

Shouji Gatou

Illustrator

Shikidouji

9

FULL METAL.. PANIC!

GATHERING MAKE MY DAY

Shikidouji

Shouji Gatou


Illustrator
Shikidouji

9

FULL METAL.. PANIC!

GATHERING MAKE MY DAY

Shikidouji



The girl stared at a point on the desk with hollow eyes. Her lips were dry, and her skin had lost its luster.

“What’s your name?”

“Teletha...”

Testarossa.”

FULL METAL PANIC!
GATHERING MAKE MY DAY

Forward! Forward! Forward! To swim, to run, to keep moving... True, there were still issues all around her, but they wouldn't necessarily last forever. So she had to keep moving forward... forward... forward...



The unknown AS
landed in front of
Sousuke. *"It's been
a while, Sarge."*



Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Prologue](#)

[1: Fallen Witch](#)

[2: Briefing](#)

[3: Front Toward Enemy](#)

[4: On a Stormy Night](#)

[5: Flaming Sword](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Bonus Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Prologue

The morning sun streamed in through the small skylight windows of the old automotive garage where she was sitting, working on three laptops at once. Each one had a screen packed with code. She needed those three screens to examine and switch between all the necessary files. Constant window-swapping would just waste time, and delay the start of the work by days.

At the center of the garage was a pathetic lump of metal—the torso frame of an arm slave, dangling from chains. It had no arms, no legs, and almost no armor. The head—hanging there almost like an afterthought—was badly damaged, with only empty cavities where sensors and machine guns had once been mounted. Even the cavity meant to hold the cold fusion palladium reactor lay hollow.

The screens continued to spill out data. She absorbed it hungrily while typing, punching in orders with a programming language known as “BAda.” The language was swift and precise, far more efficient than any programming language that had come before it. A hundred orders could be issued with just a few lines of code... so long as the programmer was capable of comprehending it.

As she typed, she began to speak to him.

Hello, there. I think you almost died.

It probably felt like your final defeat. You must think it's all over, all gone dark... that you're freed from the fight. But no, you're not even thinking, are you? Right now, you're an inanimate husk, and husks don't think... or regret.

Let's put an end to that darkness. Everyone else thinks you're a hollowed-out wreck, but not me. They destroyed your vocal interface—I'm repairing it, of course—but your mind remains intact. The quantum patterns continue to rush through the near-infinite canals of your brain. I can feel them.

The light was streaming in through the skylight at a different angle now.

There wasn't enough oxygen reaching her brain; there weren't enough calories to keep her mind going. She took a deep breath and relaxed her stiffened shoulders as she took a bite of the chocolate lying on top of the table, and sipped at her coffee with cream. It was cold. Then she began to type again, knowing every line of code would bring her closer to "him."

Around the time the angle of the light told her that it was evening, she realized she was close. She called out to one of her comrades—a woman waiting in the corner of the garage, absorbed in her reading. "Turn it on."

The woman closed her book and connected a power cable to a unit next to the damaged arm slave—an electronic device about the size of a refrigerator—then pulled a large lever on the wall. The lights in the garage flickered for a moment, and then the unit began receiving power.

"Are you finished?" the slender, dark-haired woman asked.

"Just testing it now. It may take a while yet."

"I see. Tell me if you need anything."

"Sure."

The tests took a day and a half. She modified the program, measured the unit's responses, then made even more modifications, over and over again. Whenever she got tired, she shared a club sandwich silently with her waiting comrades, had a nap, then got back to work.

Around the time the sun took on the red hue of evening again, she said, "It's finished." Then she hit the 'enter' key, delivering the final keystroke. An icon indicating a connection to the unit blinked in the center of the screen, and letters of the English alphabet began to appear in one window.

e... e...

She hadn't touched the keys. The output was coming directly from the unit to her PC.

e... es... escape... immediately. Repeat... recommended to abandon unit and escape immediately.

Thanks sergeant. Good luck.

Inside the garage, silent except for the sounds of the generator and the

cooling unit, lines of irrelevant yet frightening words crossed the screen. This was probably what the unit had been attempting to relay just before it lost functionality.

.....

She waited a little while longer. It would take “him” a while to notice the incongruities, and to work out the situation “he” found himself in.

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

A strange question. Was the complexity of the input confusing him? Or was he dreaming?

Protocol signals came through to her laptop. He seemed to have realized that he was connected to it, and that tests had been run on him before he’d awakened. The colorful three-dimensional graph in another window indicated a change in his simulated psychological state. Then a part of the graph that had been red turned yellow, and the rapid undulation of the lines flattened out. It had gone from the tension of battle to caution—extreme caution. He must believe he had fallen into enemy hands.

She twined her fingers together, stretching them lightly to loosen up, then typed out a greeting. Hello, AI. I’ve been looking for you.

The artificial intelligence maintained his silence. Not a single signal was returned.

Smart boy, she thought. *He won’t talk that easily*. It was going to take a lot of work to convince him that he was safe, and that they were on his side. Still, after about an hour of determined communication with him, AI at last made a response in two simple words:

What’s the situation?

The raven-haired woman who was watching her work over her shoulder let out a faint laugh.

“What is it?”

“He’s just like his master.”

1: Fallen Witch

Martha Witt, psychiatrist, adjusted her glasses and scanned carefully through the documents given to her by the SFPD officer once more: patient name, distinguishing characteristics, approximate age, state of health, circumstances under which she was taken into police custody. Many of the entries were simply blank.

She was sitting in a hospital in southern San Francisco, while the patient sitting across from her gazed vacantly at a point on her desk.

The girl appeared to be in her mid-teens, but her lips were dry and her skin had lost its luster; one might easily mistake her for thirty or forty. She was wearing a baggy blue T-shirt that someone at the police must have provided her with, and her waist-length ash blonde hair was tangled and untended. No one had bothered to clean the dirt from her face.

According to the doctor who had first examined her, she was relatively lucid in response to questioning. Martha introduced herself to the girl first, and then asked her, in the gentlest tone she could, "What's your name?"

"Teletha... Testarossa," the girl responded.

"That's a beautiful name. All right, Teletha. How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"Where do you go to school?"

"I don't."

"I see," Martha commented. "I'm sure that if you cleaned up a little, the boys there would all want to date you."

The girl didn't respond. She showed no embarrassment at the mention of her dreary state, and neither interest nor revulsion at the mention of boys.

"Now... the officers who took you in say they found you walking barefoot down the freeway near Redwood. It was three o'clock in the morning, and you

were alone.”

“Yes.”

“Did something happen that you don’t want to remember?”

“No.”

Her responses were indeed fairly lucid... but she also wasn’t volunteering any information.

“What were you doing there?” Martha asked next.

“I was abandoned.”

“By whom?”

“By my former subordinates.”

“Subordinates?” Martha looked piercingly at Teletha Testarossa. She clearly wasn’t joking. “Er... you said you don’t go to school, I believe. What kind of people are these ‘subordinates’?”

“Mercenaries.”

“Mercenaries?”

“Mithril mercenaries.”

“Mithril?”

“A private armed organization designed to stamp out terrorism and regional conflict. I was the commander of their West Pacific Battle Group, the Tuatha de Danaan.” Teletha’s eyes remained focused on a single point on the desk. She talked as if she wasn’t saying anything particularly extraordinary. “My rank was colonel. I had an amphibious assault submarine, third-generation arm slaves, and other cutting-edge equipment I used to attain victory on numerous dangerous missions.”

“Ah-hah... I don’t understand any of that, but it sounds quite impressive,” Martha told her. Yet even as she said that, her hand scribbled in her notebook. *Exceptionally rare delusion. Accurate(?) use of specialist terminology—battle group, amphibious, etc. Further investigation needed.*

Martha didn’t know much about military terminology herself, so she changed

her line of questioning. “You mentioned ‘Tuatha de Danaan’ before, didn’t you? Isn’t that from Celtic mythology?”

“Yes,” Teletha confirmed. “It means ‘the tribe of the goddess Dana.’”

“Would that make you Dana herself, the earth goddess?”

“‘Dana’ is the name of my submarine’s AI. It’s a massive and complex system that utilizes quantum computing.”

“I see.” Martha added, *sci-fi novel?* to her notes, then asked another question. “And... as the commander of this military organization, what were you doing on the freeway? You said your subordinates abandoned you?”

“Yes.” Teletha fell quiet for some time. The examination room was dimly lit, with weakly flickering fluorescent lights in the ceiling, and filled with the heavy, humid night air. “My base was attacked by a large enemy force.”

“Enemy?”

“An organization called Amalgam. Mithril was destroyed by a massive attack that they mounted. I escaped on my submarine with my subordinates and managed to survive, but...” Terrible pain appeared in the girl’s eyes for the first time. Whatever had happened to her next must have been a difficult memory to face. Her shoulders tensed up and began to shake.

“Are you all right?” Martha asked. “You don’t have to tell me, if it’s painful.”

“It’s okay.” Teletha gulped and let out a small sigh. “The submarine didn’t have adequate supplies aboard. We managed to last a few weeks after escaping, but soon the vessel broke down. We had no money. I couldn’t even pay my people.”

Martha said nothing.

“The environment of a submarine in a dive puts extraordinary stress on its crew,” Teletha explained. “Soon, some of them began to complain about me. They began whispering about selling me and the boat out to the enemy.”

“What happened to them?”

“I had them executed,” Teletha said again, her tone of voice suggesting that this wasn’t at all remarkable.

“You killed them?”

“Yes,” she said faintly. Then she shut down, refusing to respond to any more of Martha’s questions.

A week had passed since that first meeting. Martha met with the girl named Teletha Testarossa twice a day and, little by little, she eked out the story of how she’d come to be here. She didn’t have much confidence that she was building up a proper doctor—patient trust, but in fits and starts, she’d managed to get Teletha’s full account of how she’d come to be in police custody.

In short, the girl was an officer with a private military organization that ran counterterror operations. That organization had suffered an enemy attack, and her squad had ended up isolated on the high seas. Dissatisfied soldiers had rebelled, they’d run low on supplies, and in the end, the cutting-edge “amphibious assault submarine” that she commanded had suffered a fatal malfunction and ended up dead in the water.

She’d then taken a small group of subordinates on one of their on-board helicopters to escape the capsized vessel, but the helicopter had run out of fuel and crashed into the sea off California. By the time their lifeboat reached the shore of Half Moon Bay, she was down to a mere five subordinates, and they were all thoroughly sick of her. Annoyed by her continued attempts to order them around, they’d thrown her out of their stolen car onto the street. One had wanted to rape her first, but she’d managed to avoid that fate. That was how she’d ended up walking down the road despondent and alone until a truck driver saw her and called the police.

Martha had never heard this particular delusion before. The talk of mercenaries, submarines, and helicopters was all utterly absurd, but the rest of the information she gave, about the circumstances of being taken into custody, was coherent.

To be honest, when Martha had first read the information in the report, she’d assumed a traumatic assault had occurred. That turned out not to be the case. The chart made up by the ER doctor that had first taken the girl in showed no sign of sexual or physical abuse, and her external injuries were limited to a few

small scratches that had clearly come from walking through the underbrush.

Then, not only did her story not contradict any facts as Martha knew them, but she was also using proper military terminology. There were no obvious inconsistencies in her story about the “private military organization,” either. Martha knew a member of the police who was former Navy, so she’d called him up to confirm a few things.

“I’m pretty ignorant about these things. Are there really submarines that can carry helicopters on board?” she’d asked, and the officer had laughed it off.

“Well, there used to be submarines that could carry aircraft, but that was a long time ago,” he told her. “It would have to be huge, for one thing, and that’s just not practical. She sounds delusional to me.”

“But she said it was a special submarine. An amphibious... assault submarine, or something like that.”

The man laughed. “Sounds awesome.”

“She said that the Navy referred to it as the ‘Toy Box,’” Martha persisted.

There was a pause. “What did you say?” The voice of Martha’s friend, who had previously been jovial as he waited for a chance to hit on her, suddenly tensed.

“The Toy Box.”

“Who told you about that?” he asked now, pressing her for more information.

“The patient, I told you. Is it familiar?”

“No... No, it’s not.”

“What?” Martha tried again, feeling baffled.

Her friend responded in a very serious tone, “Well... I heard a rumor from a friend who’s still in the service. That’s all.”

“What did he say?”

“Listen, Martha. I don’t know what’s going on here, but you should probably drop this patient,” her friend cautioned. “Pretend you never heard anything she said. Just say she was totally incoherent or something.”

“I don’t understand. Why are you suddenly—”

“Sorry, but I need to get to work. Talk to you later.”

“Wait—”

Her former Navy friend hung up on her.

Curiouser and curiouser... There was no way the girl could know real military secrets. Just to be sure, Martha ran an online search for “toy box” and “submarine,” but all she got was a history of submarine toys from a collector site.

The next day, Martha decided to ask Teletha about what her former Navy friend had said.

“I suppose he would say that,” the girl replied listlessly. “The US Navy isn’t going to admit to the existence of an advanced weapons system they can’t detect. It’s probably only known in the form of rumors whispered among the rank-and-file.”

“All right. In that case,” Martha said, feeling a bit of indignation, “why give this very classified information to a mere psychiatrist like me?”

“Because none of it matters anymore,” Teletha said with a self-reproachful smile. “I’m finished. An incompetent commander. That’s why my people abandoned me, and why I’m here now. I’ve lost everything except my life.”

Martha listened quietly.

“Dr. Witt. You think I’m mad, don’t you?”

“No, I...”

“I don’t mind if you think that. I’m just an empty shell now, anyway...” Teletha slowly turned her eyes downward. Locks of disheveled hair fell over her cheeks, and the stark fluorescent lights gave her face a sickly pallor.

“I’m sorry to say this, but...” Martha paused for a moment, then continued. “You’re being transferred elsewhere. It’s a communal living facility. You’ll be with other people who have similar conditions.” They couldn’t keep her in this hospital forever, after all. Teletha was a minor with no family, no money, and no insurance. They had no choice but to send her to a specialized facility

outside of the city.

“Yes. Of course,” Teletha said, showing no particular surprise at this.

“It’s a shame,” Martha said sincerely.

Despite being inconceivable, the girl’s ramblings had an air of plausibility about them. There were none of the obviously paranoid delusions about receiving secret transmissions from underground or from alien invaders, or of the American government having planted a microchip in her brain. Teletha knew things only specialists could know, and she was able to speak coherently and in detail about nuclear fusion cells and amphibious combat tactics. Martha had never met a young patient like her before.

“The transfer will take place tomorrow evening,” she told the girl. “I’ll accompany you then.”

“All right,” Teletha said indifferently.

The transport car arrived at the hospital the next day. The black station wagon, designed to hold a wheelchair, was five minutes later than expected. The driver and his two assistants exchanged simple greetings with Martha. She didn’t recognize any of them, but there was nothing suspicious about their identifications or the transfer order they handed her. Teletha, fast asleep, was wheeled to the car by a nurse.

“She was complaining of a headache this morning, so her doctor ordered me to give her a sedative,” the nurse explained to Martha.

“Any history of violent behavior?” the driver asked.

“No, she’s been very cooperative,” Martha responded in the nurse’s place.

The driver nodded. “I’d like to restrain her just in case, even so. It would be dangerous if she lashed out during transport.”

“Of course. But...”

“Don’t worry,” he said reassuringly. “We’ll be gentle with her. Oh, and... has she said anything strange to you?”

“Strange? Well... strange is my job. It would be more unusual if she *didn’t* say

anything strange,” Martha responded with an ingratiating smile. The odd question left her slightly unsettled.

“True enough,” the driver said with a laugh as he cast a look around. They were close to the hospital’s service entrance, so the only people around were Martha, the nurse, the driver and his two assistants. “Doctor,” he said next.

“Yes?”

“Did she, by chance... say anything about Amalgam or Mithril, or something like that?”

“What did you say?” Martha found herself replying, and a chill ran up her spine.

“I see she did.” The driver smiled brightly. At a glance, he looked like your average thirty-something-year-old Caucasian, wearing navy blue chino pants and a jacket. He was about 180 centimeters tall, with a small scar just under the hairline of his short-cropped hair. But in that moment, the man’s appearance changed. An aura of intimidation welled up from him suddenly, and he seemed to grow twice as tall as before.

“Don’t you scream now,” he warned, grabbing Martha by the arm when she tried to draw herself back. His grip was so strong, she thought he might snap it. Then he used his free hand to flash her a glimpse of the small automatic pistol—yes, a gun—hidden under his jacket. Martha didn’t have much experience with firearms, but she knew immediately what that gesture was supposed to mean.

“Get the idea, Doctor?” he asked curtly.

“Yes.”

“Now stay quiet and get slowly into the car,” he instructed. “The nurse there, too.” The nurse, who was standing stock still and looking utterly confused, gulped when she saw the man’s gun. “We can’t leave the nice lady there all by herself,” he jeered. “Now, get in.”

“Wait,” Martha tried to protest. “She’s not part of this. I don’t know who you people are, but—”

“Just get in,” the driver ordered. Left with no other choice, Martha and the nurse climbed into the back seat of the transport wagon. The driver’s assistant got into the cargo area behind them, pistol in hand, taking a position where he could watch all three women at once.

The doors closed and the car pulled out. Martha could see a police car stopped in front of a coffee shop across the three-lane road, but the idea of screaming and calling for help didn’t even occur to her.

“Don’t be afraid. We just want to ask you a few things. Right, Bill?” the assistant said calmly.

The driver gave a short response. “That’s right. You’re safe.”

Liar. You’re going to kill me. Wouldn’t you blindfold me otherwise? Wouldn’t you want to make sure I never saw your faces, or heard your names? The nurse remained silent and pale-faced. Martha wished she could reassure her, but no words came to mind.

The car left San Bruno and headed for the harbor via Route 280, heading opposite the main flow of pre-rush hour traffic. At last, they arrived at an old warehouse near the harbor.

The setting sun streamed in through the small, barred windows, casting beams of light through the dusty air. There was almost no cargo in the wide-open space; just a few small shipping containers and two black sedans.

“Get out,” the driver told them as the car stopped in the middle of the warehouse. Martha and the nurse hesitantly did as they were told. Five men stood in front of them. The man who appeared to be their leader was wearing a brown suit, while the other four wore dirty coveralls, each with an automatic rifle on his shoulder.

“You’re five minutes late,” the man in the suit said, checking his watch with a practiced gesture. He was quite young, not much older than thirty, if that, with a slender face and black hair, which was nicely smoothed back. Strikingly attractive, the young man’s facial features seemed to have been drawn on with an ink brush.

The driver spoke up hesitantly. “Sorry, sir. We didn’t want to be pulled over

for breaking the speed limit—”

“I don’t want to hear excuses. So? Is she here?” the man in the suit asked.

“This way.” The assistant got the wheelchair out the back of the station wagon and brought Teletha Testarossa to him. She was awake now; perhaps the sedative had run its course. But ‘awake’ was all she was as she gazed blankly into space, as if indifferent to her surroundings.

“Miss Testarossa?” The man in the suit crouched in front of her wheelchair and gazed into her face. “I am Lee Fowler. I work for your brother. We met by your parents’ graves once... although I was inside my AS at the time.”

She said nothing.

“We heard you were in the area, so we came to fetch you. I hope you’ll relax in our custody.”

Teletha remained unresponsive.

