awful woman like me,' but otherwise thought that this was a pleasant return to her old form of humor. So he didn't try to argue, but only shared his thoughts, instead. "I'm not sure."

"Neither am I. I just feel like... you should know everything I know, that's all." Tessa stopped, then looked back at him. "That's the reason I brought you here." While Sousuke struggled for an answer, she smiled quietly and resumed her walk.

For a while, all they could hear was the wind and their footsteps. But as they passed through the residential block, Sousuke noticed bullet holes in the side of an old car on the road. *That thing didn't just break down*, he realized. *Was there a battle here, once?* Looking around carefully, he saw signs of explosions and more bullet holes in the road and the buildings, along with traces of old fires.

They were nearing the northern end of the abandoned secret city, primarily taken up by the remains of a large chemical plant. The rusty, intertwining structure had an eerie air to it, different from the rest of the town. Winding pipes of all kinds, smokestacks casting black shadows, lines of empty silos and storage tanks... It was like looking at the carcass of some strange megafauna that had died ages ago.

“Colonel,” he said. “This town...”

“Almost no one in the current Soviet government knows that it exists,” Tessa told him. “Nearly all records of it were lost in the coup d’état and ensuing civil war. I’ve been searching for its existence in my spare time... without any luck. But then recently, Mira-san gave me a hint. She was able to recall a name she overheard while locked away in that Siberian facility. Tracing that name back, and with Lemon and the others investigating publicly available documents in Moscow, I was able to ascertain the existence of the secret city, Yamsk-11.”

It seemed that whatever battle had taken place had made it as far as the chemical plant. Sousuke’s eyes landed on a set of silos that had fallen in an unnatural way... Several of them had been uprooted and left dangling precariously, with bits of pipes and girders scattered across the ground far in front of them.

“Please be careful, Sagara-san,” Tessa said. “This plant is ground zero, in a way. It should be physically harmless, and the passage of over seventeen years should have dulled the effects... but it can still scramble the minds of those who approach.”

“Scramble the minds...?” he questioned.

“Yes. A very special experiment took place here long ago... The facility is likely in the basement.” Tessa used her digital map again as she took in a full view of the plant.

“Please be careful, Sagara-san,” Tessa said. “This plant is ground zero, in a way. It should be physically harmless, and the passage of over seventeen years should have dulled the effects... but it can still scramble—”

“W-Wait a minute.” Sousuke cut her off, feeling unsettled for reasons he couldn’t explain.

“What is it?”

“Did you just say the same thing twice?”

“Ahh...” Showing no sign of surprise, Tessa nodded. “You experienced déjà vu just now, didn’t you? This is one of the effects I mentioned. Weber-san and the others were discussing it before we landed. Have you been feeling it, too?”

“Yes.”

“That’s part of the reason I wanted them to keep their distance,” she admitted. “I know it’s unsettling, but I hope you can endure it. As long as you keep your wits about you, you should be able to conduct yourself as normal. The déjà vu becomes more frequent the more you let your mind wander.”

Sousuke felt the sweat rising on his back. How could she be so calm about this? “Um... so you don’t mind it?”

“Yes. We experience it occasionally ourselves. We don’t tell others so as not to make a fuss, and once you get used to it, it stops bothering you. Most people experience mild déjà vu from time to time, don’t they?”

Judging from Tessa’s way of speaking, it probably wasn’t going to happen that often. Still, Sousuke doubted that he’d ever get used to it...

“Let’s go,” she said. “It should be through here.” Tessa watched her step as she entered the plant. “It might be best to keep talking as much as possible. Did you notice the bullet holes?”

“Yes,” he answered. “Rifle shots, machine gun shots, explosions from an RPG... all the signs of a fairly extensive conflict. What in the world could have happened?”

“The experiment, most likely,” Tessa said as she stepped over a fallen pipe on the ground. “I think it was a true calamity, causing everyone in the secret city to go mad. It must have been far more severe than the déjà vu we’re experiencing... Perhaps security forces, in their confusion, began shooting, and things escalated from there,” she speculated. “There are no detailed records, and no witnesses that I could find, so I don’t know for sure. But...” Tessa’s voice cracked, as if she found it difficult to describe the chaos that had taken place here.

What if people who had lost their minds began waging war on each other? It would turn the place into a living hell. Sousuke could imagine some of it, from the traces left behind. “Just what was the experiment?” he asked next.

“The vseobshchaya sfera experiment.”

“Vseobshchaya sfera?”

“In English, ‘omni-sphere.’ This will require a lengthy explanation, but please hear me out,” Tessa requested, then began to explain as she walked. “The omni-sphere is a realm created by the human mind. It’s invisible and intangible, and imperceptible to normal physical sensors. It’s on a completely different plane than the world as we know it. At the same time, the omni-sphere and the physical world mutually influence each other. This is why the human mind, which is otherwise nothing more than a complex chemical computer, can access the omni-sphere... and vice-versa.”

“I’m not sure I understand...”

Tessa couldn’t help but giggle at Sousuke’s confused expression. “I’m sorry, I’m getting ahead of myself,” she told him. “The notion of the omni-sphere goes back to ancient times, though back then, it was treated as a purely metaphysical concept. They spoke of it as the spirit world, or the Greek Theory of Forms. Jung’s collective unconscious is a similar concept, as well.”

Sousuke found himself puzzled as the topic seemed to veer into the realm of the paranormal. It didn’t seem appropriate for Tessa, commander of the world’s most cutting-edge weaponry, to be talking this way. Still, he’d heard the term ‘omni-sphere’ before... The TAROS was the man-machine interface utilized by the de Danaan, the Arbalest, and now the Laevatein, and he’d learned that it was short for “transfer and response omni-sphere.”

“This idea of the ‘world of the mind’ has been described in many forms since antiquity...” Tessa went on. “One scientist believed he could scientifically catalog and manipulate it through the use of quantum mind theory, the study of complex systems, and the development of a massive-scale ALU. His name was Dmitri Valov. For convenience, he named this world ‘omni-sphere,’ or ‘the domain that contains all.’ His writings about the omni-sphere have since been lost to time, but it appears that he was engaged in serious research regarding things like telepathy and precognition in Soviet academies of science through the early 1970s.”

“Telepathy?” asked Sousuke skeptically. “Really?”

“The Philadelphia Experiment, the Area-51 UFOs... You’ve heard those stories, haven’t you? Of course, they’re all quite suspect, but the fact remains that both

the American and Soviet governments have experimented with paranormal phenomena in the past,” Tessa said. “Of course, none of these experiments yielded any tangible results, and it’s believed many were pure fabrications designed to request more intelligence or military funding. Similar to the ‘soldiers gone mad in a military experiment’ story told by Gebo-6’s pilot.”

Sousuke nodded, remembering that he’d seen stories like those while watching TV with Kaname and the others during his time in Tokyo.

“But Dr. Valov was different,” Tessa went on. “He was a serious researcher who made real contributions to the fields of nuclear energy, computer engineering, and electronics. For instance, early passive stealth technology is based on theories that he pioneered.”

The footing worsened as they got further into the plant. A staircase meant to lead a half-floor down had rotted away, so Sousuke jumped down first and offered Tessa a hand. Though slow, she was able to jump down safely into his arms.

“Thank you, Sagara-san.”

“Just watch your step,” he warned her. “There’s damage all around us, possibly due to a fire.”

“Of course,” Tessa agreed, pulling out a flashlight and moving further into the plant. “I don’t know how Dr. Valov was able to study the omni-sphere. But somehow, he was able to confirm its existence. He succeeded in a small-scale experiment, and managed to make significant headway before the end of the 1970s. Nowadays, the public documents and journals in which Dr. Valov’s name appears are so sparse that one might assume he’s just another old researcher brought to economic ruin... But he held a great deal of power in the academic world, so it’s more likely that his research was classified by the state. And so, they created this secret city to further enable his research...”

Another sense of déjà vu assaulted Sousuke, who felt like he’d heard this explanation about Dr. Valov several times. He shook his head and asked another question. “Why was his research classified?”

“Because of the omni-sphere’s sheer importance. A world not bound by time or space, through which one’s mind can move freely and access our physical

world at will... can you imagine the possibilities?"

"I'm afraid not." He couldn't even understand half of what Tessa was talking about, let alone extrapolate from it. Even with the 'simplified explanation' she was giving him, this talk of 'time, space, and mind' was all too much for a realist like himself to handle.

"It might allow for highly precise precognition, for instance," Tessa tried to explain. "You could anticipate with perfect accuracy a nuclear missile launch, or the death of a major enemy politician. What will the weather be on the day of an operation? Will there be earthquakes... yes, or a massive solar flare? How much would foreknowledge of impending acts of nature improve your nation's military situation?"

"I see..."

"It could allow for telepathy, too," she pointed out. "You could convey massive amounts of information across terrains and distances that would normally be impossible. You could peer into someone's mind, plant suggestions there, and control them. Why bother waging war when you can just hack into the thoughts of the president of the United States, or his secretary of defense? No superpower could possibly oppose you."

"There's no way that's—"

"Yes, such things are only *theoretically* possible. Practically speaking, they would come with countless technological hurdles... but the point is, the existence of the omni-sphere takes them out of the realm of pure fiction," Tessa told him. "It's only natural they'd want that classified, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"But that's not all. One thing that proved relatively easy to create was technology that enabled the omni-sphere's influence on the physical world: a system that converted the user's imagination into physical power. You've seen this in practice."

"The lambda driver?" Sousuke guessed.

"Yes," Tessa agreed. "But that name was pure camouflage. 'Lambda' indicates repulsion, and thus it's known as the repulsive drive system, or pseudostring

repulsive field generator system... but what it creates isn't simple repulsion. It's actually amplifying the parapsychical phenomena that result from influence through the omni-sphere. Its original name was the 'omni-sphere high-speed chained influence reactor.'"

"Reactor?"

"Yes. Conceptually, it's a bit like a reactor. Any physical influence on our world from the omni-sphere would typically be extremely faint, a mere few microparticles' worth of difference. Every day, without realizing it, we all use the omni-sphere to influence the energy and matter around us."

"You mean... just by thinking, I can move things around me?" Sousuke asked, trying to keep up.

"Yes. Everyone's doing that, subconsciously, all the time. In a certain sense, all humans are espers—but the effects are so minor that you can't even measure them, let alone see them," Tessa explained. "The shame of it is that the omni-sphere resists rigorous testing. One could potentially measure its influence on the physical world in a room completely isolated from external influences... but since humans—chemical and electrical machines that we are—are the ones doing the observation, we'll always introduce noise into the surroundings we're attempting to measure..."

"I'm sorry, Colonel," Sousuke apologized. "I think you're losing me..."

"Ah... I'm sorry. My point is that everyone is capable of minuscule levels of telekinesis."

"I see," Sousuke said, all while thinking that one of the greatest points in Tessa's favor was her ability to humbly and kindly explain things to those less intellectually gifted than herself.

"The lambda driver then uses a chain reaction to amplify these highly common micro-influences. The human mind and nervous system are like an engine for generating omni-sphere influence, you see... That's why lambda driver-mounted ASes come equipped with an artificial brain and nervous system, to mimic that function. Then by channeling quantities of electricity through them that are beyond what a human system could ever withstand, you can create exceptionally powerful levels of influence," she said. "Do you

remember when I said that the Arbalest was like an extension of you? That's the reason I said so. The Arbalest and Laevatein can't copy your personality wholesale, but they can reflect the way your mind works."

"Ahh..."

"Have you ever wondered why aircraft, tanks, and warships can't integrate lambda drivers?"

"I have," Sousuke admitted. "It seems like it would be much more efficient. But... well... given what you're saying..."

"That's right," Tessa agreed. "The lambda driver needs a simulacrum of the human body to function. Additionally, the omni-sphere's ability to influence the physical world becomes even more dramatic when integrating a rationally-thinking human catalyst exposed to extreme circumstances. This requires the unparalleled focus of a trained soldier, and an environment that will induce the proper mental state..."

"In other words," she clarified, "combat. Thus, the eligibility requirements for a lambda driver-integrated vehicle are: a high-output engine, the specs to participate in dangerous combat situations and return alive, and a humanoid structure."

"An AS," Sousuke specified.

"Yes. The AS is the ideal machine in which to mount a lambda driver," Tessa said in agreement. "Which leads me to my next question... Don't you think the existence of the AS is quite strange? We all know that a humanoid shape is an inefficient one for combat, so why do ASes dominate the battlefield? How is it that such an ideal host just happened to already exist?"

Tessa made it sound as if the ASes had been designed and molded purely to house the lambda driver. Sousuke thought back on Kalinin's words after the escape from North Korea: *These things shouldn't exist.*

"But... ASes are very useful in combat," he insisted. It was true that ASes had weak points that other weapons lacked: they were easy to spot on flat land, and made easy targets when standing upright. Their intricate systems made them difficult to maintain and produce, and they were inferior to tanks both in the

size of the firearms they could employ and the protective value of their armor. But they had enough good points to make up for their bad. If they didn't, nobody would use them.

"Well, it's a bit of a chicken-and-egg question," Tessa mused. "So I'm not sure if anyone in the world can say for sure..."

Sousuke looked at her questioningly.

"We're here," she announced. They had made it quite far into the plant while they were talking, having long since left behind the orange light streaming in through the girders and pipes. They now came out into an area as large as a great hall, with a gaping hole in the floor in front of them. It was close to fifteen meters in diameter and led deep into the ground, surrounded by cables and pipes and scaffolds for workers, with a sort of sturdy vertical track located across from where Sousuke and Tessa were standing.

It was like a large elevator shaft, but the pallet that would have taken them up and down was probably at the bottom. The hole itself was pitch black, so they couldn't see how far down it went.

"We're going down there?" he asked.

"Yes. Our destination is at the bottom of this shaft... deep underground."

The elevator was almost surely broken, and there was no power in these ruins with which to run it anyway. There was also an unreliable-looking steel scaffolding, stairs, and a ladder, which was red with rust. They'd have to use the stairs and the ladder to get down, he speculated, but the facility had been untouched for almost eighteen years. Things had badly deteriorated in that time, and there was a chance it could all come tumbling down at the slightest touch.

"Wait a minute, Colonel. Could you wait up here?" Sousuke asked.

"What? Why would you say that?"

"It's going to be a dangerous climb," he insisted. "I'll go investigate. You should stay up here and pass on orders." He'd brought climbing gear, but scaling that hole wouldn't be easy. He could probably make it on his own, but Tessa had no experience with rappelling, and she was always... well, incredibly

clumsy.

Tessa must have been well aware of that, and yet she refused to acquiesce. “I’m sorry, but I need to go this time,” she insisted. “As difficult as it may be, will you please find a way to take me down there?”

“But...”

“I’ll try hard not to burden you too much. We’ll turn back the minute you deem it too dangerous. Please?”

“All right,” Sousuke reluctantly agreed. “But I’ll make the call. Please do as I say, when I say it.”

“I will. Thank you.”

They both put on night vision goggles, tied themselves together, and began their descent into the shaft. The stairs took them the first few floors down, but to go further than that, they’d have to climb down the ladder on the shaft’s inner wall.

“Get on my back,” Sousuke ordered.

“All right.” Tessa did as she was told, and he used the rope to affix her tightly to his own body. Her soft chest pressed against his back in a way that left him feeling a little bit flustered. “Please take care of me, Sagara-san.”

“You almost sound like you’re enjoying this...”

“Just your imagination, I’m sure. But let’s not tell Kaname-san the next time we see her.” She giggled, and the joke filled Sousuke with a sense of nostalgia. He remembered Tessa’s carefree innocence during that brief period in which she had transferred to Jindai High School. She’d teased Kaname and Mao then, and laughed just like this...

He began climbing down the ladder, with Tessa on his back. It was going to be a long trip... He managed to make it carefully down about four floors, with no sign that they were any nearer to the bottom.

That was when he heard the sound of someone calling him on his radio. It was Kurz, who was waiting outside the secret city. The structure of the building and the terrain created terrible static on the line. “Uruz-6 here. Bad news.”

“What’s up?” Sousuke replied.

“Multiple helicopters approaching from the west. Three that I can confirm... Probably hostiles.”

“Dammit,” Kurz cursed from inside his cockpit, as the three helicopters became six. “So many...” The sun was behind them, which had delayed the M9’s passive sensors in sighting them. By the time he’d finally noticed them, they’d gotten within a mere twelve kilometers. They’d be over the secret city in the next three minutes.

To preserve fuel, their two Pave Mare transport helicopters had landed in the mountain forest and shut off their engines. The pilots of the Gebo-4 and Gebo-6, upon receiving the notification from Kurz, activated their APUs and began preparations to start up their engines.

Oh no... Kurz sent out an instinctive warning. “Gebo-4 and 6, engines off!”

“Why not, Uruz-6?”

“They probably have ECS; that’s why we didn’t see them until now,” Kurz told them. “Probably ECCS too, so if you try to take off, they’ll see you right away. Stay put and keep hidden.”

If they took off now, the enemy helicopters, which were on full alert, would be very likely to detect them. The Pave Mares didn’t have much in the way of anti-air weapons, so taking off would be a death sentence.

“But what should we do, then? We can’t just sit around forever,” Gebo-4’s pilot said. But despite his argument, he kept his engine off.

“Just stand by for now,” Kurz ordered. “They’ll be open again once they land. I’ll take the first shot, and you can pick up Tessa and Sousuke while I hold them off.”

“Hmm... okay, fine,” Gebo-4’s captain agreed. “But you’re sure they’re hostiles?”

“If they were Soviet Army, we would’ve seen them much earlier. The only people who’d bring fancy equipment like that to this hole-in-the-ground are—”

“—Amalgam,” the pilot finished. “Shit...”

“They really do seem to be coming out of the woodwork lately,” Kurz agreed. “Like termites.”

Both of the pilots cursed as Kurz shifted his own ECS from radar/infrared stealth mode to pure invisibility. The M9 turned transparent, and the world outside his monitor took on a purple hue.

As the six helicopters continued to approach, Kurz called to Sousuke again. “You got that, Uruz-7? Come back right away. Move to Point Echo on the city’s northeast and hide in the old house there.”

“Uruz-7, roger. But it’ll take me some time.”

“Just hurry.”

Back in the pitch-black shaft, Sousuke tested the sturdiness of his climbing rope and began to climb back to their starting point. “Colonel,” he told Tessa, “we’re heading back.”

“Wait—” Tessa began to say, but stopped herself.

“We need to meet up with Kurz and the others,” Sousuke insisted. “It’s too dangerous here.”

“Yes, I suppose we don’t have a choice...” she said, ruefully.

Whatever lay at the bottom of this shaft was apparently very important, but it wouldn’t mean anything if they didn’t get out of there first. Enemy forces would be there soon, and Sousuke couldn’t protect Tessa by himself. Perhaps realizing that as well, she didn’t try to argue further.

The ladder was badly rusted, falling apart here and there. Some rungs seemed to have trouble holding their weight, which made it impossible for him to climb quickly.

“Hold on tight,” he told her.

“I will.”

Just as he said that, the rung of the ladder he stepped on broke away and fell,

noisily. Sousuke immediately grabbed at the handhold to restore his balance, but that broke away, too.

“Eek!” Tessa shrieked as they were cast into the open air. They didn’t fall far, thanks to the rope affixed at the entrance, but they were still left dangling.

“Are you hurt?” Sousuke asked.

“I... I’m all right,” she told him. “I’m sorry.”

“Just hold on.” He pushed off the wall, then used all his might to carefully climb back up the shaft, using the rope. *This isn’t good*, he thought. It would probably take more than three minutes to complete the climb. They might be fully surrounded by then...

“Landing zone sighted. Shall we set down?” Kalinin asked the transport helicopter’s pilot via intercom.

“Not yet. Wait until we’re done scanning for enemies.”

“Roger.”

Kalinin’s helicopter circled leisurely over the landing spot in the secret city of Yamsk-11 with its four companions. The formation was made up of four Mi-26s and two Mi-24s in total, and he was employing a method for their landing that he’d frequently made use of during his days in Afghanistan.

Three of the transport helicopters holding ASes and infantry would stand by at a safe altitude while one hid in the distant mountains. Meanwhile, the two strong, mobile Hinds would respectively patrol at 500 meters and 1500 meters in the air. Even if guerrillas attacked with anti-air weapons, they’d only get the one in lower altitude before the fierce counterattack began. Then the hidden helicopter could deploy its ground forces instantly, putting extra pressure on their enemy.

“You really are a steady hand, Mr. Kalium,” said Wilhelm Kaspar, the German sniper, over the radio. One of the other transport helicopters was carrying his lambda driver-mounted AS, the Eligore. “But save your sightseeing for another day. I want to get in and out as soon as possible.”

“It’s not sightseeing. Be ready to move out at any time,” Kalinin replied bluntly. His plan, which utilized a combination of ASes, aircraft and attack helicopters working in tandem, was known as ‘the mousetrap’ by Kalinin’s old squadron. The minute the enemy went for the delicious cheese, the spring would go off, and the mouse would be snared. The guerrillas of Afghanistan were known for their fierce fighting, but even they were terrified of this tactic which Kalinin and his comrades had worked out.

The heavy Soviet-made helicopters, the Mi-26 Halo and Mi-24 Hind, had ECS and ECCS functions specially enhanced by Amalgam along with a litany of other sensors. It was easy for them to dazzle the sensors of any conventional military and appear from seemingly out of nowhere, but they weren’t going up against the Soviet military. They were going up against *them*. Though there was no sign of the enemy at the moment, one couldn’t be too careful when making a landing.

It was then that he heard Leonard Testarossa’s voice over the radio. He was on one of the Halos, accompanied by Chidori Kaname and the French spy. “I respect your caution, Mr. Kalium, but I agree with Kaspar. We should land at once.”

“Could you please tell me why?” Kalinin requested.

“Let’s see... I think we should be feeling the effects rather soon,” said Leonard, in the tone of a mischievous little boy. Kalinin felt like he’d heard him say that same thing before. When was it? Not that long ago. In fact...

“—agree with Kaspar. We should land at once.”

“Could you please tell me—”

A sense of déjà vu washed over him, and he was about to repeat the same words before snapping back to himself.

“You see? This town is unique,” Leonard said. “The aftereffects of the experiment still linger, and if you’re not careful, you’ll lose track of time. That’s fine for passengers like us, but it could be dangerous if it affected one of the pilots.”

Just as Leonard finished speaking, the lower-flying Hind began to veer to the

side and came very close to crashing into the chemical plant. It just managed to straighten up and ascend with all its might, but its belly scraped against one of the large silos, sending sparks into the night air.

“You see?” Leonard asked with a sigh.

The Hind pilots began cursing at each other. “You idiot, you almost hit it!”

“I was sure I’d turned to the left... but then I was suddenly back in my original spot—”

“What? What are you talking about? You just said the same—”

They seemed to be experiencing the strange *déjà vu*, as well.

Kalinin ordered the Hind to gain altitude and move away from the plant, while considering the perfect place for the transport helicopters to land. Outside the city seemed best, he decided. It seemed too dangerous to come any closer...

Just then, Kaspar contacted him. “Do you see the plateau halfway up the mountain three kilometers to the southeast? Fire something there, maybe a rocket.”

“My I ask why?”

“Fire and you’ll see,” Kaspar replied with a nasty laugh.

Kalinin didn’t ask any more questions, and the helicopter pilot did as he was ordered.

Just as Kurz was informing Tessa and Sousuke about the helicopters, an alarm began blaring in the cockpit of his M9.

《Warning. Two o’clock. Multiple unguided rockets. Time to impact: three, two...》

“What the...” Kurz muttered, and made a split-second decision not to dodge. He’d decided there was no way rockets could hit him from that distance.

As he’d expected, most of the rockets exploded some distance away. But one hit a rock wall some thirty meters above his M9, and proceeded to scatter both fire and stone fragments.

Dust and sand from above rained down on the M9, popping softly as it hit.

But he remained lying very still on the ground, watching the enemy's movements through the smoke that wreathed him.

"Did they spot you?" Sousuke asked over the radio. Their two allied helicopters were lying low in the mountain forests.

"Not sure..." Kurz replied. There was no follow-up, though, which suggested that the enemy hadn't actually seen him. That had just been a test shot; a randomly fired rocket to smoke him out if he was there.

If I just remain still, he thought, I might be able to ride it out... But no, that was wishful thinking. "They'll find me sooner or later," Kurz said to Sousuke. "Let's take the initiative. Gebos 4 and 6, prepare for liftoff!"

Hiding wouldn't do Kurz any good. In the first place, there had been no reason for the enemy to expect an AS like his to be hiding in the mountains, which meant someone on their team possessed exceptional instincts. And even with ECS invisibility mode running, the abnormalities from the dust pelting his M9 might be visible to the naked eye. It was only a matter of time until they found him.

Master arm, on. The high-precision targeting sensors on his 76mm sniper cannon let out a soft hum. *Telescoping anti-air mode.* Heat, humidity and wind speed data poured in, and the detailed values displayed on his ballistic calculation unit inched up and down.

"Uruz-6, about that enemy helicopter formation..." Sousuke said. They must have still been in the shaft, because the static was terrible.

"Tell me later," Kurz replied shortly.

"No, listen," Sousuke insisted. "It was a tactic frequently employed by the Soviets in Afghanistan. Major Kalinin must be their commander."

"Damn. That old man..."

Select target. Establish threat priority. Kurz decided he'd start with the Hinds, and pointed his targeting box at the enemy machine designated Mike-3, the higher-circling of the two. The helicopter's distance and movement speed values wavered in tiny increments, and the words "VALID AIM" appeared on his screen.

Liar, he thought. *The calculations are off. The angle is the problem.* Instinct took over, accounting for the downdraft of the helicopter blades. *Two millis up. One milli left. That should do it...* He fired. The muzzle flash briefly whited out his screen.

He knew that the supersonic 76mm shot would take time to hit its target: three seconds, give or take. It was a hit, and the high-caliber round pulverized the enemy Hind on impact. The machine burst impressively, which sent its rotor flying, but Kurz didn't have time to watch the enemy machine fall. .

"Next up...!" he said jovially. Reloading immediately, he took aim at the second Hind. This one was lower and closer, so he adjusted the ballistics settings. *Aim, fire*— A hit! He'd blown its tail off.

Losing its torque control, the machine spun wildly, before finally plunging side-first towards a corner of the chemical plant. Having both enemy attack helicopters out of the picture would make it easier for their own helicopters to escape.

"Next up...!" Kurz said again, hoping to thin their numbers one more time. But the enemy would know his location now, and taking aim at the remaining three was proving difficult: one was obscured by the hills beyond the secret city, and another was plunging down from high altitude.

Distant, fast... He couldn't hit that one. The other was flying low, hidden behind the plant complex, and Kurz decided that one was his best shot.