The man named Fowler straightened up and released a whisper mixed with a sigh. “She really is an empty shell, then. Hard to believe this is the ‘Witch of Mithril’ who gave us so much trouble.”

“She doesn’t look it, does she?” the driver observed.

“But that’s the nature of slow decline, isn’t it? Thus ends the legend; in the real world, heroes rarely die nobly in battle. They’re defanged by logistics issues, interpersonal squabbles, and other petty matters, until they fade away into obscurity.” Fowler fell into contemplative silence for a moment before walking up to Martha and the nurse. “I’m sorry about this, Doctor,” he apologized. “Were they very rough with you?”

“No,” said Martha simply. Her fear remained, of course, but she also couldn’t help but be hypnotized by his dark eyes.

“We had to find out if the girl had told you anything,” Fowler explained politely. “May I ask you a few questions? Did she tell you about organizations named Amalgam and Mithril, and the weapons and battle groups that they utilize?”

“Yes.”

“Did she mention the names of any people or places?”

“No.”

“You aren’t lying, are you?” Fowler asked closely.

“O-Of course not.”

“Did you mention what she said to you to anyone but your ex-Navy friend?”

How does he know what I said to my friend? Martha wondered. *Was I bugged? Are these men really professionals, spies for some secret organization?* In her shock, Martha felt her last remnants of skepticism fall away.

This whole time, part of her had held out hope that this might turn out to be some kind of complicated prank; that this man would suddenly shout, “Happy birthday, Martha!” and all her friends would burst out with mischievous smiles, tables of food and beer and cake, and they’d have a hell of a party together. But of course, that hope had always been a false one—for one thing, her birthday was last month.

“I won’t tell anyone,” she promised. “Really, I won’t.”

Fowler searched her eyes deeply and carefully, and it gave her a moment’s inkling of how her patients usually felt. “I believe you,” he said, and smiled for the first time. “But I have some unfortunate news: the secrecy of our organization is of utmost importance to us. We’d like to... avoid the things that happened here today, and knowledge of that woman, from going public. Do you understand?”

“I understand. I swear I won’t tell anyone. Please take me home.”

“If it were at all possible, I would,” Fowler said regretfully. “But there are techniques nowadays that can draw information out of a person no matter how hard they try to resist. That’s why I said it was unfortunate... I truly am sorry.”

Goosebumps rose up all over her body, and she began to tremble uncontrollably. *I don’t want to die*, Martha realized. *I can’t die now.*

“Do you understand why I’m explaining all of this to you?”

“Please don’t kill me,” she begged.

“I’m afraid of death myself,” Fowler told her gently, “but I think it’s even more frightening to die without knowing why. That’s why I wanted to explain the situation: not in some playful way because I enjoy watching your fear, but simply so that you would know.” Sorrow and pity appeared on his attractive face; it looked genuine.

“Please don’t kill me.”

“I really do regret this.”

“I’m begging you, please—”

“Goodbye, Doctor.” Fowler stepped back, and his men stepped forward. In the corner of her vision, which was blurred with tears, Martha saw the nurse, who had been silent all this time, look up. Her face was pale but she was very quiet, and not trembling at all. Was she very brave, or simply too dense to realize the fate that awaited her?

The nurse was young, in her mid-twenties at most. She was East Asian with short black hair, and had almost feline almond-shaped eyes. The nurse drew in a breath and then whispered, in a penetrating voice, “My goodness. Was that dramatic buildup really necessary?” There was a clear mockery in her voice. “I just knew we wouldn’t get to catch up to you guys without having to deal with another unbearable pretentious asshole.”

“Y-You... stop!” Martha hissed at her. Had the woman lost her mind?

But the nurse just ignored her. “Well? Wasn’t I right, Tessa?!”

“That’s not nice, Melissa. We’ve engaged in a bit of dramatic buildup ourselves, after all,” Teletha whispered, then stood up theatrically from her wheelchair. Her eyes, which had been empty and hollow just moments before, suddenly regained their focus—and a powerful light of will. Life and agency came to dwell again in the once-gaunt face. It was like a doll suddenly coming to life.

The armed men around them seemed a little shaken by the girl’s sudden change. They didn’t even try to approach her as she began to stretch out, leisurely. After a little bit of that, she turned to Fowler and gave him a nod of greeting. “Hello there, Fowler-san. I’d meant to hold off my introduction until

just a little later, but your determination to kill the good doctor forced my hand.”

“I see,” he responded. “So I’m the one you’re after?” As befitted an apparent leader of men, Fowler showed no sign of surprise, but his expression was also far from relaxed. He seemed to be running a few calculations in his head: What kind of trap had Teletha set for him? What were his chances of winning if he stayed and fought?

“Be a good boy and tell your men to put their guns down, please,” she requested. “Otherwise I’ll have to teach you a rather violent little lesson.”

One of said men, the driver who had brought Martha here in the first place, snapped at last to his senses and began striding up to Teletha, angrily. “A lesson, huh? Quit messing around, kid!”

“Don’t,” Fowler said shortly, his eyes narrowed.

As the driver reached for Teletha’s neck, a bullet suddenly hit him in the center of his back, and he fell forward. There was an unpleasant cracking sound, and fresh blood spilled out onto the floor. A split-second later came the sound of the distant rifle shot. Someone had sniped him from far away, through the slight crack in the warehouse door...

“Nice one. Center shot,” the nurse called Melissa said into a miniature transceiver in her ear. “If anyone else tries anything funny, feel free to give ’em the same treatment!”

“Yeah, yeah. Uruz-6, roger!” Martha could just barely hear a staticky male voice reply on the other end of the transceiver.

Meanwhile, Teletha repeated her warning. “Did you hear me? Drop your weapons.”

“Ahh... wonderful.” An earnest smile appeared on Fowler’s face, despite him just having witnessed the death of a subordinate. “Truly magnificent,” he went on. “I thought I was being so cautious: thorough tapping of communications; tailing; listening devices; checkpoint monitoring... You slipped through all of that to make it here, and your performance fooled even me. And now, in the greatest of all possible power moves, you intend to take me alive? You really

are his little sister. The legend continues!”

“You appear to have been under a number of misapprehensions as well. Did you really think that as long as I live, I would ever hold up the white flag to your people?” Teletha asked, a somehow intimidating smile appearing on her face. Her eyes flashed violently, flickering with quiet rage and vengeful spirit. It seemed absurd to have ever called her an empty shell; Martha had never felt such a powerful force of life emanating from anything so small, frail, and lovely.

“I can see that I was,” Fowler agreed, making a slight gesture with his right hand. “But you still don’t know how to finish the job!” He had pressed some kind of button that he’d been holding in his palm, and in that instant, a series of explosions occurred across the warehouse. After a barrage of flashes and deafening blasts, black smoke began to spread.

They were bombs meant to distract, not to kill. Martha cried out but could only stand where she was, baffled and disoriented. Teletha ran up to her and tackled her to the ground. “Doctor, don’t move,” Teletha told her.

“But...!”

“Don’t worry,” the girl reassured her. “My people will handle this.”

Martha looked and saw that the nurse called Melissa had knocked the closest man over with lightning speed—she didn’t know how she’d done it, but the nurse had swiped his gun at some point and now opened fire at the other men.



Shots, screaming, cursing... the automatic rifles the men were carrying echoed around the warehouse. The invisible sniper kept up his work, causing more of these men to fall. Fowler shot at Melissa, even as he began to draw back, but she jumped to the side to avoid his shots and hid behind a car. Martha realized that Teletha must have had more allies than just the nurse and the sniper when several entrances were blasted in with explosives, and men wearing bulletproof vests over plainclothes rushed in.

“Give it up, sissy boy!” Melissa shouted.

“Give it up?” Fowler responded from behind a bullet-ridden sedan. “But I think we both still have more tricks up our sleeves. I can’t afford to let things end just yet!” As he made his declaration, the roof of the warehouse split open and a massive form appeared.

There was a violent roar. Dust and smoke swirled around, and shards of building material showered the floor. Martha could only look on helplessly while Teletha, her former patient, sheltered her with her body.

A gray giant was kneeling above them, clad in streamlined, angular armor. A heat sink grew from its head like a long tassel of hair. It was a humanoid military weapon. An arm slave. Even Martha knew that name... and she also knew there was no way for soldiers on foot to oppose it. This wasn’t one of those robots with the rotund, squat shapes that she saw on CNN, either. It was slender, with a silhouette that seemed to boast incredible skill and power.

Fowler drew back behind the AS without any sense of triumph. Melissa and her reinforcements didn’t try to pursue him, or retreat; they just took shelter.

“Of course,” Teletha whispered. She was still smiling... but now, it was more of an unenthusiastic, self-recriminating smile.

“Wh-What’s going on?” Martha asked shakily.

“Don’t move.” Teletha whispered back, and then raised her voice again. “You saw it, Uruz-1. Destroy the enemy AS!”

“Roger that, Colonel!” A voice resounded over a speaker from all around them. The roof collapsed with a roar and a new, black AS burst through the warehouse wall. Then, without even allowing time for a proper faceoff, it

crashed into the gray one.

The glass of the skylight shattered into pieces as steel bent and concrete broke. The crumbling structure of the warehouse danced around the black machine. Belfangan Clouseau's arm slave, the Falke, had shut down its ECS to tackle the enemy. His first priority was to get the ASes away from vulnerable humans.

Grappling with the other machine, he crashed through the wall of the warehouse and straight into a cluster of cargo containers on the wharf. Still, the enemy machine didn't go down. Holding his monomolecular cutter in a reverse grip, Clouseau plunged the weapon into his opponent's chest.

It was a meticulously timed surprise attack that would earn perfect marks in a scored simulation. Yet his enemy seemed to have anticipated it. Clouseau's strike was met with a dull jolt as the enemy machine erected a force field to block the cutter's strike. A special sensor equipped to the Falke—the fairy eye—registered the lambda driver force field's appearance. Then, a moment later, it began to blare an alarm.

A graphic overlay that utilized colors like a thermal readout shifted around the enemy machine's arm: from yellow to orange, and then to red. Clouseau braced himself; an enemy force field blast was coming. He recognized its formation before it even appeared.

The enemy's right arm came roaring towards him, warping the air around them as it passed. Clouseau only just managed to duck his machine under the coming shockwave. It hit a cluster of containers behind him, scattering their remains through the air like confetti.

He then tried a sweep on the enemy machine's leg. It lost its balance and backed up, but when the Falke stepped forward to execute a follow up, another alarm blared. The enemy's lambda driver unleashed another offensive force field, this one as powerful as a surging wave. Clouseau managed to anticipate this one, too, and leaped into motion just in time to dodge it.

He got good hangtime in the jump, flipping midair as he passed over the enemy's head and throwing an anti-tank dagger down at it from above. The

tandem warhead-shaped charge flew sharply towards the enemy machine's neck. There was an explosion, and the enemy was temporarily masked by smoke and fire.

Of course, Clouseau didn't fool himself for a moment that the job was done. The Falke landed and then immediately leaped to the side, entering into combat maneuvers. In a clash between two third-generation ASes, both of them capable of extreme three-dimensional combat, they would be at their most vulnerable the moment they came out of a jump. He couldn't spare a single moment to rest.

As expected, the gray machine shot immediately out of the swirling smoke, heading right for him. The enemy Codarl-type's lambda driver could nullify most incoming attacks. In terms of equipment, he was at an overwhelming disadvantage. But nevertheless...

"I can do this," Clouseau whispered, doing his best to endure the resulting turmoil as his combat maneuvers jolted him back and forth in his cockpit.

The enemy machine's power was truly incredible, and the difference between them felt nearly insurmountable. But didn't the operators' skill matter, too? If not for its lambda driver, their back-and-forth would have seen the enemy dead three times over by now.

In skill, the advantage is mine! Clouseau affirmed to himself. He could tell his opponent was no amateur, but he could also detect a degree of unconscious arrogance there. His bold, straightforward movements—purely reliant on his machine's superiority—were proof of it, and sooner or later, that arrogance would provide an opening to attack.

An alarm sounded. The enemy was upon him, and Clouseau had to resist the urge to pull the trigger for the head-mounted machine guns. The move would have been instinctual, but he knew that it came too soon. Relying on the fairy eye display, he dodged the enemy's shockwave. Then he called out on his radio, "Uruz-1 to HQ! Where's the package?!"

"HQ here. Firing is already complete," replied the dour and steady voice of Richard Mardukas. "TLAM currently on inertial guidance. ETA, thirty seconds. Yielding terminal guidance to Uruz-1."

“Uruz-1, roger!”

It was at this point that his machine’s AI chimed in.《Alert message: code from HQ confirmed. TLAM01 terminal guidance received. Twenty seconds to arrival.》

“Activate TLAM01 warhead,” Clouseau ordered.

《Roger. Activating TLAM01 warhead.》

A blue “SAFE” symbol in the corner of his weapons display switched instantly to a red “ARMED.” The smart warhead on the cruise missile, flying somewhere high above them, was ready to unleash its power.

Clouseau’s machine was still taking evasive maneuvers, but the Codarl was closing in. It caught the light of the setting sun as it vaulted over a mountain of containers, and the heat sink at the top of its head, like tassels of hair, glinted with rainbow light.

“Okay, come and get me!” Clouseau dared it before throwing an anti-AS grenade. The Codarl stepped nimbly to the right and dodged the explosion. Massive cargo containers behind it went flying, spinning end over end.

Clouseau opened fire with his head-mounted machine guns. The Codarl used its lambda driver first to repel the rain of low-caliber fire, but dropped the force field after determining that it was no threat to its armor. Instead, it focused that power in its hand, preparing to unleash it directly at Clouseau.

Just as he’d planned it.

The first fifty rounds in the Falke’s machine guns were normal rounds, but after that all he had were practice rounds loaded with acrylic paint. These paint rounds now rained down on the Codarl’s head, and the acrylic, aerosolized by the impact, clung to the enemy machine’s sensors.

The intention was to blind his opponent, but modern ASes were equipped with high-frequency wipers and nozzles of cleaning fluid. These were typically used to combat the mud and dust that frequently clung to external sensors during combat, but even when dealing with acrylic paint, they could restore visibility in just a few seconds.

Fortunately, a few seconds was all he needed. In those few seconds, the

enemy machine wouldn't be able to track millimeter band radar.

«TLAM01, ten seconds to impact,» Clouseau's machine's AI announced.

The air around them began to tremble as the roar of a powerful jet engine drew nearer overhead. From out of the sun that burned in the western twilit sky, a cylindrical object approached.

«Five... four... three...» The small red light of a terminal guidance laser was projected from the Falke's head onto the chest of the guarded Codarl.
«Impact.»

A massive explosion hit the enemy machine from above. The cruise missile, flying at close to the speed of sound, had detonated its shaped charge right at the place where the laser was pointing—in other words, the Codarl. Burning gas, denser than steel, transformed instantly into a fiery spear aimed at a single point on the enemy's armor.

The explosion's shockwave rocked the Falke's body. Clouseau grunted as he felt his machine being lifted into the air, but he skillfully kept his footing, and then ran straight for the enemy machine, knowing that the Codarl was still alive inside the smoke. It had erected the lambda driver in the instant before the hit came.

But...! The fiercely surprising attack, right on the heels of the blinding one, would have left his enemy disoriented. The fairy eye confirmed that the lambda driver was active; it had just managed to put up a defensive wall to prevent a follow-up attack from the Falke.

But that wall was only at its front.

Clouseau slipped past his enemy and, faster than the eye could see, plunged his monomolecular cutter into the machine's right side. The engineer's report he had read said that was the location of the lambda driver module. He received quick confirmation of his success—the force field display surrounding the Codarl flickered a few times, then disappeared.

The enemy's lambda driver was neutralized, and the enemy machine, shaken by the unexpected hit, stood stock still... but the iron law of battle for third-generation ASes was to always be moving, quickly and mercilessly.

As it turned back, Clouseau threw his last anti-tank dagger sharply at the enemy machine, hitting the Codarl in its newly-exposed chest. The dagger exploded. This time, the hit sent the machine's upper half scattering into pieces. The Codarl's severed arms tumbled end over end, tracing strange arcs over the twilight bay.

Turning his back on the scattering shards of machinery, Clouseau immediately switched his scanners to active mode. His ECS counter-sensor checked for the presence of enemy reinforcements, just in case.

Nothing.

"Whew..." Once he was sure they were alone, he allowed himself a deep sigh of relief. It seemed the enemy had only prepared one machine, as well.

He'd had his AS on standby, to support Tessa's decoy strategy just in case things went south. Then, for even greater insurance, they'd had the submarine, the Tuatha de Danaan, waiting in San Francisco Bay, ready to fire a cruise missile in support. They'd rigged up the head-mounted machine gun ammo for the same purpose. They'd known there was a chance that the enemy might also prepare an AS, and one equipped with a lambda driver, at that.

Glad we played it safe, Clouseau thought as he called to his allies over the radio. "Uruz-1 to all units. I've destroyed the enemy Codarl-type AS."

Following the departure of the Falke and the Codarl, the outcome of the battle in the warehouse was well on its way to being settled. The warehouse itself was in pieces, the parked car was crushed, and the ground was littered with enemy bodies. Most of what remained around them was rubble, still being licked by tongues of flame that billowed white smoke.

"Tessa. Ben took out the enemy machine," Melissa Mao, dressed as a nurse and carrying a submachine gun, said to Tessa after a brief radio exchange. "There don't appear to be any other enemy machines present. It's impressive—our first time having an M9 beat a Codarl in a one-on-one fight."

"Indeed," Tessa—Teletha Testarossa—answered shortly from the place where she was sheltering alongside the psychiatrist, Martha Witt. She looked out over the thoroughly destroyed warehouse, confirming that her PRT soldiers were still

carefully monitoring the controlled area, and then checked herself for injuries.

She'd popped the buttons off the back of her patient's smock, leaving it in danger of falling from her exposed shoulders. She wasn't wearing underwear, either, so she was all but naked... but any injuries she had were minor scratches. Not an issue.

"The target escaped, then?" Tessa flicked her eyes to the side, looking around for Lee Fowler with little hope of satisfaction.

"I lost sight of him when the ceiling collapsed. I'm sorry," Mao responded.

Tessa just shook her head. "It's all right. This operation was mostly just saying hello, anyway. Too many innocent civilians were put at risk to call it a success."

"I tried to get the doctor as far away as possible, but... yeah, it didn't go the way I wanted it to. Yeesh..." Mao grumbled with a shrug. But as the warehouse fell silent again, an electronic beeping suddenly rang out. It was a simple, high-pitched alarm, intrusive and inappropriate to the scene.

Barefoot, Tessa walked towards the sound. A black cell phone lay among the fragments of concrete scattered across the floor. She picked it up and silently pressed the 'receive call' button. "Fowler-san, was it?" she asked.

Her prompt was met with a chuckle. "That's right. I felt like we had more to say to each other, you see... but not so much as to simply let you catch me. As a compromise, I left my phone behind." Fowler had probably already left the area, likely on his way to the city in a backup vehicle he'd had prepared. He'd have taken measures to prevent the call from being traced, as well. "First, my compliments on your success. You killed at least ten of my men and destroyed one of my ASes, and with such a minimal force of your own. I was completely outplayed."

"I'm not sure I'd agree," Tessa told him. "You're still free, after all."

"Indeed."

"I'd meant to take you into custody and extract as much information from you as possible," she went on. "Even if it took methods that would wipe that smirk off your face for good."

“Your voice is far too lovely to say such frightful things.” Fowler’s tone conjured images of him smirking on the other end of the phone right now. “But, I wonder... Do you really intend to continue fighting us?”

“I don’t think you need a formal declaration,” Tessa said. “I wouldn’t have gone through such a complicated performance if I wasn’t dedicated.”

“I’d thought we’d done more than enough to demonstrate our power already,” Fowler mused in reply. “Mithril is gone, and it’s not as if Amalgam is out to destroy the world. Quite the contrary; we’re venting a little pressure from a world on the verge of bursting. You have no reason to want to fight us.”

“How naive of you,” Tessa said, her tone one of scornful mockery.

“Naive?”

“Yes, naive. You assume we’re fighting you from some moral high ground, out of some grand sense of justice?”

“If I did, it sounds like you’re about to correct me.”

“Your people have killed many of mine. That’s all the motivation we need,” Tessa said plainly. In fact, that wasn’t the only reason that she and her subordinates were fighting, and there was more that they could do, but... but when you drilled down, that was the most fundamental of their reasons. Teletha Testarossa could no longer abide the continued existence of Amalgam after it had killed so many of her people.

“I feel the same way,” Fowler said calmly. “My bond with my subordinates isn’t as strong as yours, I’m sure, but we’ve suffered significant losses as well. Yet I swallowed my resentment and extended a hand to you. What I want to know is why you slapped that hand away and went to the lengths that you did.”

“Thank you very much for the clarification,” Tessa said. “So, your intention was to establish dominance through an overwhelming force of arms, then extend an olive branch? I once subscribed to a similar approach, but no longer. What you call ‘venting’ involves playing with the destinies of too many people. I cannot abide such arrogance.”

“I see. Would this be a sort of partisan spirit at play, then?” Fowler’s teasing had an edge of bitterness to it.

Tessa paused. “Fowler-san. Given the situation, may I be blunt?”

“Feel free.”

Tessa chose her next words carefully, emphasizing syllable after syllable. “Just to eliminate any ambiguity... I utterly despise hypocritical, pretentious *fucking shits* like you people. Do I make myself clear?”

Silence reigned.

Mao and the rest of the PRT members, who’d been watching the phone call, were so shocked by Tessa’s use of profanity that their eyes opened wide and they stared.



“I’m done now, messenger boy. Pass my words along to Leonard Testarossa.” Before Fowler could reply, Tessa turned off the phone and unceremoniously dropped it onto the ground. “Let’s withdraw,” she commanded. “We need to reach the Pave Mare’s LZ before the local police arrive... wait, what’s wrong with you all?”

The staring Mao and the others finally snapped back to their senses, exchanged looks, and at length, burst out laughing. They seemed truly delighted.

“Really, what is this all about?”

“Fucking shits!” The men clapped their hands and cheered.

“Honestly... you got balls, babe.” Mao clapped the baffled Tessa on the back and put an arm around her shoulders.

“What? Ah...”

“I know I’ve said it before, but I love you dearly, my commander.”

Tessa’s cheeks went red as she remembered what she’d said, and Mao gave her a big sloppy kiss on one scarlet cheek. “A-Anyway, we must withdraw! The local police are on their way, surely! This is no time for mock sexual harassment!” Wriggling out of Mao’s arms, Tessa began to give orders to her crew.

“Yeah, yeah, we got it. But Tessa... what do we do with the doc?” Mao shot a nod in the direction of Dr. Martha Witt, who was still slumped against one of the warehouse’s metal supports, gazing glassy-eyed at the entire exchange.

“That’s right.” Tessa walked up to the frightened Martha with an expression of melancholy, and addressed her as delicately as she could. “I’m sorry for putting you in danger, Dr. Witt.”

“Wh-What are you going to do with me?” the doctor asked shakily.

“You can be assured that I won’t harm you,” Tessa promised. “For now, we need to leave.”

Tessa and the others promptly withdrew from the warehouse where the

battle had taken place, en route to a park in the city several kilometers away. Clouseau's AS activated its ECS in invisibility mode and accompanied their car by leaping from building to building, alley to alley, in order to avoid obstacles.

On the way, Tessa explained things to Martha. "That Fowler man's threat to kill you was more likely intended for me." She'd managed to successfully lure him out, but the enemy had remained cautious. Fowler's reason for prodding Martha in front of Tessa the way he had was likely to assuage any personal doubts he still had about Tessa's performance.

In actuality, basic knowledge of "Amalgam," "Mithril," and the various terms associated with them was no longer top secret information. Most military and government officials powerful enough to have a vested interest in such organizations would already know that much. The same went for the things the students of Jindai High School knew about them.

After the attack on the Merida Island Base and their subsequent escape via submarine, while Tessa was wrestling with logistics issues, she was also gathering as much information as she could about the outside world. That included the objective truth about what happened to the transport helicopter and Arbalest they had sent to Tokyo, and also Sagara Sousuke and Kaname.

What she'd learned was that the Gebo-9 transport helicopter had been shot down in a park within the city immediately upon its arrival, and that everyone on board—including the pilot, Lieutenant Santos—was dead.

The Arbalest had fought a violent battle in Sengawa, Chofu—near the school attended by Sagara Sousuke and Kaname—against forces dispatched by Amalgam. In the end, though, it had been destroyed in a battle with an "unknown new AS." The Japanese police had recovered the Arbalest's remains, but someone had made off with its core unit immediately afterwards.

Chidori Kaname had also gone missing during the battle, and nobody knew where she was. Most likely, she had been taken by Amalgam. And as for Sagara Sousuke... Several days after the destruction of the Arbalest, he'd popped back up at the school, met with the students of class 2-4—no, it would be class 3-4 now—explained to them why Kaname was missing, and left. He'd also declared that he would bring her back, no matter what.

None of this had been on the news, but most intelligence organizations would know it by now.

What Amalgam would want to know, then, was more urgent: the location of the Tuatha de Danaan, the weapons it carried, its remaining resources—whether it was still battle-ready, in other words—and how much Tessa had learned about them.

Martha didn't know any of that. If she talked to the police, the FBI, the CIA, or the NSA about the things Tessa had told her, they would probably treat it as low-value information.

After explaining all of that to Martha in the car, Tessa told her, "That's why I think Fowler only said all that to test me. It was purely a cautionary measure."

"I don't understand, Teletha."

"He was probably watching me to see if I was affected. And if I had kept up the performance, he really might have killed you. That's why I gave up my act then and there. In other words..."

"In other words... what? What are you trying to tell me?" Martha asked, exhausted by the flurry of bizarre events she'd just been through.

"In other words, you have no informational value," Tessa said plainly. "If you return to your old life now, you'll probably never hear from any of us again."

"I see. That sounds wonderful."

"I'm sorry, Doctor. You were very kind to me. When we first planned this out, I was expecting to be in the care of someone far more indifferent."

"I see. I'm just too kind, then? Why, if only I'd cared less about my job, I might not have been manipulated by a patient I cared about and then targeted by killers!" the doctor shouted, half-hysterical.

Tessa just gazed at her placidly. "I apologize for that. But it was quite a convincing performance, wasn't it?"

"I suppose so."

The car entered the park that was their destination. The city around them, sinking into evening darkness, had already begun to sparkle like artisan crystal

under the various colorful lights.

Urged by Tessa, she got out of the car. Despite the park containing a few passersby, Tessa's subordinates got out of the car, guns in hands. From above came the sound of rotors pounding the air, and a powerful wind buffeted the park's greenery. An invisible transport helicopter was descending. In just a few seconds, Teletha Testarossa and her comrades would be gone.

Holding down her hair to keep it from being tousled by the gale, Martha called to Tessa, "Can I ask you one last thing?"

"It depends on the question. Go ahead."

"Didn't you... feel anything? When you were carried to the emergency room, you were surely subjected to a humiliating inspection. And even after you came to me, you weren't treated as fully human. How did you endure it?"

"Many of my friends have died," Tessa said calmly. "You can imagine it was nothing compared to that, can't you?"

"So you're trying to avenge them?"

"I'm not sure."

"Then why go to such extremes—"

"I wish I could tell you." Tessa smiled brightly. "Whence comes this wellspring of determination to fight? Whence this desire for revenge so powerful that I'll run through fire to achieve it? I would love to explore that question, with your help... but I fear we're out of time."

As the invisible helicopter landed in a wide-open space in the park, powerful downcurrents buffeted them, causing leaves and flowers to swirl around Tessa. Bathed in the park lights, her sparkling silver hair billowed beautifully in the wind. The helicopter landed behind her, disengaged its ECS, and appeared in a shower of pale blue sparks.

"Hey, Tessa!" Kurz Weber shouted, stepping onto the opened cargo hatch. They'd already picked him up from his sniper point.

"Yes, I'm coming. Goodbye, Doctor." That was all Teletha Testarossa said before running up to the transport helicopter and vanishing into the cargo bay.

She didn't turn back once to look at Martha Witt, who could only stand there, staring after her.

The other men boarded, and the helicopter was in the air even before the hatch was fully closed. Once it had ascended past the park's tallest tree, it activated its ECS again and disappeared. Seconds later it was gone, having faded into the violet darkness of evening.



The dining room had a curious design; neo-Gothic elements had somehow been incorporated into a simple, modern cheeriness. It took in bright sunlight from the southeast-facing windows, and the furniture had a tasteful, calming color scheme that was very relaxing to visitors.

Leonard Testarossa was returning from a journey, conducting errands and negotiations across both hemispheres. He had just entered the dining room when he got a call from Lee Fowler.

"Your sister gave me quite a run," Fowler said over the phone.

It would be night in San Francisco now, but here in tropical latitudes, the sun still hung gold in the western sky. "She's still in her right mind, then?" Leonard asked.

"Yes. It appeared to be a plot to take me into custody. They destroyed a Codarl-m."

"Well, well..." Leonard let out a sigh, the receiver still to his ear.

"I'm very sorry, sir."

"Ah, I'm not criticizing you. I'm exhausted by her stubbornness." He'd thought she was smarter than this. *When did she change?* he wondered. The more time she spent with Mithril, the more foolish her decisions seemed to become. Now she was no different than those coarse and vulgar "sea dogs" he so hated—his dead father and the man's friends, those absurd anachronisms wallowing in self-pity...

"What do you recommend I do?" Fowler asked, interrupting his thoughts. "I've prepared a few options—"

“No, don’t bother. There are far more important things I need your help with, Lee.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“First, return here,” Leonard ordered. “Leave my sister be for now.”

“Are you certain?”

“She’ll come here eventually,” he predicted, “risking countless lives just to ‘teach me a lesson.’”

“Yes, sir. That did appear to be her intention.”

“I see.” He chuckled.

“She left a message for you, as well,” said Fowler.

“Oh? What did she say?” Leonard asked, idly wondering if it might be simpler to just set up a sibling hotline.

“I’m afraid it’s rather vulgar.”

“That’s fine, just tell me.”

“Certainly.” Fowler’s voice became ever-so-slightly more strained. It sounded less like he was afraid of Leonard hearing it and more like his throat was seizing up in embarrassment. “Teletha-sama said that she despised... ‘pretentious fucking shits like us.’”

Ah, there it is, thought Leonard, *like some gutter quarrel between working-class siblings.* She had truly fallen in with the wrong crowd. “How aggressive of her,” he commented.

“Forgive me, sir.”

“Not at all. I’m glad to hear her sounding so feisty. Now, I’ll talk to you later.” Leonard hung up the phone and looked around the dining room. The table, likely a bit over five meters long, had nothing on it but candlesticks and a few dishes.

Dinner wasn’t ready yet, but he could hear stirring through the half-open door at the end of the room. Someone was working in the kitchen. *Fallen in with the wrong crowd...* Maybe he wasn’t much different from his sister, in that

respect. Leonard passed through the door with a slight shrug, entering the kitchen to address the girl inside. “I’m back,” he announced.

The girl—Chidori Kaname—was standing in front of the large gas range, messing around with a frying pan. She stopped and gave him a short nod. “Good for you,” she responded indifferently, and then went back to her cooking.

“You know the cook doesn’t like it when you make dinner on your own,” he observed.

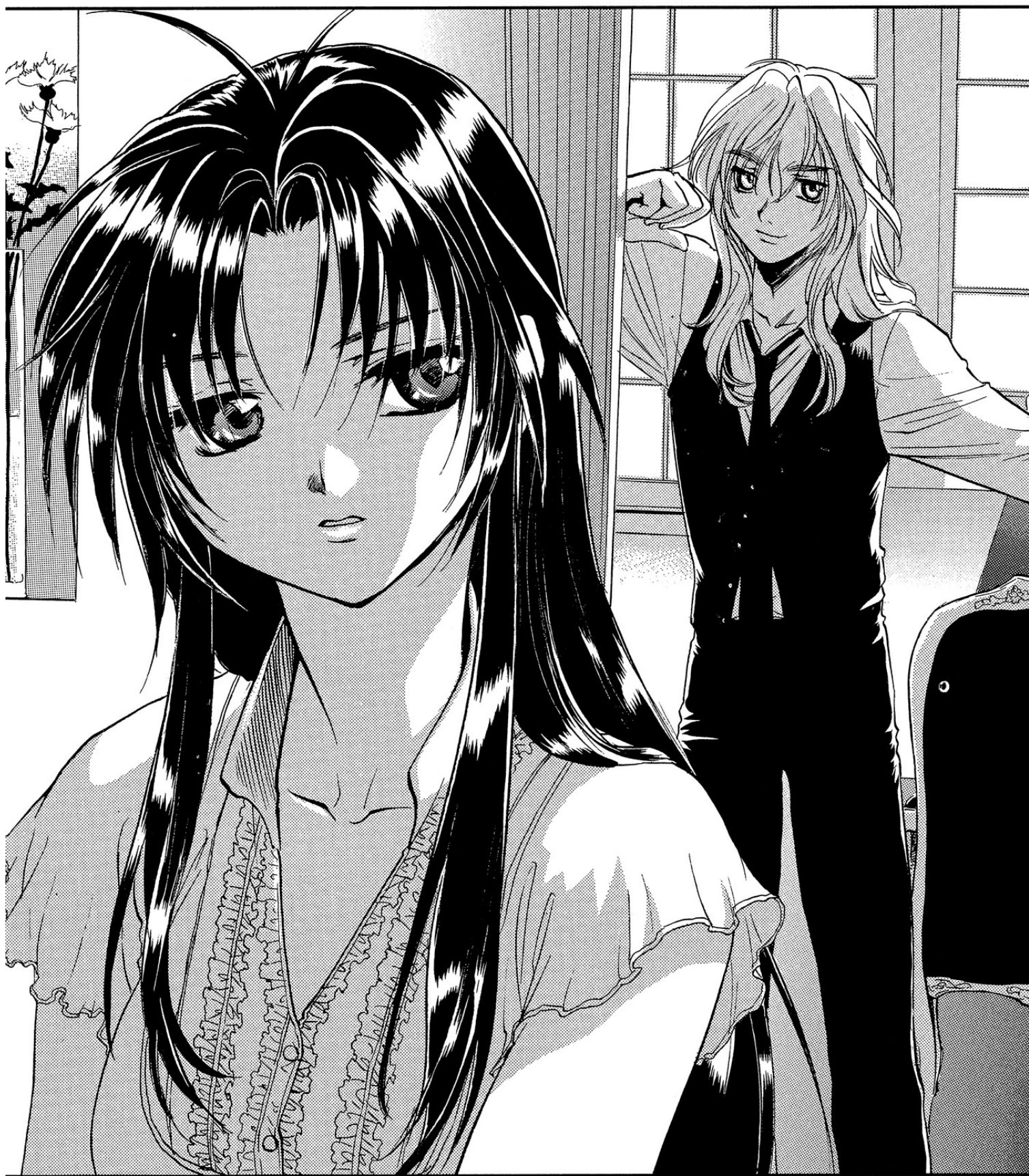
“Oh, yeah?” Kaname shook the frying pan back and forth a little as she reached for a small shaker of salt nearby. “Do you know what I’m making?”

“What?”

“Omelet rice. But there’s no Thai rice here, and no Japanese ketchup. I’ve made a few substitutions, but it won’t be the omelet rice I know.”

“That’s a shame.”

“Could someone buy some for me?” Kaname requested. “Any supermarket in Tokyo would have it.” It seemed like a weak complaint, more so than malicious sarcasm.



He sat down in a nearby chair and said, “You’ll forget soon enough.”

“The taste of omelet rice?”

“I forgot, too, the taste of the roast lamb I ate so long ago,” Leonard told her. “And the face of the mother who made it.”

She didn’t respond.

“That’s what time does.”

“And so, someday I’ll come to love you. Is that it?”

“I didn’t say that.” Leonard gave her a self-reproaching smile. “But we can’t hold off fate forever. All I’m saying is that acceptance can be a relief, in its own way.”

Kaname gazed at him, her eyes as quiet and still as a lake. They were emotionless, like the sensors of a machine, but Leonard accepted that as inevitable.

“I wonder if that’s really what you think,” she whispered, then went back to her frying pan.

He continued to stare at her from behind. Her thin pleated skirt and fitted silk shirt... as he pondered the gentle lines from the nape of her neck to her back, from her hip to her thighs, he considered the meaning behind her words.

Is that really what I think? Of course it is... He considered saying that as he drew up and embraced her from behind. She probably wouldn’t fight him... But then, it wouldn’t mean anything. So Leonard shrugged, standing up to leave the kitchen instead.

“But...” she whispered. “The real omelet rice, the omelet rice only I can make... it was really good. It’s a shame you won’t get to try it.”

“Indeed.” He let the comment roll off his back as he left the kitchen behind. He then realized he was feeling a sense of displeasure—reminiscent of that which he had felt in the schoolyard that day—and it left him slightly annoyed.

He passed through the dining room and into the corridor on the side of the mansion’s courtyard, where he found a woman in a suit waiting for him. It was

one of his subordinates, Sabina Rechnio. She was holding a portable tablet, and seemed to have just finished some kind of communique.

“Survival is confirmed,” Sabina said.

He didn’t even have to ask who she meant. Leonard Testarossa already knew. “You’re talking about *him*?”

“Yes,” she confirmed. “Sagara Sousuke.”

2: Briefing

A simple bed and brick walls, light streaming in through small windows... He was in a room in an old building somewhere, and all he could hear was the sound of waves in the distance. The checklist replayed in Sagara Sousuke's hazy consciousness for the thousandth time: Name, time, location.

All he knew was his name.

How long has it been since I was mortally wounded in the battle with Kurama, and collapsed lifelessly in the Arena in Namsac? he wondered. *Why am I still alive? Where am I?*

He realized he'd asked himself those questions several times already.

Yes. I kept waking up in a daze, realizing that I couldn't move an inch... Then a nurse would arrive and inject me with something, and I would drift back into a deep sleep...

But things were slightly better this time, because he could feel pain: dull, heavy pain in his chest and back and right thigh. Each beat of his heart was an ache that washed over his entire body. His head felt like it had been hit with a sandbag—no wonder he was dizzy.

There was an IV stand next to the bed, medical monitors were all around him, and a mess of EKG cords were attached to his body... an oxygen tank and an aspirator, too. He was covered with a thin sheet, and he was wrapped in bandages.