The rapidly descending helicopter skimmed across the ground and spat an AS out of its already open hatch: it was that improved entry in the Codarl line, its armor painted crimson. Kurz caught a glimpse of a large sniper cannon in its hands.

That red AS... he thought, and felt his heart start to pound. *Should I shoot it while it's landing?* he wondered. No, it wasn't possible... He knew his attacks wouldn't work on a lambda driver-mounted machine on its guard, but he also knew it would be shooting at him soon.

In a split-second decision, Kurz took aim at the transport helicopter hiding behind the plant complex. The large Halo flitted between silos, water tanks, towers made of winding steel... He anticipated its trajectory and took aim.

Wishing he had more time, but knowing that he had to work with what he had, Kurz fired. The shot pierced the silo, but he couldn't tell if it had hit its target.

A flash of fire came from the ruins. *Here it comes*, he thought, rolling over into a supine position, rifle in hand. Then, with a short snap of his machine's back muscles, he executed a jackknife maneuver. The shot landed, kicking up a plume of dust in the space his M9 had occupied a split-second ago.

Kurz clicked his tongue, righting his posture in order to land on both feet. The next shot came immediately, and he just barely dodged it with a duck. *That guy's aim is damned accurate*, he realized. Even with a long-range fire control computer, how could he make such precise shots at this distance?

Shooting like this wasn't the result of a high-spec machine. It was the skill born of a veteran sniper's experience and instinct. Kurz was sure now: it was him. "Kaspar..." he whispered.

Kaname was checking on Lemon in the transport helicopter's cabin when she heard the sounds of a distant explosion. Looking out the port side window, she caught sight of the helicopter that had been circling the ruins just as it was blown to smithereens.

"An explosion?" she wondered. "Ah...!" Their helicopter banked suddenly, almost throwing her to the floor, but she grabbed her chair and managed to stay upright. Fortunately, Lemon was fixed to his stretcher.

They didn't seem like they were shot down; the pilot must have been dropping them in response to the enemy attack. Below them, the ruins that had seemed so small were rapidly growing larger.

"There's an enemy AS sniper out there! I'm going to hide behind the north side plant!" the pilot cried over the internal comm.

"No, don't get close to the plant. Gain altitude," she heard Leonard in the cargo area respond. His voice was perfectly calm.

"But it's going to shoot us! They took one out already! From a distance like that... hell, just how good is he?!"

“Taking us up will ensure our safety,” Leonard insisted.

“How can you be so sure?!” the pilot demanded to know. Then he declared, “The hell with this, I’m hiding!” The helicopter turned. Just ahead of them was the great steel tower of the plant; he was hiding from the enemy’s aim.

“Fasten your seat belt, Kaname-san,” Lemon said, face pale, from where he lay trapped on the bed.

“I’m saying this for your own good,” Leonard repeated flatly. “Lowering altitude will put you in greater—”

There was a flash outside the window, accompanied by a strange jolt and sound. The helicopter suddenly tilted, in combination with the terrible noise of warped metals scraping together at high speed.

Kaname wasn’t quite sure what had happened. *Did the “enemy” hit us through the building we were hiding behind?* she wondered. *Was that the sound of us losing the drive shaft on the tail rotor?*

The pilot screamed over the internal comm. “But it’s going to shoot us! They took one out already! From a distance like—”

He just said that, thought Kaname. *This doesn’t make any sense.* The craft rocked wildly and they skidded through the skies over the plant. Their altitude was dropping further.

The pilot and the co-pilot were yelling at each other.

“What are you doing?! Take us higher—”

“The hell with this, I’m hiding!” The pilot stopped suddenly, sounding confused. “Wait, what’s going on? Where’d the damage go?”

“Pull the stick, idiot!”

“Oh God, help me. What’s going on? I thought we took a critical hit!”

“What are you talking about?!”

“How are we still airborne? I thought we crashed!” The man sounded terrified. The helicopter was shaking. The plant was drawing closer. It looked like a tangle of metal vines, looming larger and larger in the darkness.

Suddenly, the rotor snagged on something. She could hear metal tearing overhead, and the sound of something ripping through the air like a banshee's wail. They were jolted and shaken as the cabin's lights sparked and went out.

Then they were surrounded by darkness, and Kaname's body went weightless. She slammed back into her chair, then hovered again. Her headset ripped away from her head, and she heard Lemon scream in pain.

The helicopter was plummeting, tangled up with the plant structure. That was the one thing she could tell for sure. *How far are we going to fall?* Kaname thought. *There's no guarantee that there's solid ground so deep in these ruins...*

"—ruz-6 here! Engaging enemy AS—" Kurz was reporting the status of the battle over the radio, but Sousuke was in no position to follow the back-and-forth. A helicopter was on the verge of falling right into the shaft they were still trying to climb.

"What in the..." The helicopter showered sparks as it creaked downward through the large, open space above them. It seemed to be tangled up in the pipes and girders of the plant, which acted like ropes, keeping the helicopter suspended... But they were breaking, one by one, under its weight.

Sousuke had maybe ten or twenty seconds before it plunged into the shaft. There was no time to lose.

"We're going down! Grab on!" he told Tessa, and fixed the remaining slack of the rope to a nearby girder with the carabiner before kicking off of the wall. They didn't have time to climb out. He'd have to drop swiftly to the bottom and flee into a cross-shaft.

Each kick took them down two floors. One kick, then another... He wished he could drop faster, but to do so was impossible while holding the weight of two people.

There was a crash from above as the helicopter collided with the entrance to the shaft. It sounded as though it had just barely caught on the edge, but was slowly tilting their way.

Shards of machine and plant showered down on them, grazing past Sousuke.

A shadow loomed in his night vision scope: a metal fragment the size of a throw pillow was plunging towards them. Planting his legs hard against the wall to brace himself, he tilted his body upwards to protect Tessa and shielded his own head with his left arm.

The metal grazed his arm as it flew past. “Ngh...!” Sousuke forced himself to shake off the pain and return to his descent, kicking off the wall a third time, a fourth.

Tessa simply clung to him with laudable silence.

How far to the ground below? He looked down and saw the ring-shaped bottom approaching: there were three floors remaining. The helicopter fell at just that moment, and sparks filled the shaft as it raced towards them. Sousuke felt like he was inside the barrel of a huge gun with the ravaged machine serving as the bullet.

One more kick... he told himself. Then suddenly, the rope lost its hold; the helicopter’s fall must have dislodged its support.

Sousuke exclaimed wordlessly, and Tessa shrieked. The distance of their fall was about one story, and he just managed to twist his body to avoid crushing Tessa beneath him. Still, his right side hit the floor hard, which expelled the air from his lungs and sent his head spinning.

Sousuke sucked up the pain, removing the rope and straightening up. *It’s coming. No time to look up.* With Tessa still on his back, he ran for the corridor just ahead. *The helicopter’s coming.* Almost there. Four steps— three steps—

“Ngh...!” He hurled himself forward, with a blast of wind and an ear-splitting crunch that came from behind them. Sousuke turned back to see the remains of the helicopter blocking the entrance to the corridor.

They’d managed to survive, but they weren’t safe yet—he could smell leaking jet fuel. If the helicopter exploded in this closed-off space, they’d be roasted alive.

Picking himself up from his prone position, Sousuke continued to run through the dark passage. They had to get as far away as possible. “Tessa?!” he called out. There was no response, but he could still feel her breath; unconscious, but

at least she was alive. He thought he'd attached her firmly to himself with the rope, but Tessa was starting to slide off his back. He tried to adjust her position, but his left arm—which had been injured by the metal fragment earlier during their descent—was now numb and unresponsive.

As Tessa slid limply off him and hit the floor, the entire corridor suddenly bucked. Sousuke felt the ground give way beneath him as a yawning hole opened at his feet. *There's something below even this basement facility, then...* he realized. *Was the helicopter's impact the last straw for an already brittle structure?*

He was reaching for Tessa behind him when the floor beneath his feet suddenly gave way, and he let out a shout. His injured arm betrayed him as he sought something to grab onto and, dragging a rusty steel panel with him, Sousuke plunged into the black hole.

When the fall stopped, he was still alive.

"Mm..." Kaname groaned into the darkness. The seat itself had been partly uprooted from the floor and was dangling precariously, causing the seatbelt to dig into her shoulders and hips.

"Is anyone there?" she shouted. "Anyone alive?!" *I can smell jet fuel, and the engine is still running*, she realized. *We have to get out of here, fast!*

"Just barely..." Lemon's voice came from nearby. Kaname removed her seatbelt and, careful not to fall from the almost vertical floor, groped through the darkness to find him.

"Yeek!" he squealed as her hand made contact.

"Ah, sorry. Wait... Yeek!" Realizing exactly where she'd grabbed, she echoed his squeal, and wiped her hand on her clothing hurriedly.

"You don't have to act *quite* so disgusted..." Lemon said weakly.

"We have to get out of here." Kaname quickly began removing the straps that held Lemon to the stretcher.

"Agreed, but I'm not sure if I can walk."

“You’d better try, if you don’t want to be dead!” Removing Lemon’s restraints, Kaname helped him up. His wounds must feel like torture, because he hissed and moaned through his teeth.

Tracing back her memories as she searched beside her seat, Kaname found an emergency flashlight. Turning it on brought their surroundings at last into view: they seemed to have fallen nose-down. The cabin was still intact, but the fore control room was crushed.

“Where’s the hatch?” she asked.

“Over there,” Lemon told her. “Can you make it?”

“I’ll try,” said Kaname. She could see a hatch next to the partition between the control room and the cabin, which had been warped and partly dislocated from the force of the crash. Climbing down the now vertically-aligned seats, she made it to the hatch. Lemon managed to follow after her, favoring his non-injured leg.

Kaname kicked at the hatch the second she arrived, but the door groaned in protest and refused to yield. She kicked again with all her might. She kicked it so hard her knee began to ache, but it still wouldn’t open.

“Kaname-san, it’s not working,” said Lemon. “We need to find another way out.”

Ignoring Lemon’s warning, she removed a fire extinguisher hanging on the partition. Though taken aback by its weight, Kaname quickly held it up, then smashed it down on the hatch. It still wouldn’t open... But she did feel it budge. *Okay, one more time!*

“I’m telling you, it’s not working. Let’s find another—”

“Graaah!” Projecting the faces of everyone she hated onto the hatch, she slammed the fire extinguisher down again. There was a clunk of warping metal, and this time it notched open, granting them just enough space for a person to squeeze through. “Okay,” she declared, “let’s go!”

“Impressive...” Lemon muttered.

Kaname peered out through the exit, and the smell of fuel stung her eyes. *It*

could go up like a match at any minute, she realized. There was a concrete wall right in front of her, so she pointed the flashlight down and saw the floor about two meters below. They could probably just climb down from here.

“Okay, let’s go,” Lemon said, when they heard a groan from behind them. They turned and saw a man crumpled on the other side of the cabin. It was one of the soldiers who’d been monitoring Kaname. He looked injured, but he was still alive.

“Let’s go, Kaname-san,” Lemon told her ruthlessly.

“But...”

“He’s the enemy! Come on!”

“No, I can’t,” she told him. “Go down without me.”

“Ah...”

Pushing Lemon out of the helicopter, Kaname ran up to the man. “Can you move? We’re getting out of here!”

“Ugh...” The man seemed hazy, and couldn’t answer her clearly. His leg appeared broken, and he probably couldn’t stand.

“This might hurt, but try to bear it!” Kaname grabbed the man’s collar with both hands and began to pull him forcefully towards the hatch. He was incredibly heavy, but she focused all her might into walking him backwards. Her steps were unsteady and she was panting for breath in no time, but she powered through and kept pulling. “Ah... grahhhh!” Enduring the pain, she heaved the man the last of the way to the exit, then pushed him out through the slit in the hatch.

“Hurry!” Lemon was already on the ground, beckoning from below. With the man’s upper half dangling out of the helicopter, she lifted his bottom half and pushed—

“Wagh!” Lemon cried as the man landed on top of him.

“Let’s go!” shouted Kaname, quickly exiting the helicopter to clamor down the various protrusions that served as footholds. She and Lemon (who was dragging his injured leg) each supported the injured soldier on one side as they slid

through the space between the helicopter and the wall. Soon enough they came to a cross-shaft, sized roughly for a single truck to pass through.

“I wonder what this tunnel’s for...” Lemon mused.

“Who cares?” said Kaname. “Let’s go!” They stumbled into the tunnel as fast as they could manage, but the walls around them were crumbling—perhaps set off by the crash—and panels in the ceiling creaked unsteadily.

Kaname and the others went a few dozen meters down the tunnel before they heard a roar behind them; the helicopter’s remains had caught fire.

“My leg...” Lemon moaned. “I can’t walk any farther.”

“No! You have to try!”

Covered in rust, an old wreck of a truck sat on one side of the tunnel, its tires rotted away. Kaname wrung out the last of her strength to pull Lemon and the man behind it.

Will we be safe enough here? she wondered, just as the explosion happened. Dual waves of heat and force burst out from the helicopter’s remains, showering the tunnel in metal fragments.

Bits of aluminum alloy stabbed into the remnants of the truck like blades as the air around them turned as hot as a sauna. All Kaname could do was hunch over, hold her breath, and try to bear it. Her heart was pounding in her chest, and she could feel sweat rising up on her back.

She remained perfectly still for ten seconds or so. Then, timidly, she opened her eyes and gasped for air. *Are we out of oxygen?* she wondered. *It feels hard to breathe...* But the difficulty lasted only for a moment. There must be a source of fresh air nearby. Remaining on hands and knees so as not to breathe in the smoke, she coughed, shoulders heaving.

“Lemon-san, you okay?” she asked.

“I think so...” Lemon replied weakly. “But I think I’m starting to understand why Sousuke-kun fell for you...”

“Huh? How come?”

“You’ve got impressive drive. It’s honestly a little intimidating...” He laughed,

weakly.

After finally reaching a place of comfort again, Kaname thought back on what she'd just done. None of it felt all that strange, but... "I guess it has been a while since I did this kind of thing."

"Huh?"

"Really taking action," she clarified. "I guess being with him was really stifling." She spat on the ground and picked herself up.

Leonard's Belial hung in the air as he watched the helicopter from which he'd just escaped go crashing its way down into the chemical plant's basement. He could have kept it from falling. He could have dived into the shaft and pulled it back out. He could have also torn the cabin open in order to save Chidori Kaname alone.

But he hadn't. Instead, he'd just used his high-resolution infrared sensors to monitor the wreck at the bottom of the shaft, looking on as she and the Frenchman escaped into the underground facility. *How heartwarming!* he mentally applauded. *She's even saving a wounded soldier to whom she has no obligation whatsoever...*

The helicopter exploded just moments afterward, but she would be fine. Leonard was sure of that much. Yes, she was surely fine.

"The M9 that sniped at us seems to have withdrawn," reported Wilhelm Kaspar, who had disembarked in the Eligore and traded fire with the enemy. "I found traces of the Pave Mare that brought him in, but they've already escaped, as well. We should remain on full alert."

"Roger. Our infantry are disembarking now. We'll lock down the town," Kalinin responded.

"Then I'll leave it in your hands," Leonard acknowledged. "I'm going down."

"To the plant's underground facility? By yourself?"

"Yes. I'm going to investigate it myself. Chidori Kaname and the Frenchman have escaped underground."

“I’m sending soldiers now,” Kalinin told him. “Is that all right?”

“As you wish,” Leonard said succinctly, and then cut off the transmission. Hovering his machine up to compare the data he’d received with the actual scene around him, he considered the spatial relationship between his current location and the underground facility. Then he dropped again, and entered the elevator shaft in the plant’s central area.

The helicopter was still burning at the bottom of the hole, like a cremation oven in full blaze. The flame and smoke bent away from the Belial as it approached. As he got closer, an invisible power pushed the air aside, crushing the burnt remains and quelling the fire before his eyes. Heat, smoke, fire, and metal... all of them yielded to Leonard’s approach.

The Belial planted its feet silently at the bottom of the shaft. “Now...” he said, squatting his machine down and opening the cockpit hatch.

Kurz and the Pave Mare crews retreated to the very edge of radio range with Tessa and Sousuke—the mountains about ten kilometers east—to discuss their next moves. They’d taken off their camouflage and distributed disposable vibration sensors around the area, so there should be no more threat from that red AS for a while.

“Any word from Sousuke?” asked Kurz, climbing down from his dust-coated M9. He walked up to the Pave Mare, which had parked in the middle of the forest, in order to speak with the pilot who came out of the back hatch.

This was an Italian man named Salvio, the pilot of the Gebo-4. “None,” he replied. “No idea if they’re even alive. If we contact them too frequently, even encrypted, we might tip the enemy off to our location.”

“What about the de Danaan?” Kurz asked.

“I got them up to speed, but they’re on the other side of the world,” said Silvio. “They’ll be slow to send reinforcements, and Mao and Clouseau are busy with jobs of their own.”

“Damn. We’re in deep, huh?”

“At least we got away,” Salvio said philosophically. “Things could be worse.”

The pilot of the Gebo-6, an American named Lieutenant Fischer, came by to toss a bottle of mineral water at Kurz. He caught it effortlessly, removing his headgear to dump the water over his head. Despite the chilly air, he felt like his head was on fire.

“The enemy doesn’t know we’ve left two of ours behind, either. And those ruins are like a maze,” Lieutenant Fischer pointed out. “If Sousuke and Tessa can hide and lay low, they won’t be found that easily. And the colonel said they only needed a few hours to do what they came to do. If those guys are after the same thing, maybe we can wait this out overnight?”

“Doubtful,” Kurz said, then drank down the rest of the bottle’s contents. Salvio and Fischer were lieutenants, but didn’t seem ready to pull rank on ‘Master Sergeant’ Kurz. They were all about the same age, and they’d been doing drop missions together for two years now. With all that plus Mithril’s hierarchy in tatters, there was no point in obsessing over rank. At times like these, they were going to respect the judgment of Kurz, who had more live combat experience.

“The enemy has probably seen signs of Sousuke and Tessa disembarking,” Kurz said thoughtfully. “Hard not to leave tracks in a deserted town like that, even if you’re careful. They’ll be able to tell that one experienced soldier and one clumsy girl entered the plant.”

“You really think so?” Fischer questioned.

“The major’s with them, remember?” The people of the de Danaan still referred to Kalinin as ‘the major.’ It wasn’t out of lingering regret; they simply hadn’t adjusted their habits. “And... *he’s* with them, too.”

“He? He who?”

“My old teacher,” Kurz said darkly. “You know the name Wilhelm Kaspar?”

“Yeah... sounds familiar,” said Fischer. “I think I saw a few articles about him in trade magazines a while back... German, right?”

“Yeah, from a long line of snipers. His uncle killed a ton of Allied soldiers in World War II, and earned himself the Knight’s Cross. His grandfather had a long career in Indochina and Africa,” Kurz told them. “But Wilhelm himself...

between the Soviet Civil War, Lebanon, and Tajikistan, he's killed over a hundred men. He's former East German Army, but went mercenary after the whole reunification mess."

"A real master, huh?" Salvio observed.

"More like a monster. You know the world record for sniping in a live combat situation? It's 2500 meters," Kurz told them. "A US Navy sergeant pulled it off in Tajikistan against an Iraqi officer. He did it with a .50-caliber anti-materiel rifle with a modern ballistic tracker device and almost no wind."

"That's pretty impressive," said Fischer. "Olympic-class."

"It's good, sure, but the equipment did a lot of the work, and he had to fire a few times before one landed. Kaspar's record is 1520 meters. That's a thousand meters off that world record, yeah... but he did it with a wooden .30-caliber, at night, in the pouring rain, with a 33-mile-per-hour crosswind. And he did it in one shot."

"Uh... is that harder?"

"Way harder. A .30-caliber is lighter and produces less muzzle energy than a .50. Plus, awful weather throws a monkey wrench into attempts to calculate ballistic arcs. It's like hitting a hole-in-one in a hurricane. Most people in the business would say it's bullshit if I told them he made that shot," Kurz said, expression dark. "But I saw it. I was right next to him, acting as his spotter."

The scene from that night replayed in his mind: A city in ruin. Neglected fires turning the sky the color of blood. The rain soaking through everything. The trees along the street, swaying in the wind. Artillery fire from the Israeli army sounding off in the distance...

They had been in a dilapidated Western-style mansion, and Kaspar was aiming at their target through a large hole in the wall. 1520 meters... That was the distance from the mansion on the hill—the closest place with an appropriate view—to the entrance to the city hotel where the target was staying. If they wanted to snipe him from outside the enemy's region of control, it would have to be from here.

The target was a militia leader. His meeting would soon end, and he'd leave the hotel. He'd be in the open for only five seconds before disappearing into the bulletproof limousine waiting out front.

1520 meters. Even for a master sniper, in these conditions, it was like the other end of the universe. A completely other dimension. An area no one could reach.

Ridiculous. There's no way he'll hit him, Kurz had told himself. Out loud, he'd snarked, "Let's just get back to camp and I'll buy you a drink."

Kaspar hadn't responded. He didn't even seem to have heard Kurz. Seemingly welded to his gun and wet from the rain, he was lying face-down on the floor with his right eye planted to his scope. His breath was exceedingly quiet. They weren't far from the Mediterranean Sea, and the air was cold and humid. For some reason, the white of the man's breath stood out in Kurz's memory.

There was movement in the lobby, and Kurz let him know the target would be out soon. "The buck is on the way"—That's what their squad had called their targets. Kaspar probably heard him, but didn't respond. Answering would have forced him to move his jaw, and moving his jaw would throw off his aim.

The trees on the road were swaying as the hotel door opened. A bodyguard came out. Of course, he didn't notice them, and the "buck"—a bearded man of just over fifty—followed soon after, with the collar on his thin coat raised.

The target walked out to his waiting car. *There's no way he'll hit him*, Kurz thought, even then.

Kaspar fired. It was hard to describe what happened in the instant in which he pulled the trigger; it would be no exaggeration to say that the air around him had seemed to warp, coalescing onto a single point. At least, that was how it seemed to Kurz. The act of acquiring infinite focus had called something invisible to him.

They referred to it as "the spirit," although it wasn't some kind of divine intervention. All of the parts involved—eyes, brain, finger, trigger, blaster, cartridge, barrel, rifling, muzzle, and bullet—remained subject to the laws of physics. There was no room for God or ghosts to interfere.

Throughout a sniper's career of tens of thousands of shots, you took notes every time, learned from mistakes, packed the powder, added it to the cartridge, and shaved down the bullet yourself. Through failures in all kinds of weather, conditions, distances, and angles, you calculated and recalculated, tried again, calculated and recalculated. Through that repetition, one acquired skill. Mystical aid was irrelevant. Everything had to function like a well-oiled machine in order to send a bullet to the calculated destination.

But in that moment, something really had interfered, and Kurz didn't know how to describe it as anything other than a spirit. In that instant, a spirit descended. He felt its presence arrive, then saw the spark at the end of the gun, and at last, heard the shot reach his ear.

1520 meters. It was unthinkable. *But he's going to make it*—Kurz thought at last, in the wake of the spirit's arrival. Of course, he hadn't seen the bullet flying through the rain and wind. But two seconds after Kaspar fired, he saw blood misting out of the target's head, droplets flying amidst the rain.

The shocked bodyguards screamed something, pushing the headless target's body into the backseat before driving off.

Kaspar had patted the dumbstruck Kurz on the shoulder. "Let's go," he'd said plainly, with no sense of satisfaction or pride in his own skill.

They'd left the mansion and headed back to camp, and while they were walking through the rain, Kurz expressed breathless wonder about the accomplishment.

"Don't try that one, boy," Wilhelm Kaspar said as he stopped and turned back. There was something lonely in his eyes. "You couldn't do it."

And in fact, Kurz had never once tried to make that shot. A week later, certain events had caused Kurz to leave Kaspar's squadron with bitter feelings.

"That was four years ago in Lebanon," Kurz finished. He hadn't told the pilots the details of the story; he'd just taken a few seconds to remember the scene for himself. "I couldn't make a shot like that. Experience and instinct... it goes way beyond that. He's got something... something decisive that I lack."

“Will, determination, that kind of thing?” Salvio asked.

“I wish I knew,” Kurz answered. “I don’t understand it very well myself... Of course, it’s not like I don’t have natural talent. I only first picked up a rifle five or six years ago, see.”

“You never mentioned that before.”

“Not like I was hiding it. I started as a volunteer soldier in the Middle East, and after a few misadventures, I got recruited by Kaspar’s squad. That’s where I learned.”

“Wow,” Salvio remarked. “What was the squad?”

“It didn’t have a name. It was just ‘Kaspar’s Squad.’ We were a gang of snipers who went all around the world taking jobs, and... well, I guess it’s like a modern version of Bailey’s South African Sharpshooters,” Kurz mused.

“What’s that? Bailey’s...?”

“It was an old mercenary group. But never mind that. The point is... I don’t think I can beat that guy.”

Of course, there was more to battle than pure firing skill. If your viable range was a hundred meters less than the enemy’s, you got a hundred meters closer—simple as that. One could also employ bluffs, feints, tricks, flanking, and all kinds of tricks to land a killshot. Battle was complex. Yet even taking all that into account, Kurz was sure he couldn’t beat Kaspar.

“But we’ve left the colonel and Sousuke there,” Fischer protested. “We can’t just abandon them.”

“Yeah, I know...” Kurz was about to sigh, but stopped himself in time. It wasn’t good to sigh around allies who were already nervous. “Well, it’ll work out somehow,” he decided. “Let’s just wait for our chance.”

“What kind of chance?” Salvio asked.

“Either we re-establish contact, or we see signs they’re leaving,” Kurz explained. “Then we’ll set up a diversion and run to their rescue.”

Standing up, he returned to his M9, where he opened a small impact-resistant container for small arms under the cockpit hatch and pulled out a carefully

wrapped rifle. Returning to the ground, he opened the bundle and gazed silently at the rifle within.

The AS battle will just be a prelude. Your turn might be coming soon, he thought. It was a bolt action rifle with a dull luster, old and unrefined, with wooden portions that had blackened from frequent handling. The thick barrel was blue-black, with granular white flecks from the Teflon enhancement. Attached to the top, the rifle's 36x scope was long and thick enough to resemble a second barrel. These simple qualities gave it the beauty of a work of art.

The rifle had been made by Winchester about fifty years ago, and boasted precision equal to that of most cutting-edge sniper rifles. It had clearly been loved and cared for by every past owner. This "rifle to end all rifles" felt like too much for a young man with less than five years of experience; Wilhelm Kaspar was more worthy of a gun like this.

1520 meters, Kurz thought. *With this gun, I might just be able to do it.*

It was clear that the man whom Kaname had pulled from danger was injured, and badly so; this was a black man in his 30s, well-muscled, if not exceptionally tall. Had he been in perfect health, this soldier would have easily been able to restrain both Kaname and Lemon without much effort.