The toes of his right foot... mobile.

The toes of his left foot... mobile.

The same could be said for the fingers of his right and left hands. Everything seemed to be in place... but he couldn't discount the possibility of a phantom limb phenomenon. Silently, hoping to check his limbs for himself, he labored to move his head.

There wasn't much around him beyond medical equipment, but there was a large painting on the wall beside his bed. It was a panoramic landscape, nearly as long as two adults' armspans. Barely clothed people stood in a blue jungle. Babies, dogs, and divine statues, too. There were lounging women and men writhing in torment. At the center, a young man in a loincloth looked up, his posture that of someone waiting to see if a basketball he'd shot had gone through the hoop. It was simultaneously relaxing and despairing. He couldn't think of where he might have seen it before, but it felt strangely familiar nonetheless.

"Do you know the name of that painting?" a man's voice asked, though he couldn't see the face of the person who had entered the room. The slightest attempt to sit up was met by waves of pain. *"Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?"* The man peered into Sousuke's face. He was handsome, blond, with round glasses.

Michel Lemon.

Is that its name? he tried to whisper, but his voice refused to leave his throat. Instead he just let out a pathetic moan, while his lips flapped uselessly.

Nevertheless, Lemon let out a quiet, "Yes," as if understanding his words. "It's a replica, of course, but it's quite a famous work."

"Gauguin, correct?" This time, he managed to speak.

"I'm surprised. You know things that aren't weapons and military tactics?"

"I saw it in an art textbook," Sousuke whispered, feeling a sudden nostalgia for the art teacher who would rattle on about all kinds of complicated, difficult things if given the slightest chance.

"Ah. That's right, you went to high school..." Lemon pulled out a small wooden chair nearby, turning it to face away from Sousuke before sitting down on it with his arms folded over the back.

After studying him for a while, Sousuke asked, "What's the situation?" He already knew he was alive, but he didn't have time for pleasantries, or even to revel in that fact. He needed to know as much as he could as quickly as possible.

Lemon let out a distasteful snort, shrugged his shoulders, then let out a soft

sigh. “The situation, eh? All right. It’s been fifty-six days since Nami died. It’s the twentieth of May.”

Sousuke said nothing.

“You were badly wounded in the fight with that Kurama guy,” Lemon went on. “You took a rifle round in and out, so it’s basically a miracle that you’re not dead. It missed your heart, major arteries, and spine, but you lost part of your liver, a kidney, and part of your digestive system, too. You’ll never drink liquor again, and you’ll have a few other dietary restrictions.”

Sousuke didn’t even flinch. It was a small price to pay to not be dead. He’d sworn off drinking since that day in Hong Kong, anyway.

“You got lucky. My medics managed to hook you up to life support, but it still seemed like you were done for,” Lemon continued. “Your heart nearly stopped a few times. I manned the defibrillator myself, so I know. We brought you to a hospital in Namsac under a false ID, and got you in good enough shape for surgery. But there wasn’t a surgeon in the local hospital that could do what needed to be done. The enemy was tracking us, too, so we had to carry you while on the lookout, and airlifted you to Phnom Penh in Cambodia. There’s a hospital on our payroll there, and a skilled French surgeon happened to be working with an NGO in the area at the time, so we could call him in to do the procedure while remaining incognito. It took twenty hours in all. We had to keep the nosy local press away while dealing with the aftermath of the incident —”

He got that far before Sousuke stopped him. “The point is, you saved me, right?”

“I suppose. And now you’ve fought your way back to verbal conversation.” Lemon’s voice sounded disbelieving, yet at the same time, amused.

Sousuke wondered why he might have to go to such lengths to save him, but the reasons that his imagination volunteered were too numerous even to count.

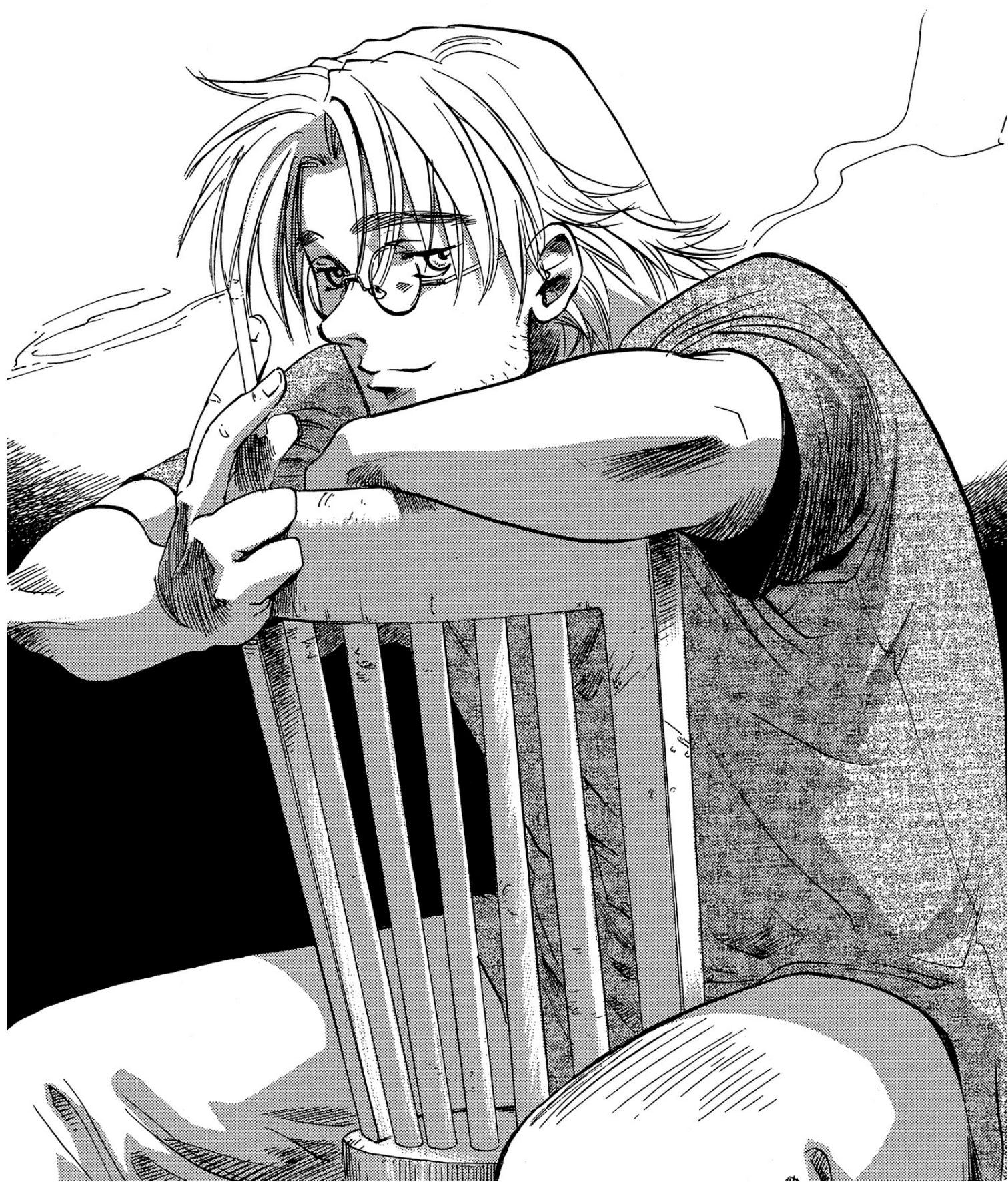
“You regained consciousness several times after that, but you weren’t in any condition to talk. You whispered a few location names, usually along with things like ‘bring her back’ and ‘get her back.’”

“I don’t remember that.”

“Of course you don’t,” Lemon whispered, then pulled a cigarette out of the pocket of his short-sleeved shirt. He lit it with a match and took a drag.

He’d lived with him for a month, but Sousuke had never seen Lemon smoke before.

Lemon must have noticed Sousuke’s inquisitive gaze, because he cast a glance at his cigarette and shrugged self-deprecatingly. “Yeah, I smoke,” he said, circling the lit end of the cigarette in his fingers. “I thought playing the mild-mannered photographer would be a good chance to quit, but I just couldn’t cut it.”



“I see.” Sousuke nodded, thinking back on Kurama’s last words.

“Once we had you out of the woods, we carried her back to her home village, and held a funeral for her,” Lemon told him.

Sousuke said nothing.

“After that, I got about a hundred meters from her grave before I couldn’t take it anymore. I broke down and had a smoke. I think I really loved that girl. I choked on the smoke some, and then cried a lot. About ten years’ worth of tears,” said Lemon, although he showed no particular emotion now, as if he were talking about something from the distant past.

“I don’t blame you for what happened,” he continued. “I’m as guilty as you are. We both used her, got her in over her head, then let her die. It’s a common story in our line of work. Of course, some day...” He dropped the cigarette on the floor and rubbed it out with his shoe. “...Some day, I’ll pay for it, I think.” Lemon fell silent for some time, staring emptily at a point on the wall. The sunlight streaming in through the window created deep shadows on his face.

Sousuke felt like he’d seen this expression many times before. It was one he saw on the faces of his battle comrades from time to time; a sort of death mask, unique to those who made their business in and around death. Whether far in the future or soon to be, the shadow spoke of the inevitability of entropy.

“Where am I?” Sousuke asked, and Lemon slowly turned to look at the painting behind him.

“That painting is a hint; the artist spent his last days here. Hiva Oa in the Marquesas Islands, smack in the center of the Pacific. It’s like the end of the Earth to a Frenchman like me.”

The Marquesas Islands. Polynesia. He seemed to recall that being French territory, but Sousuke wondered why they’d bring him out to the middle of nowhere. They probably wanted to hide him from someone, which was enough information to give him a good idea of what organization Lemon belonged to.

“Answer my questions thoroughly,” said Lemon, “or you’ll spend your last days here, too.”

“I doubt that.”

“I didn’t just save you out of friendship or the goodness of my heart. I wanted to know what you know, about Amalgam and Mithril. So does the DGSE.” He took his glasses off to peer at Sousuke again, then turned his chair around and sat in it properly. “Let’s start the questioning,” he said, his tone strictly business.

It was after nightfall when Lemon left Sousuke’s room. He passed through the corridor and entered the nave of an old church, erected in the 19th century, which they’d chosen as their local base of operations. It wasn’t a known tourist destination and no locals worshiped there, but Lemon’s fellow special forces members still kept a strict watch over the area to prevent unknown elements from wandering in.

It was another hot day on the equatorial Hiva Oa Island. Outside the window, beaming sunlight reflected off the ocean beyond the cliff, bright enough to sting Lemon’s eyes as he left the dark room. His only salvation came from a cooling wind that passed through the stone corridor.

His superior, who was waiting for him in the nave, now noticed Lemon and began to approach him. The man’s name was Delecour. He was slender and just over forty, with black hair and a goatee. They were both agents of France’s Directorate-General for External Security, and they’d been on countless operations together.

“Well? Did the kid talk?” Delecour asked.

“Well...” Lemon shrugged. “He was evasive. Lots of ‘I don’t know’ and ‘I don’t remember...’ He probably knew we couldn’t torture him in his current condition, though I don’t know why he’s so reticent to inform on an extinct organization.”

The other man said nothing.

“He was being cagey with information about that submarine and its battle group, too,” Lemon continued. “I think he was trying to find out what I knew, if you can believe it.”

They didn’t know much about the amphibious submarine that the American military referred to as the “Toy Box.” Some data said it had capsized, while

other sources claimed that it was still hiding in the Pacific. In practice, this was as good as knowing nothing. Even Sousuke, who Lemon was sure had been part of that battle group, seemed genuinely ignorant of his allies' whereabouts.

"Anything else? No one cares about that submarine whatsit. What we want is information on Amalgam," Delecour pressed him, his irritation plain. "We were originally investigating their open dealings in world arms markets, but some incidents this year have begun painting us a much clearer picture: These men manipulate international conflict to prolong the stagnating Cold War structure—and much more importantly, to deny us influence over it. But the fact that we can't get any information about them, either through soft or hard power, is—"

"I know that," said Lemon, waving his hand in annoyance. He didn't like Delecour. As someone who had worked his way up from the bottom, Delecour had a tendency to condescend to Lemon, who had been on the fast track since he was a child, and could have become a high-ranking bureaucrat if he'd so desired. He seemed to regard him as a spoiled graduate school intellectual. "Sagara Sousuke said he'd cooperate in exchange for certain things."

"Things?" Delecour questioned.

"Yes."

"What 'things,' exactly?"

"Weapons, ammunition, funding; an easy-to-procure arm slave, a cargo ship for transport, and a safehouse in a designated location." Lemon relayed Sousuke's words exactly as they'd been spoken.

Delecour's brow furrowed. "He still wants to fight Amalgam?"

"It seems so."

"So we save his life, and he treats us like his errand boys. Arrogant, isn't he?"

"Are you going to accept his requests?"

"Absolutely not," Delecour spat. "We haven't decided for sure that we're going to fight Amalgam. The only thing we can offer him is a promise not to kill him."

"Makes sense to me."

“Let’s let him recover a while longer. Then I’ll apply the thumbscrews myself.” When Delecour talked that way, he was usually serious. He’d wait for Sousuke to recover his stamina, then torture him severely, maybe drugging him for good measure.

Lemon didn’t have the authority to stop him. Depression sank over him as he considered the scene to come.

“You don’t approve?”

“Well...” Lemon hedged.

“He may be getting to the point where we need to restrain him as well,” Delecour pointed out. “Go on and cuff him.”

“That won’t be necessary yet,” Lemon protested. “He can only just move his head. He won’t be causing trouble for a while.”

But “trouble” went down that very night.

The church where Sagara Sousuke was being held had been built on a low mountain slope, facing the southwestern sea of the isolated island. There were no civilian houses or harbors around, and the agents who came in and out dressed as tourists blended in well. It was a perfect place for a spy organization’s safehouse.

All the locals knew was that some rich foreigner had bought up the church and used it from time to time. Very few of them ever ventured nearby, either.

The 29 SA—the special forces of the DGSE—ran patrols around the church in shifts. The soldiers, wearing plain clothes and night vision goggles shaped like sunglasses, carried only small machine pistols hidden under their Hawaiian shirts. It was hardly an ideal security situation, but if a young person or a tourist wandered into the grounds—the likeliest scenario—then scaring them away with body armor and carbine rifles would be counterproductive. Such things would cause more trouble than they would prevent.

That night, a young foot soldier on watch duty was walking along the cliff face, which was being lapped at by the quiet waves. He’d come out of the army, gone through grueling training and tests, and only just gotten himself assigned

to a squad mission.

He wasn't about to complain about how boring the mission had been. The fact that they'd been called in especially to run these patrols in lieu of some over-the-hill security forces meant that whoever was being held in the church was of the utmost importance. Anyone who would yawn and slack off in the face of sentry duty in the sticks would never have been chosen for Special Forces in the first place.

It was this state of alertness that allowed him to spot three men silently trying to come ashore from the sea below the cliff. They were holding brand new carbines and dressed in black diving gear, wearing water-resistant tactical vests. He could tell at a glance that they weren't local youths or tourists.

Naturally, he wasn't about to come right out, pointing his gun at them while shouting, 'Halt! Who are you?' The young soldier knew that he couldn't confront three armed professionals with a machine pistol alone. Instead, he hid and whispered into his mobile transceiver. "Éphémère-4 to Éphémère-1. Three armed intruders sighted at E12. Instructions?"

Commander Delecour responded immediately. "Éphémère-1 here. Continue monitoring. I'll send support in three minutes."

"Éphémère-4, roger. Out." Turning off his radio, the young soldier moved soundlessly to hide behind a nearby rock. That would serve as a blind spot for the enemy making landfall, and he could watch their movements from a hundred meters above.

Just then, a hand wrapped around his neck from behind. He opened his mouth in shock, but didn't have time to shake free; the knife was at his neck.

There had been a fourth man.

"Where is Sagara Sousuke?" the person whispered in the voice of Death itself. Then, "One more time: where is Sagara Sousuke?"

The young agent didn't answer.

In response to his silence, the man said, "Impressive spirit."

He felt a burning pain in his back; the knife had pierced his kidney. The enemy

dug the tip of his dagger in mercilessly, and the shock of it made it impossible for him to cry out, even if he'd wanted to.

The knife was pulled back out, stabbed twice into his heart, and then drawn straight across the young soldier's throat to finish him off before dumping him onto the rock. They hadn't tried to finish him with one blow, but had struck multiple vital areas to make sure he was dead. It was the best way to kill with a knife.

Something strange was happening. Sousuke could sense that, based on the sounds of security guards running around in panic. Faintly, he could hear people having conversations via transceiver. He could barely read and write in French even with a dictionary on hand, so he didn't stand a chance of understanding the conversations he'd overheard. Nothing else seemed immediately amiss, but there was definitely trouble brewing.

Something hung in the air that hadn't been there before... It was malice, he realized, as the smell of blood came drifting towards him on the salt wind. It seemed very far away, and he didn't know where it was coming from, but Sousuke's finely honed sense of smell caught it immediately.

Someone was dead—murdered.

That realization came at the exact same moment he heard gunshots from outside. Low-caliber rifles and submachine guns, likely M4s or MP5s. They weren't using burst shots or full automatic except for when obviously in support. It was the rhythm of the professional soldier, firing only as much as was needed.

The minute I regain consciousness... Sousuke gritted his teeth and picked his head up, and agony went coursing through him. His head was swimming and his fingertips trembled, but he knew he had to stand.

Sousuke felt the alluring urge to tell himself that the chaos outside wasn't related to him and to go back to sleep, but he dug down deep and fought it. If the situation was really as Lemon had described it, then it was obvious who the battle outside was being fought over.

It felt like he was carrying a multi-kilo sandbag when Sousuke put a hand on

the bed and picked himself up. Fighting the pain, he sat up, twisted his body, and pulled out the various wires and tubes that had been hooked up to him. He just barely managed to remain upright on the bed.



His muscles were shockingly depleted; if Lemon had been telling the truth, then he'd been asleep for a month and a half. "Damn..." Sousuke cursed, looking at his arm, which was so thin and frail he didn't even recognize it. It almost looked like a woman's. It would be no exaggeration to suggest he might lose an arm-wrestling match to Teletha Testarossa or Tokiwa Kyoko.

The shots outside continued sporadically, coming closer bit by bit.

Any weapons? he thought. None. All he had was his IV pin.

Anywhere to run? None. His door was locked; he'd heard it snap into place when Lemon had left. The windows—if he could even break through the glass—were too small and too high up. It would be impossible for him to climb out in his current condition. Frankly, even walking was a dicey proposition.

Gunshots and screams echoed from the hallway. They weren't far now. In fact, they were right on his doorstep. The enemy would enter his room, no question about it.

Sousuke clicked his tongue and ran his eyes over his scant available resources: an IV set; several medical devices; a medical oxygen tank; and a bottle of mineral water. That was it. And he didn't have the strength left to run, let alone fight off a group of highly trained enemies. If the enemy entered the room, he'd be shot to death; that was all there was to it.

There was no way to fight back. *No, actually...* Fueled by knowledge and instinct, Sousuke began to move, clenching his teeth as he shifted his feet from the bed to the floor. If it turned out he couldn't stand, that would be it—game over.

Fortunately, his legs just managed to hold his weight. From there, he made his way shakily to the heart monitor, and reached for the medical oxygen tank beside it. He tried to yank out the tube attached to the tank, but didn't have the strength for it... so instead, he opened the tank's valve all the way and slammed the attached inhaler mask against the wall until it broke. With that task accomplished, he could hear the sound of air leaking out.

Destroying the breathing apparatus had proved hugely draining, but Sousuke wasn't finished yet. Shoulders heaving from the effort, he grabbed the bottle

left on the simple side table. It felt incredibly heavy, and his subsequent pouring of the mineral water out onto his bed felt like a herculean effort.

He then dumped the last fifth of the water in the bottle over his head, then wrapped the wet sheet around his exhausted body.

“Ngh...” That was the best he could do. The rest would come down to luck. Sousuke lay back down on the bed, grabbing the pin of the IV that had been sticking into his right hand, and calmed his heaving breaths.

Outside, he heard gunshots. Inside, there was the sound of oxygen rushing out of the tank. His body was aching all over, but he ignored it. He’d done this many times in the past. It would work out somehow.

There were more gunshots, this time in his immediate vicinity. A few seconds later, a man in black battledress kicked the door in with a crash.

The man pointed his carbine straight at the bed. “Sagara Sousuke?” he asked.

“I would try to deny it,” Sousuke admitted, “but you’d shoot me anyway.”

“Indeed.” The man fired.

In that same moment, Sousuke twisted away. He knew that even if he dodged the first one, the man’s follow-up shots would finish him off... But before the man could fire again, the air in front of him exploded.

The man let out a cry of shock as a raging flame swelled up from his hands. With the abruptness of an acetylene torch flickering on, a fireball engulfed the area three to four meters around the man, accompanied by the dull, heavy roar of an explosion.

The oxygen released from the medical tank had filled the room, and had been triggered in an instant by the man’s gunshot. It wasn’t as effective as a military incendiary device, but flame consumed him as surely as if a massive lighter had been switched on at his feet.

The flame reached Sousuke on the bed, and a violent wave of heat washed over his body. He tried to hold his breath, but the heat still got into his nose and throat. If he hadn’t been doused in water and wrapped in wet sheets, he probably would have been badly burned as well.

Once the worst of the heat had passed, he sat up again. The next thing he heard was the enemy's screams. "Ahhh! Ahhh!" the man shrieked, dropping his gun to clutch at his eyes, which must have been burned in the blast. Sousuke got up out of the bed—faster now than the first time—and staggered towards the enemy in front of the door.

The painting on the wall was in flames. *Where do we come from, what are we, where are we going?* he thought, musing over its title.

"Chidori..." he said, whispering under his breath. Then Sousuke walked straight forward, grabbing his enemy to pull the pistol out of the man's own thigh holster. While the man clung to him for dear life, shrieking in confusion and fear, he pressed the gun against his enemy's jaw and pulled the trigger. There was an ear-splitting scream, and the man fell dead on the spot.

Sousuke stood there silently. Maybe it was because of the painting behind him, twisting and blackening as it burned, but for some reason, he found the action exceptionally painful. He didn't know anything about this man except that he'd been trying to kill him. He had no reason to pity him.

And yet, Sousuke felt miserable over the knowledge that the cycle had resumed; that the nightmare hadn't ended, after all. He would have been content to die back at the Arena, but some unknown force had ordered him to remain alive and keep killing.

Sousuke knelt down next to the body and stole the man's equipment: tactical vest, digital transceiver, carbine rifle, spare magazines, blood-stained knife, smoke grenade, survival and medical kits. He put the vest on over his naked upper half, holstered the pistol in its hip pocket, shouldered the carbine rifle, and left the room.

He seemed to be in some kind of old church. He didn't know what had happened to Lemon and the others; maybe they'd run off, or maybe they were dead. Either way, he had to get out of there. Once he had done so, he could hide. It was dangerous to be where people were, so he'd escape to the nearby mountains and recover his strength there.

That was the best option Sousuke could think of right now, and he began to move wordlessly. His breathing was ragged. His legs were heavy. The

equipment he'd taken from the enemy weighed on him. The carbine felt like a fifty-kilogram cement bag on his shoulders. How could he have ever swung this thing around weightlessly?

He came upon a dead body. Judging from his civilian outfit, he must have been one of Lemon's colleagues: a man of just over forty with black hair and a goatee. Sousuke felt as if he recognized the man; he must have seen him several times during the month he'd spent drifting in and out of consciousness.

He passed through the corridor and came out in an open space. Apparently, it really was a church; the worship hall had high vaulted ceilings, and silvery moonlight streamed in through the stained glass windows despite the surrounding darkness.

He could see Lemon and several other men standing beyond the beams. "Don't shoot!" Lemon sharply ordered the men who'd pointed their rifles at Sousuke. "Look, it's him."

Lemon then began to approach him as Sousuke supported the carbine with his shaking arms, all while trying to keep the other man in his sights.

"Sousuke. You're safe?" Lemon asked.

"Unfortunately. Where is the enemy?"

"We've cleared out all the ones outside. It looked like one was heading our way. I heard a big explosion earlier, but..." Lemon said, then furrowed his brow as he noticed the gun and equipment Sousuke was carrying. "Isn't that enemy equipment? Did you kill the invader?"

"Affirmative."

"That's all of them, then... But I can't believe they'd come this far to attack us," Lemon spat ruefully.

Sousuke had already slumped back against the nearby wall, uneasy on his feet. "You have a dead comrade back there."

"What did he look like?"

"Forties, goatee, black hair."

Lemon's eyes went wide, then he looked down and closed them. "Delecour?"

Damn.”

“But it seems I’m the one they were after,” Sousuke pointed out.

“You are. But how did you know?”

“He knew my name.”

“I see.”

Just the act of standing was so taxing that Sousuke ended up slumping down the wall to the ground.

“So? What were you planning to do, dressed up like Rambo?”

“Escape. But I think it’s proved beyond me.”

Hearing Sousuke’s exhausted words, Lemon smiled. “Yeah, I agree. You’re not your usual Superman self. You should save your strength.”

“Agreed.”

“The real question is why someone wants to kill you so badly that they came here to the end of the earth to do it.”

“Yes,” Sousuke agreed.

Lemon walked up to him, knelt down, and peered into Sousuke’s face before asking, “Any ideas? Why would they see you as being valuable enough that they’d send forces to kill you? I could hazard a guess, but it would be a shot in the dark. So why don’t you just tell me?”

“I don’t know,” Sousuke whispered, fighting his not-yet-healed wounds. “They have their fair share of reasons to hate me.”

“That wouldn’t explain it, I’m afraid.”

“There’s one other possibility I can think of.”

“What’s that?”

“Al.” Sousuke said, naming his partner. “If he’s still alive and Amalgam knows about him, then they know that he and I as a team are a threat, and they’ll want to take one or both of us out.”

Teletha Testarossa's problems kept piling up. Her week-long performance had left her mentally and physically exhausted, and she didn't have time to take the long break she needed.

First, she had to deal with the aftermath of the San Francisco operation; even though there hadn't been many witnesses at the harbor, there had still been a massive AS battle there, and a panic was sure to follow. If she'd had the power of Mithril behind her, she'd have been able to spin a cover story about a drug war, but she was on her own now. Still, some degree of information control was necessary, so she had her ship's AI, Dana, and various subordinates handle it, before personally checking their work.

After meeting up with the Tuatha de Danaan, which had been waiting for them in the ocean near the coastline of California, their next job was to stay under the twin radars of the US Navy and Coast Guard.

That was no easy task; the United States Naval Forces weren't stupid, and the de Danaan had been out in the world for over a year and a half. They would have spent that time finding ways to detect the rogue submarine, and by now they should be achieving some results. And the further the United States detection systems evolved, the more limited the actions of Tessa and her crew became.

After three days of silent running, they reached an area 120 miles off the shore of Mexico. Only then could Tessa relax their security levels a bit. When XO Mardukas and the ship's AI relayed her announcement, it was met with a sigh of relief throughout the boat, even from the crew in the control room.

"Ma'am. Captain Clouseau has been waiting for two hours," Mardukas said.

"That's right," Tessa agreed, rising from the captain's chair. "Let's go." Her ash blonde hair, which would normally have been done in a braid, was tied behind her in a simple ponytail. She hadn't had a shower in two days, either. The last three days had been so unpredictable that there had been no time for basic hygiene. Had she been a male captain, she'd have had stubble by now.

She left navigation and monitoring duties to the officer of the deck and headed towards the first briefing room. The sailors and officers she met on the way continued to salute her. It seemed vaguely inappropriate; Mithril had been

effectively neutralized as a military organization, and while she'd told the crew many times that they didn't have to salute anymore, none of them heeded her suggestion.

"Everyone's exhausted," Tessa whispered, going out of her way to maintain a straight posture and walk with a swift step for the benefit of onlookers. She was exhausted, too, but couldn't let her men see that.

"Yes, Captain. There's been no adverse effect on morale yet, but I'm worried about mistakes slipping through," Mardukas whispered from behind her.

"Twelve hours, if possible, but a break of at least eight would be advisable."

"Impossible. We'll take six hours' R&R, then continue on south." Tessa knew that Mardukas never exaggerated his advice, but six hours really was the longest they could afford to rest. Any longer than that, and the US Navy would find them. Then Amalgam, who was surely monitoring the Navy's communications, would know their location, too.

"I don't mean the crew. I mean you," Mardukas nagged, predictably enough. "You haven't taken a single proper rest since your decoy performance in San Francisco. It's creating tension in your orders to the crew, as well. I'm sure Captain Goddard and the rest of the control room crew are talking about how tired you look right now."

"If they're sympathetic to it, why can't I just keep going?" Tessa asked, fighting back the annoyance rising inside her chest. She immediately regretted her words. "I'm sorry. You're right. I'll be more careful."

"Not at all..."

"But six hours is still our upper limit. I'll take a proper rest later. Let's try to hang in there a bit longer." She gave him the prettiest smile she could, but Mardukas seemed unmoved.

He stopped, checked briefly to make sure no one was watching, and then spoke again. "Captain. May I?"

"What is it?"

"My loyalty to you is unchanged, as is that of the crew. I hope that was made clear after our escape from Merida Island."

“Yes...” Tessa nodded, thinking back on what had happened after they’d left Merida Island in the wake of the attack there.

The three Behemoths and the bombings had dealt them a mortal blow, but the de Danaan had escaped. And despite the severe losses they’d taken, Tessa and the others had used all of their knowledge and experience to shake off the enemy’s pursuit. The United States military seemed to have learned about the attack as well, and evading them had proven to be exceptionally difficult. Had she had a normal submarine under her command, there would have been no way to escape their search nets.

After shaking off their pursuers and coming to a rest in the ocean near Indonesia, Tessa had revealed to the crew that the other battle groups had undergone similar attacks, and that Mithril was effectively dead. They would have to accept the fact that they were now on their own, and would need to evade the enemy without any organizational support whatsoever.

Their enemy, Amalgam, had started various civil wars and regional conflicts in the past. With Mithril gone, they’d probably become even more active in world affairs, and be able to reap rewards from their warmongering with impunity.

After explaining her sources for that information, Tessa had added, “Of course, it would be impossible for us to create any kind of absolute, everlasting peace. We’ve always known that. Yet the purpose of Mithril was always simply to use force to create ‘as much peace as possible.’ It’s too late to debate the merit of that use of force. Idealistic pacifists call us human garbage, but you wouldn’t be here if that bothered you. The nature of violence is that you’ll be called such things. There’s no honor or glory in it.

“With all that in mind,” she continued, “I will remain on this vessel, the strongest tool of violence in human history. I will do whatever it takes to oppose them tooth and nail, and force their backs to the wall. Let us abandon all platitudes: This is a mission of revenge. I want them to pay for those they took from us on Merida Island. It may be difficult, but we do stand a chance.”

She could even remember, clearly, the feeling of the microphone in her hand.

“I can’t pay you properly, of course, and things are about to become far more

dangerous. You're mercenaries, so I can't force you to stay. I'll prepare helicopters in the hangar deck for anyone who wants to leave the ship. The helicopters will fly to Jakarta, and from there you'll be free to go. There's no need for officers or NCOs to hold back. If anyone doesn't want to be a part of this, meet me in the hangar one hour from now. That is all."

She'd spoken it all plainly, and turned off the microphone once her long speech was finished.

Thinking that the control room personnel would need time to consider the offer as well, Tessa left her chair and shut herself up alone in her quarters for the hour to come. Mardukas appeared to have something to say to her, but Tessa ignored him. Melissa Mao, her best friend, also knocked on her door while she was waiting out the hour. But even then, Tessa just said through the door, "Return to the duty room and think it over."

I'll be lucky to have thirty percent of my crew remaining... No, maybe even twenty percent, thought Tessa, who knew that what she was asking for was utterly unreasonable. It would then require multiple round trips to transport off the hundreds of people leaving with the few helicopters they had. She spent the hour calculating the logistics of it all, as well as how to restock their still-insufficient supplies.

Tessa headed from her quarters to the hangar deck, opened the heavy door all by herself and went inside. There were about a hundred crew members hanging around there, Kurz, Mao, and Clouseau among them. They were chatting among themselves, showing no particular signs of tension.

"Is this all of you?" Tessa asked them, finding it strange.

Mao furrowed her brow. "All of who?"

"Well... all of those disembarking."

"Oh, them? They're down that way." Mao gestured with her chin.

A little ways away, a group of twenty was standing next to the transport helicopters. They were joined by ten seriously injured people in need of proper treatment, and three members of the nursing staff to accompany them. Thirty-three in all.

A mere thirty-three.

“Most of the ones leaving are the ones with families, kids. It makes sense,” Kurz said.

“But what about the rest of you?”

He glanced into Tessa’s face, then shrugged. “Look around you, Tessa. This is all ground force guys, base personnel, and maintenance crew. We’re just here because we don’t have anything better to do. By the way, there are other base personnel around at various posts, studying up for how they can be of best help.”

“B-But... Isn’t there anyone else? If you’re having any second thoughts at all, you’re under no obligation to stay,” Tessa pressed them.

The group all looked at each other. “You heard her. Hey, anyone here have doubts?”

Nobody responded. No, one private from logistics raised his hand and shouted, “Colonel, ma’am! There’s a TV show I recorded on land! Can I have permission to go ashore for just a little while to watch it? I’ll be right back!”

Immediately, the hundred people present burst out into laughter.

From the center of the group, the large maintenance chief who’d just finished drinking a cola, Sachs, broke through the crowd to approach her. “You heard ’em, Captain. Now, we do have plenty of worthless assholes sucking up the boat’s oxygen. So if you want to fire ’em, now’s your chance! Right, barkeep?” Sachs asked, turning back towards the others.

A plump, elderly man standing in the crowd—the man who’d run Darza, the bar at Merida Island Base—shook his fist, and cursed back at him. “I’m not worthless, you idiot. I was a mercenary in Africa in my youth! I could step into the shoes of the old Russian if you want!”

“Sounds good to me,” Sachs called back. “The old man can take Major Kalinin’s place as field commander. Starting today, you’re Perth-1!”

“Bet he’ll be getting everyone drunk every day, though,” someone else predicted. “Wouldn’t expect much out of them from now on.”

“Idiot, as if I had time to bring a drop of alcohol on board,” the man grumbled back. “Too many dead assholes to haul along, instead. Lousy bums...”

The group clapped their hands and whooped.

It was only later that Tessa learned that the man who'd run Darza really hadn't brought any alcohol on board. Instead, before he evacuated, he'd packed into his bag all the pictures of their late colleagues that hung on the bar wall, including Captain McAllen.

“No real man would ever turn tail and run, you know?” another man called.

“That's right!” chimed in another.

“Excuse me! Don't forget there are women here, too,” the engineer, Lieutenant Lemming, shouted across the crowd.

Tessa's secretary, who's name was Villain, and communications officer Shinohara raised up their cola bottles and joined in. “Hear, hear!”

“But... but... we've lost dozens, remember? And I told you what to expect here, too. Why would you possibly...” Tessa trailed off, standing there uncertainly.

Mardukas, who had come up behind her at some point, said, “Honestly... What reckless lowlives.”

“Mardukas-san?”

“Myself included, of course.” His words got another roar of laughter from the crew. For once, Mardukas didn't shout for them to quiet down. Instead, he spoke further to Tessa over the ruckus. “Captain, everybody here is honored to serve you. You're the commander every soldier dreams of. It's true that, at first, they dismissed you as being an impudent girl who knew nothing about the world. But things are different now.”

Tessa was speechless.



“You’ve accomplished things beyond what even the most battle-hardened veteran has. If you tell us to fight, we’ll fight. What’s more, you were genuinely honest about your motives. If you’d told us it was ‘for peace’ in your speech earlier, I might’ve disembarked myself.”

Merely for revenge... Tessa actually didn’t see it as being that simple. She had other, more practical reasons for wanting to destroy Amalgam. But she couldn’t deny that that primal motive was the main force spurring her along.

She had no great cause, no honors to promise them. The soldiers were sticking with her purely for the sake of revenge. She could anticipate and plan for most eventualities, but this one had completely escaped her imagination. She was expecting them all to chew her out and abandon her, and she wouldn’t have blamed them if they had.

“I can’t believe it,” she said. Not long ago, such a sight might have caused her to break down in tears, but not today. That wasn’t what her people wanted to see. Instead, Tessa put her hands on her hips and proclaimed, in a clear and resounding voice, “Very well. But as I said before, I can’t pay any of you, all right? I’ll do what I can to feed you, but that’s all. Understood?”

“Sure.”

“Well, makes sense.”

“Yeah, yeah,” came the slovenly replies.

She took a deep breath and raised her voice to a shout. “I can’t hear you! What was that?!”

They all moved in a panic to shout out in unison, “Yes, ma’am!”

“Excellent.” Tessa nodded in satisfaction, and a strange silence fell over the room. Then, unable to take it any longer, she began to snicker, and then the rest of the group began to chuckle with her, which soon grew into roars of laughter until the incongruous sound echoed all throughout the hangar.

She wasn’t quite sure herself what was so funny; maybe all the tension had made her slightly mad. While she laughed and laughed, she found tears flowing from her eyes. Not wanting the others to see, Tessa dismissed them and quickly

left the group. It took about thirty minutes for her to regain enough composure to say her goodbyes to the people disembarking.

“Captain?” Mardukas called out to Tessa, pulling her from her memory.

“What? Ah, I’m sorry...” she apologized, snapping back to reality.

Mardukas examined her haggard face. “As I was saying, it’s *your* exhaustion I’m worried about. Are you sure you’re not feeling an exaggerated sense of responsibility towards the men and women who chose to remain?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not good for your mental state to beat yourself up like this,” he said. “I recommend you take a month’s vacation on a tropical island.”

“You know I can’t do that.” She’d said it in a self-chastising tone, but Mardukas didn’t smile.

“And there it is, exactly.”

Tessa gave him a questioning look.

“In the past, you would have responded with a bit more wit,” he observed. “Something like, ‘Then let’s occupy an island somewhere and have a nice rest,’ perhaps... Of course, I’m hardly a comedian myself, so I cannot say for sure... but at least, you would have a more ready response than, ‘You know I can’t do that.’”