"His right leg is broken, and there's a gash down his right side," said Lemon, after a quick examination of the man's wounds. "Also, I think he hit his head... though I don't know how bad it is."

"Will he pull through?" Kaname questioned.

"I'm not sure. He might, if he gets treatment right away, but... I'm afraid I don't have a first aid kit," Lemon said regretfully. "Probably best if we don't move him."

"I see..."

The man, who seemed to have regained consciousness, let out a low, hazy moan.

"Hey, talk to us," Kaname said. "What's your name?"

“Brown.”

“Brown-san,” she continued, “the helicopter crashed, but we saved you before it exploded. Sorry to say, the others in there are probably all dead. We want to give you first aid, but we don’t have any tools or medicine. Are you with me?”

The man nodded weakly, and breathed an affirmative.

“I think your people should be coming soon,” Kaname told him. “You understand our position, right? We’re gonna have to run away and leave you here. I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t... leave...” The injuries must have made Brown timid, as he shakily tried to grab her arm.

Enemy or not, Kaname felt guilty for having to refuse him. She gently took the man’s hand and wiped his face with a handkerchief. “I’m sorry. Here, take this and try to stay warm,” she said, removing her red down jacket to lay it across the man’s shoulders. “Good luck.” Then turning away from him, she asked, “Lemon-san, can you walk? I’ll lend you my shoulder.”

“Yeah, I’ll try... ow, ow...”

“Let’s go.”

The two of them began to stagger off, leaving the man behind. They walked straight down the passage until they hit a dead end, caused by a ceiling that had collapsed with the passage of time. They retraced their steps for a while and took a different path at a fork.

“Are you cold?” Kaname asked.

“I’m okay,” Lemon told her. “You’re the one who gave your coat to that man...”

“I’m just being self-righteous, is that it?” she said with a scowl.

“That’s not what I meant,” Lemon replied quickly. “I just... don’t understand. You seem like a smart girl, so you have to realize how dangerous that was.”

“What do you mean?”

“Saving that Brown guy means he can tell his allies we survived and got away,” Lemon pointed out. “If not for that, they’d have assumed we burned to death with the rest of the crew. There’s no way we’ll make it out now.”

“Ah...” Kaname suddenly stopped.

“What?”

“N... Nothing. Let’s just hurry.”

Lemon blinked in surprise. “Wait, did you not realize that? You did all that without even thinking?” He was right on the money. Kaname truly hadn’t thought that far. She’d basically been acting on autopilot. “Wow, I was right. You really weren’t thinking...”

“W-Was too!” she said defensively. “I was thinking, but I still just couldn’t let him die!”

“Hmm... Well, I won’t argue the point.”

“And you could’ve said something earlier if you were so worried!”

“Yeah, thought so,” Lemon said with a chuckle.

“Ugh...” Kaname did feel embarrassed, but another feeling had struck her even more deeply. Awakening as a Whispered had led her to a rapid increase in intelligence, and her knowledge of certain fields had increased to genius level, and yet...

Wow, I can’t believe how badly I screwed that up. Why did that thought bring her such a feeling of relief? It means I’m still me, she realized. I still make mistakes. I can still save people. I haven’t really changed...

But Lemon’s next words brought that euphoria crashing down. “That’s not what I meant,” he tried to explain. “I just... don’t understand. You seem like a smart girl, so you must realize how da... huh? I mean, I don’t think it’s self-righteous... huh?”

“What are you talking about?” Kaname asked in confusion.

Lemon stopped, put his fingertips to his forehead, and groaned. He looked really sick.

Kaname was also seized by a curious feeling. *I've seen Lemon act disoriented like this several times before*, she thought. *Or is this the first time?* Oh, of course...

“déjà vu, right?” Kaname whispered soberly. She'd been through this time and again herself. déjà vu wasn't an uncommon phenomenon, and she'd thought she was used to it by now... but since entering these ruins, she'd felt she was experiencing it much more frequently. She hadn't counted how often, precisely, but there was definitely something strange going on here.

What in the world is it? she wondered. *Is it connected to the omni-sphere?* *Yes, it has to be...* The déjà vu was a sign of its influence growing stronger. The harmless “reverberations” she felt from time to time in daily life were now affecting the otherwise normal Lemon, as well. She remembered the strange words of the helicopter pilot just before they crashed... That had most likely been the same thing.

Is there another Whispered nearby, she thought next, *aside from me and Leonard?* She was sure Leonard had boarded his AS, the Belial, in the helicopter's cargo hold before the crash. He wasn't about to let something like that kill him, so he was probably still somewhere in these ruins. A Whispered out there, using an amplifier like a TAROS... could he be creating these “reverberations,” like some kind of localized jamming field?

No... It's more than that. She knew this facility contained something far more dangerous. She'd been feeling a sensation separate from the déjà vu... A feeling of *someone* whispering into her head, every time danger came near.

“Kaname-san?” Lemon's voice snapped her back to reality.

She shook her head. “Ah, sorry. Everything okay?”

“Um... you mean with him?”

“Huh?”

The next thing she knew, she was in front of the black man she'd saved from the helicopter again. They were back by the wreckage of the truck they'd taken shelter behind initially. Lemon spoke, looking at the man's injuries.

“His right leg is broken. There's a gash down his right side. I think he hit his

head... though I don't know how bad it is."

"Will he pull through?" she asked Lemon after tracing back the conversation in her memory. *Ah, I'm so sick of this...*

"I'm not sure. He might, if he gets treatment right away, but—"

She listened to the same explanation as before, explained their situation to Brown, wiped his face, gave him her down jacket, offered Lemon a shoulder and left. Lemon pointed out her mistake, she got annoyed and denied it, and he laughed in response.

"Lemon-san."

"What is it?"

"We're going to be experiencing a lot of déjà vu here, so try to keep your wits about you," Kaname told him. "I think something in this facility is the cause."

"Okay. Got it," Lemon said, shaking his head.

"That was easy," she observed. "You're not going to ask how I know?"

"I already know at least a little bit about what this place was built for. Wraith and I were the ones who found it, after all." He'd told her in the helicopter that Leonard had captured him while he was on a mission with Wraith. He'd said that Wraith had fled, and no one knew where she was now. But he hadn't told her what they'd been investigating in Moscow, since they weren't alone at the time.

"You found this place?"

"At Testarossa's request," he confirmed. "She'd been theorizing the existence of a top secret city like this, but she didn't know where it was. This facility was built in the late 70s to do experiments on iffy stuff, like telepathy and precognition. Our research in Moscow told us it was spearheaded by Dr. Valov—a truly brilliant scientist—as a major project for the state."

"Dr. Valov..." Kaname echoed.

"I didn't entirely believe it, but now I think I'm starting to," Lemon admitted. "Amalgam wouldn't have captured and interrogated me if there was no truth to the story, and they certainly wouldn't be here now. And... like you said, we

really are experiencing this weird sense of déjà vu. I don't know exactly how it works, of course... But this place seems dangerous as hell."

"I don't think we were shot down earlier, either," Kaname informed him. "I think the pilot got disoriented."

"Yeah. If so, whoever it was that shot at us... They almost killed us, too."

Kaname remembered the conversation in the helicopter:

"AS sniper."

"From a distance like that."

Someone who'd be attacking Amalgam... *Could the one shooting at us have been Kurz Weber?* she wondered. He wouldn't have had any way to know that she'd been in that helicopter. If Kurz and the others were close by, that could be their ticket out of here.

And not only that, she realized. It's possible that Sousuke is somewhere out there as well... But to Lemon, all she said was, "For now, let's just try to find an exit."

"Yeah," he agreed. "I'm curious about the mysteries this place holds... but now's not really the time."

"Right."

Having reached that decision, they continued down the pitch-black hallway. They went on instinct at each fork in the road, first going right and then left. The occasional dead ends and closed steel doors made the place truly feel like a maze.

There were no maps of the facility on the walls, and the label plates had long since corroded and fallen uselessly to the floor. The occasional area displays they saw simply read things like, "507" and "394," numbers that meant nothing to them. They weren't even sure what floor they were on.

"Sheesh. We're totally lost..." Lemon whispered, leaning up against the wall as they found another corridor blocked off by a collapsed ceiling. He hadn't brought it up, but the wound in his leg must have been aching by now. His face, in the light of her flashlight, was paler than before.

“No, we’re not,” she told him. “We can still go back the way we came if we have to.”

“You remember it?”

“I think so. I’m drawing a map in my head.” *I never would have been able to do this in the past*, Kaname thought. But aloud, she just said, “Let’s try that way.”

Five minutes of wandering later, Lemon seemed to notice something. He stopped short and seized Kaname’s arm.

“What is it?” she questioned.

“Hush! Someone’s coming. Kill the light,” he hissed, drawing a pistol from his belt. She wanted to ask where he got it, but didn’t. He’d probably swiped it from Brown while assessing his injuries.

Kaname turned off the flashlight, and Lemon took it from her. They hid behind a nearby fallen locker in time to hear a single set of footsteps sounding out in the distance. Someone was approaching, slowly, past the bend of an intersection further down the corridor.

They don’t seem to have a light, Kaname observed. *Do they have night vision goggles on?* As the two held their breath and waited, the person stopped at the corner. They couldn’t see them in the dark, but they could tell from the sound alone.

Lemon turned on the flashlight and pointed it at the person, along with his gun. “Don’t move!”

The person covered their night-vision goggles with an arm and hunched over in surprise. It was a petite girl dressed in shorts, a flight jacket, and hiking boots far too bulky for her skinny legs. Her ash blonde hair was done up in a neat braid.

“Ah...” The girl pulled off her night vision goggles and squinted into the flashlight’s beam.

“Tessa...?” Kaname cried out. “Is that you, Tessa?!”

“That voice... Kaname-san?” asked Tessa, in surprise.

“Yes. But what are you doing—”

“Kaname-san!” Before she could finish, Tessa had made it down the hallway and thrown her arms around the other girl. She didn’t even seem to have noticed the surprised Lemon. “Oh, I’m so glad... I was so worried about you,” Tessa gushed. “Is it really you, Kaname-san?”

“O-Of course it is! Ah... Tessa, don’t cry,” Kaname begged. “C’mon...”

“I’m sorry, but I’m just so glad you’re safe. So glad...”

“Yeah. It’s good to see you, too. It’s been a while, huh...?”

Tessa cried for a while, her face buried in Kaname’s chest. Kaname really was happy to see her too, but it would be a while before she could get over her shock long enough to appreciate it.



4: Time Hazard

I'm not dead yet, Sousuke thought after opening his eyes and checking himself over. He was soaked from head to toe, for some reason. He could feel pain here and there, but his AS operator's uniform had spared him all but a few bruises. His left arm still wasn't in top shape, but that, too, seemed to be a light sprain at the worst.

For now, he remained silent in order to listen. He could hear flowing water and the faint howl of wind, but it was too dark to see anything. His night vision goggles had fallen off at some point, so he searched for the Maglite stuck in his tactical vest. He thought, *Good, it's still there*, and then turned it on at the lowest setting.

The first thing Sousuke saw was an exposed rock wall. The second was all kinds of things that had been piled up: broken-down polystyrene foam; tangled-up wires; tarps; wastebaskets; wooden chairs; shredded fencing; garbage of all kinds.

The space he was in resembled a round-roofed cave. *A sewer system?* he speculated. Knee-high water flowed along the ground, and the trash it swept up on its journey seemed to have collected here in piles. Given the size of some of the objects, he quickly postulated that the flow must become a torrent at certain times of the day and year. He himself must have fallen into the hole and been carried here while he was unconscious. The flow seemed to be dying down even now, the water level seemingly lower than it had been when he'd first looked.

In other words, he'd been flushed out like waste.

How far have I come? What time is it? Sousuke checked his watch to discover that he'd been out for about fifteen minutes. He didn't know how far he'd drifted, but judging by the quiet around him, he must have ended up quite far from his fall point. He'd lost his carbine, too. Probably dropped somewhere...

"Colonel..." He looked around for Tessa, but she was nowhere to be seen.

“Colonel... Tessa?” He kept his voice down even as he called for her, and began rooting around in the rubbish.

He found a body, bleached to the bones, in a tattered jumpsuit with a nameplate. He couldn’t make out the gender, but whoever this person was and however they had died, it clearly wasn’t Tessa. She’d been left at the accident site, or been carried elsewhere by the current. He didn’t even know if she was still alive, but...

Dammit, he thought. His radio would be of no help. A few impacts and submerging wouldn’t have been enough to break it, but radio waves also wouldn’t penetrate this far underground.

Just head back upstream, he told himself. *You have to find her.*

Sousuke swiftly headed back up the cave, against the flow of the water. Soon, the exposed rock walls turned to brick. *It really is a sewer, then*, he realized. Given that no one had lived in these ruins for years, the flow must have come purely from rain and spring water.

He must have walked over three hundred meters before coming upon a large hole in the ceiling. There was a slope there, formed by a pile of collapsed rubble and steel girders, which he managed to crawl up to reach the lowest floor above the sewer. There he found a large vertical shaft, narrower than the one they’d first come down, but still covering about five stories.

Sousuke maxed out his light and pointed it at the area above him. *There are cross-passages in the shaft*, he realized, *made from metal scaffolding and pipes*. They all seemed rickety from age, and several passages had come loose. Straining his eyes further, he could see that there was a square hallway with a large hole in the floor at the top.

That must be where I fell from, he speculated, and found himself impressed he’d gotten off so easily in the fall. He must have hit scaffolding, girders, pipes and wires on the way down, mitigating the impact of a five-story fall... although, Tessa wouldn’t have been likely to survive it.

Dimming his Maglite again, Sousuke looked over the floor of the cave, with its rubble and pipes stacked up in conical piles. There was no sign of Tessa, but he did find his lost carbine, which he picked up and examined for damage. It

seemed fine at a glance, but after a fall from that height, he wouldn't know if the carbine worked right until he'd fired it.

Is she still up there? he wondered next. Tessa could still be unconscious in the hallway from which he'd fallen. He couldn't see from here, but if he called out to her, would she answer?

No, too dangerous. He didn't want to be heard. Over thirty minutes had passed since he'd first fallen, and enemy reinforcements could be swarming the area. He'd have to climb back up and check the corridor himself.

Of all the rotten luck... he thought, briefly annoyed at his current situation, but then reconsidered. Real bad luck would've been getting crushed by that helicopter. Real bad luck would've been Tessa, lacking the protection of a shock-resistant AS operator's uniform, falling down the hole with him.

Holding the light in his mouth, Sousuke began climbing the pipes and girders along the shaft wall. He managed to make it three stories up, but no further—he'd have to leave the shaft here and find another route for the last floor.

Upon entering the closest cross-tunnel, Sousuke emerged into what had once been a corridor. *I just have to find a staircase,* he told himself, *and then I can trace my way to where I left Tessa.*

He proceeded down the empty hallway on full alert, with the Maglite in his left hand and his Glock 19 in his right. Since he wasn't sure if the carbine was still working, Sousuke didn't intend to use it for his first shot. *The tests can wait until the shooting's started,* he thought. *After the enemies already know my location.*

Sousuke turned at several forks in the passageway, which was lined with doors. He'd looked inside several to discover dormitories and offices, most of which were empty.

But at the end of the corridor was a set of stairs, in front of which stood Leonard Testarossa.

Sousuke couldn't believe it. The red coat worn over an AS operator's uniform, the wavy silver hair... He held an ornate Colt Peacemaker in his right hand, and though Sousuke couldn't see his face beneath his night vision goggles, he was

sure it was him.

Sousuke didn't think twice or hesitate before opening fire, and the red coat leaped into action to stop the bullets. *That active bulletproof clothing again...* Sousuke fired five more shots regardless, all of them equally ineffective.

"Predictable as ever," Leonard observed before making his own move, his revolver flashing with fire.

But Sousuke had ducked into a nearby doorframe a split-second earlier, letting the shot pass him by to hit the wall and chip at the concrete. Sousuke stuck his gun out and returned fire immediately, unloading his clip. The shots echoed through the area.

Not good, he thought grimly. Every one either missed or was blocked by the coat.

"Your stubbornness is truly tiresome," Leonard told him.

And your pretension is maddening. You gave up your chance to make the perfect surprise attack... Sousuke thought, but didn't say it. Instead, he changed his clip, returned the Glock to its holster, and readied his carbine. *How will that fabulous bulletproof coat of yours stand up against a full metal jacket?* he wondered, and unleashed a semiautomatic shot.

It missed. Leonard must have known he couldn't block rifle shots, because he turned tail immediately and disappeared down the corridor. Sousuke fired again, hoping to hit him through the wall, but to no avail; Leonard simply returned fire, which Sousuke managed to duck.

The carbine's aim seems to be trending towards the upper right, Sousuke observed. This was probably due to the five-story fall, but it seemed to be working fine otherwise. *Sturdy work, indeed...* At the next opportunity, he resolved to send a thank-you email to the maker.

Sousuke fired; Leonard fired. Sousuke moved; Leonard moved. The back-and-forth continued until they entered a room the size of a gymnasium, filled with tanks full of fluid, compressors, and a forest of intertwined pipes and valves.

Having only a Maglite against Leonard's night vision goggles had Sousuke at a tactical disadvantage. The light gave away his position, and there was no way to

catch Leonard by surprise.

No... That's not the only reason I can't finish him off, Sousuke thought. Leonard was good at this: his reflexes; his precision; his purposeful, cool-headed movements; his seemingly indiscriminate yet thoroughly logical positioning... Pulling that off took real skill. Sousuke didn't know if it was due to natural talent or training, but he realized he shouldn't be fooled by the other man's whimsical choices of weapons and words. He'd had a preconception of him as being a spoiled rich boy fully reliant on his high-tech equipment, but it seemed that there was more to Leonard than met the eye.

"Not bad at all, right?" asked Leonard, laughing in the darkness. "You can't beat me in an AS, so you'd better take your shot here... It's your last, best chance to kill me."

There was something off about his provocation, Sousuke felt. They'd only spoken a few times in the past, but there had been a more languid air about Leonard then. Had it all been an act, or had something in him changed?

"You've lost some of your class, I see," Sousuke decided to say. There was nothing wrong with conversing during combat, since his Maglite betrayed his location, anyway.

"Have I?" Leonard mused. "Meeting you on your level seemed the best way to get along."

Sousuke heard a gunshot, and Leonard's bullet grazed by. Using a waist-high pipe as a shield, he moved to a position that would put more pressure on his opponent.

"I'll get along with you when you're dead," Sousuke told him.

"Ah," Leonard said appreciatively, "nice comeback."

The firefight had been raging for over three minutes now—a bad sign, if Leonard was trying to buy time for the soldiers under his command to arrive. *Should I focus on beating him*, Sousuke wondered, *or withdraw?* He didn't have much time to decide.

And indeed, the reinforcements arrived before he'd made a decision. A group of four men armed with submachine guns arrived from an up-leading staircase,

about fifteen meters away from the tank where Sousuke was hiding.

“Mr. Silver?!” one of the men shouted.

“I told you to stay away,” Leonard told them coldly. “Turn back.”

“But you can’t—”

“Leave!”

“There he is!” one of the men shouted, and fired at Sousuke. His shot pierced the tank he was hiding behind, releasing the liquid within.

Sousuke returned fire, downing one of them with a shot to the chest. The remaining three fanned out and kept up the fire. Their stray bullets ricocheted off pipes and cables, causing sparks to fly.

The enemies are well trained, Sousuke observed. They don't seem fazed by the losses they took, and work skillfully together for support and setting up kill shots. But there was a monotony to the rhythm of their attacks and movements: they must not have been a team for very long.

One of them came into the open just as Sousuke had expected, and he put the man down with a single shot. But his opponent seemed to have been trying to throw a grenade at him, and it rolled from his fallen hand with the pin pulled...

Sousuke gasped, and there was an explosion as the incendiary grenade went off with a flash of white and a burst of fire... It was meant to burn its surroundings at high temperatures, and was especially effective indoors.

Sousuke was far enough away not to be hurt, but something more serious had happened: there had been a fluid tank right next to the space in which the grenade had gone off, the same one that had been damaged before.

Sousuke didn't know what fluid it could be that hadn't lost its flammability in over seventeen years... but whatever it was, the grenade had set it off, and now the flames from the ensuing fireball were spreading across the room along the pipes.

In turn, those flames triggered more fires and explosions. The shockwaves of heat and force smashed through the floor, which brought down a rain of rebar

and concrete from the ceiling. Sousuke barely managed to dodge the falling debris on his way to the exit. He knew if he stayed in the room, he'd asphyxiate—if he didn't boil first.

He heard one of the enemies scream as he caught fire and fell through a newly-made hole in the floor. This sound was followed by another explosion behind him. It was hard to run with the floor collapsing beneath him, warping and shifting into a steep slant. Sousuke fell, got up, and fell again.

They were in no condition to keep up the fight. Half running, half crawling, Sousuke scrambled away from the fire and the landslide.

"There it goes again..." There was a series of gunshots followed by a large explosion. The corridor's ceiling trembled, showering dust down on Kaname and the others from above.

"It must be Sagara-san. He's encountered the enemy while searching for me," Tessa said, having more or less caught Kaname up on the situation. She'd been separated from Sousuke after the helicopter crash, and had run into her and Lemon while searching for him.

Sousuke's nearby. The thought of it caused Kaname's heart to race. She had to hold back the urge to run off blindly on her own, reminding herself that she'd just get herself lost.

But emotion refused to disentangle itself from good sense. *I want to see him,* she thought desperately. *I can't wait one second longer. I won't get lost. He'll find me if I call for him. The enemy will find me, you say? Nope. He'll find me first, for sure.* That unreasonable train of thought kept on asserting itself inside of her, refusing to be put down.

The explosion had come in the middle of one such agonizing session.

"Let's find him!" Kaname begged the others. "I think I know which direction it came from."

"Perhaps, but..." Tessa hesitated.

"But what?"

“There’s clearly a battle in progress,” Tessa pointed out. “Lemon-san’s leg is injured... If we run into the enemy before we find Sagara-san, he won’t be able to escape.”

“But we don’t know that we will!” Kaname argued back. “And Sousuke might be in trouble! We can’t just leave him there!”

“We don’t know that we won’t. And my priority is your and Lemon-san’s safety—”

“Oh, screw your stupid logic! I want to see him! And if you try to stop me, I’ll go by myself!” déjà vu washed over her yet again, and Kaname’s voice trembled as she found her irritation reaching its boiling point.

“Please calm down. I haven’t—”

“Calm down, my ass! He’s finally... finally here, after all this time. Why won’t you let me see him?” she demanded. “Would that be *inconvenient* for you? Why—”

“Kaname-san, stop,” Lemon interrupted, grabbing her arm. Shocked by his strength, Kaname snapped out of her fugue, realizing how inappropriately she was behaving. “I get how you feel, but you have to calm down. If we get careless now, all we’ve done will be for nothing.”

He’s right, she realized. Now’s a time for caution. Out loud she said, “Sorry, Tessa.”

“It’s all right. It’s partly my fault in the first place,” Tessa whispered weakly.

A powerful feeling of guilt surged through Kaname. Tessa cared for Sousuke too, and here Kaname was, thinking only of herself... And yet, Tessa had borne the abuse admirably. If Kaname had been in Tessa’s place, she would have torn her a new one over behavior like that. “No... I really am sorry,” she said, trying to apologize once more. “I think I might be going crazy...”

“It’s understandable,” Tessa said in a comforting voice. “It’s been so long since you last saw Sagara-san, and now you’re so close...”

“Yeah...”

“If everyone’s feeling better, we should get moving,” Lemon told them

gravely. “It’s dangerous to stay in one place for too long. We need to get as far from the enemy as possible, and if we’re lucky, we might find another exit. Getting to the surface and contacting our allies with Testarossa-san’s radio is still our best move.”

“But Sousuke—”

“He’ll be okay. He’ll find it easier to act without us slowing him down, and eventually he’ll get the idea to head for the surface and check in, too. There’s nothing to be gained by meeting up with him now, and trying to force it will just raise the chances of us all dying together.”

It sounded like a coward’s reasoning to her, but Lemon must have been through his share of dangerous situations... *It’s probably wisest to listen to his judgment*, Kaname decided. “Okay, we’ll do that,” she said with a nod, forcing down the lingering desire to run to where she knew Sousuke to be. “Tessa, do you know your way around?”

“I know the facility’s general layout,” Tessa told them. “If we can make it to the lowest floor, there should be an emergency staircase or exhaust duct on the north side. There’s no guarantee the enemy won’t have the place surrounded by now, but it’s safer than going out the south side, at least...”

“Which way is north?”

“This way. Let’s go.” Tessa pointed to one hallway in a four-way intersection, and they began to walk, with the girls supporting Lemon on both sides.

In the dark, Lemon let out a small laugh.

“What’s wrong?” Kaname asked him.

“Ah... I was just thinking, ‘You’ve got a beautiful woman on each arm, you lucky dog.’ If I wasn’t in screaming pain, I’d be in heaven.”

“Tessa. Are you sure we can’t just leave him here?”

“Hmm... but we should give him one last request before we do,” Tessa agreed innocently.

“Ahh... sorry,” Lemon told them. “I’m sorry. Please don’t leave me here.”

“For Pete’s sake...” Kaname muttered. Then, adjusting her grip on the

genuinely penitent Lemon, they resumed their slow movement though the darkness.

I'm trapped. That was the conclusion Sousuke had come to after escaping the fire and wandering around for a while. Everywhere he went, he found collapsed ceilings and sealed iron doors blocking his way. He'd thought about blasting through with C4, but the smell of some kind of gas permeated the area, and he was afraid it could trigger another explosion.

Staying alert towards the room in which they'd initially fought, he tried to go back the way he'd come, only to find the path blocked by more collapsed girders and pipes. The fire was out by now, and while he was glad it hadn't devoured all the oxygen, he also knew he couldn't stay here forever.

He was worried about Tessa, too. *If the enemy has come this far,* he thought, *she might already be in their custody.* She was the little sister of their commander, so they probably wouldn't kill her on sight, but that didn't mean they'd let her go free, either.

Maybe I should escape and meet up with Kurz and the others first, he reasoned. With the powerful Laevatein and the backing of Kurz's machine, it might be possible to get Tessa back. He still wasn't sure if he could beat Leonard's AS, but it was a more realistic plan than standing off against a horde of enemies with a lone carbine with dud aim.

But what if Tessa hadn't been caught yet? *Even then,* he told himself, *I should still try to meet up with Kurz and the others.* If he wanted enough time to find all of his allies in this labyrinth, he'd have to take out all the enemies first. Assuming that was even possible...

Sousuke gasped as he once again turned the corner to find Leonard there. He must have escaped the explosion as well... More annoyingly, his outfit was barely even scuffed.

Leonard and Sousuke each noticed the other at about the same time. They pointed their guns, but didn't fire.

"Hold on, now," Leonard laughed. "Surely you've realized that shooting might trigger an explosion."