Tessa said nothing.

“You’re lacking in your usual humor,” he said gently. “This itself is proof that you’re at the end of your mental rope.”

Tessa struggled to keep her composure in the face of Mardukas’s words. Maybe he was right, but they still couldn’t afford to take a break under these circumstances. And—

Then the realization hit her. Why hadn’t she immediately noticed the irony of Mardukas—that stuffy, overserious man—telling her that *she* was lacking in humor? Was that not itself proof that she was exhausted?

“You may be right,” Tessa responded weakly. “I’ll keep that in mind. But for now, we have a discussion to deal with.”

“Yes, ma’am.” There was something almost pained in Mardukas’s voice as he responded.

Resuming their walk, Tessa and Mardukas finally arrived at the briefing room, where they found Ben Clouseau, Melissa Mao, and Kurz Weber waiting for them. Clouseau had succeeded Kalinin as the commander of their ground forces; Mao had taken on the duties of Castello and other officers. And lately, Kurz had begun undertaking various duties as well; the role of SRT sub-leader, which Mao had assumed in the past, and go-between for the NCOs. Although the role was almost meaningless, now that they’d lost most members of the SRT to death or injury.

Ranks were effectively meaningless now that Mithril had been destroyed, but Tessa kept them in place to preserve a chain of command. Clouseau had been promoted to captain, and Mao to first lieutenant. Kurz was being treated as a master sergeant.

It had been Clouseau, whom Tessa had believed to despise Kurz, who recommended his promotion to Tessa. She had asked him, “Are you sure he can handle it?”

Clouseau had responded, “I think so. His skill and experience are all in the top of his class and, despite his behavior, he’s more attentive than you’d think. Captain McAllen liked him, too, though I confess I can’t see why,” he’d added gruffly.

Kurz himself seemed to like the title “Master Sergeant Weber,” and he’d made a big fuss about the other soldiers calling him that. Of course, that mainly meant a lot of, “Master Sergeant Weber. Please return the ten dollars I lent you, jackass,” and “Master Sergeant Weber. If you need something to do, go peel potatoes, stupid.” In other words, his new title hadn’t changed much.

Kurz didn’t do things in the manner of your typical senior NCO, but his unique personability and sociability made it work. In fact, Kurz had managed to resolve several disputes that had come up between the soldiers. He was as jocular as

ever, but he wasn't quite as irresponsible and reckless as he had been previously. He seemed to be mentoring the less experienced soldiers, too.

Clouseau and Mao seemed to have realized it earlier, but Kurz had the makings of a real leader. It wasn't like the sort of grand officer's responsibility that someone like Tessa bore on her shoulders, either; he acted more like the captain of a baseball team.

Incidentally, the remaining members of the SRT who had survived the battle at Merida Island, like Yang Jun-kyu and Sandraptor, had boarded the submarine, worked hard on their recovery, and were now devoted to rehabilitation and basic training.

This was the general state of affairs on the de Danaan at present.

Their greatest unsolved question—the matter of how to resupply—had been resolved in a way that none of them could have anticipated. An anonymous person had left information with Dana about a stockpile of provisions on an isolated island near Indonesia that none of them had known about.

Dana had told them about it one day after they'd made their escape. Of course, it could have been a trap, but it was also their only hope. While staying on their guard, the de Danaan had headed for the given coordinates and found several dozen containers of ammunition, fuel, provisions, and sundries waiting for them on the island.

It still wasn't clear who had left them there, but Tessa and Mardukas both felt they had a vague idea. There weren't that many people who'd be capable of arranging this, for one thing. It had to have been someone who had set up various underground routes independently from Mithril; someone extremely cautious, with great foresight, who would have known what supplies the de Danaan would need in case of emergency.

Andrey Kalinin seemed to be the only possibility, and they were ninety-nine percent sure he was dead. But even if he were, it was still a mystery as to why he would have made such scrupulous preparations, and why he would have gone about preparing a stockpile that neither Mardukas nor Tessa had been aware of.

"Sorry I'm late," Tessa said to Clouseau, Mao, and Kurz, who'd been waiting

for her in the briefing room. Clouseau started to stand up, but she stopped him with a gesture and quickly took a seat. “The currents were faster than expected, and getting us here took longer than anticipated. I’m sorry.”

“Not at all,” Clouseau responded, settling back down in his seat. “Now, regarding our next move, since Fowler escaped capture...”

“Yes, I fear that we failed to pick up Leonard Testarossa’s trail,” Tessa agreed. “We’ll have to get to him some other way, somehow.” All those present were accustomed to hearing Tessa talk about her brother like a total stranger by now. She’d already told them that her brother was working as an executive for Amalgam, and that he was also a major force behind their enemy’s technological prowess. “Fortunately,” she continued, “we’re not without leads. This is why I sent most of the former base personnel to land months ago. They’ve managed to build up quite an information network in the time since.”

Most of the base personnel who’d come aboard to escape Merida Island had disembarked by this point. She’d distributed them around the world, with each working in their own specialty field: Buying of provisions; acquisition of funds; preparation and preservation of supply lines... Of course, they were also gathering information while doing so, working to locate and contact surviving members of Mithril. They had spent over a month making preparations for how to contact old allies and keep their existence a secret.

Mao spoke up next. “Still, it won’t be so easy for them to track down the enemy, will it? The base personnel aren’t exactly professional spies.”

“Indeed. That’s why their priority order is to locate Mithril’s survivors,” Tessa affirmed. “Sagara-san, for instance, may be out there somewhere, searching for the same things we are... If we can get in contact with him and those like him, it might open up new avenues for us.”

The mention of Sagara Sousuke’s name caused Mao and the others to lower their eyes. “Sousuke, huh...” Mao said.

“We don’t even know if he’s alive,” Clouseau observed.

“Yeah. Though I doubt they could take him out that easily...” Kurz whispered, sounding surprisingly confident. He let out a deep sigh. “Still... I think it’s time you came clean with us, Tessa.”

“About what?”

“About why you’re so obsessed with Leonard. His being your brother, or being an Amalgam executive, doesn’t explain the fixation. There’s another reason, right?”

“Weber,” Clouseau warned Kurz, reacting to his overly frank comment.

“It’s all right, Clouseau-san.”

“But—”

“I was planning on doing that soon, anyway. With the caveat that I’m not certain of any of this myself yet, I’ll share the theory I’ve been exploring.” Tessa had been keeping her reason for pursuing Leonard a secret, because she hadn’t been sure how much of her theory was safe to reveal. But for now, she was choosing to open up to the four people she trusted most in the world.

“Amalgam is an extremely resilient organization,” Tessa began, choosing her words carefully. “They lack a pyramid-style command structure like Mithril’s, opting instead for a spider’s web; it’s full of complex intertwined branches, with the executives at the center. These executives are more like the ‘nodes’ of the Internet... and high-functioning nodes, at that. But even if you were to find and nullify one of those executives, it would deal only minor damage to the organization as a whole.”

“Why? Wouldn’t that throw their command structure out of whack?” Kurz asked in confusion.

Mao whispered, “It’s like a scale-free network. Another hub just swaps in.”

“Precisely,” Tessa confirmed. “I’m sure you all know this, but the Internet was originally created to decentralize US command structure, allowing it to survive in the event of an all-out Soviet nuclear attack. Amalgam has adopted that concept to create an unusual sort of secret organization. Some in the structure have more power than others, but there’s no strict hierarchy with someone on top. They all participate in decision-making and have executive power, as well.”

“How very democratic,” Mardukas whispered sarcastically.

“It *is* democratic,” Tessa agreed. “That’s why their decision-making is slow.

But it also makes them overwhelmingly difficult to destroy through force alone, which is why they've given us so much trouble."

"Am I the only one not following this?" Kurz asked, furrowing his brow. "What's the upshot, exactly?"

Clouseau spoke up after a moment's hesitation. "In video game or anime terms," he explained, "it means there's no one big boss we can defeat to resolve things."

"Ah-hah..."

"There are simply a lot of mid-level bosses instead... too many for us to see them all," he went on. "And while we work on beating one, another middle boss will arise organically to fill his place. It's like an unending game of whack-a-mole."

"Okay, got it... Hey, wait! So, how're we supposed to fight them, then?" Kurz demanded, his voice cracking.

"I realize that I'm making them sound invincible, and it's true, they are resilient. But resilient doesn't mean invulnerable," Tessa clarified. "I said before that a path to victory exists. It came to me after the Christmas incident... I sent a report to Admiral Borda about it, and I think he took it seriously. But before we could come up with a proper plan, he was killed in the destruction at operations headquarters. Fortunately, I am still alive, and I know what the weak point of a system like this is, both in terms of biology and computer science."

"What is it, then?"

"I see... a virus," Mao said, deep in thought.

"Precisely," Tessa replied with a smile. "Perhaps we can't eradicate them entirely. But we can cripple them beyond recovery; so badly that they might as well be dead. That is our path to victory."

"But Colonel," Kurz said. "We're not dealing with a computer or a single organism. It's an organization of people coordinating in ways we still haven't even identified. We don't know anything about them, either. How could you even start preparing a virus to deal with them?"

“I couldn’t.”

“Then how—”

“I can only think of one person in the world brilliant enough to prepare such a virus... someone deep enough in the organization and sufficiently knowledgeable about its inner workings to execute it. Can you guess who I’m thinking of?”

“Your brother, huh?” Kurz asked.

“Precisely. Knowing who he is and what he’s capable of, I suspect he’s already come up with such a virus behind the other executives’ backs,” Tessa predicted. “Therefore, I believe our best course of action is not to crush Amalgam’s institutions or weapons manufacturing facilities, but instead to capture Leonard Testarossa, and gain his cooperation by any means necessary.”

“Any means necessary?”

Tessa nodded, her eyes cold. “Any means necessary. I don’t need to elaborate, do I?”

“B-But—”

“Thank you,” said Tessa, “but I’m fine.” She smiled quietly.

Tessa’s friends and subordinates examined her face and body language, each of them attempting to gauge how serious she was. Kurz, lips pursed, felt a chill go up his spine. Clouseau and Mao peered at her seriously, and Mardukas’s expression was pained.

“Fowler may have escaped, but the confrontation gave us several useful pieces of information,” Tessa continued, unperturbed by their scrutiny. “I’m going to take us south, so we can remain on standby in the Pacific while Dana continues to analyze that intelligence. We might need to head for the Atlantic at some point, but with our capabilities, getting around South America shouldn’t take that much time. Any objections?”

“No, Captain,” Mardukas said first, with the other three agreeing right after him. The conference ended shortly afterwards, following another brief discussion. Mardukas, Clouseau, and Kurz left the room.

But Mao stayed behind to talk a little more. “Tessa,” she began.

“Yes?”

“You okay?” Mao’s gaze was serious.

“Yes,” Tessa replied. “Why do you ask?”

“Why do I... ask? Well, I just had a feeling...”

“Mardukas expressed his concern earlier, as well. But I’m fine.” Tessa smiled, but Mao didn’t.

“If you insist,” Mao said instead. “But we only have about five hours left. Why don’t you eat something and get some proper shuteye?”

“Yes, I intend to.”

“Remember what Dr. Goldberry said? If you have an appetite—”

“I know, I know! Eat when I have an appetite and sleep when I can, wasn’t it? Please stop reminding me!” Tessa forced herself to yawn, stretching out her arms, and left the briefing room.

As she arrived at her quarters, she found a club sandwich and a vegetable juice pack waiting for her; Private Kasuya from the galley must have dropped it off. Tessa hadn’t eaten anything for over twelve hours, so she took a bite of the club sandwich and forced it down her throat, but couldn’t manage a second. She also downed half of the vegetable juice, but couldn’t drink any more. She dumped the remains of the sandwich in her bathroom toilet and flushed it down like a criminal hiding evidence.

Tessa thought about taking a shower next, but couldn’t bring herself to do it. Instead, she just turned off the lights, stripped off her clothes and lay down in bed, curled up under a blanket. Ten minutes passed, then thirty... After an hour, she finally gave up on trying to sleep.

She sat up slowly, pulling the blanket to her chin and leaning back against the wall, huddled up in the darkness. Her eyes remained open the entire time. Swirling through her mind were the names and faces of her dead subordinates: the men and women she had left to die.

She did nothing but stare silently at the wall.

3: Front Toward Enemy

All the muscles in his body were screaming. *This hurts*, he thought desperately. *I can't do it. My feet feel like lead. I want to throw up.* His mouth hung open. His ribs hurt from breathing. His throat was parched.

The humid air of the jungle made his skin feel sticky. Sweat poured off him, and his jungle boots squished with every step he took. His backpack straps were digging into his shoulders, and the pain was growing unbearable. He wanted to stop, put his hands on his knees, and rest for just thirty seconds. It wasn't like anyone was watching him. No one would criticize him for slacking off.

But instead, Sousuke gritted his teeth and shook off his doubts. *Pathetic*, he told himself. *It's only six kilometers, even if it is on a treacherous mountain road. Keep those legs moving; right, left, right, left.* He tripped over a large root and staggered towards the edge, close to pitching over, but managed to keep his balance. He considered stopping there, but dug deep and kept moving.

Don't think, he reminded himself. *Run.* His heart was pounding so hard that he could hear his pulse in his ears. His vision darkened, and his consciousness turned hazy.

Right, left, right, left.

What are the basics of combat? The basics of being a soldier? Yes, it's running. Just run. Run. Run.

A soldier who can't run, can't win. In the most extreme cases, skill and equipment are irrelevant. Whichever side can run longer earns the Goddess of War's blessing. When all else is equal, it's this simple difference that determines the outcome. The only reason I've lived as long as I have is because I could always keep running.

Slowly, the distractions began to fade away. Hesitation and doubt left him. All regrets about the past and uncertainty about the future lifted from his shoulders. *Keep moving. Forward. Forward. Forward.* Sousuke passed a

particularly grotesque shrub, which he'd set as a marker. He'd reach ten kilometers soon, surpassing the milestone he'd fallen short of yesterday.

The agony in his body remained. But tomorrow he'd be able to run farther.



“He’s still at it? Heaven’s sake...” Michel Lemon whispered as he watched Sousuke return to camp, run through a few stretches, then head to the athletic field without any kind of break.

They were in the wetlands of northern Florida. It was an area untouched since primordial times, with the closest town, Taylor, dozens of kilometers away. The only people who came here were eccentric hunters and researchers, and even those were limited to a few a year at most.

The area was remote, too. The only way to get there by land was to pass through Taylor, which meant that if anyone was coming after Sousuke, the townspeople could warn Lemon and the others by radio in advance.

The attack on Hiva Oa Island had been a painful lesson to Lemon that Amalgam had compromised even his own state intelligence organization, the DGSE. There was no other way they could have learned Sousuke’s whereabouts. He’d considered bringing him back to France after the attack, but had decided that it would be unsafe to do so. Besides which, the higher-ups would likely take Sousuke away and subject him to agonizing interrogation, which would ultimately make him less likely to cooperate. Lemon didn’t share the belief of some members of his country and organization that Amalgam could be placated: that raid had been an unprovoked hostile action.

It was for those reasons that Lemon instead moved Sousuke elsewhere, taking with them only those subordinates he was sure he could trust. Delecour—his direct superior—was dead, so he had a great deal of personal discretion in the matter, but he knew his decision would put him on thin ice with the higher-ups. He was hiding a valuable information source without approval, after all. In a way, he and his men were on the lam with Sousuke.

Like I care, Lemon thought. The others might not see it that way, but his actions really did stem from his patriotism. Wouldn’t the truest act of treason be to hand Sousuke over to the enemy, or to some stuffed shirt intelligence official back at headquarters? The last few months had shown Lemon just how vulnerable his institutions were; Amalgam was just that dangerous, and their influence ran deep.

His first priority, then, was to get Sousuke’s strength back. Once he’d done

that, the kid wouldn't need their protection anymore. That would free up a lot of possibilities in and of itself, and if he could build up a spirit of camaraderie with Sousuke on top of it, he could get that much closer to Amalgam's core. He might even be able to divert the enemy threat from his home country. Before they had arrived here at the camp, Lemon had shared these thoughts with Sousuke and requested his cooperation.

Sousuke had thought for a minute, and then nodded. "Very well," he'd agreed. "But is that all?" He must have felt there was more to Lemon's obsession with Amalgam than the logical reasoning he'd offered. His doubts were understandable; a typical agent would want to dump such a troublesome VIP onto his superiors and move on as soon as possible.

Lemon's response was delivered in a distant voice. "Revenge, then? It might sound odd, but it's how I feel."

"I see," Sousuke observed solemnly, "and I understand." That appeared to have been enough for him, because he never questioned Lemon's motives again. As for information about Mithril and Amalgam and the reason they were after him, Sousuke had promised to share all of it once he'd sufficiently recovered.

The remaining question was where to lie low in the meantime. Lemon tried a few of his personal connections, but none of their locations seemed safe. While he continued to hit his head against the problem, Sousuke made his own proposal to Lemon.

"I know someone who will help us, I think," he'd said. That someone turned out to be US Marine John George Courtney, who'd offered them this remote and deserted camp.

Sousuke was still on the field, wordlessly jumping, leaping, climbing, running. Watching silently at Lemon's side was Courtney himself, a man just entering old age. His face was weather-beaten and wrinkled, but his posture was straight, and his every motion radiated power and confidence. He was clearly a veteran, and seemed perfectly at home in his faded olive fatigues.

"He's doing pretty well," Courtney observed.

"Agreed," said Lemon. "He's pushing himself too hard, though."

Courtney sniffed in response to Lemon's words. "The kid can handle it. He's got that special something. You know what I'm talking about?"

"The will to fight? A goal?"

"Nah, more simple. Fucking guts," the old man whispered, running his fingers over his goatee.

"Guts, huh?"

"No. *Fucking* guts," Courtney insisted.

"What's the difference?" Lemon wanted to know.

"Oh, you never heard of it? You must be a fucking idiot, then! Though at least you're a smart enough fucking Frenchman to learn to speak fucking English!"

"Um," said Lemon.

Former Lieutenant Colonel Courtney, in addition to being a clear F-bomb enthusiast, was a sixty-year-old-plus American who'd taken part in the Vietnam War. He'd prepared the land and the camp personally, and gone to great lengths to earn the cooperation of Taylor's population. Apparently, it had once been a facility for training soldiers in jungles and wetland terrain, in order to help deal with the difficult guerrilla combat the US Army and Marines had encountered in Vietnam. An officer known as "Chargin' Charlie" wanted to give the young soldiers, who were more accustomed to conventional warfare, a taste of the hell awaiting them in Vietnam. It seemed that Courtney had been one of the first to undergo training there.

Conditions at the camp had been harsh: they'd spent their mornings crawling around the fields, battered by bombs and tormented by instructors dressed up like the Viet Cong. Incidentally, that same Charlie had established an armed special forces unit known as Delta Force. That was the pedigree of the camp where Sousuke was doing his rehabilitation.

But Courtney and Sousuke only knew each other from one meeting, which had taken place at a New Year's party arranged by his superior. Lemon found it suspicious that the old soldier would go through such scrupulous preparations to help someone he barely knew. He'd asked Courtney about it at the very start, and the man had replied, in a lonely whisper, "He's the chosen one of an old

friend's dear daughter." It was an evocative thing to say, and there had to be more to the story, but... bugging the man further would just make him harder to deal with, so Lemon stayed away from the subject.

But although Courtney had been the one to set everything up, Lemon couldn't help but challenge him from time to time. "Courtney-san, there's such a thing as training theory," he argued now, bothered by the former lieutenant colonel's dismissive assertion that guts would be enough. "He's clearly overtaxing himself. It flies in the face of everything I know about exercise physiology. You can't build muscle properly this way; you're more likely to burn yourself out and collapse. Why won't you tell him that?"

At this, Courtney pulled a partly smoked cigar from his breast pocket, struck a match on the starched sleeve of his fatigues, and lit up. While Lemon watched, waiting for an answer, the man lit the end of the cigar, took a few puffs, then let out a luxuriant plume of smoke.

"Excuse me," Lemon tried again. "Did you hear what I said?"

After a second puff, the old soldier finally looked at him. "Of course, I did. 'Exercise physiology,' right?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I'll give him some advice," Courtney said, taking a step forward. He shouted to Sousuke, who was covered in sweat, crawling over and under large logs lying on the makeshift field. "Sarge!"

"Sir!" Sousuke answered between gasps for breath.

"You're slowing down! You're swinging your ass like some whore on the prowl! You trying to seduce me with that ass, Sarge?!"

"No, sir!"

"I think your heart's not in this!" Courtney bellowed. "I think you're slacking off!"

"No, sir!"

"Then put your back into it! Move like you wanna stick your prick in some first-rate pussy! Move, move! Move, you maggot!"

“Yes, sir!” Sousuke groaned as he hurled himself over a log.

“That’s right, suffer! You worthless piece of shit!” Colonel Courtney shouted, heaping abuses upon him.

Lemon argued with him with a groan. “Why are you egging him on?! Exercise physiology theory states—”

“*Fuck* theory!” the old soldier roared, his eyes bulging from his skull. Lemon couldn’t help but recoil from his gaze. The man took another drag from his cigar, then breathed out a stream of smoke so thick, it concealed his face entirely. He spat out a huge wad of phlegm onto the ground. “Listen up, kid,” Courtney went on. “The only people who value science over guts are people who underestimate the human spirit.”

“I—”

“When you’re on a mission, you’re an island!” Courtney interrupted. “You’re surrounded by enemies! You get caught, you die! You’re at the end of your rope! You’ve got no water, no food, no bullets! What do you do?!”

Lemon didn’t respond.

“Well, what do you do?! Do you remember what some teacher somewhere told you and say, ‘Gee, science tells me I’m done, so I’d better give up and let them fill me with lead’?”

“Well—”

“That’s the turning point,” Courtney insisted. “If something amazing is gonna happen, it’s then. God, in his great wisdom, gave Man that little extra, that little fucking supercharger.” Courtney balled up a fist, pressed it to Lemon’s chest and twisted it. “The minute that gets going, cowards turn to heroes, and useless fucking worms turn to super elites. So if you wanna turn a dying man into a proper soldier in a very short time... that’s gotta be how you do it.”

The sheer irresponsibility of that statement made Lemon wince. Carefully regulated exercise, proper rest, balanced meals... Science made it clear that this was the ideal way to build up the body.

“You don’t believe me?” Courtney challenged him.

“I don’t, actually.”

“Then I’ll prove it. Hey, you! Fuckin’ kid! Get over here!” Courtney called to one of the soldiers doing arms maintenance in a corner of the camp, one of the special forces under Lemon’s command. The soldier looked confused, pointed to himself for confirmation, then ran up to them.

Courtney slapped him on the back, pointed to Sousuke, and said, “He needs some motivation. Smack him around a little and knock him on the ground. No mercy, okay? Get to it!”

The burly soldier looked dubiously to Lemon. Lemon thought for a minute, then nodded at him.

“If you insist, sir...” The soldier shrugged and ran up to Sousuke, who was struggling at the center of the field. As the man drew back his fist, they could hear him say, “Nothing personal.”

“Now, watch. You’re about to see a counterattack that’ll set your head spinning.” Courtney chewed on his cigar and folded his arms confidently.

The soldier hit Sousuke. Twice. Three times... Sousuke, already at the limits of exhaustion, staggered helplessly, then fell back into the mud. The soldier inspected the now-immobile Sousuke, then turned back to Lemon and Courtney. “He’s unconscious!” he shouted apologetically.

The two just stood there silently as the soldier quickly began treating Sousuke for his new wounds.

Lemon looked back at Courtney with a sigh, but the man was already puffing out cigar smoke as if nothing had happened. “Well, sometimes you get that too,” the old soldier quipped. “The point is, you can’t go easy on a man.”

“Modern warfare can’t be won with mud and sweat,” Lemon argued.

“Of course not,” said Courtney, dropping his cigar on the ground to stamp out the tip with the heel of his jungle boot. “But kid, what can a man who’s never tasted mud and sweat, or blood and tears, accomplish?”



Chidori Kaname spent every morning in a deck chair on a shady terrace,

watching the sun rise over the ocean. She even came out on rainy days. Generally speaking, she only went to the beach a few times a year, so this was her first time seeing the same view of the ocean for months at a time.

They'd moved between a few locations since leaving Tokyo, but this estate by the beach had lasted for a while. When Leonard had brought her here, he'd said that she could ask absolutely anything of the staff and do whatever she wanted, as long as she remained within the large grounds.

"Do you think I enjoy being treated like a princess?" Kaname had asked, to which Leonard had just shrugged self-effacingly. The same day he'd arrived, he'd left her to fly off somewhere in a helicopter. His work at Amalgam must have kept him busy, she figured. He would return once a week or so, but otherwise he was always off somewhere or other.

Despite his professions of love, Leonard had never tried to force himself on her again since that first kiss in the rain. He didn't even try to touch her, let alone embrace her. He didn't use resonance, either. He just kept her locked away, like a jewel in a treasure box.

This had surprised Kaname. She would have expected a young man in the grips of unrequited love to act more persistently, yet just having her here seemed to be enough for him. He didn't send her to be poked, prodded, or subjected to more of their strange research, either. Aside from the confinement, Kaname was certainly free, and even treated like a VIP guest at a luxury hotel.

After she'd lived there for several weeks, Leonard gave her a rather old laptop and told her, "If you're bored, feel free to play with this." The laptop (which had all network capabilities removed), contained blueprints and live combat data for several of Amalgam's superweapons. The information was all highly classified, and absolutely invaluable. It included several varieties of lambda driver-mounted AS—the Codarl-type and Behemoth-type—but unfortunately lacked information on Leonard's Belial.

The live combat data provided for them included several battles with Sousuke's Arbalest. There were quite a few operators listed for the Codarl-type, but the one who had seemed to make the best of its capabilities had been

Gauron, the terrorist Sousuke had fought. Even without the lambda driver, he'd used his near-superhuman instinct and experience to move it in swift and unpredictable ways. Kaname was reminded of the tremendous skill that Sousuke must possess in order to have fought Gauron as an equal.

There was also data on battles with M9s that she intuited to belong to Mao and Kurz. It was unusual to see such minimal losses when a standard AS fought one equipped with an LD; usually, in the situations outlined in the data, one would expect to see the M9s destroyed and their pilots killed. The more she examined the battle data, the more she appreciated their team's caution and care.

From Amalgam's side, of course, it reflected a frustrating situation—an inability to eradicate their enemy, despite having vastly superior hardware. Their enemy had somehow continued to resist, using experience, cleverness, flexibility, and animal instinct. They'd exploited any moment of weaknesses and never once missed a chance to strike decisive blows, which was a reflection of superior skill on the part of Mithril's pilots.

Kaname had known Mao and Kurz and the others as ordinary young people with all of their flaws, but seeing them rendered in objective numbers on her screen, she could tell they were also terrifyingly polished combat machines. The data allowed Kaname to realize what Leonard had meant when he said that Mithril had flown too high—they had indeed become a threat to Amalgam.

She cast a glance through the specs data for the Codarls and Behemoths, too. Kaname had become brilliant enough by now to see all of their problems at a glance, one of which was that, while Leonard had helped with the machines' basics, most of the real work had been done by ordinary engineers.

Amalgam used drugs to enable operation of their lambda driver-mounted ASes. The drugs induced a state of "quiet agitation" in their users, which let their brains create the special electric patterns required. Those patterns were then relayed to the machine through an interface known as TAROS, creating a power that the machine then amplified. She couldn't be sure with blueprint data alone, but the drugs used by Amalgam's operators seemed to also play a role in enhancing the power. The instability of Takuma, the Behemoth operator whom she'd met a year ago, wasn't reflected in the data here, either. Maybe

modern Codarl operators didn't suffer the same emotional impairment that he had.

But then, the principle behind the Codarl's lambda driver was likely the same as that of the Arbalest, and Sousuke hadn't taken any drugs. The reason that Sousuke and the Arbalest were able to display such dramatic power from time to time was due to a mental state that drugs couldn't replicate—probably a kind of focus and will unique to the trained soldier, as well as a certain form of exaltation.

The Arbalest was unreliable, but it could summon up overwhelming power under the right conditions. The Codarls could perform reliably and be mass-produced (within limits), but they couldn't unleash the same spontaneous power that the Arbalest could. One way to put it would be that the Codarl was designed to annihilate normal ASes, whereas the Arbalest had been designed to fight LD-mounted ASes. That relationship was also reflected in the battle data.

It was a strange way of saying it, but the Codarl and the Behemoth both seemed to her like "realist" machines. This made them more accessible, but it also shackled their potential. Many sacrifices had been made in the name of functionality, without considering that they might have to face enemy machines with lambda drivers of their own. They couldn't keep barriers up for long periods at a time, so if an enemy knew the lambda driver well, as Tessa and the others did, even a normal AS could destroy them. Just because the force fields seemed otherworldly didn't mean that they were impregnable.

From what Kaname could see, the power differential between lambda driver-mounted ASes and regular third-generation ASes—assuming equal operator talent—was about eight to one. In other words, eight M9s working together could take out one Codarl. Of course, the M9s would suffer quite a few losses in the process, and in practice, things could vary depending on tactics, but when you boiled it down to fundamentals, that was the rough equation.

An extreme example of a power differential commonly seen in modern combat was that of tanks versus anti-tank helicopters. This was sixteen to one, so by comparison, lambda driver-mounted ASes weren't really worthy of the awe they inspired. They were impressive from a purely technological standpoint, certainly. But looking back across military history, the birth of

artillery, of communications systems, of intercontinental ballistic missiles were all far more impressive leaps.

How many people in the world had realized that? Probably only a handful... him, Tessa, and a few others they knew. Maybe Mao and her comrades, who were experiencing it firsthand in combat themselves, would realize it too someday. Yet Kaname had gotten all that just from looking at the laptop's data... Perhaps that, too, was by Leonard's design.

Then, later, he asked her this: "How would you make use of the lambda driver? If it were up to you, how would you fix this machine?" Kaname gave him a design that added two more heat sinks out of the Codarl's head, braided together and tied with a ribbon. "Your friend is safe," he'd replied, referring to Tokiwa Kyoko. He'd then said, "Try again," and returned the data with a smile.

Since then, Kaname ended up submitting whatever popped into her head to one of Leonard's subordinates. The designs were less like blueprints and more like rough sketches. These were also completely impractical, mere sarcastic jabs meant for Leonard. She intentionally included mathematical errors, or factors that resulted in contradictory specs: clever traps that normal engineers might overlook. She didn't like having her skills tested, so she'd decided to test his observational prowess in retaliation. Naturally, Leonard would catch all the errors, point them out to her, and then leave with another shrug.

What does he want from me? she wondered. *How long do I stay in this mansion, doing this?* Leonard hadn't told her much. She felt like this wasn't really about his organization, but that he was making preparations for some far greater goal. He would probably leave her here until the time for that came.

Deep in despair, with her life in Tokyo now a distant memory, Kaname didn't have the heart to inquire any further. "I'll just let it be," she thought, and meant it. She couldn't remember what it felt like to get angry, or to smile. She'd be here in this unfamiliar place forever. She'd grow up, then grow old, and then she'd die.

And that all seemed to be acceptable.

We're probably in the tropics, she'd reckoned. It had been hot there since

February, and all the trees she could see were broad-leafed. There were no towns or houses visible from the grounds. No ships sailed past, and no planes flew by. The only sign of life from the outside world was the occasional helicopter, bringing visitors to the house.

It was a quiet place; quiet and empty, just like her. Every day, as the sun started going down, she would leave the terrace and walk the gardens on the western grounds.

The gardens were well tended. Crimson jacaranda flowers were in bloom, and by the end of the day, they would take on a dusky color in the purple twilight. The salty air that blew in from the calm sea caused the trees to whisper around her.

It was on one such evening, while she was sitting and meditating in a corner of the garden, that she overheard a conversation going on between a man and a woman:

“What then? You lost track of them after LA?” She recognized the voice of the man as belonging to Lee Fowler, who worked under Leonard. He was dark-haired, and attractive enough to make most women swoon. She didn’t know much about him, but she could tell that his gentlemanly demeanor masked the sharp-eyed alertness of a trained soldier. He always showed deference to Leonard, and the utmost civility and politeness to Kaname. Leonard typically had him flying off all around the world, but that particular day, he was visiting the mansion.

“Yes. A pity.” Kaname also recognized the voice of the woman who answered him: this was Sabina Rechnio, another of Leonard’s subordinates. She supervised the mansion itself, and always dressed in dark suits with black-rimmed glasses. She appeared very young, not much older than twenty at the most. She might even be close to Kaname’s own age.

Sabina was always in the mansion, so they saw each other frequently. She seemed to have been instructed to treat Kaname with civility, so she was always deferential in their interactions. But despite her young age, she was far from fragile; not only did she act in the capacity of the mansion’s butler, but she often contacted the outside to issue orders to others in their organization.

Behind her well-mannered demeanor hung a certain smell... a certain quiet tension, unique to those who lived their lives on the battlefield.

The mansion's employees all seemed vaguely afraid of her.

Kaname was in a grove a little ways off the flagstone path, a place unilluminated by the lights of the estate. She had fallen partway into a doze, so perhaps she had unconsciously masked her own presence; Fowler and Sabina didn't seem to realize she was there.



Now, these two close confidantes of Leonard were whispering to each other in a corner of the garden. They were talking about losing track of someone in LA—Los Angeles—but she didn't know who.

"Did you tell Leonard-sama about Hiva Oa Island?" Fowler was saying. "That you sent a team of assassins there at your own discretion, that the mission failed, and that you then proceeded to lose track of him entirely?"

"Of course I told him," Sabina responded in a perfectly even voice. "I wouldn't bother trying to hide it. He would see through me in a second."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. He praised me, in fact."

"How generous of him," Fowler observed.

"What does that mean?"

"He would have been within his rights to be furious: that unit was only looking after the operator. But even if they do rebuild that ARX whatever-it-is, the Belial is still invincible. There's no reason to fear it."

"I disagree." There was an implication in Sabina's words that Kaname found difficult to read.

"You think he could lose?"

"No, he's invincible, I agree," said Sabina. "And I believe even my Eligore could beat that system."

"Then why bother with the assassination?"

"I didn't see any need to waste time engaging in a fair fight. It's always better to root out weeds before they sprout."

Fowler let out a sigh. "Of course. But don't you realize it may have wounded his pride?"

"You mean, regarding her?" Sabina questioned.

"Yes."

It took Kaname a little time to realize that she was the "her" in question.

“You’re worrying over nothing,” Sabina insisted. “He means nothing to Leonard-sama now. I went to dispose of a paper napkin he tossed away after a meal—that’s all.”

“I see,” Fowler said thoughtfully. “A truly feminine way of thinking.”

“Is it?”

“Ah, pardon... But either way, there’s no longer any need to assassinate him.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve located the ARX unit that went missing in Tokyo,” Fowler told her. “It doesn’t appear to have been completed yet, but I’ve sent three Codarl-ms to ambush them and retrieve it. It’s time to see what Mr. Kalium can do.”

“You don’t think *that* will wound Leonard-sama’s pride?” Sabina questioned pointedly.

Fowler sniffed. “That’s why I said ‘retrieve.’ From there, he’s free to do with it as he sees fit. He gave me permission too, you know.”

“I see.”

“Anyway, I’ve had all I can stand from Mithril’s leftovers... Though personally I would prefer to focus on *the plan*.”

“As would I.”

“I look forward to it.”

With that, Fowler and Sabina left, each heading in a different direction.

Kaname had listened in on the conversation as quietly as she could. She wasn’t actively trying to remain still; she simply blended into the air around her. If she were still the boisterous girl she’d been ages ago, she might have tensed up and begun breathing heavily, and Fowler and Sabina would have noticed her for sure.

Hiva Oa Island; team of assassins; ARX system; *the plan*—none of these words stirred any feeling in her. But the man they were discussing... it had to be Sousuke, she realized.

Minutes passed in silence after Fowler and Sabina’s departure. Kaname sat

there in the darkness of the grove and, at last, whispered only to herself, “That idiot...”

So, he is alive. And... whatever he’s doing, he’s making trouble for Amalgam, as usual...

He’s probably searching for me, she realized. Trying to bring me back to the courtyard of that school. Our lives have been completely destroyed, yet he still refuses to give up or surrender. What does he expect to accomplish?

That idiot...

All to save someone like me... someone who betrayed you... who abandoned you to go off with another man while you lay dying...

That idiot...

Her eyes couldn’t even form tears. Kaname felt disgusted inside and out. Not at him, though—at herself.

What the hell is wrong with me? she wondered. Thinking I’d be content to grow old and die here, in this boring old house... Inert, helpless, harmless... What good would that do anyone? Thinking I’m so accomplished for dishing out a few harsh words, a few hurt feelings...

That idiot...

Just leave me alone. Forget about me. Go make yourself a nice life somewhere else. Why are you so obsessed with me?

That idiot...

Get over here already. Walk up to me and say your usual line... Give me that sullen, sour expression, and tell me everything is “not an issue.”

But no... That’s not even true. There are too many issues to count right now. The best thing to do would be to remain perfectly still, hidden in the darkness behind the trees.

That idiot...

I can’t even stand on my own two feet anymore. I’m a coward. Such a coward...

Kaname remained in place for another half hour or so, wallowing in her self-loathing. Then at last, when the night air began to turn cold against her skin, she stood up. She dragged herself out of the garden, heading towards the mansion to return to her room. Maybe she'd feel better lying in that big bed, emptying her mind, and drifting off to sleep.

But on her way in, she passed the swimming pool. It was an immaculate reservoir, twenty-five meters long, located on the south side of the property. She'd never once used it.

Silently, she stopped and gazed at the pool with indifference. Its surface glittered in the light from the mansion's windows. A thought rose absently into her mind: *Maybe I'll take a swim.*

What she really wanted to do was sink below the surface and disappear forever. But even if she threw herself in, she might not be able to go through with it. And yet, for reasons she couldn't quite fathom, she found herself walking up to the side. She kicked off her high-heeled sandals and dipped a bare foot into the water.

It's cold.

Still dressed, Kaname sat down at the water's edge. She hadn't felt anything like it in months, and nobody was around to see her, so she kicked her feet around for a while before sliding her whole body into the water.

It's cold.