That rotten onion smell that had been tickling his nose all this time was most likely a flammable LP gas. Using his gun would be dangerous.

“Or it might not,” Sousuke said, keeping his gun pointed at his opponent’s head. He was too close to miss. One shot would end it. But the reverse was true, too...

“Shall we, then?” Leonard offered. “It might be amusing to see what happens.”

“An appealing proposition,” Sousuke agreed.

“So you say, but you’re actually planning on pulling a knife from your belt,” Leonard predicted. “That won’t risk an explosion. You think you can push weak little me to the ground and cut my throat, right?”

Bingo. Sousuke’s hand was inching towards his knife. If he got in close enough, he had a good chance of winning in a physical fight.

“Too bad I have this.” Leonard pulled a knife out from under his coat and pointed it at Sousuke. At first it just looked like a simple shiv, but he noticed a thumb-activated button where the blade met the handle. Sousuke quietly clicked his tongue as he saw it.

“A spetsnaz knife,” Leonard told him. “You’re familiar, I’m sure.” This was a weapon designed by Soviet special forces: the grip was mounted with a powerful spring, and pressing the switch would send the blade flying. It was a simple setup, like one you might see in a toy, but far more powerful. It could pierce through a phone book at ten meters.

Sousuke was at a disadvantage again. His AS operator’s uniform was blade-resistant, but it wouldn’t stop that kind of piercing power. A hit from that knife would gravely wound him, if not kill him outright. And the simple spring trigger wouldn’t spark an explosion.

But it was one-use-only. If he could dodge the first strike, he could get in close...

“I know your type,” he said, as if reading Sousuke’s mind. “Kill the enemy no matter what it takes—if you don’t have a gun, use a knife. If you don’t have a knife, use your bare hands. If you lose your hands, chew their throat out. If they

kill you, sharpen your bones and wait until they step on you. I suppose you wouldn't be open to parley?"

"What exactly would we have to discuss?" Sousuke asked suspiciously.

"Escape," Leonard admitted. "As much as I hate it, we're both trapped in here."

Sousuke said nothing.

"The place is filling up with propane," Leonard went on. "We're fine for now, but if we don't die from the toxicity first, we'll asphyxiate in about two hours."

"You're saying you don't want to fight?" Sousuke asked more directly.

"We're both dead if we do. I've looked all around, and the only way out is a stairway blocked by rubble. But if we work together to clear it, we might escape."

"Are you proposing a truce?"

"Yes, a truce," Leonard agreed. "If we were to fight now, whoever wins will surely be wounded in the process, and a wounded man can't do the necessary work on his own. We'll work together to escape, and only then return to our regularly scheduled attempts to kill each other. That's my proposition."

Leonard's not lying, Sousuke thought, knowing full well that he was right about the gas and the escape route. *Without a truce, we'll both die here for sure*. "Very well," he said out loud. "But only until we escape." Sousuke wasn't going to let his guard down for a second, but he had no choice but to accept Leonard's proposal. They both lowered their weapons at the same time.

"Excellent," Leonard said dryly. "Do we need a handshake?"

"Don't be stupid," said Sousuke, who shouldered his carbine and headed for the stairs.

Under Kalinin's command, Amalgam's airborne squad had finished securing the ruins on the surface... though in fact, what he'd really done was simply check for enemies, and found none.

After disembarking and checking for traces of other helicopter landings,

Kalinin had found the two sets of footprints leading into the plant, which he identified as belonging to Sagara Sousuke and Teletha Testarossa. They were likely to be in the plant's underground facility right now.

Leonard was likely aware of this, too. He had entered the plant alone, and they hadn't heard from him since. The four men Kalinin had sent to scout afterwards had reported gunshots before going incommunicado... *Most likely neutralized in a fight with Sousuke*, he thought.

A few minutes later, a report from a subordinate supported that theory. He'd said there was a fire in a different area than that in which the helicopter had gone down, and they'd found a survivor near the crash site who confirmed that Chidori Kaname and the Frenchman had survived. Leonard was now missing, and Sousuke and Tessa were still out there, somewhere.

Strange things seem to be happening under that plant, Kalinin thought speculatively. He could send a large number of those still on the surface to search underground... But the déjà vu effect made him reluctant to send any more of his men inside.

"Leave things up here to me," said Kaspar, on standby in his AS. "If anyone approaches, I'll finish them off."

"Very well," Kalinin said after a pause. "I leave it to you." With that, he left on his own foray into the plant's basement, accompanied by a few soldiers down the shaft.

Tessa was an excellent guide, and the three of them quickly reached the bottom floor of the plant. They managed to do it without any hostile encounters—which wasn't especially surprising, given that they were heading in the direction opposite to that from which their enemies were coming.

Kaname understood the idea of the plan—to cross the bottom floor and come out the other side—but the idea of going deeper into the maze still made her uneasy. "You sure this is the right way?" she asked Tessa. She'd done so multiple times; more often than she could count, thanks to the increasing frequency of her déjà vu.

"Yes, quite certain..." Tessa seemed to have more on her mind than just the

directions, but she seemed hesitant to reveal it to the others. “Now, turn here and go straight,” she instructed. “You’ll end up on the opposite side of the plant from the one we came in on. If you can find a staircase or a ladder there, it should bring you topside.”

“But you’ve got something else on your mind, right?” Kaname asked more directly.

“Yes...” Tessa stopped walking. “There’s a place I want to visit nearby. You two should keep going without me.”

Lemon and Kaname were shocked by her words.

“What place?” Kaname demanded to know. “What are you talking about?”

“The enemy will be here soon,” Lemon told her. “You can’t resist them all alone.”

“I’ll be fine,” Tessa said. “And it’s the place I originally came here to see... Having come this far, I can’t pass up the chance.”

“Well, what is it, already? At least let us come with you,” Kaname insisted.

“It’s close by, right? Let’s go,” Lemon offered.

But Tessa just shook her head. “I can’t let you do that. Just know that it’s something very important, and... I can handle it by myself.” Tessa’s ‘explanation’ was extremely elusive, as if she knew something she didn’t want to tell them.

No... to be more specific, it was likely Lemon’s presence that made Tessa reticent. He’d been enthusiastically helping her up until now, but he was still an agent in French intelligence. If there was a major secret here in the plant, there’d be no guarantee he wouldn’t pass it on to his government.

Lemon seemed to realize her motives, as well. “You mean you can’t let *me* do that, right?”

Tessa fell silent. He must have been right.

“Wraith and I are the ones who staked our lives to find this place, you know,” he pointedly reminded her. “I went to Moscow, totally blind, just on your say-so. I got shot for you, and Wraith might’ve gotten killed. But after all that, I still

don't deserve to know what's going on?"

"I'm grateful for all you've done. But I—"

"It's because of my affiliations, right?" he asked, cutting her off. "I'm not exactly in good standing with the DGSE, okay? I haven't contacted my superiors in ages, so I'm probably fired."

"I'm not just worried about what you might reveal," Tessa denied. "The secret contained here goes beyond any one country's national security concerns. In the wrong hands, it could affect people all over the world."

"Yeah, right," he scoffed.

"No... in fact, that's a conservative estimation. Few people who learned the secret of what lies here would be able to resist its allure, its power," Tessa went on. "I can tell Kaname-san, or Sagara-san, but only because it's already upended our lives. We're already *in*. But Lemon-san—I've seen nothing to prove to me that you can resist it."

"I don't understand," Lemon argued back, and Kaname could see how much Tessa's words confused him. "You think that the minute I learn this secret, I'm going to turn on you two and try to take it for myself?"

"It's entirely possible. That's how serious this matter is. Now, would you please leave me here and go on with Kaname-san?"

"There's no way that's happening. Okay, how about this?" Lemon whispered as he drew the automatic pistol from his belt.

"Wait—" Kaname said, panicked.

But with the safety still on, he flipped the pistol over and offered it to Tessa. "Take this. If I start acting weird, shoot me."

"Lemon-san, I—"

"I still don't know if we're even getting out of this alive," he said flatly. "At least let me see what it was all for. Please."

Tessa seemed deeply troubled by his request. In Kaname's brief time knowing him, Lemon had come off like a nice enough person... but there was no guarantee that it wasn't an act. Who was to say he wouldn't still turn on them?

But in the end, Tessa must have decided it was unavoidable, because she let out a deep breath and carefully took the gun he offered. “Very well,” she agreed. “But if you try anything, I really will fire.”

“S-Seriously?” Kaname asked.

Tessa gave them a firm nod. “Yes. I won’t hesitate to shoot at him. Whether I hit or not is another question entirely...”

“I... I see.”

“Kaname-san,” Tessa went on, “this is something I knew I’d have to tell you about eventually. Even if I didn’t, my brother may have been planning to do so himself—I think that’s why he came here. Or, if not that, to...”

“To what?” Kaname asked.

“Nothing,” Tessa said with a sigh. “Well, if we’re going together, we should hurry. It’s this way.”

Meanwhile, Sousuke and Leonard’s strange collaboration continued in the dark. They’d spent over five minutes wrestling with a girder that stubbornly refused to give way, before deciding to clear out the surrounding concrete and rocks first. After ten minutes of that, they’d finally managed to get to the point where the beam budged when they kicked it...

Sousuke and Leonard shared no conversation other than what was necessary to accomplish the work at hand: “Move this,” and “Pull that,” and nothing more. Of course, Sousuke wasn’t letting his guard down for a second. He had his knife ready to draw at the smallest provocation, and didn’t turn his back on the man for a second longer than he had to. Whatever the situation, he couldn’t forget that Leonard was an enemy.

“Goodness me...” Leonard said with a sigh, drawing back. He didn’t look to be tired, just sick of the work.

“Keep working,” Sousuke demanded. Surprisingly, Leonard didn’t seem to be lacking in either skill or strength, and he did as he was told. It felt strange to see the ever-pretentious, suit-clad man engaged willingly in this kind of labor.

“Teletha came with you, didn’t she? You aren’t worried about her?” Perhaps unable to stand the drudgery, Leonard began to talk.

Tessa must not be in their custody yet, Sousuke thought. It was entirely possible that Leonard was bluffing, of course, but to Sousuke’s eye, he seemed to be merely speculating. Of course, Sousuke had no obligation to give him any information, so he simply said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” choosing to play dumb.

“Don’t expect me to believe you came here by yourself,” Leonard told him dryly. “She’s the only one who would have business here.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sousuke insisted. “Even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you.”

“Ah, I see.” Leonard lifted up a piece of reinforced concrete, threw it down the stairs, then started again in a needling tone. “How would you feel if I told you that Chidori Kaname was here?”

Sousuke’s hands stopped on a fragment of metal pipe. “You brought her here?” he demanded incredulously. “Into these ruins?”

“Now, now. Keep working.” Leonard chuckled, seeming to consider this a point scored against Sousuke. It was annoying, but Sousuke silently resumed work. “Do you remember the helicopter that fell down the elevator shaft?” Leonard went on conversationally. “She was on it.”

“What?!”

“Your team brought it down,” Leonard informed him, “and it exploded soon after impact. I didn’t check for bodies, of course.”

Sousuke felt a momentary chill go up his spine, but filed the statement away as being a lie. *If Kaname were really dead*, he thought, *Leonard wouldn’t be this casual about it*. It was hard to imagine the man grieving over anyone’s death, but he probably wouldn’t be snickering about it, at the very least.

“I can see you don’t believe me,” Leonard observed. “It is the truth, though... I was in the hangar in my AS, and she was still in the cabin when I escaped on my own.”

“You’re lying,” Sousuke accused him bluntly.

“I am not. Kaname was on that helicopter.”

“Then why are you so calm about it?”

“Ah, a fine question... All right, it should be mobile now,” Leonard announced in an attempt to change the subject of their conversation. “Let’s try it.”

“Right,” Sousuke agreed. Together, they grabbed the obstinate beam and pulled together with all their might. The base, which had been buried in rubble, slowly began to creak as it finally gave way.

“There we are. Now... what were we talking about? Oh, yes. Her,” Leonard continued, as they each returned to their individual labor. “She was indeed on the helicopter that went down. I didn’t save her, and the helicopter exploded soon afterward. Yet she’s still alive, I’m quite sure of it. And *that’s* what’s so interesting.”

“What are you getting at?” Sousuke asked, completely unable to follow the sequential logic of Leonard’s statements. *If Kaname was on the helicopter, how can he be so sure she’s alive?* he wondered. *And why go out of his way to tell me about it now?*

“I tested it once... Just before your little Hong Kong rampage,” Leonard said next. “That rainy night, when she was attacked by Gauron’s assassin in Tokyo? I was hiding nearby, watching, but I didn’t interfere.”

Sousuke listened quietly.

“Think about it,” Leonard insisted. “An assassin—Gauron’s protege—pitted against a slightly above-average teenage athlete... By any estimation, she should have died. But she didn’t.”

“She got lucky,” Sousuke opined.

“Yes, lucky—unusually so.” There was a mysterious implication in Leonard’s tone. “The assassin caught her by surprise and shot her. His first shot missed on a fluke, and then the empty cartridge caught in the chamber. That’s what allowed her to escape.”

Kaname had never spoken in detail about that day, so Sousuke had never

heard this part before. She'd just told him about the Alastors—those miniature ASes—and that she'd met and talked briefly with Leonard.

"Automatic pistols jam all the time," he pointed out.

"They do, yes," Leonard agreed. "But if you were planning to assassinate someone with a gun, what would you do just beforehand?"

"Well..." Killing your target on the first shot was of utmost importance. An early miss would spur them to desperate resistance and make it difficult to complete the assassination smoothly. Thus, Sousuke knew that he'd check the gun's internal mechanisms and make sure the cartridges were in order.

That assassin had probably done the same. Yet the bullet had just happened to miss, and the gun had just happened to jam.

"She's a lucky girl," Leonard mused again. "Almost unbelievably so."

"And that's enough to make you believe she survived the crash?" Sousuke demanded incredulously. "You're mad."

"Am I? But I'm sure you've seen her escape danger countless times yourself, all by the skin of her teeth," Leonard pointed out. "By any reasonable estimation, she should be dead."

"But..." Sousuke wanted to laugh this observation off, but couldn't, because the man was right. Kaname had survived countless dangerous situations since he'd met her, even ones that had given a veteran like himself pause. *Could it really all come down to luck?* he wondered. *Impossible...* "She's always stayed strong and kept moving," he said out loud. "She swiftly determines what's within her ability and sees it through with iron will and conviction. In that sense, she's just like any soldier."

Of course, Sousuke had no intention of denying that luck played a role. Having seen better soldiers than him die to a single stray bullet, he knew that much of his own survival had been due to luck. There was a saying: "Do all you can, then leave the rest in God's hands." Luck was an ancillary element that only made the difference after you'd done everything in your power.

But, aside from her curious Whispered abilities, Chidori Kaname was an utterly ordinary person. Her stubbornness perhaps gave her an edge... but as

impressive as that was, it wasn't a particularly rare trait.

"I'll grant that she's a person of uncommon will and decisiveness," said Leonard. "But have you considered that her particular combination of abilities is *itself* a form of luck?"

"Now you're just quibbling," Sousuke told him. By that standard, everyone who survived to old age was lucky; they'd lucked into the abilities and circumstances that let them live out a full life. There were billions of such people in the world.

"Ah, perhaps so. I'm engaging in a bit of circular wordplay... And the truth is that her survival is not due to luck, but predetermination."

"Predetermination?"

"She is the place where cause and effect converge," Leonard hypothesized. "You could say she is who she is because the world went mad, and that the world went mad because she is who she is. I believe she's going to—and would have, even without my interference—meet the spirit that dwells in these ruins. Then she'll fuse with that power to bring about the end of history. She'll become the keystone—the *kaname*—to a world with no past, future, or present."

"What are you talking about?" Sousuke asked suspiciously.

"The omni-sphere and the whispers, of course," Leonard answered. "This is the place where the world went off the rails."

The frequency of the *déjà vu* was increasing. Kaname felt like she had walked through this narrow corridor dozens of times, listening to Lemon's quiet cursing and Tessa's soft coughing. There was a sort of trick to getting past it, and by keeping her consciousness clear and focused, she was able to maintain her sanity. Nevertheless, she felt her nerves fraying in a way that she found hard to describe.

"I think I'm going crazy," Lemon whispered. She felt like she'd heard him say that countless times before, too. "I know we're moving forward, but it's like the door keeps getting further away... I'm starting to understand how mountain

climbers feel.”

“We will arrive eventually.” Exhaustion tinged Tessa’s voice as well. “Our destination is the core of the facility, where the device that Dr. Valov created long ago still lies intact.”

“And that device is what’s causing all this?” he questioned.

“Yes. Though to be more precise... not the device as it exists right now. There’s no electricity to run it, after all.”

“How can it be causing this if it’s not running?”

“It’s difficult to explain... the device is having the effect eighteen years in the past,” Tessa told them. “But the waves of mental energy it emitted at its full power are still echoing forward into our time.”

“Mental energy? In the past?” Lemon asked again, clearly perplexed.

“Do you remember my explanation about the omni-sphere before? The core here is the epicenter,” Tessa specified. “It’s where everything began.”

After what felt like ages, the three of them reached the core. They passed through several thick doors, which luckily weren’t locked, but were so heavy that Tessa and Kaname working together could just barely open them.

Inside was a vast space several times larger than a school gymnasium. Countless cylindrical units were fastened to the interior walls, each the size of a truck tire. In the center of the room lay a giant dome, like a cross-section of one of the spherical gas holders common in Japan. That dome was also covered in hundreds more of those cylindrical units, identical to those that lined the room’s interior walls.

“What is this place?” Lemon whispered timidly.

Its purpose was inscrutable to a layman’s eye. The atmosphere, at least, reminded Kaname of that neutrino observatory she’d seen pictures of once... An experimental device, built underground on a vast scale, yet for a very simple purpose. *I exist to learn important things, no expense spared*—the space’s grandeur boasted. And while it was all very well organized, she couldn’t help but to feel a morbid perversion about this place, like it was less a scientific

facility and more the long-lost temple of a blood cult.

Perhaps due to the facility's age, several of the cylindrical units had broken off the walls and fallen to the floor. They were probably amplifiers, containing special electronic circuitry to simulate the functions of a human brain. *But wait... they didn't have circuits on that scale at that time, she realized. Could it be...*

"Kaname-san," said Tessa, breaking into her thoughts. "Are you wondering what's inside the cylinders?"

"Yeah. Are they..."

"I don't think they're human brains, at least," Tessa said weakly. "More likely the brains of other higher mammals. Dr. Valov's team included a neuroscientist who specialized in dolphins, so it was likely those who were slain on this altar."

"That's awful..." One or two would have been sickening enough, but there were thousands of those cylinders in this facility. Kaname felt herself dry heave a few times, but managed to keep the bile down. It was clearer now than ever that these ruins were the product of evil and madness. Even if the sacrifices weren't human, it had been an unspeakably cruel thing to do. "So, this is a TAROS?"

"Yes," Tessa told her. "The world's first TAROS, constructed by Dr. Valov, though he apparently called it the 'mental transceiver.' The modern TAROSes we use in the Laevatein and the de Danaan use cutting-edge, massive-scale logic elements—AI and Dana—as amplifiers to send to and receive from the omni-sphere."

"But they didn't have those when this place was built, so they used living brains as amplifiers?" Kaname clarified.

"Yes. The Yamsk-11 plant complex was designed to create the chemicals needed to keep the brain tissue at work here alive and chemically controlled," Tessa told her. "The manufacturing was contained to the city in order to better preserve the secret. Once, some of the brightest minds of the Eastern Bloc lived here... though most of them didn't realize the full scope of the experiment they were involved in. It took me some time to find out this much myself. The danger that Lemon-san and Wraith put themselves in brought the last of the pieces

into place.”

“Why was it so hard?” Kaname wondered. “Even if it’s a secret city, someone had to still know about it...”

“They didn’t,” Tessa answered. “Because everyone who lived here either died or went mad eighteen years ago, over the course of one night.”

“How?”

“It appears something went wrong while they were running a full power test. The TAROS lost control and began emitting exceptionally powerful mental waves,” Tessa explained. “All humans within a thirty-kilometer radius received serious mental poisoning... The result is the ruins you saw outside. I believe they lost their minds, killing their neighbors and themselves. Those closest to it likely died immediately from shock.”

Kaname hadn’t gotten a good look at the city, but the scene was easy to picture. It must have been like hell on earth.

“Like a telepathic version of Chernobyl?” Lemon whispered, breaking his long silence.

“Something like that,” Tessa agreed. “The accident sent two kinds of mental waves through the omni-sphere: one was iota waves, which lose strength with distance and time. They affected a relatively narrow area, and are what drove the people of Yamsk-11 mad. The other kind were tau waves, which can travel on and on without weakening, irrespective of distance and time. They do little harm to most people, mainly causing a momentary feeling of déjà vu. But they did affect a very wide area—the entire Earth, most likely.”

“But no one realized it?” Lemon asked incredulously.

“No. Tau waves can’t be perceived through any material means, and they affected only a single small class of people. All over the world, that class of human being was affected during the time in which the TAROS was running out of control—for exactly three minutes, beginning at 11:50 am Greenwich Mean Time, on December 24th, 1981. Eighteen years ago. Can you guess what that class might have been?”

“I... have no idea,” Lemon said, looking baffled.

But Kaname let out a deep sigh, perhaps the deepest of her life. The last piece of the puzzle had snapped into place. Her secret. *Their* secret. “Newborn children drawing their first breath,” she hypothesized.

“Yes,” Tessa agreed. “*Us*.”

Kaname recalled a project they were given in elementary school: *Explain something that happened on the day that you were born*. Her mother had shown Kaname her birth certificate then... December 24th, 8:50 pm Tokyo Time. In Greenwich Mean Time, 11:50 am. *Mom*... she wondered mournfully. *Why couldn't you have had me just a minute earlier?*

“I’m not entirely sure why the tau waves influenced only infants at the moment of their birth,” Tessa confessed. “A biologist named Alice Miller theorized that in the moment babies are born, there’s a brief flurry of activity in the basal ganglia and occipital lobe. But there hasn’t been any medical verification, as it’s difficult to receive parental permission to study it.”

“That’s for sure... I can’t imagine many mothers are raring to have electrodes hooked up to their baby’s head just before it’s born.”

“I think it would be possible to use more advanced technology... For instance, you could have the birth inside a special NMR,” Tessa speculated. “If you have a chance to give birth in the future, I hope you’ll consider it, Kaname-san.”

“Wh-What the heck? Why don’t you do it yourself?”

“I’ll likely be single all my life.”

“Hey, what’s with the glare?” Kaname wanted to know.

“I’m not glaring,” Tessa protested innocently. “But, well... If you would lend me Sagara-san, I would happily try it myself.”

“That’s pretty out of nowhere...”

“You object?”

“You bet I do!” Kaname responded hotly. “I mean, he and I haven’t actually... you know...”

“I was joking. There’s really nothing for you to worry about.”

“You are so...” Kaname trembled angrily.

Lemon hesitantly chimed in, “Hey... Weren’t we having a really serious discussion just now?”

“Ah, right,” Kaname agreed with a blush.

“I’m sorry,” Tessa said. “I was distracted.” By now, they’d made it up to the giant dome at the center of the space. She began tracing its circumference, seemingly searching for a way inside. “Now, then... children imprinted with information carried by the tau waves at the moment of their birth became the Whispered,” she said, confirming Kaname’s theory. “Of course, that alone didn’t give us our knowledge. I believe it simply gave us the *ability* to receive other mental waves transmitted through the omni-sphere, from some point in the future.”

“Some point in the future?” Kaname echoed.

“Yes. The omni-sphere makes it possible for information to travel back through time,” Tessa told them. “We weren’t born with the knowledge of all this unknown technology; we’re simply receiving mental waves from the future that contain the information. What was imprinted upon us in the moment of our birth was the minimal requirement needed to receive those waves.”

“Like an access code or a protocol...” Kaname mused. “And as the children grew up, their intelligence increased, or something would trigger them to start receiving those strange transmissions.”

“Precisely. We can identify 174 children in the world born within the three minutes in question,” said Tessa. “Given that countries with less advanced healthcare systems often don’t record the precise time of birth, there are probably even more than that. We estimate these extra births to number approximately 135. By the way, the number of currently confirmed Whispered are a mere handful of that—ten or fewer.”

“What accounts for the gap?” Kaname questioned.

“There may be other traits that cause Whispered to awaken at different ages, and other conditions besides birth time that determine who becomes a Whispered and who doesn’t. An ‘aptitude,’ as it were... Humans are born with a

variety of traits, and it's entirely possible that not all newborns were affected equally by the tau waves," Tessa pointed out. "At the moment, the rate of Whispered 'onset' is less than three percent, and I don't find that surprising. Either way... those of us who *were* affected became output terminals for information about technology being broadcast by someone in the future."

"It's almost unbelievable," Lemon whispered. His face was pale, and it didn't seem to be the result of his injury. "'Information about future technology'...does that mean there've been weapons produced based on that information?"

"Yes. This is the so-called 'black technology' that led to ASes, among other things." Tessa's voice, flat, echoed hollowly in the vast dark space inhabited only by the three of them. "I believe the influence of black technology began in the mid-80s. There are records of a Whispered child beginning to show their abilities at a mere three years old. My father was investigating it before he died."

"It's been there since the 80s?" Leonard asked incredulously. "Then the world we live in now..."

"It's not difficult to imagine what effect black technology would have had on the world these last fifteen years," Tessa speculated. "Explosive advancements in computer technology. Revolutionary inventions in the energy sector. Drastic changes in radar capabilities..."

Companies that should have developed might never have been conceived. Companies that should have gone under might have survived. Military operations that should have failed might have succeeded. It would definitely have had an effect on the world economy, might have changed the course of elections in superpower nations... administrations that might never have been could have come up with policies that changed world events. A country that should have collapsed might have remained intact. A country that should have been united might have split in two. And, perhaps... the Cold War might have ended.

"If there's a 'proper history,' a history that might have come about if not for black technology—and this is pure speculation, of course—then perhaps there,

technology hasn't changed much since the early 80s," Tessa went on. "Voice recognition would still be in its infancy, palladium reactors would not exist, and robotics would not have reached the bipedal stage."

"And this is just technology, right?" Lemon asked.

"The influence it's had on politics, economies, and militaries... it's too much to speculate on," Tessa agreed. "There could have been a full-scale nuclear war, or an end to the Cold War entirely. Regardless, that world would be very different from the world we know today. The small group of people who know the truth about this refer to our situation as a 'time hazard.' But nobody really knows if this 'proper history' really exists. If the existence of the Whispered and the omni-sphere influence represent a causal loop, then the way the world is now is the only way it could be."

"It's all too big to conceive of... That plus all the déjà vu is making me feel a little crazy," Lemon admitted.

"Try to hold on to your wits, Lemon-san," Tessa advised him. "We're at the epicenter of the time hazard right now. It's impossible to predict what effects it might have on the mind."

"The epicenter, huh? But isn't it strange? The world rotates and revolves," he observed. "The solar system travels through the galaxy. If we're talking strict coordinates in space, the place we're 'at' is leagues away from where it was eighteen years ago, right?"

"No. The omni-sphere exists only in the presence of human minds, so coordinates in the physical world are irrelevant. This isn't the luminiferous aether postulated centuries ago..." Tessa trailed off for a moment. "I can only explain it by referring to the realm in which humans exist—in other words, the Earth—as 'where it is.' The omni-sphere sticks to the Earth and moves with it, and in Earth coordinates, the epicenter remains here, at Yamsk-11—That's not an entirely accurate description, but it should cover what you need to know."

"This is tricky," Lemon agreed. "But these ruins were abandoned. How could the omni-sphere still exist if there were no people here?"

"It's not that it can't exist without people. It would be more proper to say 'it would serve no purpose.' And this place is different... The effects echo—they

linger, you could say—eighteen years after the incident.”

They located the entrance into the dome, a narrow hatch about Tessa’s height.

“Yeah... I’m totally lost now,” Lemon admitted. “How are you doing, Kaname-san?”

“I...” She’d been silent for a while, since her head was beginning to pound. It wasn’t just the déjà vu now, and every step she took made it worse. She felt like she was walking through slime, and the discomfort and resistance was getting stronger as they went on. “I... I understand.”

She did indeed. These weren’t just uninhabited ruins. Something was waiting for them here.

“Yeah... I’m totally lost now. How are you doing, Kaname-san?” Lemon said.

“Lemon-san. You’re repeating.”

“Yeah... I’m totally lost now. How are you doing, Kaname-san?”

“Lemon-san?” she tried again.

“How are you doing, Kaname-san?”

“Lemon-san!”

“How are you doing? ...you doing? Doing? Ing? Ng... uuuuwah... wahhhh!” Lemon launched into a bloodcurdling scream, writhing as he clutched at his head, trembling and arching his back. It was like electricity was coursing through him. “Stop stop stop stop stop stop no no no no no no!!”

“Lemon-san!” While Kaname just stood there and trembled, Tessa shoved him with all of her might. Lemon lost his balance and fell onto his back several meters away from the dome, but his struggles continued. “I’m dragging him out! Help me!”

“Huh? Um, sure...” Kaname and Tessa dragged Lemon, still kicking and screaming, out of the chamber. Before long, his fit stopped, and he just lay there, coughing and weeping. “What... What just happened?” Kaname asked.

“I’m not sure. But I suspect...” Tessa whispered, shoulders heaving with effort.

“The iota waves emitted from the core of this facility were stronger than anticipated. Powerful feedback from the omni-sphere might have triggered a mental breakdown. He’s an ordinary person, after all.”

“Could be. I hear I reacted a little like that the first time I heard the voices in North Korea,” Kaname agreed. “It’s pretty rough here, even for people like us, who are used to it, so I can see how it’d be enough to send someone into shock...”

“It’s unfortunate, but we can’t take him any further,” said Tessa. There was no reason to drag Lemon along if he couldn’t handle it.

It might, in fact, Kaname thought, be more convenient for Tessa if she could leave him behind... but she doesn’t seem happy about it at all. Out loud she said, “But the presence of iota waves means there really is something in there, right?”

“Yes, and it may be far more powerful than we imagined...” Tessa turned her eyes down, and coughed again as if holding back bile.

“Tessa, you okay?”

“Yes,” she said shortly. “Let’s leave Lemon-san here. You can remain here as well, if you wish. Remain here with—” she began to say, but Kaname seized her hand and gave it a squeeze.

“I’m okay,” Kaname told her. “Let’s go.”

“All right,” Tessa said after a pause. She squeezed Kaname’s hand back, and they proceeded once more into the abandoned dome—into the TAROS.

“The end of history,” said Sousuke. “What does that mean?”

Leonard whispered into the deep darkness, something about “Machenschaft” and “Herrschaft...” It sounded like German, but Sousuke couldn’t catch the meaning. He made a questioning noise.

“Oh, words from Heidegger... ‘Machinations towards creation and control of the created.’ The *causa sui* of a god, one might say... It just came to mind,” Leonard said absently. “The end of history means an end to known relationships

of cause and effect. But, that's all philosophy—the point is that we liberate ourselves from causality, it opens up to us a completely different world. If a human could be entirely unshackled from fate and destiny, what would they want then? That's what I've been making the preparations to find out."

Causality? Destiny? Sousuke didn't understand it at all.

"My sister told you about the omni-sphere, correct?"

"A little," Sousuke admitted carefully.

"And the TAROS?"

"A bit. It's a machine that can access the omni-sphere, and it's what makes the lambda driver work."

"The lambda driver is entirely a side benefit... though a useful one, to be sure," Leonard commented.

"That's what she said, yes."

"These ruins are where the world's first TAROS was built. This is where it first lost control, and what caused the Whispered phenomenon to appear in children born at that time. The true importance of the omni-sphere is that a certain kind of wave permeates its field of influence, without restriction in time or distance. This lets the Whispered exchange information about the past and the future, and it's why this world is different from 'the original world,' a place with an entirely different history and timeline. ASes shouldn't really exist, you see, and neither should Mithril. Amalgam should most likely look different than it does."

"What in the world are you—" Sousuke started to ask.

"You don't have to believe me," said Leonard, cutting him off. "But assuming I am telling the truth... how do you think we should rid ourselves of the world we're currently in?"

"We don't have to. We can just leave it be," said Sousuke, who had no interest in the state of the world. History changed at some point? Who cared? Even if that were the case, it didn't change the fact that what he existed in now was reality. He had enemies and allies, tactical and strategic objectives. The

only things he needed to do, the only things he needed to know, were those things which he could see and hear for himself.

“You think things are fine the way they are?” Leonard laughed. “That’s absurd. Things that shouldn’t exist do, and things that should exist don’t. Humans that should have lived have died, and humans that should have died lived. The world is off the rails. Those with the power to restore it, should.”

“You’re the one who’s off the rails,” Sousuke retorted. “I don’t know what kind of reforms you’re proposing, but—”

“Not reforms,” said Leonard, in a mocking, annoyed tone from out of the darkness. “I’m not talking about some ridiculous political movement. Think of it in terms of the cataclysm that would result if the axis of the world shifted. You’d want to find a way to set it right, wouldn’t you? To return the world to the state it should be in?”

“Keep in mind that I’m not a genius like you are, so you can tell me the world is off the rails, but I just don’t feel it,” Sousuke reminded him flatly. “When you talk about ‘restoring the world,’ are you talking about rejecting everything around us? Enemy and ally alike? I don’t entirely understand, but I don’t think it sits right with me.”

“A new question, then,” said Leonard, switching tactics. “You’ve lost people in battle, haven’t you? Friends and family, various allies?”

“Of course,” Sousuke answered. Comrades in Afghanistan, mercenaries he’d met after... too many to count. The allies he’d gone on operations with for Mithril. Matt Shade, in the intelligence division. The original Uruz-1, Gale McAllen. Liang Xiaoping of the PRT. Eva Santos, the pilot of Gebo-9, and her crew. Those whom he heard were lost in the attack on Merida Island... Castello, Speck, the dozens of West Pacific Battle Group officers. And... Nami.

Some of them he didn’t care about, but some had only died because he wasn’t strong enough to save them. In particular, the thought of Nami back in Namsac stung at his heart. *Nami*, he thought regretfully. *I’m sorry. If I’d acted one second sooner...*

“No doubt there are. Countless people have died on your watch,” Leonard noted. “You don’t regret it?”

“I don’t need to answer that.”

“But you do regret it, I’m sure. In the original world, you see, most of them would still be alive,” Leonard pointed out. “The black technology that the Whispered brought about changed the nature of war, and had remarkable effects on the destinies of those in its orbit. You’re denying them the lives they should have lived, coldly telling us to ‘leave them dead.’ Which one of us is ‘off the rails,’ then?”

“I’m not leaving them!” Sousuke said, his voice becoming labored. He knew he was playing right into his opponent’s hands, but was unable to stop himself.

“Could you say that to their faces?” Leonard countered. “‘Sorry you all died, but that’s just your bad luck. I know a way to save you, but I’m not going to try it’?”

“You’re talking nonsense. There’s no way to raise the dead. Babbling on about the past and future and timelines won’t bring them back to life.”

“Hmm, that sounds like mere stubbornness to me. Why don’t you elaborate?”

“I’ve killed people myself,” Sousuke said, staring at Leonard. “Over a hundred, like you told Chidori before... I don’t know the exact number, but how could I? I never knew how many people were on those Soviet military trucks I blew up in the valleys of Afghanistan. What matters is, I’ve taken more lives than I can count. So I know. I’ve felt it.”

“Hmm. Felt what?”

“That human death is final. It can’t be undone. Even if you find some way to bring a person back to life, they won’t be the same person.”

“Why not? If their body and memories and environment are the same, aren’t they the same person?” Leonard questioned.

“No. Their death itself is a part of them. Their final moments are a part of them,” Sousuke said. “That’s why we’re all so earnest, fighting for life with every inch of our being. That’s the one unchangeable rule in life. That was one thing even Gaoron respected. He was an awful person, but he understood life’s fleeting nature. The difference is that he reveled in it, and I don’t.”

“A very interesting opinion,” Leonard said, straining to lift up a large chunk of concrete. “Gauron, eh? I told him about this once myself... about time and destiny going off the rails. He didn’t doubt it, but like you, he showed no interest. His words were quite similar to yours. Two mortal enemies with such similar opinions... would that qualify as irony?”

“No, it stands to reason. It’s a soldiers’ unwritten rule.”

“And Gauron was a soldier?”

“He was. And I don’t think you are.” He didn’t mean it disparagingly; Sousuke was simply stating the truth as he saw it.

Yet the words seemed to trigger something inside of Leonard. “I see,” he said coldly. “Then... I feel like I should make sure to ask this, but would you say the same thing if Chidori Kaname died?”

Sousuke stood there, and didn’t say anything. He wasn’t sure himself.

“You don’t know, I see.” There was no particular insinuation in Leonard’s tone. “If I were in your position, I probably couldn’t accept it. Pleasantries like laws and unwritten rules can do little to override sheer emotion. Are you sure you haven’t oversimplified things? Good and evil, love and hate, enemy and ally... you can’t possibly subscribe to such two-dimensional thinking.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I’m not sure,” said Leonard. “There may be no need for us to fight after all.”

Sousuke was surprised to hear those words. *No need to fight... Why would you say that? You’ve been nothing but my enemy from the start. You’ve interfered in our missions, killed my comrades, and kidnapped Kaname. How could there ever be peace between us?*

“I know, I know. I’m not trying to craft a treaty,” Leonard assured him. “And no matter how I explain myself, I’m sure you’d refuse regardless. I’m not trying to win you over.”

“Of course.”

“Your group is as stubborn as a band of fundamentalist terrorists. But Kalinin was different... Though he was also hesitant at first.”

“The major?”

“The first time I contacted him was around Christmas of last year,” Leonard explained. “I told him about the off-the-rails world we lived in, and though he didn’t believe me right away, he eventually came around. That was during the January attack.”

“He would never believe your nonsense,” Sousuke scoffed.

“I showed him the proof, you see. I told him I’d use an unpredictable natural event to enable Amalgam to strike a blow against Mithril.”

“A natural event?”

“The solar winds,” Leonard explained. “I used the TAROS to predict that massive solar activity would take down all communications. Predicting terrestrial weather and societal movements are still beyond me, but solar activity isn’t especially hard to predict, thanks to a general lack of interaction between the sun and the lives of the tiny people here on Earth. I knew the timing down to the second, and I exploited it. It’s the only way Amalgam would have been able to strike so hard against Mithril in such a short period of time.”

Sousuke had heard that Kalinin acted strangely during the attack. *Was it because of Leonard’s ‘prophecy,’ then?* he wondered. Amalgam had mounted their attack using what should’ve been an unpredictable solar flare. What better proof was there that the notion of time-traveling communications through the TAROS and the omni-sphere, and the resultant changes to history, were real?

“He consequently accepted that the mistake could be fixed, and that I had the power to make it happen,” Leonard continued. “It’s not Amalgam that he’s joined, precisely. It’s me.”

“Impossible...” Sousuke muttered. *Isn’t Andrey Kalinin the living embodiment of the soldiers’ unwritten rule?* he thought. Even if ‘putting the world back on the rails’ were possible, he surely wouldn’t join in on a plan to do it. He was a man who accepted his losses and failures so that he could incorporate them into his next plan.

He has to be that way, Sousuke thought again. *If he isn’t, then what was our*

loyalty for?

“Andrey Kalinin is a realist,” Leonard insisted. “He accepts things that you people never would. I’m sure that’s why he didn’t try and explain it to you.”

“Does the colonel... does Tessa know?” Sousuke asked next.

“I suspect so. And yet, she’s been working to stop my plans without telling the rest of you what they are,” Leonard pointed out. “Can you imagine why that might be?”

“Are you suggesting that anyone in Mithril would agree with you?”

“Of course. That’s why Teletha keeps you in the dark. She thinks we should accept the past and let history continue to play out. She’s forward-looking, noble, and utterly narcissistic,” Leonard said bitterly. “She also wants revenge against Amalgam, and finds the idea of anyone controlling the world abhorrent. But her main motivation is to lash out against me. She thinks that denying me is the only way for her to assert her own power.”

“She’s not that self-serving,” Sousuke denied.

“She probably doesn’t even realize it herself,” Leonard continued. “If I told her this, she’d just insist that I was wrong. She’s still a child, you know, and her above-average intelligence only makes it worse. She’ll say whatever it takes to justify what she’s doing to herself.”

They pulled out a steel pipe buried in the rubble, and the surrounding concrete tumbled down noisily. From there they created a hole large enough for an arm to pass through, and felt a cold wind blowing in through it. They were almost there. If they could clear the surrounding rubble now, they could escape.

“Amalgam is currently heading for a rapid weakening,” Leonard revealed as they stripped the rubble away. “Though I don’t think anyone realizes it. My plan, to put an end to the history of a world gone off the rails, requires considerable funding and resources. The previous democratic system was inconvenient to that end, so I’m giving it a shot in the arm.”

“A shot in the arm?” Sousuke asked suspiciously.

“The instatement of a dictator,” Leonard stated calmly. “Undermine the delicate power balance between the higher-ups, spread suspicion and uncertainty... then watch a firebrand appear and pick up allies through the tacit use of carrot and stick. It took six months of boring drudge work, but things are finally getting there. Thanks to the activities of Kalinin, as well, of course.”

“So, you’re the dictator?”

“Not quite yet. I know the identities of most of the major executives, and I’ve finished implanting a sort of a virus into their communications network,” Leonard clarified. “I call it a ‘communications network,’ but it’s not the Internet, if you’re wondering. It’s a far more primitive system of encoding. Amalgam has been using it for decades to grow themselves in secret.”

Even if Leonard doesn’t tell me what their network is, this is still important information, Sousuke thought. *Why is he revealing things about his own organization so flippantly?* Out loud, he asked, “Why are you telling me this?”

“Well, what’s the harm?” Leonard asked in return. “Amalgam will die out soon enough, whether or not you noble knights do the honors. No... it would be more accurate to say that the world will be remade before you ever could.”

Sousuke’s confidence in the emptiness of Leonard’s boasts was shaken. If Leonard were simply mad, he could write it off easily, but he clearly wasn’t. Kalinin’s betrayal, Amalgam’s recently strange behavior, the unnatural state of the world... it all matched with Tessa’s explanation. But if he wasn’t lying, and he wasn’t mad, then how exactly did he intend to carry out this plan of his?

“Is this the reason you need Chidori?” Sousuke asked now.

“Yes. We’re building a new TAROS right now, at a scale far grander than any before it,” Leonard confirmed. “Its power will let me affect the past, but the catalyst can’t just be any ordinary Whispered. It requires the person uniquely suited for it, the one who was imprinted with the greatest power of all.

“After a long search, I found that person,” he continued. “The one who received the longest exposure to mental waves emitted during the Yamsk-11 disaster—the whole of the tau wave information—from start to finish. The one who’s been sending technological know-how to the Whispered from the future hasn’t been some unknown entity; it’s been *her*. She’s about to do it very

soon.”

“Chidori will...?”

“That ‘unusual luck’ of hers is the result of her being a living singularity. She was made that way. It’s destiny. She isn’t really a Whispered, you see... If I were to give Chidori Kaname a name, it would be ‘the Whispering,’” Leonard mused. “She is the one who sent the black technology into the past and threw the world off the rails.”

“She’s an ordinary person,” Sousuke insisted irritably. “She’d never willingly disseminate technology that would be used to kill people. I don’t understand all this talk of ‘has been doing’ and ‘is about to do’... but she wouldn’t do it, now or ever.”

“And that’s what’s so strange,” Leonard said, with a laugh. “Why would someone so strong and self-righteous interfere in the past? What’s happened that she can’t accept? Is it something that from long ago, or something yet to happen? And why did she—or will she—send black technology, of all things? Who was it that came up with the information she has? Is there another Whispering even further in the future? I’ve been ‘hands-off’ in the past because I wanted to know the answers... But what do you think?”

His words were full of self-recrimination, and had a sort of cold ring to them. Leonard had the air of a devil around him now, laughing ironically about an act of God that exceeded his own prodigious knowledge.

“How would I know?” Sousuke asked, feeling as though he was going crazy. The things Leonard was saying scrambled his understanding of past and future tense, of cause and effect. The one thing that was clear to him was that Chidori Kaname, that innocent girl, was about to be sacrificed on the altar of some kind of arrogant plan based on nonsense logic, whether she wanted to be part of it or not.

“So, let me ask this: what are you, yourself, after?” Leonard tried again. “What are you fighting us for? And don’t give me some grand motivation like revenge against Amalgam, or resistance against our control of the world. I want to hear as simple and honest a reason as you can give me.”

“To get Chidori back and return to a normal life,” Sousuke told him. “That’s

all.”

“Impossible,” Leonard told him bluntly.

“It’s not.”

“Yes, it is. Even if you get rid of me, someone else will come for her eventually. There’s no way society will accept her into their ranks,” Leonard predicted. “And Mithril isn’t made up of angels, either... Sooner or later, they’ll begin to hunger for her power to change the world. They’re an organization, after all, no different from any other.”

Sousuke said nothing.

“But if I correct the warped history, she’ll be able to live life as a normal human,” Leonard hypothesized. “No one will go after her. She’ll live in peace, fall in love, have children, and grow old... Just as you wanted for her. It’s the only way to resolve this.”

Given his earlier explanations, Sousuke thought, it might be true. A corner of his jumbled mind was telling him that Leonard was right, but that he was missing something important. Why was it that he found himself rejecting that resolution?

No, he knew why. *Because if it happens that way, I won’t be in her life,* he realized. Every word Leonard said—fall in love, have children, grow old—stung at his heart. *I won’t be there. I won’t even be able to watch her from afar.*

“But then there’d be no point,” he finally said.

“A challenging dilemma,” Leonard agreed. “I struggled with it, as well. I’d like you to struggle the same way.” Then, he lifted up a piece of concrete and threw it down the stairs.

Sousuke threw a piece of his own, and they remained lost in their work for several minutes in silence. At last, they worked together to pull out a steel girder, which caused much of the rubble blocking the stairs to come crumbling down all at once. When the dust and smoke cleared, there was a hole just big enough for a person to pass through.

“Well, now we’re safe,” Leonard whispered, climbing through the hole. He

was completely defenseless now, but Sousuke couldn't bring himself to attack. He followed after, and they made it safely to the next floor up, a narrow corridor that formed a T-intersection with the stairs.

The ceasefire was over. The enemies stood a few meters away from each other, facing each other in the darkness.

"All right," said Leonard. "Shall we resume our attempts to kill each other?"

There's no risk of starting a fire now, Sousuke thought silently. *We can both use guns and explosives.* Furthermore, this was his best chance to kill Leonard. Even in the Laevatein, he had little chance of victory against the man's Belial. But here on the ground, things were better. It was his last chance to eliminate a possibly massive future threat.

"It's fine. Don't hold back." Through the dust and the darkness, Leonard Testarossa smiled. It wasn't his earlier smug smile. He seemed almost burning now, staring right at him, hoping for a fight. This was the smile of a madman, who had no further attachment to this world.

Sousuke was suddenly seized with the thought that he couldn't possibly kill this man. It wasn't that he'd lost his nerve; he'd just lost all of his earlier hostility. Listening to Leonard's words had produced a hesitance inside of him.

If... If Leonard's goals are achievable, wouldn't that be the best way to return Kaname to a peaceful world? he wondered. *Will killing him now prevent that? I don't care what happens to me. Chidori... Why aren't you here?* After a moment's hesitation, he finally said, "Not now."

"All right," Leonard agreed. "We'll vent our frustrations on each other another day." Then he walked away from Sousuke.

He's vulnerable, with his back turned, Sousuke thought. *I can still catch him by surprise. It will probably be my last chance.* But nevertheless, he didn't make a move. Leonard disappeared into the darkness, and the chance to shoot him was gone.

"One last thing... I'm going to see my goal through, even if the whole world turns against me." Leonard's voice resounded through the corridor. "You can sit back and watch if you wish. But the next time we meet, I won't show a shred of

mercy. I'll do whatever it takes to kill you."

Sousuke couldn't find it in him to respond. He stood there dejectedly, until he heard the enemy's footsteps recede into nothingness.

Change the world? he wondered. Now that he was alone with his thoughts, it seemed absurd again. These rejuvenated doubts proved to him that he was still in his right mind. But he had a more important task remaining...

"Chidori..." he said to himself. If she were somewhere inside the ruins, he had to find her before the enemy did.

Kaname and Tessa passed through the dome's hatch and proceeded down a narrow tunnel. They'd left Lemon outside of the dome; it was hard to imagine he'd still want to come in with them.

déjà vu, déjà vu, déjà vu... Kaname's thoughts repeated themselves again and again. The closer they got to the core, the worse the indescribable pressure and exhaustion that assailed her became.

It was only five meters or so. Why did their finish line, that tiny room in the dome, still feel so far away? It was that feeling of despair at the ninth station of Mt. Fuji, when the peak was in sight, but no matter how you climbed, you never seemed to reach it.

And both of them felt it. Hand in hand, they communicated without words.

I'm scared. Hang in there. Almost there.

It's hard. Can't breathe. Don't give up.

It was even hard to tell which of them was doing the complaining, and which was doing the encouraging. Stepping through those several hundred meters that felt like eternity, the two girls arrived at the center of the dome.

"This is..."

At the core of the first TAROS lay a corpse, covered in electrodes. It was secured, mannequin-like, at the center of a receptacle the size of a large bathtub, hooked up to countless cables and tubes.

It was a woman—and apparently a young woman, at that. She wasn't rotted

or bleached to her bones or mummified. It was as if she'd turned into wax, or to ice that had gone cloudy. Her body still had its luster; her copious bosom and slender legs remained perfectly preserved. If you poured varnish on a freshly-dead person, they'd probably look like this—that was the thought her smooth lines inspired in Kaname. *Less a corpse and more a sculpture...*

She couldn't make out her face. The countless electrodes that crowned the so-called sculpture's head obscured it like a helmet, and the head was at the exact center of the dome, probably to increase the experiment's precision.

"Who is she?" Tessa and Kaname asked together at the exact same time.

"The trial subject from 18 years ago. I don't know who it is, though."

"Then why is the corpse in this state?"

"No... The actual corpse rotted away a long time ago," they explained. "What we're seeing now is the residue of her existence. Her mind and form have manifested physically all these years later, building up through the omni-sphere."

It was like an icicle forming in a limestone cave, crafted molecule by molecule by the power that lingered here. A rift in time. This crystal—the woman's residue itself—was the Whispering. *My power is limited now, but some day... yes, some day in the future that nobody knows is coming, I'll be reborn. A greater power is controlling me now. It won't be eternal. Ten years? A hundred years? There's no telling. An unknown amount of time...*

"Get ready," said the fused consciousness of Tessa and Kaname. She took a plastic explosive out of the bag in her hand. She attached an electric fuse and lay it at the sculpture's feet. She rolled out a cord from a reel and attached it to a detonator plunger.

"We're blowing her up?" they asked.

"Yes," they answered. "We're blowing her up."

That was her objective. This sculpture—this crystallized catalyst—was receiving tau waves sent from another time and relaying them into higher-energy iota waves, which were causing things like Michel Lemon's madness. By destroying it, they could free Yamsk-11 of its curse. But they couldn't stop the

same crystal from growing again someday. They'd have to destroy it again another time.

No... Wouldn't that be the greatest contradiction, the most wasted effort? They couldn't stop the appearance of the Whispering. It was eternal. In that case...

She heard a voice.

How intelligent of you, my daughter. Thank you for coming.

A voice she'd known for a long, long time.

Yes, it's me. I've been waiting for you to come. I've called to you many times in the past. Every time, you resisted me and shut me out. But you're here now, as you were always meant to be. You can't shut me out any longer. Accept my power. Take in my soul.

If there is a god, then we are the closest thing there is to it. We are the three Fates in one: Clotho, Lachesis, Atropos. There's no longer any need to fear. Hold out your hand. Open your heart. Let out a cry and embrace infinite joy.

That's right. This is how it's always been for us. Your hesitation is just... killing time...

"Kaname-san?!" Tessa screamed desperately. Her voice went beyond simple fear and despair.

The next thing she knew, Kaname was standing in front of the "sculpture" formed in the middle of the TAROS, stroking her exposed cheek.

"We're here to destroy it! Get back!" Tessa warned her, gripping the detonator.

"Destroy...?" Kaname whispered, as if possessed with a fever. Whatever had been pounding in her skull all this time was gone now. The déjà vu had stopped, as well. Her vision was clear. It was like breathing her first unimpeded breath after a bad case of nasal congestion. "There's no need to destroy it now."

"What?" Tessa asked.

Kaname left the sculpture and walked up to Tessa, knowing exactly what to do next. She took the arm of the bewildered girl and quietly took the detonator

from her. Tessa reached for it in surprise, but she batted the hand away and tossed the detonator aside.

“What are you—” Tessa began to ask, but Kaname quickly stole the gun away from Tessa’s belt and slapped her across the cheek. As the other girl lost balance, she grabbed her by the collar and pulled her up close with all the strength she had. Tessa gasped.

“Let’s go, Tessa. There’s nothing left for us here,” Kaname whispered. Behind her, the statue audibly shattered.

5: The Enchanted Bullet

Avoiding detection from enemy soldiers that had spread further throughout the underground facility, Sousuke arrived at the lowest floor. If Kaname had avoided capture, she'd be passing through the basement to head for the exit on the other side, he knew. Tessa would, too. If he headed in the same direction, there was a good chance they'd find each other sooner or later.

It was difficult making his way through the underground labyrinth without a map. All he had to rely on were his compass and his instincts. His enemies probably weren't fools, so they would also find Kaname and Tessa eventually. No, they might already have them in custody...

I have to hurry, he told himself. Despite the heightened risk of being found by the enemy, he moved swiftly through the twisting, interweaving corridors and stairs. He didn't bother to conceal his footsteps or the light from his Maglite. He'd have to keep pushing on swiftly if he wanted any chance at finding them.

It was pure luck that he didn't run into any enemies before arriving at his destination. Sousuke came out into a vast hall in what looked like the center of the facility, which was a wide open space.

Before he'd even walked a few meters, he discovered a man slumped against the wall. "Lemon?" he asked. Keeping an eye out for threats around him, he ran up to his friend and shook him by the shoulders.

Lemon looked up with a groan. "Sousuke..."

"Lemon," Sousuke replied. "What are you doing here?"

"That's what I'd like to know. But... well, it's been an eventful time. Kaname-san and Testarossa-san are with me here, somewhere. Ah, my head hurts. I want to throw up," Lemon said vaguely. He sounded like a man with a bad hangover.

"With you?" Sousuke asked anxiously. "Are they both safe?"

"Yeah. Over there..." Lemon pointed to the large dome at the center of the

hall. “They went inside. I don’t know what happened. I tried to go with them but my head went nuts... and I couldn’t go any further. Pathetic, I know. I’m sorry.”

“Wait here. I’ll check it out.” *Kaname is so close*, thought Sousuke. He couldn’t just stand around knowing she was out there. But before he could run to the dome, Lemon grabbed his arm and stopped him.

“Don’t, Sousuke.” He felt another wave of déjà vu. How many times had it been now? Sousuke tried to shake him off in annoyance, but Lemon held him tightly. “It’s... strange over there. It’ll make you crazy if you get too close.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know the logic behind it, but only the girls can go in. I think you have to be a Whispered.”

“Have to be a Whispered...?” Sousuke echoed. Feeling a chill go up his spine, he gazed at the dome they had disappeared into. The structure, covered in blocky protrusions, did have a supernatural sort of air around it.

It was fortuitous that his allies were here, but luck wouldn’t remain on their side forever. The enemies would arrive here eventually, and they couldn’t afford to hesitate.

“Chidori! Are you there?!” Sousuke called out to the dome. “Can you hear me?! It’s not safe! Come out quickly!”

There was no response.

“Chidori! Colonel!” he tried again. “We have to get out of here! Come on!” But again, there was no response. *It’s so quiet here*, he thought. *They have to have heard me. Though the greater risk is that the enemy might, too...*

Wait... there was movement. Just as Sousuke was about to shake off his hesitation and run for the dome, two figures came out of it: Kaname and Tessa. They were walking towards him slowly, huddled side-by-side.

Thank goodness they’re safe, he thought, and heaved an internal sigh of relief. Kaname looked just the same as she had nine months ago when they’d last seen each other, in tight jeans and a turtleneck sweater with her distinctive

black hair... *She seems to have lost a little weight*, he thought. *But it's her. It's really her. I've found her. We've made it!*

All the emotions he'd kept locked down for so long began to fire up inside of him. There was so much he wanted to tell her, and he was angry at himself for not figuring out in advance what to say when they found each other again. He wanted to tell her everything he hadn't been able to say to her before. But even more urgently, he wanted to run to her and hold her... He wanted it so much.

Sousuke took a step forward as all of Lemon's words about it being dangerous to approach the dome flew out of his head. *It should be fine for a little while. I can't wait any longer...*

"Chidori..." he whispered, and was about to run out when Chidori Kaname pointed a gun at him and fired.

"What the..." Sousuke had no idea what had just happened. It hadn't actually hit him; the bullet she'd fired had hit the ground right in front of his foot, letting out a spark and a sharp echo. But still, she had fired in his direction.

"Chidori. It's me! Look!" he called to her in confusion as he halted. It was dark here... Maybe she'd shot at him by accident? That had to be it. "Lower the gun. You're safe n—"

Kaname fired again, interrupting him. This time, it hit closer to his feet. "Don't move," she said, her voice gentle.

Sousuke stared at her in disbelief, and there, he finally realized it: Kaname and Tessa weren't huddled up side-by-side. Kaname was dragging Tessa along with her, threatening her with a pistol like a hostage.

"What are you doing, Chidori?" he began to ask. "What in the world—"

"I told you not to move," she reminded him. "If you come any closer, I'll shoot Tessa first. So, stay back."

"I'm sorry, Sagara-san," Tessa whispered faintly. There was blood dripping from the corner of her mouth.

Was she struck? he wondered. *Did Kaname hit her?*

"I don't fully understand," Tessa went on, "but... I think Kaname-san is—"

“Hush, Tessa,” Kaname chided. “You need to keep your mouth shut.”

“Ah...!” Tessa let out a cry as the other girl twisted her arm.

“What’s going on here?” Sousuke tried to ask again. “It’s me, Chidori. Don’t you know me?”

“Of course, I do,” she answered. “It’s been a long time, Sousuke,” It really was her. It really was Kaname. “I wanted to see you so much. Even now, I wish I could just throw myself into your arms...”

“Then why are you doing this?” he demanded to know.

“There’s an important job that only I can do,” Kaname explained. “Sofia asked me to, so I have to go... I still love you, but if you try to stop me, I’ll have to kill you.”

Sofia? Job? What is she talking about? he wondered. Out loud, he said, “Chidori, stop joking around. Now’s not the time.”

“Yeah, I know. And I *wish* I was joking around... you’re kinda clinging to that idea right now, right? I know it’s probably confusing, but just be brave and accept this, please. That’s what will allow us to make the world better.” With a violent motion and tear-filled eyes, Kaname pressed the gun to Tessa’s head, and pleaded with Sousuke. “Please, Sousuke. Trust me. Let me go. If you don’t, I’ll kill Tessa and you’ll die, too. I really don’t want that!”

“Don’t talk nonsense!” he pleaded. “Put the gun down and get away from her!”

“Why won’t you understand?!” Suddenly, Kaname slammed Tessa in the side of the head with the butt of the gun. The girl staggered and started to fall, but Kaname yanked her back up by the braid. “I hate this! I decide what I’m going to do! Nobody can control me! Not even you have that right, Sousuke!”

“Chidori?!” he cried out in alarm. None of it made any sense. The fire that he’d felt just moments before had been doused, replaced by a chill that he’d never felt before—a creeping sensation he could never have even imagined.

That voice, those words, that speech pattern... They sounded like Kaname, but they were completely at odds with her actions. He felt like he was talking to

an artificial intelligence that had been modeled on her, instead. How could she say something like that after striking the defenseless Tessa? Kaname continued walking towards the exit to the hall, dragging Tessa with her. There was no way he could shoot her to stop her.

“Wait,” he called after her. “Where are you going?”

“You love me, right?” Kaname replied. “So, don’t follow me.”

“You can at least explain! Do you even understand what you’re doing?!”

“Of course I do! So don’t follow me!”

“Come back to your senses, Chidori!” Sousuke yelled, striding towards her. *This is absurd, he told himself. I’m not letting her go after coming this far. Shoot Tessa? Shoot me? It must be a bluff. There’s no way she’d do that. I just need to jump on her and wrestle the gun away. It might get a little rough, but these are desperate times... I don’t have a choice. Then we’ll get out of here, and I can investigate—*

“Sousuke!!” Tessa screamed, and a gunshot rang out.

Kaname had shot her in the head. The 9mm bullet opened a gaping hole in her temple and scattered her brains out the other side. Tessa’s body let out a little tremor before slumping to the ground, and a large blood stain began to spread across the floor. She didn’t even let out a final cry. She had died on impact.

“Te...” he choked out. *Tessa. It can’t be...*

Kaname turned the gun again at Sousuke, who was frozen to the spot. “I told you! It’s your fault! I told you... I told you to stay away! You’re the one who killed her! Now make it right!”

Incredible. Don’t you even realize that you’re the one who killed her?! He couldn’t think any longer. His mind was blank. Sousuke ran towards Kaname with all his might, hoping to constrain her.

“It’s your fault!” Kaname cried, and fired again without any hesitation.

Sousuke felt a heavy jolt in the center of his chest, and his breathing became shallow. She fired again. A second time, a third time, again and again she hit

him... His bulletproof AS operator's uniform just barely managed to stop the shots.

"Chidori..." he moaned. *I don't believe it.* As he stood there, unsteadily, she took the gun firmly in both hands and took aim at his unguarded head. "Don't —" he tried to say.

"Goodbye, Sousuke." Kaname smiled. She fired.

The last thing he saw was the muzzle flash. The bullet landed just above his forehead, blasted away part of his brain, and killed Sousuke on the spot. He didn't even have time to curse in despair.

Silent darkness and emptiness. That was all this world contained.

No... There was a voice.

It said to him, *It's okay. You don't have to try so hard. I promise I'll wait, so don't worry...*

A faint light appeared in the darkness.

His vision—which had narrowed to a point—rapidly expanded, and a scream that tore from his throat. The sound combined rage, sorrow, self-loathing, and a fear that seized his heart. It sent the muscles of his body into a violent spasm, bringing him upright.

"Sousuke?!" Lemon was looking at him with an expression somewhere between terror and exhaustion.

They were still in that great chamber, Sousuke having collapsed at some point. Lemon was crouching by his side, and Tessa was lying about five meters away. Her head seemed to be intact.

I wasn't shot, he realized. *I just lost consciousness...*

Kaname was nowhere to be seen.

"I'm not... dead?" Sousuke asked, touching his forehead. It was whole. He checked his chest and his stomach, where he'd been shot before, and found no sign of a hit there, either. "What's going on? And... where's Kaname?"

“She... left,” Lemon told him slowly. “You tried to run at her but then suddenly collapsed.”

“I did?”

“Then she shoved Testarossa-san away and ran off. I didn’t think I could catch her with my leg in this condition, so there’s nothing I could’ve done... I don’t think,” Lemon said uncertainly. He looked pretty confused himself.

Sousuke stood up, heaving for breath, and walked over to the collapsed Tessa. Aside from the strike across her face, she had no visible injuries. There was no sign that she’d been shot, either. She looked just fine, fortunately, but... “What did you mean, ‘I don’t think’?”

“I could’ve sworn I saw her shoot you to death,” said Lemon. “Both Testarossa-san and you. But I guess it was my eyes playing tricks on me, or... ugh, that déjà vu again. From what I’ve been gathering about how all this works, what I saw might have been a ‘potential future,’ one where Kaname-san resorts to lethal force. But I wonder why that would happen when the déjà vu has otherwise stopped...”

Lemon’s right, Sousuke realized. He’d been hit by waves of déjà vu since he’d first entered the great hall, but it had stopped a short time ago. “Chidori...” he said, tottering up to the door she’d left through.

He had to catch up to her. *She’s gone mad*, he told himself. *That’s the only explanation for why she’d shoot me like that...*

“Wait, Sousuke. It’s been at least three minutes,” Lemon protested. “You’ll never catch her.”

“Let me go!” Sousuke shook off Lemon’s hand as he tried to grab him, still dragging his leg.

“Be rational! If we get separated here, we’ll never find each other again!”

“She... She’s sick. She’s not in her right mind—”

“Look out!” Lemon dove at Sousuke and knocked him to the ground, at almost the same time they heard gunshots all around them.

Sousuke looked up, startled, as gunshots echoed throughout the hall. Enemy

soldiers had come in through the south entrance and were now firing at them. He could tell that they were about 100 meters away, but couldn't pin down how many there were.

"I guess they caught up with us," he observed to Lemon, realizing the degree to which he'd let his guard down. Cursing his own foolishness, Sousuke returned fire with his carbine. There was no sign he'd hit anyone; it was too dark, and they were too far away. He couldn't even be fully sure of their position.

"We'd better get going," suggested Lemon.

"Right!" Sousuke agreed. While firing a few suppression shots with one hand, he threw an incendiary grenade with the other. There was a flash and an explosion that created a wall of fire and smoke between them and the enemy soldiers. *That should blind their night vision goggles and infrared scopes*, he thought.

Lemon was trying to help Tessa up, despite his injured leg. Sousuke ran over to them, hefted Tessa onto his back, and made a beeline for the nearest exit.

"Hurry!" he urged them, as more gunshots came from another direction. The enemy soldiers were surrounding the hall. "Lemon, do you know the way?"

"This way." They exited the hall with Lemon taking the lead, hurrying north at the T-intersection. But Sousuke stopped, hesitantly.

"What are you doing?! They're coming!" Lemon shouted back at him.

Sousuke looked down the hall's other direction. The light from his Maglite revealed new footprints on the dust-covered floor. *Kaname's footprints...* he thought. *If I run off at full speed, I might just catch her...*

"Sousuke?!" Lemon shouted again.

Should I leave Tessa and Lemon behind to pursue Kaname? Sousuke wondered. The direction she'd gone in would be swarming with enemies by now. *Chasing her now would be reckless*, he reminded himself. From the way Leonard had talked, they were unlikely to kill her, at least... Meanwhile, it would probably be impossible for Tessa and Lemon to escape without him. They might let Tessa live as a useful information source, but Lemon would be killed

for sure.

But Kaname... I only just found you again... “Dammit!” Sousuke shouted, his heart fighting against his head. At last, he shook off the powerful yearning, turning around to run back to Lemon. *If I go after her now, I’ll just end up dead,* he told himself. His best option was to run away with the other two. *I’ll get another chance to save her,* he reasoned. Out loud, he asked, “This is the way?”

“Most likely,” answered Lemon. “If we climb up a staircase on the northern side, she said that we should come out on the surface on the other side of the plant.”

Sousuke fired at an enemy peeking at them from around the corner. While trying to keep the opposition in check as much as possible, he headed for the back door of the facility.

Kaname felt quite sure about what she’d done. She’d killed Sousuke. She’d killed Tessa. She was entirely convinced she’d shot them to death.

Poor Sousuke and Tessa... Thinking about them caused her chest to ache. But while it was a painful and sad thing in principle, the truth was that she didn’t need them anymore. *Shallow sham friendship and tragic sham lover,* she reminded herself. *What good would it do to keep going through the motions?* They’d be pressing the world’s reset button soon either way, so none of these deaths or events really mattered. Nothing mattered, except her own survival.

But first, she had to find out what exactly was going on.

Leonard Testarossa of Amalgam... He must have known this would happen. He’ll have already been laying the groundwork, she reasoned. The earlier her—the person she’d been just ten minutes ago—might have refused to cooperate with him unconditionally.

But now, it’s different, she told herself, *because I finally understand his exceedingly simple solution.* It was the same mission that Sofia had entrusted to her. She knew at long last that she was the only one who could save the world, and her understanding of that noble mission filled Kaname’s heart with pride.

After walking alone down the wide corridor for a while, she ran into a man; it

was Leonard. He was sitting at the center of the hallway, legs crossed, on an old folding chair.

“Did you wait long?” she asked him.

“Not long at all,” Leonard told her with a smile. “It seems you’ve finally awakened.”

“Yeah. Sorry it took so long.” Smiling back at him, Kaname walked up to Leonard and imperiously took his collar in both hands to bring him up to a standing position. “Is everything ready?” she asked.

“Almost,” Leonard told her. “I’ve been working at it for six months now.”

“Shall we, then?”

“As you wish, my lady.”

“I’m a little cold,” she suggested, and Leonard quickly took off his crimson coat and put it over her shoulders. “Thank you,” she said modestly. “You’re very kind. You won’t be rough with me again?”

“There’s no need for that now, is there?”

“No, I won’t be selfish anymore,” she told him, knowing that there was no longer any need to fight it. Together, they walked further down the hallway to where his troops were waiting for them.

They were carrying her roughly down the hall as they ran, which might have been why Tessa woke earlier than expected. She seemed woozy at first, but quickly recovered to the point of insisting that she could walk.

“Are you sure?” Lemon asked, cautiously.

“Yes,” Tessa told him irritably. “What with your injury, you’re worse off than I am, anyway. But where is Kaname-san?”

“She left without us,” Sousuke said, running down the exit hallway. “I don’t know what’s going on, but she definitely wasn’t in her right mind. What happened in there?”

“Well...” Tessa hesitated.

“Tell me! What happened to her?!” Sousuke’s voice was straining as he lost his temper and grabbed her by the shoulders. Tessa looked shocked for a second before her expression turned a mix of regretful and indignant. At last, he said, “I’m sorry, Colonel. I’m just... confused.”

“It’s all right,” Tessa said. “I feel the same way.”

“I ran into Leonard before I came here,” Sousuke told them next. “He seems to know something. He said that Chidori would go to the bottom floor even if he didn’t interfere... and meet a spirit.”

“I see. He must have been quite confident, then...”

“About what?”

“That this would happen to her,” Tessa clarified. “Although I couldn’t have predicted it, for reasons that are still hard for me to explain: a sort of ‘shadow’ of the TAROS’s original test subject has been gestating over time in that facility’s core. Mental waves passing between future and past via the omni-sphere created a crystallized consciousness. The crystal itself is the true ‘Whispering.’

“It’s like the relay antenna broadcasting our knowledge to us in the present,” she tried to explain further. “I came to these ruins in order to destroy it. I thought that with the Whispering gone, we could stop the flow of black technology.”

“Leonard said Chidori was the Whispering,” Sousuke told her.

“She is now,” Tessa agreed. “I don’t know how it happened or what powers are at play... Or why it chose her...”

Perhaps because he’d been hearing so much fantastical nonsense lately, Sousuke understood what Tessa meant without much difficulty. He didn’t understand the precise mechanisms involved, but he had an idea of what had happened to Kaname now. “Her mind’s been taken over?” he asked. “By the Whispering?”

Tessa neither confirmed nor denied this theory. She just kept walking in front of him, trembling as she squeezed the next words out of her throat. “I’m sorry...” Her tone was tormented, full of regret, mortification, and a terrible

sense of guilt. "I didn't realize," she told them wretchedly. "If I'd known this would happen, I would have kept her away at all costs... this is all my fault."

Sousuke couldn't find it in him to comfort her. *You think that would have helped?* he thought bitterly. *You already let her go so easily...*

He was doing everything he could to keep himself from laying into Tessa. She must have picked up on his mood because she didn't say anything more, being fully aware that excuses and apologies couldn't take back what had already happened.

Perhaps unable to bear the awkward silence, Lemon was the one to comfort her. "It's not, Testarossa-san. I'm the one who insisted on coming with you," he added, "and none of us could have expected this outcome."

"Thank you," Tessa said emptily. "But there's no taking it back..."

I'm the worst, Sousuke thought. *Why didn't I encourage her? Why couldn't I tell her, "it isn't your fault," the way Lemon did? I've made more than my share of mistakes, so why can't I let this go?*

I know why, he thought gloomily. *It's because it's about her. Despite all my improved understanding, I still can't give up my fixation.*

Moving through the dark corridor, Sousuke whispered too quietly for anyone to hear, "Chidori..." *I almost had you,* he thought regretfully. *If I manage to see you again, what will I have to do?*

Kalinin received a transmission.

"This is Alpha Leader. Three enemies sighted in region F3: two men, one woman. We traded fire, but lost sight of them. No dead. One light injury. Continuing pursuit."

That was the report from his subordinates, who had finally arrived on the bottom floor just as Sousuke and the others were escaping. "One woman" was probably a reference to Teletha Testarossa.

"Continue pursuit, but remain cautious," Kalinin ordered. "All you have to do is slow them down. Don't kill the woman, if possible. She has valuable

information.”

“Alpha, roger.” The responding voice was interspersed with gunshots as it cut off.

Even with a relay station, the signal was bad. Moving squads of a few dozen men around an underground labyrinth was backbreaking work, and until just recently, the soldiers’ confusion had made it difficult for them to proceed to the lowest floor.

It was because of that bizarre déjà vu, of course. *It hasn’t driven us all mad, at least, but it throws a significant wrench into communication and coordination*, Kalinin thought. Some were forced to repeat orders multiple times, while others found it difficult to explain their current location and status. The confusion became more frequent the further in they went. In the end, a pair of teams had almost engaged in friendly fire, with only Kalinin’s warning beforehand allowing them to avert catastrophe.

That sense of déjà vu had just recently lifted.

Something strange has happened down there, Kalinin intuited in a corner of his mind, remembering what Leonard had told him previously. Chidori Kaname had survived the helicopter crash, arrived on the bottom floor under her own power, and there, guided by destiny of some kind, she and the Whispering—

No, don’t think about it, he told himself. All that mattered was that their teams could move unhindered now.

Their vanguard, Alpha Team, seemed to have allowed Sousuke and the others to escape. But Kalinin had already placed another team nearby the exit from the basement floor. No matter how incredible his skills might be, Sousuke couldn’t escape on his own, and Kalinin’s subordinates would shoot him to death without hesitation. If Teletha Testarossa tried to resist, she’d suffer the same end.

Is it all right to let them die? Kalinin asked himself, the question flitting through his mind for the umpteenth time. *Don’t worry about it*, he told himself sternly. *If they die here, they die here*. The hesitance in his mind disappeared, and he even managed to convince himself that it was for the best.

During the attack on Merida Island, he'd decided not to delete the "worst case scenario" resupply point data he'd secretly prepared in the de Danaan's databanks. He'd still had his doubts then, even after Leonard's premonition about the solar flares came true. The de Danaan had managed to retrieve important supplies and survive because of his hesitation in that moment.

But now that he'd committed himself to achieving Leonard's objective, he wouldn't show them an inch of mercy. The sense of unease that had haunted Andrey Kalinin for so long—that the world they lived in was somehow wrong—he felt keenly, and it was stronger than ever now. So, no matter what happened, from now on, he had to purge with great prejudice those who stood in the way of that objective. Even if they were his former allies.

And Sousuke... you're no exception, he thought. If it's your destiny to die now, then so be it. But, if it's not—and if you mean to try and stop me—I hope you're prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice.

"Halt!" a subordinate nearby shouted, taking aim at the man and woman who had just become visible through the lingering dust and darkness: they were Leonard Testarossa and Chidori Kaname.

"Hold your fire," Kalinin ordered. He didn't have to try hard to stop the mercenary; once the two figures were clearly in view, the man quickly lowered his gun. Leonard was in his AS operator's uniform and Kaname was in a crimson coat, walking towards them with steady steps. They appeared to have met up successfully.



However... Kalinin couldn't help but think that Chidori Kaname had a relaxation about her that almost seemed unnatural. She was a mere seventeen-year-old girl, yet walked as though she were queen of the world...

No, he reflected, *perhaps she is the queen of the world*. He and Fowler and the others were simply her unworthy retainers, taking the smallest scraps from the power they represented.

Out loud, Kalinin told them, "I'm glad you're safe."

"Likewise to you all," Leonard said with a shrug.

"Sagara and the others will try to escape through the northern emergency exit," Kalinin said next. "We should have them surrounded soon."

"Sagara?" Chidori Kaname said, sounding out the word with scowling uncertainty. "That can't be right, Kalinin-san. I already killed Sousuke and Tessa."

"What?"

"I killed them," she insisted. "I shot them both in the head."

"But my team's report said—" Kalinin began. He was more surprised by how casually she said it than by the thought of his subordinate's report being wrong.

Leonard interrupted, holding up a hand to stop Kalinin mid-sentence. "Never mind," he told him. "It doesn't matter."

"But—"

"Never mind, Mr. Kalium."

If ordered to be silent, Kalinin knew he had no choice but to comply. "Three *unidentified enemies* are escaping, then," he said. "But we'll have them neutralized soon."

"I see. I leave it to you, then."

"Sir."

"We have no more business in these gloomy old ruins," Leonard announced. "Prepare to withdraw at once."

“Yes, sir.”

“See you later, Kalinin-san.”

Kalinin watched the two leave as leisurely as could be, and felt unsettled in a way that was difficult to describe. No, it wasn't just that... He felt a sense of loss, as well. Then he contacted Kaspar, who was on standby on the surface.

“Mr. Tin,” he ordered. “Status.”

“I'm in position,” said Kaspar. “Still no sign of Weber.”

“I expect he'll be coming to the aid of Sagara and the others soon enough. The minute you see him, eliminate him.”

“Oh, of course,” said Kaspar, laughing through the transceiver. “I'm going to enjoy this.”

《Rifle shots detected. Eleven o'clock. Assigning designation: Echo-4.》

After receiving his AI's report, Kurz whispered in the cockpit, “So they're on the move.”

His M9 was currently laying low three kilometers to the northeast of Yamsk-11. He'd been crawling his way down for over two hours, moving slowly so that the enemy wouldn't detect him. Using ECS and regular camouflage as appropriate, he'd kept his data link usage to the minimum and maintained maximum caution. Once he'd arrived at the closest possible point, Kurz had stopped his machine, placed his M9's hands on a nearby exposed rock, and used his high-sensitivity vibration detectors to get a handle on the situation.

He got a hit. There were repeated gunshots coming from under the plant. He couldn't pick up footsteps, but he could tell that it was different forces fighting each other. He isolated a certain rifle sound—the aforementioned Echo-4—enhanced, and then replayed it. *The reverb makes it hard to be sure*, he thought, *but it sounds like Sousuke's carbine*. The rifle had a rhythm to it... Maybe most people couldn't pick it up, but Kurz could. That was Sousuke's rhythm.

“That bastard, he really did survive.” He said with a smirk, and turned on voice input. “Estimate E4's specific bearing, distance, and vector.”

《Understood. Processing complete. Estimated bearing: 261. Distance: 1800. Vector: 73-10.》

Kurz brought up the digital map data on his screen and zoomed in. He didn't know how far down Sousuke was, but he knew he was moving in his own direction while under fire by pursuers. He'd be moving faster than this if he was alone, so he was probably with a wounded person, or perhaps a woman, or a child. It could be safely assumed that Tessa was with him, as well.

Sousuke was trying to escape out the back of the plant, but the situation was grim. It seemed there was already an enemy squad fanned out near the Yamsk-11 plant's back entrance in the mountains, which meant that he wouldn't be able to escape without Kurz's support. The enemy had probably anticipated this eventuality and would have stationed Kaspar out there, waiting for Kurz to act.

From outside, Kurz was able to pick up a faint allied signal. "Uru... to... ruz-6. ...ruz-7... 6." The signal was choppy with a lot of digital static, but it was definitely Sousuke's voice.

"Uruz-7 here. Do you read me?"

"Uruz-6. Status report," Kurz responded urgently, without wasting time on banter. He was using an encrypted channel, but still wanted to keep his output to a minimum.

"Currently esca—ant underground. Current lo—asement corridor near 32a-71a. Currently enga—enemy heading west-northwest. I'm with Ansaz and Lemon. Lemon is wounded. How are things above?"

Sousuke must have been on the move while they were talking, because the signal was getting stronger and stronger.

"There's an enemy ambush around 33c-70a," Kurz replied. "Just one squad, I think."

"Can you support?" Sousuke asked immediately. He'd probably assumed that if Kurz was observing, he could give them cover fire.

"I can, but there's a lambda driver-mounted AS hiding somewhere nearby," Kurz told him. "The sniper. I'll need to take him out first." If he provided sniper cover for Sousuke's escape first, Kaspar would learn his location and destroy

him immediately.

In other words, Sousuke couldn't escape until Kurz took out Kaspar. "It's not just the sniper," he told Kurz. "There's a chance we'll see Leonard's machine, as well."

That incredible machine—the one that had destroyed the Arbalest in Tokyo—was here as well, which meant Tessa's brother had survived. It was a difficult situation by any measure.

"Got it," Kurz replied shortly. "But the imminent threat is still the sniper. If we can destroy it, we can probably get the Laevatein to you."

That meant putting Gebo-6 at risk. After he finished off Kaspar's AS, Kurz would take out the enemies waiting in ambush as quickly as possible. And while he did that, he'd have to send a non-invisible Gebo-6 to drop the Laevatein to Sousuke, all before Leonard could react.

Kurz didn't know if the Laevatein could beat Leonard's machine, but having it in action would at least open a path to escape.

"Got it," Sousuke told him. "I'll wait at the exit for as long as I can. Good luck."

"Yeah. Just hang on," Kurz responded while feeling his own heart racing. *Me? Take out Kaspar? Is that even possible? But Sousuke is dead if I fail...*

Sousuke couldn't even count how many stairs he'd been up and down that day. Returning fire at his pursuers while lending a shoulder for the struggling Lemon, reaching another landing and firing again... It was that, over and over.

"Kurz and the others are fine for now," he reported.

"Right," Tessa nodded, opening a digital map on her portable terminal. "I just received the data from his machine," she told them. "I have the layout of the enemies waiting above us. From what he can see, it's one squad."

Tessa showed them the digital map at maximum magnification, which showed the location of the eleven enemies picked up by Kurz's passive sensor scans.

Sousuke made an objective judgment: if they kept climbing the stairs, they'd come out of an emergency exit in the mountain slope. There would be several

buildings just outside, and the enemy seemed to be scattered around those in a semicircle formation. They'd probably want to keep their own losses to a minimum and take them alive, if possible, which would explain why they weren't just charging in to pincer them.

Either way, it was clear that if Sousuke and the others surfaced, they'd wind up at the center of a ten-man crossfire. Even poking their heads out would be risky. On top of that, the men they were up against were Kalinin's subordinates. They probably had excellent aim and restraint.

"We're trapped," he announced solemnly.

Tessa and Lemon weren't amateurs, so they didn't lose their heads at Sousuke's report.

If they had the support of an M9 on the surface, they might be able to escape. Kurz could fire into the surrounding houses and neutralize half the enemies at once. Then the smoke from the explosions would obscure vision enough so that a Pave Mare could rush in and drop the Laevatein. Sousuke could board it in twenty seconds, and with the Laevatein at his side, he might be able to buy time against Leonard...

But Kurz was the key to all of it, and he was currently locked down. The enemy sniper's AS would take him out the minute he began firing. That made defeating the enemy sniper their priority. Leonard could wait.

"So, what's the plan?" Lemon asked despondently. He seemed to have reached the limit of what his exhaustion and injuries would allow.

"We'll have to hold them off at the exit until Kurz works something out," Sousuke answered.

"So it's all up to him, huh? How are his skills?"

"Beyond anything you can imagine. But... it'll still be difficult." Sousuke knew that the only way for a normal M9 to take out a lambda driver-mounted AS was to catch it unawares. If he failed to down it with his first shot, he'd be dead. And given how Kurz had been talking, that lambda driver-mounted machine was a powerful enemy...

"How much ammunition do you have left?" Tessa asked, her voice tinged with

exhaustion.

“I could hold out for about five more minutes, if I’m careful,” Sousuke responded, switching his carbine’s selector from burst to single-round. Then he pulled his handgun out of its holster and spun it around before giving it to Lemon, who might be exhausted, but was still probably a better shot than Tessa. “This is a faithful companion of mine,” he told Lemon. “Treat it with care.”

“Got it.”

“Colonel, handle surveillance and communications.”

“Very well,” Tessa said without any hint of complaint.

They continued up the sloping and narrow tunnel until there seemed to be no more stairs ahead of them. Limping and helping each other as they went, the three kept going through the darkness. Sousuke sometimes sent out a shot behind him, and in that moment, Tessa would help Lemon to hurry forward.

At last, they came to a dead end. After checking for traps, Sousuke kicked open the rusted metal door and came out into a small, damp room. It was an empty space with minimal ventilation and lockers filled with cleaning tools. Across the room, there was a thick door that would likely take them to the surface.

“We’ll make our stand here,” he decided. “Lemon, take the back entrance.”

“Got it.” The door to the outside wasn’t locked. Lemon opened it a crack, and that was enough to bring blessed fresh air blowing in from outside. Sundown had been a while ago, so it was pitch black outside.

Sousuke shouted out as a bullet landed nearby; it must have come from the enemy hiding outside. He saw a spark before his eyes and heard a ringing in his ears. It seemed to have come from an entrance to a building about fifty meters away. He traded fire with his attacker while keeping ammo usage to a minimum, just enough to keep them at bay.

“They’re coming from behind, too!” Lemon shouted sharply, pointing his gun in the direction they were coming from.

“Buy us time!” Sousuke yelled back. “As much as possible—” A bullet flew into the room from the corridor, grazing past Lemon to ricochet around them.

“Dammit!” Lemon fired. Sousuke fired. Tessa huddled up in a corner. The roar of the gunshots and metallic clinking echoed around them.

The enemy was well trained enough to know that they were just buying time. At this rate, they’d run out of ammunition and soon be overwhelmed.

“We’re surrounded!” Sousuke screamed. “Kurz, where’s that support?!”

Uruz-7’s demand went in one ear and out the other, as did the reports from Gebo-4 and 6 and the messages from his AI, Yukari. A duel between snipers came down to finding the enemy before he found you. They were both hiding as carefully as they could, focusing all their knowledge and concentration on a battle of nerves.

Kurz didn’t have time to think about anything else. He had to predict the enemy’s location using just his night vision display, a map of his surroundings, electronic information, climate conditions, and all the other data on his screen.

Where is he? Kurz wondered.

Any heat sources? Kaspar’s machine had its ECS on, but with its generator set to minimum it would be outputting very little heat. *With so little human activity around the ruins,* Kurz thought, *there must be a telltale sign somewhere...* But his infrared sensors only showed complicated patterns in the blue to yellow-green range, denying him an obvious location for the enemy.

Any sounds? he wondered next. In ruins this quiet, he might just be able to pick up a low-running palladium reactor. But all the M9’s high-sensitivity directional microphone could pick up was the gunfire being exchanged between Sousuke and the others. If the enemy was keeping as quiet as he was, it was unlikely he’d be able to trace him by sound.

Anything electronic? Not likely. Using an active anti-ECS radar would be like projecting a searchlight into the darkness, so neither he nor his enemy were doing it. The fairy eye wasn’t picking up on any lambda driver force fields at all, which meant Kaspar must have shut it off to avoid detection. On the other

hand, that confirmed to Kurz that if he could down his opponent with his first shot, he'd win.

Where is he? Kurz knew that he would have to intuit the answer based on knowledge of terrain, vantage points, and what he knew about his opponent.

Screw the tech, he told himself. *Let's think about Kaspar's position.*

He'll know as well as I do that the battle between Sousuke and the others is going down in the northeast of the ruins. He'll be positioning himself to offer support fire if needed, just like me. So he has to be somewhere with a sight line to Sousuke, instead of hiding beyond the hill line. Still, I can say for sure that he'll be as high up as he can. He'd need to be up high to find me.

A building in the ruins? The east side of the plant, among the winding pipes and silos? There were about ten places Kurz could imagine, which wasn't enough to narrow it down.

He'll have to be on the lookout for the transport helicopters, too, and for the likelihood of other M9s hiding nearby. So, he won't be too close to the plant itself. That narrows the candidates down by about half, Kurz reasoned.

Still not enough. What about considering the machine's weight, and escape route after firing?

If he's firing a high-caliber sniper cannon, he'd want to avoid anywhere with too much dust, which would be stirred up by the shot and make it hard to aim a second. Hard to imagine he'd be inside a building, especially since most of the ones here are in danger of collapse...

Kurz made a mental checklist of a few other highly specialized elements in his mind before narrowing down the options. "And then there were three..." he mused: the roof of one of the government buildings in the ruins; the large statue of Lenin at the center; and a steel tower that loomed over the plant's north side. It had to be one of those.

Now let's consider his personality, Kurz thought next. *Kaspar's not a flashy guy, and he's always been steady when it comes to the sniping part of the job. He'll hide wherever he's least likely to be spotted, and that will give him the easiest shot. Even if with a lambda driver-mounted machine, he won't rely on a*

hard sell or luck.

The roof of the government building, then? he guessed. Firm footing, clear sight lines, and probably the widest vantage point, locationally speaking. It would let him deal quickly with attacks from other directions, and offer support fire to allied helicopters arriving with aid.

But would Kaspar really take up residence in such an obvious place? Kurz wondered. Out loud, he said to his AI, “maximum magnification.”

《Roger.》

His screen displayed a zoom-in of the building in question. Kurz tried viewing it with various modes: infrared, amplified light, passive EM... but he just couldn't be sure. Kaspar might be there, or he might not. He scanned the other two locations with passive sensors, and got similar results. If he could study it all a little longer, things might come clear, but...

One of the three. If he was right about that, it would come down to instinct. *Kaspar's a logical sniper—that's one thing I know for sure*, Kurz reminded himself. *And he knows all about me. He probably knows how I'll be approaching the problem, too. So maybe he'd be somewhere else? But what if he's anticipating me realizing that, as well?*

“Uruz-6, hurry up! Sousuke and the others will be killed!” said Gebo-6's voice, urging him on. They were waiting to fly in from a spot just beyond the ridge.

Kurz tried to ignore this but failed. He felt a new swell of urgency rising inside him. “Wait a minute,” he snapped back. “Almost got it.”

Time was the element that gave his enemy an advantage. Kaspar didn't have to worry about allies in danger; he had all the time in the world to look for Kurz. Kurz's condition was entirely different. No matter how skilled Sousuke might be, his ammunition was limited. He only had a few minutes before his resistance reached its limit. Kurz had to defeat the enemy before then—no, as soon as possible.

He had to hurry.

The building in the city center, or the tower in the plant... Kurz had narrowed it down to those two locations. Kaspar was in one of them.

His infrared sensors showed him a yellow-green reading, indicating a slightly higher temperature, on the building's roof. But there was a similar color pattern on the top of the tower. Both were roughly a match to an AS's size.

Which is it? Which one is him?

"Uruz-6, hurry!" Gebo-6 urged.

Kurz felt even more nervous. The building had the higher temperature, and there was something unusual about the flow of wind there... Could it be an AS in invisibility mode disrupting the wind patterns? The shape on the temperature reading looked like a humanoid lying in an ambush position, as well. It must be that. It had to be.

He made his decision and took aim.

Infrared mode. 24x zoom. Manual control. Distance: 3390 meters. Wind speed: five knots from the southeast. The power of a 76mm round makes moisture and the coriolis effect irrelevant. Margin for error, thirty centimeters.

He aimed two meters to the right of the center of the temperature reading, where he expected the cockpit to be.

Kaspar... I've got you, he whispered in his mind, and then pulled the trigger. He felt a jolt as his 76mm muzzle flashed and the low trees around him were blown back. The shot flew through the night like a dart.

The shot was a hit.

No... All it seemed to do was blow up chunks of concrete. There was a large amount of rubble and dust stirred up by the impact, but no AS. He'd just hit the building.

That means—

He looked again to the steel tower, but it was too late. A red machine was dangling from the tower's summit, having already fired. The enemy's shot was on its way.

It hit.

Kaspar had learned of Kurz's location the moment in which he made his shot. He'd fired immediately and hit his target with precision.

Kurz's M9 had been lying on its front, so the enemy's shot hit the M9 in the head—the area that would be the forehead on a human—piercing through its radar, ripping apart the drive system and dynamic relay, breaking through the rear cockpit block through the upper torso armor. The shot's explosive kinetic energy wreaked havoc on the electronics, the shock absorbing system, and the operator beyond them, before it continued out the machine's back, just above the hips.

Kurz didn't even have time to bat an eye or click his tongue.

With his ECS lifted and lambda driver force fields up, he checked for attacks from other enemies. After confirming that there were no more hostile ASes in the area, Kaspar made his report to Kalinin.

"Mr. Kalium," he said, "I just finished off Weber."

"Are you certain?" Kalinin asked.

"He's done. He'll have died instantly."

"I see. Then move on to the enemies resisting in the northeast."

"We're to take the woman alive, correct?" Kaspar asked, seeking confirmation.

"If you can," Kalinin affirmed. "The others don't matter."

"Roger." Kaspar ended the transmission, then leapt his Eligore off of the steel tower and towards the northeast. Kalinin didn't seem troubled at all that his former student had been killed, but then, Kaspar hadn't felt any remorse, either. In fact, it had brought him a sort of elation that was rare for him these days.

You were so close, Weber. That building in the center of town really was the best candidate... I definitely would have camped out there, if I hadn't known it was you I was facing. I avoided it because of that, because I knew you'd see it.

I had a subordinate set a small gas burner on the roof of that building. It was a minimal heat source, but enough to put doubt in your mind. And you fell for it. I'm sure you were rushed. You didn't have time to think it through. But that's

why you failed.

Did some part of you believe that you'd get a second shot? Kaspar wondered. Or were you simply lacking the necessary concentration in that moment? Yes, you committed too early... You should have thought it over for one minute more. Then you might have out-thought my trick.

Sorry, my student. It was nice knowing you.

You had natural talent. Five years ago, one of my employers brought me an 'interesting kid.' That was you. You said you wanted to kill the man who killed your family... a former Japan Red Army terrorist, wasn't it? I decided to throw you into battle to test you, and in turn, you showed me a glimpse of your potential. Your observations, focus, and ability to visualize ballistic trajectories told me you had promise. That's why I took you on.

Yes, you were a genius. You absorbed two hundred years of sniper know-how and skill in no time at all. In a year, just one year, you became the greatest sniper on my team, Kaspar marveled.

But you couldn't summon the spirit.

You soaked up every bit of knowledge I had, like planning, reading maps, communications, camo, and surveillance, as well as the secrets of rifles, ammunition, and trajectories.

But, my student... The spirit never came to you.

You died never having known the moment in which everything becomes one. That moment when all of creation comes together, time stops, and you feel like you can control every molecule. We call it 'seeing God,' too. It happens when it happens.

The final determiner doesn't come down to logical calculations. You never understood that. And that's why the spirit never visited you.

I gave you your revenge. I passed on most of my skills to you. But you turned your back on me and left, Kurz Weber. You never really had what it takes.

I really am sorry, my student, he thought regretfully. Then Kaspar's Eligore jumped a second and third time through the ruins, hurrying towards the

battlefield on the northeastern side.

Sousuke heard a series of distant explosions from the plant's south side. There were two shots from high-caliber AS sniper cannons, followed by... the sound of an AS getting hit and exploding. Sousuke couldn't see anything from his current position, and knew that if he stuck his head out to look, he'd get a bullet in it for his trouble. His gut feeling, though, was that a split-second sniper battle had taken place, resulting in one AS's destruction.

"Uruz-6," he radioed, "Report status."

There was no response.

"Uruz-6," he tried again. "Did you eliminate the target?" Then he thought, *It can't be...* Desperately, he repeated the call. "Kurz, respond!"

"The ADM link is down," Tessa said, her finger dancing on her tablet. "We're not receiving data. I'm not even getting an SOS signal, which can only mean his M9 is disabled."

"Is he dead?" Lemon shouted while trading fire behind them.

"I don't know," she admitted. "But he'll be out of the fight, at the very least..."

"He wouldn't be killed that easily," said Sousuke, while firing out the door. "We've been through worse than this. He'll be fine." *I'm almost out of bullets*, he realized. *Just about twenty left. I can't fend off the enemy soldiers much longer.*

"You're right. But at this rate—"

"Don't give up, Tessa."

Tessa said nothing.

"You still have responsibilities," Sousuke insisted. "I will get you back home. Don't give up now."

At length she responded, "All right."

But then, as if to shatter Sousuke's stubborn sense of confidence, the enemy's red AS arrived. This was the lambda driver-mounted Eligore—an upgrade to the

Codarl model—and it landed in the center of the path they'd have to take if they wanted to leave the room where they were hiding.

No... Sousuke thought desperately. The Eligore was a sniper model, armed with a high-caliber 76mm rifle. If the sniper Kurz had warned him about was appearing in the open like this, that meant...

"Kurz..." he cried out.

"Weber-san..." keened Tessa. "No..."

"Get down!" Lemon shouted at them, as the red Eligore swung its arm down to pry open the room where they were hiding, tearing the rusty roof free from the aged concrete below. They'd managed to take cover so as to avoid immediate injury, but now they were in plain view to the outside. Lemon whimpered weakly as the concrete fragments fell around him.

"You're on your own now," a man's voice said through the AS's external speakers. "Kurz Weber is dead. Time to pack it in."

Sousuke knew that a sniper only came out into the open when it was clear that the battle was over, and he had no reason to doubt the man's words. Still, he muttered, "It can't be..."

"We hope to take the woman alive," the voice continued. "Hand her over, or we'll have no choice but to kill you all."

Tessa was clearly holding up against the psychological shock this news represented as Sousuke met her eyes. Mustering up all the will she had, she shook her head and mouthed the word, 'No.'

He knew that if Tessa didn't want to be forced to give up information on her comrades, she would have to die with them: that's clearly what she wanted as well. *But wouldn't her survival lead to the possibility that she might be rescued, Sousuke wondered, increasing their chance for a counterattack later? Couldn't she help to bring Kaname out of her stupor?* Those almost delusional hopes led him to hesitate.

Just then, Sousuke heard a whisper through the FM radio band in his ear. "Sousuke... you read me?" came a weak, halting voice. *It's Kurz, he thought. He's alive.*

“Yeah, I read you.”

“I fucked up, man,” Kurz confessed. “My machine’s busted. I think... I don’t have much longer.”

Sousuke knew that the destruction of his M9 had probably dealt Kurz a mortal wound. The world would be growing dark around him, and his body would be telling him it was giving up.

“But... I can manage one shot,” Kurz finished. “Listen, Sousuke... Get the pilot of that red AS... outside his cockpit.”

“Outside? How—”

“Whatever it takes, just do it.”

Sousuke said nothing back as the red AS looked down on them. The soldiers behind it were holding their fire, but remained on their guard. Sousuke had about fifteen rounds left in his carbine, as well as a single smoke grenade. *What kind of bluff can I manage with that, he wondered? How can I lure a sniper I’ve never even met before out of his cockpit? That sniper...*

Sniper, he realized. Of course...

“I’ll do my best,” Sousuke whispered into the radio, dropping his carbine onto the ground. Yanking Tessa towards him, he pulled a knife from his belt and pressed the tip to her throat.

“Sousuke?!” Lemon shouted in shock.

“Don’t move,” Sousuke hissed back at him, using Tessa as shield to keep his body perfectly hidden, along with what remained of the wall behind him. Tessa didn’t resist, seemingly curious about where he was going with this.

“Oh? And what’s this, now?” the operator of the red AS asked.

“I want to negotiate.”

“Negotiate?”

“If you want the girl, you can have her,” Sousuke told him. “But I want my own safety guaranteed. If you refuse, I’ll kill her.”

“Please, she’s not worth that much to us,” the AS sniper scorned. “I was only

told to bring her alive *if possible*. I'm just as happy to kill you all at the first sign of resistance."

"Then you should be just as happy to let us all live," Sousuke retorted. "Let me go, then you can take her unharmed."

"Are you stupid or something?" The red AS's shoulders shook, reflecting the laughter of the pilot inside. "Sagara Sousuke, was it? I've heard of you. You wouldn't kill that girl just to save yourself. Drop this absurd bluff right now."

"It's not a bluff," Sousuke said, his body flush against Tessa's. "I can't afford to die yet. I'll do whatever it takes to stay alive, so let me through now."

"You really think I'll let you go?" the AS operator asked flatly.

"Your other option is to blow us both away," said Sousuke. "You can do that trivially enough." *Now, what will you do?* he wondered. *I know you won't let us escape. As you said, you have no qualms about blowing us both away—your AS could do it in a second. It would be simple... Yes, extremely simple. That's why I don't think you'll do it. It's just too easy.*

I'm making sure not to say, "You're not good enough to kill me and not her." That would be overdoing it. My actions alone should be enough to provoke you.

Well, what now? You can't kill just me from inside that machine...

"Hm..." the enemy operator pondered.

Do it.

"Goodness me. I'd heard you were stubborn, but..."

Come out, Sousuke mentally dared him.

There was a pause that seemed to go on forever, and then the red AS's chest slid sharply and he heard the cockpit hatch open. The machine was locked in its standing position as the pilot made his way out of the back of the head.

Good boy, Sousuke gloated to himself.

The operator showed himself, rifle in hand. He was suntanned and Aryan, with a glint in his eyes that told Sousuke immediately that he was a veteran. He had large eyes, a wide brow and a Roman nose. "Sagara, was it? Even for a last

gasp, this seems excessive,” the man said from his AS’s shoulder.

“Call it what you like,” Sousuke retorted. “I’m going to survive this.”

As the man showed himself, Tessa seemed to realize what he was going for, and he felt a different kind of tension enter her body. Now they just had to wait.

Yes, Sousuke told himself. *I’ve done everything I can.* He had no gun now, just a knife and smoke grenade. Throwing the knife at the man would be pointless. He’d either be riddled with bullets before it hit, or the man would take him out with one precise shot.

The rifle in the man’s hand shone dully. *Is that what he’s going to hit me with?* Sousuke wondered. *Without harming Tessa as I use her as a shield... he’ll try to get me right through the forehead.*

The man’s eyes were merciless as readied himself. There was no way out for Sousuke, now. *Kurz, he thought, I did as you asked. But if you are where I think you are, you’re too far away...*

1650 meters: that was the distance to the target given by Kurz Weber’s scope. He didn’t have a laser or a computer to confirm that estimate, but felt that the number was probably accurate.

Kurz’s body was a mess: his right leg was completely limp, and his left leg dangled at a strange angle off his knee; he wasn’t even sure if his spine was still attached to his lower half. There were metal fragments stuck into his back, which had cracked his ribs and shredded his internal organs upon entry. He was bleeding from a head wound, and he couldn’t hear out of his right ear.

I’m going to die here, Kurz realized. *There’s no doubt about it.* He was sure of that much. *But I’m not dead yet,* he told himself. *There’s got to be something I can do, right? Just one thing...*

What else? Use my rifle. Using his arms, which were still functioning, Kurz crawled his way out of the M9’s trashed cockpit. Each movement of his body sent a shot of pain through him, but soon even that felt distant.

He crawled up to the weapons rack—which had been blown out of the

cockpit—and with great effort, pulled out his rifle. *The old bolt action...* he thought wistfully. *It survived, too.* He unwrapped it from its packaging and pointed the rifle at his target. It was at this point that he'd gauged the distance with the scope: 1650 meters.

There's no way I'll hit, he thought ruefully. *If I could get four hundred meters closer, then maybe...* Kurz could see Kaspar through the scope, just getting out of the red AS's cockpit.

Sousuke did great, but the guy's just too far away. He couldn't do it. It was over. *Sousuke,* he thought regretfully, *I'm sorry. You'll need to handle this yourself. I can't help you.* Now, at the very end, Kurz spared some thoughts for his other friends:

Tessa, the other operative and friend present today, came first. *Tessa,* Kurz thought sincerely, *Give up on that perpetual downer and find yourself a good man.*

Then, *Mao... Lonely little Melissa,. I wanted to be sweeter to you. Will a woman like you cry for me?* he wondered. *I'm not sure if I want you to or not. Maybe we shouldn't have slept together...*

And Kaspar, he thought last of all. *I guess I am a failure. I didn't take it seriously enough. To the very end, I couldn't beat you. I couldn't call the spirit or become a true sniper.*

But Kaspar... When it was time to take that revenge shot, when I had the man I'd been searching for in my scope in south Lebanon... I couldn't fire. Because Lana, a total innocent, was standing behind him on the stairs. She was only eight years old. It was clear the shot would go through him and hit her.

You told me to shoot anyway, Kurz recalled. *You said it was my first and last chance. But I couldn't do it, and then you made the shot, instead. And yeah, you're right... Because of that, the man died. My revenge was complete.*

But it wasn't worth Lana's life, Kurz thought towards his former mentor. *Your "precise trajectory" didn't just blow off that man's head; it also took her spine, and a few of her organs with it. She's still in the hospital, even now. In a normal hospital, she would have been dead already. You knew it would happen, and yet you still fired. That's why I left. If that's what a 'real sniper' is, they're freaks.*

You're a freak. I don't want to be a freak.

But in that case... Kurz pondered. Can I really let him just have my friends? That freak? Can I really just give up and abandon them, just because he happens to be 1650 meters away?

"Let's try for it..." he whispered to himself. He had only one bullet, and he wouldn't be conscious much longer. His candle's flame was flickering: he had ten to thirty seconds, tops. Just peering through the scope made Kurz feel like he was being sucked into the darkness.

He lay down on his stomach and readied his rifle into the most stable position. Given that he couldn't exactly stand, it was the only position he could hold now, anyway.

1650 meters; Kurz knew that there was no way his .308-caliber could hit at that distance. He'd never heard of any sniper landing such a shot. It was even 130 meters further than the miraculous shot he'd once seen Kaspar make.

Resting the stock firmly on his shoulder, Kurz wrapped his hand around the grip, and pressed the lower part of the stock against the ground to stabilize it. Grabbing his right shoulder with his left hand, he managed to keep himself low on the ground. His right cheekbone touched the frame, creating a straight line between his right eye and the scope...

Read the wind, he told himself. Here it's northwest, fifteen knots. There it's north-northwest, ten knots. There are air currents, too. Gotta take it all into account...

Of course, the temperature and humidity mattered, too. Air pressure, powder ignition speed, swelling of the gun and the bullet—they could all have huge influences on the trajectory.

How much would the bullet spin or pitch? There was a phenomenon known as tumbling, which would increase proportionally to the square of the distance traveled. At this distance, even the slightest roll would have a huge effect.

And there was a larger element at play: the Coriolis effect, caused by the Earth's rotation. They were close to sixty degrees north latitude; higher latitudes made the effect especially significant. It could move a bullet eastward

by at least thirty centimeters.

There were also a variety of extremely delicate issues, all of which Kurz instinctively took into account as he set his final aim. It was a complicated calculation, one which even modern computers couldn't successfully complete. Only a human could perform this art.

Kurz mixed together all these elements into a single mental equation, and then purged clean the result. *All you have to do now is picture the trajectory*, he told himself. This would be a super calculation, relying purely on instinct. Fix the crosshair on the point needed... several meters away from the target. But it wasn't enough yet.

His irregular breathing moved the crosshairs up and down slightly. Kurz needed more concentration. It wasn't enough to just thread the needle. He had to dot an eye on a dragon *painted* on the needle.

'There's no way I can hit that' would be the natural thought, but somehow, a different set of words drifted into Kurz's mind: *Ah, I can do this...* He felt no surprise, no joy at having made this realization—just silent confidence.

Suddenly, Kurz could see things he'd never been able to see before. He could feel his muscles relaxing, the heat of his blood beginning to fade. He could even see the color of the wind in motion. The imagined bullet's trajectory became crystal clear, and he could see the movement of every surrounding molecule.

He wasn't even thinking of Sousuke at this point. He wasn't thinking of Mao, either. He wasn't thinking of Lana in the hospital, or his dead family, or the middle school teacher who had been his first crush. They had all left his mind. He even forgot who he was aiming at.

Who was that guy again? he wondered distantly. *Ah, who cares. Just land that bullet in him...*

The moment came immediately: this was the transcendent moment into which he'd pour his entire life into a single target. *You know*, Kurz speculated, *I could shoot him from even farther away than this...*

Something had descended upon him. Something invisible, something beyond the physical world. The space around him warped and the passage of time

seemed to slow.

Kurz realized that he'd already pulled the trigger.



The shot fired, and it all went as he'd imagined it. The firing pin fell as expected, the powder ignited as estimated. The bullet expanded as anticipated, and proceeded, spinning, down the barrel of the gun.

This enchanted bullet cut through the air as it flew, tracing an arc that showed Kurz's perfect reading of the wind as if were being drawn to the designated location.

1650 meters: he knew that it would hit. Kurz Weber's last thought was, *Take that, asshole*, and then, with his rifle in his arms, he let the empty darkness have him.

He's going to hit me, thought Sousuke at the exact moment he saw the blood spurt from his enemy's chest. The bullet came from out of nowhere, entering through Kaspar's back and out his front. It had gone straight through his heart.

"What..." Kaspar spluttered, his eyes widening in shock. He wasn't looking at Sousuke. He'd managed to use his last bit of remaining strength to look in the direction, far in the distance, from which Kurz had made his final shot. Kaspar said nothing more, but his lips mouthed the words, *There's no way he could have hit...*

And yet, he had. Kurz's shot was right on target, and Kaspar's legs went limp as he plummeted from his AS's shoulder.

Kurz... Sousuke moved in that same instant, throwing his last weapon—his one smoke grenade—and yanking Tessa by the collar. He shouted out, "Gebo-6, the sniper's neutralized! Bring in A1!"

"Roger!" Fischer, pilot of the Gebo-6, responded on the comm. He must have also realized what the situation was, because he'd kept his ECS in silent mode while he waited just past the ridge, just far enough away not to be seen. Now that the sniper was neutralized, he could fly in, drop the Laevatein, and then take shelter using the terrain.

This was, of course, assuming that Leonard's own AS wouldn't be making an appearance in that ten second interval...

"Tessa," Sousuke shouted, "the beacon!"

“Right!” she replied, recognizing that they needed to let their allies know where in the swirling smoke they were located. Crawling over to her tablet, Tessa tapped at it and put out a radio beacon with their location.

Once they’d recovered from the shock of Kaspar’s death, the enemy soldiers had resumed firing. Sousuke heard bullets whiz over his head.

While firing back down the tunnel they’d come from, Lemon shouted, “They’re coming from behind, too! I’m almost out of bullets!”

“Figure something out!” yelled Sousuke, creeping forward to pick up the carbine he’d dropped earlier. *Fifteen shots left*, he thought, firing at an enemy who’d come charging at them through the smoke. The first shot missed, but the second took him down. He fired again at the enemies coming up behind him...

“Gebo-6, where are you?!” Tessa screamed.

A mechanical voice came over the radio before Gebo-6 could actually respond. 《Almost there, Colonel: ETA five seconds.》

“What? The cargo hatch just—”

《Descending now.》

The sound of rotors, engine noise, and an AS being released from its hydraulic bolts could be heard all at once. Gebo-6 arrived from the sky above to drop the Laevatein at just the right time, and it landed right in front of Sousuke, with its head-mounted machine guns on full automatic.

《Hurry, Sarge.》

“Al!” Sousuke shouted, tossing his carbine aside as he ran towards the roar of the guns, knowing there wasn’t a second to lose. The Laevatein held out its right hand while opening its cockpit hatch. Once he was in its palm, it swung it as if to throw him onto the back of its head.

Sousuke managed to keep his balance midair and slide into the cockpit. The hatch closed before he could even give the order, and Al went through the startup sequence on his own. They were on full speed ahead, abbreviating every checklist item. The usual settings, the usual master mode, the usual search mode... It was like the machine was hurrying him along.

《Targeting detected! Two, one...》

Sousuke grunted as they made a leap, just barely dodging the 40mm shot coming from the southwest. *A 40mm shot powered by the lambda driver...* Sousuke thought belatedly. *Leonard! He's shooting at us from somewhere in the ruins.* If Al hadn't expedited the startup procedure, they would've been hit for sure.

《Enemy AS, two o'clock, distance eight. It's that rat bastard.》

"Yeah," Sousuke agreed, "it's Leonard." Twisting his machine in midair, he used the Laevatein's head-mounted machine guns swiftly to fire down on the enemy soldiers. *Tessa and Lemon are still down there,* he thought. *I have to protect them.* A rain of .50-caliber bullets kicked smoke up all over the area.

As he landed, Sousuke realized that Gebo-6 had already retreated behind the ridge, and that it wouldn't have time to call him back to get the others on board. "Pick them up," Sousuke ordered.

《Roger.》

The Laevatein squatted down before the room in which Tessa and Lemon were hiding, its auxiliary arms extending from either side to grab the weary Lemon and panicking Tessa. Another attack was incoming—multiple 40mm shots. As expected, Leonard was serious, and he wasn't holding back one bit.

Sousuke dodged the first shot with his two charges in hand, then blocked the second with the lambda driver. But the force field didn't fully hold, and he dodged just in the nick of time.

He wouldn't be able to block Leonard's shots once he got close enough, and he didn't have an anti-ECS sensor. His opponent was probably invisible already, which meant he had no way of locating him...

"Can we use the fairy wing?!" Sousuke shouted to Al.

《Charging in without tests again?》

"Just do it!"

《Roger!》

The massive amplifiers attached to each of the Laevatein's shoulders, dubbed

the fairy wing, slid open and expanded. The machine's generator let out a roar as it revved up to maximum output, with electricity flooding into the shoulder units as the air around them warped with exhaust.

《All power lines secured. LDC, electric charge rising. LBS, contact. One, activation successful. Two, activation successful. Interference radius increasing. 50, 100, 200...》

Despite its name, the fairy wing wasn't for flying; rather, this was an amplifier which Mira and the others had built based upon the hard drive which Kaname had left behind in the mansion at Niquelo. They'd initially called it "the lambda driver canceler," because it temporarily negated the functions of any lambda driver nearby.

Sousuke didn't understand at all how it worked, but he'd been told that the fairy wing expended vastly more power than the lambda driver alone, so it would render the Laevatein's own lambda driver unusable for a time, as well.

There was one other factor in play: for the fairy wing to work, its operator—i.e., Sousuke—would have to be in the right mindset. Just as he had to visualize a shield to block bullets, or an arrow to pierce through force fields, he had to form the image in his mind that "paranormal phenomena doesn't exist."

Sousuke hadn't been able to imagine that at all the first time he'd heard about it, but now he could. He just had to go back to his old mindset. In other words, he had to tell himself, "It's all a fraud; it can't possibly exist."

Disappear... Sousuke thought. In that instant, the fairy wing responded to his wish, warping the surrounding air for just a second as the canceler's effect burst out for several hundred meters around him.

That was the only change. Nothing else happened. In a way, it was the sign that the fairy wing had worked... The point of the unit was to make sure that "nothing happened," after all...

"Did it work?" he finally asked AI, just as a large cloud of dust rose up around the ruins about three hundred meters in front of the Laevatein. Leonard's black AS, which had been flying invisibly, now plunged straight into a building.

It had worked. The enemy lambda driver had lost its power, and Sousuke

exclaimed with surprise as an alarm sounded out. Despite having plunged to the ground mid-flight, Leonard's machine seemed to have regained its footing, dropping its ECS in favor of firing immediately from the ground.

Leonard must have realized that Sousuke couldn't use his lambda driver, either. Sousuke ran evasive maneuvers, but because he was holding Tessa and Lemon in his auxiliary arms, he had to be careful. *I don't have much power, either*, he realized. The fairy wing had sapped his energy, which rapidly forced him into conserving his movements.

"Dammit!" Sousuke cursed, pulling his Boxer shotcannon from the hardpoint on his machine's back and returned fire.

He couldn't use the demolition gun. He couldn't even fire it without his lambda driver's assistance. And Leonard's AS was agile even without a lambda driver, capable of moving from obstacle to obstacle as it returned fire.

Perhaps on the lookout for attacks from Sousuke, Leonard's AS wasn't reckless in its approach. but if it came to a full-on shootout, the Laevatein wouldn't stand a chance. *What to do?* Sousuke considered.

《Warning. Temperature spike in LDC-1 detected. Range of influence decreasing.》

The fairy wing on his left shoulder had overheated from the strain. The cooling system couldn't keep up with the heat the explosive electricity generated. It would break down soon, and Sousuke knew that it was only a matter of time before the one on his right shoulder suffered the same fate. *If the lambda driver canceler shuts down*, he thought grimly, *I'm finished*. He had no way of beating Leonard's machine in a straight fight. He couldn't even retreat. They'd all be killed. All of them...

《Sergeant. I'm sure you realize this, but...》

"Yeah," Sousuke responded while returning fire. *If I'm going to retreat*, he thought, *I'll have to do it fast*. He'd have to withdraw at top speed while keeping Leonard's machine at bay, get picked up by Gebo-6 waiting over the ridge, and escape as fast as possible.

《We will have to abandon retrieval of Uruz-6. Given my analysis of the ADM

data—》

“Don’t say it,” Sousuke ordered.

《—he is already dead.》

“Shut up!” *None of us know that for sure*, Sousuke told himself optimistically. *Kurz could still be clinging to life. If we treat him quickly, he might just pull through. We might be able to save him. I survived wounds at least that bad, didn’t I? Kurz is too stubborn to die from something like that. We can’t leave him behind. There’s no way. What would I say to Mao when we got back?*

《LDC-1 disabled. LDC-2 temperature rising.》

The left shoulder unit would burn out soon. He didn’t have time. Studying their positions on the digital map with a cool head, Sousuke found that AI was completely right; every element told him there was no way to retrieve Kurz from his current location.

《Your decision, Sarge.》 AI didn’t push him any further than that, waiting patiently for Sousuke’s reply.

After a long pause, Sousuke gave it. “Withdraw,” he ordered shortly.

《Roger.》

Setting his shotcannon to automatic, Sousuke threw out all the grenades he had, detonating them in midair with his head-mounted machine guns. While Leonard’s machine was held in check, the Laevatein used its remaining power to go leaping and jumping across the mountains.

Gebo-6, standing by at low altitude, began to accelerate and ascend. Ignoring standard withdrawal procedure, Sousuke’s Laevatein latched onto the lower half of the Pave Mare with his emergency hook, with Gebo-6’s pilot accelerating to top speed without comment. Dangling from the helicopter with one arm, the Laevatein left Yamsk-11, heading east.

“They escaped, eh?” By the time Leonard’s lambda driver was working again, Sagara Sousuke had nearly completed his escape by helicopter. Realizing that pursuit was futile, Leonard turned his machine around. *I could fly after the*

helicopter and catch up with it, he speculated, *but if that canceler activated again, I'd be finished*. The Belial had numerous strengths, but the ability to survive a thousand-meter fall without a lambda driver wasn't one of them.

A canceler, eh? He knew it was possible in theory, but Leonard was genuinely shocked that Teletha and the others had managed to complete one. And he felt like that red-and-white AS had given him more trouble than the Arbalest he'd fought before. It had managed to dodge his lambda driver-assisted shots, he recalled, which was impressive, even considering the distance from which he'd been firing.

Of course, that didn't change the fact that Leonard held the advantage. It had occurred to him during the fight that his opponent's machine might not have an ECS counter-sensor. He'd disengaged his invisibility with the assumption that doing so meant little against a third-generation machine, but...

Ah, well, he thought regretfully. The next time they fought, he'd be more careful and better prepared, and he would take him down. "Even so..." he said out loud.

Kaspar, you failed this time, Leonard thought to himself next, snorting as he gazed down on Wilhelm Kaspar's corpse. His red Eligore was in a bad way as well, having taken a hit while unmanned during the chaotic battle with Sagara Sousuke.

Kaspar's loss was a serious blow. Fowler and Sabina were both very talented operators, but there was simply no replacing Kaspar's sniping abilities. He was just the person Leonard wanted on his side for the upcoming battle.

He received word from Kalinin as he and his men reached the surface. "Soviet air force approaching from the southwest," Kalinin reported. "Two companies or more. Should we open fire?"

The Soviet Army was approaching. Leonard didn't know how they had picked up on the fighting in the ruins, but it also wasn't especially unexpected. It was their territory, after all.

"No," he decided. "There's nothing left for us here. Hurry up and withdraw."

"Roger."

“Ah,” Leonard added. “Also, Kaspar is dead, but it seems he finished off Mithril’s sniper first. I’m told he was one of yours.”

Kalinin remained silent for just a second. “Then it’s a significant loss for their side, as well,” he finally replied. “Weber’s skill was a greater threat than even Sagara Sousuke’s AS.”

“Does it hurt?” Leonard inquired.

“I’ve thrown away my capacity for pain,” Kalinin told him stonily.

Leonard and his men quickly loaded their remaining forces in the helicopter and left the deserted town behind.

Epilogue

Sousuke didn't even have the presence of mind to comfort Tessa, who was clearly feeling despondent, on their way back from Yamsk-11. *Kaname turned her back on us*, he reflected. *And Kurz is...*

Tessa would be rebuking herself over both of them. *My mistake. My incompetence. If only I'd had more foresight...* Even though there was nothing she could have done.

Tessa never blamed anyone else in times of tragedy, only herself. Her intelligence and good-heartedness only made it worse. *What can you say to someone like that?* Sousuke wondered, as the helicopter's crew prepared her a tranquilizer. Tessa initially refused it, but staying with her and forcing her to take the medication was the best Sousuke could manage to do.

Lemon was severely depleted, but would probably pull through. The crew had finally been able to give him proper first aid, and he'd been fast asleep ever since.

While holding Tessa's hand as she struggled with nightmares, Sousuke thought over many things: the omni-sphere; the accident eighteen years ago; the Whispered, and the Whispering; the world, which had gone off the rails; and finally, Chidori Kaname, who was now the key to all of the above problems...

He couldn't even begin to think of how to go about solving them.

He thought next of Kurz, and could only remember Kaspar, the enemy sniper, with blood spurting from his chest as he died. He'd checked the estimated distance on a digital map later, and found that Kurz made the shot from a distance of about 1650 meters. From what little Sousuke knew about sniping, he knew well that this had been an insane distance for any sniper to have pulled off a shot. It had to have been the greatest shot of Kurz's life, and his willingness to put his life into that shot had saved Sousuke and the others.

A person's death is a part of their life. That's what Sousuke had said to Leonard back there in the darkness. To think he'd be reminded of it so soon afterwards...

They returned to the Tuatha de Danaan, which was heading to the Pacific via a southerly route, some 54 hours after their escape from Yamsk-11. The crew there seemed to be under a pall, having already heard the news.

Clouseau had already returned, and without any criticism, said, "Well done; now rest."

Mardukas, similarly, had just said, "I'm glad you're back. Don't worry about the captain." They were all used to losing friends, too, and could just leave Tessa to handle her grief in her own fashion.

Then he'd met with Mao in the briefing room, where they'd spoken without anybody else around. At first, she listened to his explanation with an air of total calm. Once he was finished, she let out a sigh, and whispered, "Well, I guess that's just how it is." After a long silence, she then said, "Did he tell you? About us..."

"Yes," Sousuke responded simply.

"I see... Well, it was a spur-of-the-moment thing," Mao said. "Pretty casual. No big deal."

"I see."

"It was just a fling," she went on. "Not even a good fling. Just stress relief, really. We weren't serious about each other, and we knew things like this could happen, so I really should've kept my distance. Yeah..."

This was very different from what he and Tessa had heard about it, which just made it even more painful for Sousuke. "Mao," he started to say.

"I really wasn't all that into him," she rushed to say, cutting Sousuke off. "He's six years younger than me, you know? He was an idiot, a womanizer, and a playboy... we were just messing around. Yeah..."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't say that," Mao ordered. She must have reached her limit, because she

turned her eyes downward, put her arms around Sousuke, and whispered softly, "It's not your fault. He's just an idiot, that's all."

"Mao..."

"He was so stupid," she sniffed. "But I really liked him..."

"I know."

"Don't you go dying on me, please."

"I won't." Her tears soaked into Sousuke's shoulder as she trembled and wailed and choked with uncontrollable emotion. Her weeping echoed in his ears. He couldn't say anything else. All he could do was hold her.

He wasn't sad. He was used to it.

But... am I really? Sousuke wondered. He'd learned a bit about how to smile. But he still didn't know how to cry. *When will an imperfect person like me be able to tremble and weep?* he thought regretfully.

Then he thought, *Chidori, why aren't you here? If I were with you... If I were in your arms, I think maybe I could cry.*



All these flights aren't so bad, Kaname thought, sinking deeply into a chair in the jet's business cabin. Surrounded by burly bodyguards and loyal attendants, she enjoyed her high-class meal and watched her favorite movies. It had been a very long time since she'd felt so relaxed. *How long has it been?* she wondered. She couldn't really tell.

Sousuke and Tessa were dead. She'd heard Kurz Weber was dead, too. *Poor things,* she thought distantly. *But it's their own fault for forcing us into conflict. They could have just sat back and left everything to me; then, everything would get better. They didn't even have to worry. They could have just taken it easy.*

"Ms. Chidori. Do you need anything else?" asked Sabina Rechnio, from the back of the cabin. She'd previously been off on an errand in South America, but they'd met up with her after transferring to the business jet.

"Hmm, not in particular," Kaname mused. "But... oh, I'd love a long soak in a bath."

“We can’t do that on a plane, of course,” Sabina replied. “But I can have one prepared the moment we arrive.”

“Oh, then a hot spring would be nice.”

“Hot spring?” Sabina repeated.

“Hot spring,” Kaname told her firmly. “I’m going to take it easy there until the preparations are complete. A big, open-air bath... It would be great to go in with everyone and have some fun. Actually, it’s been a long time since I went to a hot spring...”

Memories of fun times welled up in her mind; it was a nostalgic image, a memory of a time she’d fully enjoyed, despite her nerves. *When was the last time I went to a hot spring, again?* she wondered. *And who did I go with? Who had proposed the idea, and who had been in on the fun?* She came to again as she felt the blood go rushing to her cheeks, and noticed hot liquid pouring from her eyes. She found it so strange, when tears were so pointless now...



“Ms. Chidori?” Sabina asked.

“That’s strange,” Kaname mused, “I didn’t think it was that kind of situation... Oh, well. Will we arrive soon?”

“Fifteen minutes,” Leonard said, returning from the cockpit. “It should be in view on the left side soon, and the weather is very nice today.”

“Let me see,” said Kaname, leaning forward to peer out of the window. In the middle of the glittering ocean, beyond the misty clouds, she could see an isolated island, shaped like a half-moon. She remembered that island. “We’re building it there, huh?”

“Yes,” Leonard confirmed. “A temple to you... a temple that will save us all. Sooner or later, our enemies will intuit our goal and come to stop us. We need to prepare to meet them.”

The greatest and largest TAROS would await her there, to put the world back the way it was supposed to be. The place where everything would end, and then begin again. A hot, fierce battle—the greatest battle in history—would unfold from that island.

The name of the island was Merida, and it was the former base of Mithril’s West Pacific Battle Group.

[To be continued]

Afterword

It's been a while since I wrote one of these. It's another thick volume, huh? This is a volume that would've gotten published this summer on a normal serialization schedule, but... well... er... I guess I still got it out on the earlier side. No, excuse me. I'm really sorry for the long wait. Next time... Next time! (I sound like the lieutenant of an evil organization, don't I?)

We're reaching the end of a long story, so it was time to start preparing for the wrap-up. I would've liked to show what Courtney, Clouseau, Mao, Fowler, and Sabina were all up to, but it was irrelevant to the main story, so I cut it out for the time being. After the main story's over, I might write it up as a side story (if I have time).

I feel like there are a lot of shocking stories going down this time. Sousuke and the others are really going through the wringer, and you have to hope that things get better for them.

Regarding the portrayal of the snipers: I feel like the maximum range for a 7.62mm bullet is about 1000 meters. Kaspar's story is a bit bullshit from a real-world perspective, but you might think that someone who's really incredible could make it happen. I thought we'll just make it a more powerful shot, a 12.7mm... but there's nothing romantic about firing such a modern-day rifle like that! You need to make a super shot like that with an old wooden frame. It's like a Les Paul guitar.

Umm, a page and a half left, huh?

That reminds me. Today, I went to a drinking party held by a friend of mine, and on the way back we started talking about how the booths are always so cold. Then we started telling spooky stories and speculating that maybe there's something supernatural involved.

I don't have any trace of a sixth sense, and I tend to feel bad about always poo-pooing my friends' talk about such things. But the ghosts in ghost stories really do feel like they're cheating to me. I think that even if you're a spirit, you

have some limitations on your attack power and spiritual power. On paranormal shows, the ghosts are treated as invincible, like they can do whatever to ordinary people regardless of time and distance. I mean, come on. If supernatural phenomena (particularly the bad kind) really exist, why is the ego of these former humans who turn their backs on this world for sad reasons so focused on ruining human lives?

When I tried to explain that on the way home, I ended up saying, "If I ended up in a fight with a ghost, I would win. They might be powerful, but I'd fight them tooth and nail." And then I imagined a dramatic and tearjerker scene where the instant the ghost is about to kill me, my beloved Cooper S (AKA Bonta-car) sacrificed itself to save me in the nick of time. Okay, so I was really drunk.

It's hard for me to write enthusiastically about the kind of serious developments present in this story. I just want to say, "Please keep reading." Sorry.

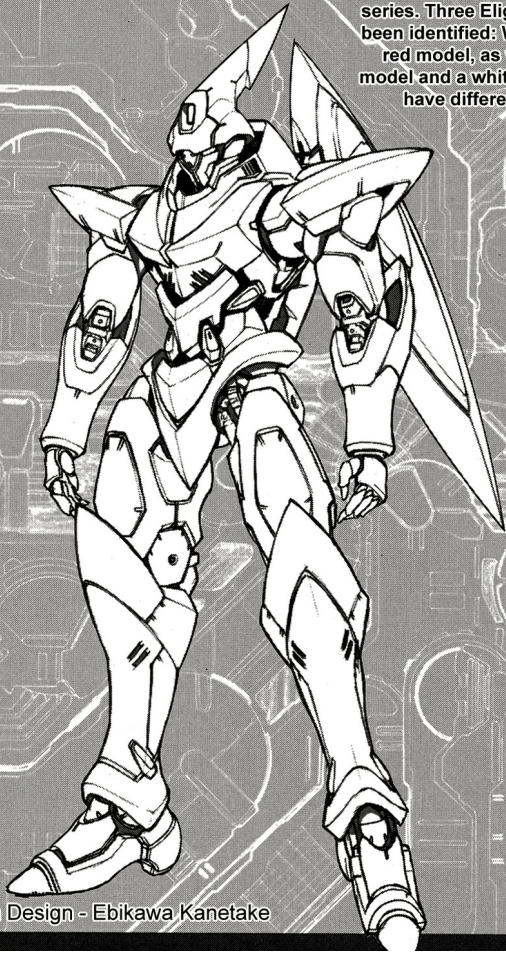
Next story is supposed to be the climax of the novel series, though I have my doubts I'll be able to finish it in just one volume (sweats). To those who read this far, I'm going to do my best out of gratitude for you for sticking with me this far.

So I'll see you next time for more Sousuke... actually, to borrow again from the origin of that phrase...

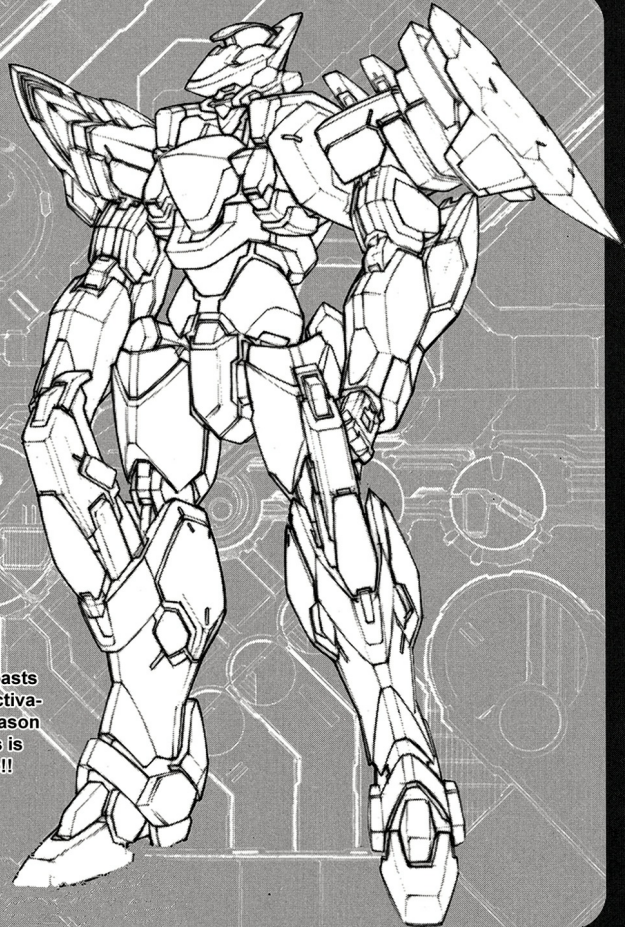
Wagering everything on a distant time.

Plan1065 ERIGOR

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Mecha Design - Ebikawa Kanetake



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ARX-8 LAEVATEIN





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