She began to tread water, but her dress billowed out around her, and clung to her body with every move she made. Annoyed, she stripped it off, and her body suddenly felt much lighter.

Now dressed only in her underwear, Kaname allowed herself to float, face-up, drifting silently to and fro. The night sky was clear above her, and sparkled with a blanket of stars. At some point, she decided to swim in earnest.

She kicked her legs slowly, propelling herself forward, head raised. Her body moved smoothly through the water. It felt nice, but the chill of the water kept her breathing short and shallow.

Maybe I should swim faster.

She assumed a crawl position, increasing the power of her flutter kicks and scooping her arms through the water, one after the other. Her pace quickened and the sound of her splashing echoed around the deserted pool.

Could I swim even faster? she wondered. She decided to try, and was soon moving faster than she'd expected. Her body pushed farther and farther onwards with every flex of her arms and legs.

I don't know why, but... this feels really nice...

She was swimming harder now, and the end of the lane was approaching. She touched it and turned, then swam another twenty-five meters. After that, she just kept swimming, no deeper goal in mind. Her form wasn't perfect, and she wasn't moving smoothly: Kaname's swimming was more like a desperate struggle. She kept splashing against the water's surface, twisting her body violently. She was heaving for breath, but kept swimming regardless.

Onward. Onward.

She swam lap after lap. She wasn't even sure why she was doing this; she just wanted to swim. To keep her whole body moving forward.

Forward. Forward. Forward.

She tired almost immediately, months of inactivity sapping her strength. She was aching and out of breath, and her muscles cried out in pain. Nevertheless, she kept swimming.

Forward! Forward! Forward!

She kicked through the water in the dim light, groaning softly with each movement. Gasping for air like a drowning animal each time her face left the water, Kaname kept on swimming.

Swim! Swim! Swim!

The water no longer felt cold. Her whole body was on fire. Droplets flew through the air with each strike she made against the water's surface, and she found a laugh rising inside of her. There was something pleasant about the agony coursing through her body. The ache of it should have made her want to vomit, but as her mind wandered, the pain became distant.

Yes, that's it... The thought came to her like a long-lost friend. *I've been overthinking this*, she realized. *Torturing myself won't get me anywhere. Okay, so maybe it was a little necessary... but there are more important things to be done right now.*

In other words...

Keep swimming, keep running, keep moving forward. Twelve hours from now I might be laid out in exhaustion, but right now, I like swimming.

Forward! Forward!

And Kaname kept swimming. She didn't know how many laps she'd done in the end, but it wasn't until she really felt that she might pass out and drown that she finally stopped. As she hauled herself up onto the edge, she felt like steam was rising off her body.

She staggered to her feet, and heard someone address her from behind. "What an unusual sight." It was Sabina. It was no surprise that someone would find her here, given all the noise she was making.

"Is it?" Kaname looked back at her, shoulders heaving with breath. Her heart was pounding wonderfully. She unceremoniously hiked up the waistband of her panties, which had fallen down almost to her thighs. It was as vulgar a gesture as could be imagined, but Kaname wasn't thinking about that at all. "The water's nice. Want to join me?" Kaname's eyes glinted with an air of challenge, but Sabina just shrugged.

"No, thank you," she replied. "But I'm glad to see you're perking up."

"You are, huh? But I still feel like shit."

"Do you?" Sabina scrutinized her for a moment, then said, "You overheard, didn't you?"

Kaname knew immediately what she was referring to: the conversation in the garden. Sabina must have noticed her presence at some point.

But Kaname admitted to it easily enough. "Yeah, I did. Sorry."

"You are aware, then, that I gave the order to kill the love of your life?"

"Yeah. And?" Kaname sniffed. "Besides, he's not even the love of my life..."

and you're in for a shock if you think *you* can kill him. Boy, what a bunch of self-involved bit-rate villain crap... 'Ooh, I'm so sorry, I'm gonna kill someone you care about, look at me, I'm so cool.' Sheesh, find a better cliché, at least."

Sabina remained expressionless. "It's almost time for dinner. Would you accompany me to the dining hall?"

"I'll pass, thanks," Kaname said bluntly.

"But—"

"I'll only eat Koshihikari rice grown in Uonuma with hikiwari natto, topped with some dried urume-iwashi. Go on."

Sabina, who didn't know much about Japanese eating customs, couldn't even repeat the names of the ingredients back to her. She simply retreated to the house, leaving Kaname there in her underwear.

There really are still issues, too many to count. But they won't necessarily go on forever.

For now, keep going forward, Kaname told herself. Forward. Forward...



The ambush hit Gavin Hunter, former head of the Hong Kong branch of Mithril intelligence, on the road sixty kilometers out of Cantwell. They'd beat a quick retreat from the machine's assembly point in Anchorage, en route to a new factory they'd arranged in advance.

Dawn was breaking after a rainy night, and they were surrounded by conifers. Even in June, early mornings in Alaska remained cold, and the road they were on was generally free of traffic outside of the occasional late night convoy. The machine had been split between two trailers, and Hunter was dozing in the leading truck's passenger seat.

And that was when the trap sprung.

A giant appeared in the middle of the road amidst a shower of blue sparks—it was an arm slave. But it wasn't just the one—another had appeared behind their trucks, and a third atop a tall hill to the left about three hundred meters up. They were slender, with diamond-shaped heads; Codarl-types. Even if

they'd had a tank company as an escort, it wouldn't have been enough to mount a resistance.

The Codarl before them spread its arms, telling them to stop.

"Do it. Stop," Hunter said to the driver, who was stunned by the ASes' sudden appearance. The driver was an outsider, a local hire, so of course, he didn't know about their cargo.

Once the two trailers had come to a stop, a voice emerged from the Codarl's external speakers: "Shut down the engine and come out with your hands up. If you resist, we will shoot you."

They did as they were told, and five or six men sprang from the brush on the side of the road. They grabbed Hunter and the others by the necks and lined them up next to the trailer. They were dressed in plain clothes but carried suppressor-armed submachine guns, and their movements were perfectly in sync. Their positioning was perfect; if they had to start shooting in the face of resistance, there would be no friendly fire. These men were obviously professionals.

The drivers were terrified. Hunter regretted dragging them into this, but this was also the reason he'd hired them. He didn't want to put his skilled, experienced subordinates in the line of fire if he could help it—in other words, in his mind, hired drivers were more expendable.

In that case, why had he come himself? There were a few logical reasons: firstly, they might not even want to kill him, and if he was captured, he'd know how to escape. Secondly, even if he was killed, nobody would really be bothered by his loss; his relationship with his beloved wife in Hong Kong had deteriorated quickly after Mithril's fall, and they were now separated. *Well, forget that stuck-up ex-model, he'd told himself. The only reason she married a dumpy little man like me was to get herself a Grand Cinq ring.*

But the main reason he'd come was because it was the only way to make sure the enemy bought their ruse.

"Gavin Hunter?" one of his assailants asked, keeping a gun carefully trained on him. Realizing there was no point in denying it, Hunter affirmed his identity, but their enemies remained cautious. "Your mother's name and her birthday,"

one of them demanded, apparently worried he might be a standin.

It took a little remembering—his mother had died twenty years ago—but he answered, “Debbie. June 4th.”

“All right. Now, I want to see your cargo,” their captor said. “Go unlock the truck.”

Hunter wasn’t sure whether to protest or not. Should he look slightly worried as he went? No, that would be an even greater cause for suspicion. After reconsidering, he calmly replied, “All right,” and began walking towards the back of the trailer with his hands up. Two of the armed men followed.

He knew that resistance would be pointless. These were well-trained fighters armed with automatic firearms, with three lambda driver-armed ASes standing watch. Everything Hunter could see suggested they were both talented and dedicated. Not even the operations division’s storied West Pacific Battle Group would be able to break out of a situation like this.

Hunter released the rear door’s padlock and turned the thick metal latch with a clack. Then he threw open the double doors to reveal the cargo inside: stacks of large cardboard boxes.

“Smoked salmon,” Hunter said. “I got a good price from a dealer. I was planning to carry it through Canada to Utah—” Ignoring his explanation, the men climbed into the trailer and began rummaging through the boxes. As he watched vacuum packs of smoked salmon spill out of the back of the truck, Hunter couldn’t help but crave a beer.

“Keep looking,” their captor demanded. After pushing aside a few more boxes, his subordinates eventually exposed part of a large machine, which was clad in curved armor plates. Anyone with military experience would recognize it immediately as being the head of a third-generation AS.

“More smoked salmon?” the man snickered and put a call into his digital transceiver. “Blue-1 here. Tango-1 located. Executing procedure alpha. Tango-4 is neutralized. Requesting orders...” after a moment had passed, he simply replied, “Blue-1, roger.”

The man finished his communique and ordered the other assailants to

withdraw. Two large, ECS-equipped helicopters immediately appeared, hovering ten meters above, and dropped a set of sturdy-looking wire hooks. The men below quickly went about affixing the wires to the two trailers.

One other small helicopter was approaching over the treetops, an old-fashioned Gazelle. It flew in low, then touched down about thirty meters from the trailers, at which point a large man in civilian clothing got out. He removed his headset and tossed it into the seat, then approached swiftly. He had a military bearing, but the shadows from the trees made it hard to see his face. His coat flapped in the breeze, gray, to match his hair.

A member of the attack team ran up to the “gray man,” leaning in close to make sure his report could be heard over the helicopter’s roar. This man must be their commander.

The gray man responded with a clipped order before approaching Hunter slowly. He was close to 190 centimeters tall and looked to be around fifty years old, maybe older.

Hunter scrutinized the man questioningly as he stopped a few steps in front of him. He recognized the face. The face of the last man he expected to see here. “Impossible,” he spluttered. “You’re...”

“It’s not so surprising, in our line of work,” said the man—Andrey Kalinin—as Hunter looked on in shock.

“But...” Hunter wasn’t surprised by much in life, but he felt happy making an exception in this case. *Mistaken identity?* he wondered at first. But no, there stood the former operations commander of Mithril’s West Pacific Battle Group, the Russian Andrey Kalinin, who was dishing out orders to one of Amalgam’s squadrons.

Kalinin passed by Hunter to check the interior of the trailer. “This is the machine in question?”

Hunter made no reply.

“Building this won’t change anything, you know,” Kalinin told him gently. “You’ve wasted a lot of effort.”

Hunter found his fists clenching. “Mr. Kalinin, I never thought I’d hear those

words from you,” he told the other man coldly. “I know we were never particularly close, and that we only ran a handful of missions together. But the man I pegged you for would never say something like that. Isn’t that why those brilliant young people put their trust in you?”

“Their trust was misplaced,” Kalinin said carelessly.

“Hundreds of your allies were killed! Doesn’t that matter to you?!” Hunter shouted.

But Kalinin didn’t even blink. He just gave a command to his nearby subordinate: “Withdraw.”

“Wait, Mr. Kalinin. Are you really—” Hunter tried to say more, but Kalinin just drew his pistol and fired. Hunter felt the impact in his gut, and then burning pain ran through his body. With a silent cry, he clasped his hands to the location of the awful sensation, and found them stained with blood. A memory of being stabbed during a fight as a poor boy growing up in Glasgow surfaced in his mind.

Hunter fell to his knees, then collapsed forward. All he could see in a corner of his darkening vision was the wet road and Kalinin’s leather shoes.

“A person can’t survive losing 35% of their blood,” Kalinin said. “At the rate you’re bleeding, you’ll need first aid within thirty minutes. The closest hospital is sixty-three kilometers away. We’re leaving soon, but it’s doubtful that a car will happen by, then be willing to pick you up, move at full speed, and make it in time. But I do have a medical kit in my helicopter that could save you.”

Hunter listened quietly.

“So tell me, Mr. Hunter. Who put together this machine, the ARX-8? Where are they now?”

Hunter spat at Kalinin’s shoe, saliva mixed with blood. It fell short of its goal. “Eat shit,” he said.

“I see,” Kalinin remarked, showing no sign of disappointment. “Then enjoy your last thirty minutes of life.” And with that, Andrey Kalinin walked away from the fallen Hunter. His subordinates began to withdraw as well, leaving behind the drivers, both of whom were kneeling in place.

The turboshaft engines of the helicopters above began to roar. Then they ascended, carrying the two trailers beneath them. After tilting for a minute to gather strength, they accelerated toward the sunrise. Kalinin's small helicopter took off as well and was soon out of sight.

The three Codarls watched them go, then lowered the weapons they were holding, activated their ECSes, and also departed. The three machines vanished into blue sparks in the morning air.

"How could this have happened?" Hunter whispered, face to the ground, as silence returned. The drivers ran up to him, shouting in concern, but he couldn't even hear them anymore.

Friends of the West Pacific Battle Group, he thought. You're about to face something far more terrifying than lambda driver-mounted ASes...



They certainly know the fundamentals, was Sousuke's evaluation of his combat opponents by the second day of the exercise. He was referring, naturally, to Lemon's men.

They seemed to have all the necessities—route planning, camp building, river crossing, tracking—as well as live combat experience. Their problem was their inexperience in tropical environments. They'd drenched themselves in bug repellent to keep off mosquitoes and ants, but it would wash off in the periodic squalls and then show up in puddles. Such signs of artificial materials were rare in a tropical region like this, so even if they avoided leaving footprints and disturbing spider webs, their trails were as clear as day.

They seemed to have split up into two teams to pursue him, but they had strayed too far, given the local terrain. If one team ended up in combat, support would come too late. If he managed to clear up one group of four, he could easily set up a trap for the reinforcements.

Let's see how they perform under stress, he decided.

Sousuke chose to attack at the time of day when their concentration would be at its nadir. They'd arrived at the base of a large tree where he'd intentionally left the remains of his meal, and just as their pointman was

noticing this, he'd snuck up to the last man in line from their left flank. He wondered if he'd made the trap too obvious... but he still approached the last man in line, silently restrained him, and put a knife to his neck.

"You're dead," he whispered into his ear, and laid him down on the spot.

The remaining enemies shouldn't be more than eight meters away, but the heavy brush kept them from sight. What came next would be the hard part.

Rather than moving straight forward, Sousuke had approached from their left flank. Since it was impossible to kill a trained opponent in perfect silence, the enemy would have sensed the "death." They would now be on the alert, and calling to their allies.

With that in mind, he sheathed his knife and readied his submachine gun before charging at the enemy. Knocking aside a leaf the size of a sheet of tabloid paper, he sighted his opponent just a few steps ahead. The other man was pointing a gun back at him, but Sousuke shot first, and the sound rang out through the jungle. Paintballs ejected from the weak cartridge hit his opponent in the chest and the head. It still must have hurt, though, because his opponent let out a rather pathetic scream. "Oh... owie!"

"Lie down, dead man," said Sousuke, immediately proceeding forward again. He could hear his remaining two enemies already opening fire in reaction to the gunshot and the scream. If these had been live rifle rounds, they might have pierced through the leaves, and Sousuke would be dead. Unfortunately, the paintballs didn't have the power to do that. Furthermore, the opponent had weak footing, which slowed their movements. By contrast, Sousuke had spent most of last night walking around the area, familiarizing himself with the local terrain well enough to run it with his eyes shut.

Despite feeling a little like he'd cheated, he skillfully cleaned up the last two. This earned him understandable complaints from all four, but he told them to "play dead already," and promptly embarked upon setting his trap.

Twenty minutes after the first gunshot, the other four man team arrived, guns blazing. Five minutes later, all four were "dead," and Sousuke got a new round of complaints about unfairness.

Once the training was over, they all returned to the cabin, where Lemon and

Courtney were playing chess in front of a fan and arguing.

“I told you, I’m not cheating!”

“Oh, you’re a *fucking* cheat! My pawn wasn’t there before! You moved it when I went to take a shit! Fucking *cheater!*”

“Listen,” Lemon said in an exasperated tone, “I have an IQ of 150 and I graduated from the Sorbonne. Someone as young and intelligent as me would never lose to an obstinate old man like you! Now, stop making accusations!”

“The mouth on you!” Courtney retorted. “My grandpappy died on Omaha Beach, saving you sissy Frenchies from fucking *Hitler!*”

“Hah! *My* ancestor died two hundred years ago delivering weapons to your sad little ancestors in the New World!”

“Liar! That’s a damned lie!”

“Then so is yours!”

“The hell you say?!” Courtney demanded. “Fine, I’ll prove it! I got a picture from those days back home in Arizona—you sit tight! I’ll go back and get it! Be back tomorrow!” Courtney stood up, appearing genuinely intent on traveling 2500 kilometers to Arizona. That’s when they noticed Sousuke and the others. “Hmm,” he said, quickly switching gears. “Whadda you assholes want?”

“We finished the exercise. He took us all out,” said the team leader, a warrant officer.

Courtney’s eyes widened. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah, it was really something. I like to think we know what we’re doing, but Sagara got us good.”

“Well, in a real fight I probably would’ve only gotten three of you. I’m still not at my best,” Sousuke said modestly, removing his belt kit and starting up maintenance on his magazines and transceiver.

“Very confident of you,” Lemon whispered as he watched Sousuke line up his equipment and check it over with practiced hands. “So you *could* have taken out all eight in a real fight if you were at your best?”

“Affirmative. I couldn’t fight Amalgam otherwise,” Sousuke responded casually enough.

“I wouldn’t doubt it. But you might not have time to get there.”

Sousuke looked back, questioning.

“Niquelo, right? That’s one of the places you named. That really helped us narrow things down. Here.” Lemon opened a laptop on the plain table, and pulled up a few images. They were satellite photos of a region of coastline near a small city called Niquelo, on the outskirts of Pochutla in the south of Mexico. It appeared to be completely uninhabited at first glance; the only thing there was a large mansion facing the sea.

“These were taken twenty hours ago,” Lemon told them. “I got them from hacking a NATO military satellite—sadly, not one with the best resolution.”

“Hmm. Well, aren’t you clever?” Courtney grumbled, peering at the screen from the side.

“I told you I was. It’s why I don’t need to cheat to beat you at chess.”

“Shut up! It’s not the same thing!”

Courtney was about to smack Lemon on the head, but Sousuke interrupted to ask, “So, what’s that building?”

“It belongs to Mendoza—a wealthy Mexican IT entrepreneur frequently featured in the Wall Street Journal—but he hardly ever uses it. This chart shows how the money flows around it: here’s last year’s numbers... deposits and withdrawals from contractors, agents, bank transfers...” Lemon proceeded to embark upon a highly detailed explanation of the various spreadsheets. Sousuke didn’t know much about the financial or legal concepts he was explaining, so it went in one ear and out the other.

“So?” everyone besides Lemon, none of whom knew anything about money either, said in unison.

Lemon, knocked out of his smug explanation, replied in despondency, “So... in practice, the estate is actually being used by some unknown entity.”

“You think it’s connected to Amalgam?”

“It’s being looked after in a very similar manner to that ‘VIP box’ building on the outskirts of Namsac. I could say with 90% certainty that it’s them.”

“Could be a gang or a drug cartel,” Sousuke pointed out.

“It isn’t. Security’s too tight for a gang. Let me blow up the satellite photo.” Lemon zoomed in to a high enough resolution that they could see blurry figures walking along the estate’s garden path. Everyone nodded in agreement this time.

“I see. That’s very serious,” Sousuke agreed. There seemed to be at least sixteen soldiers on foot, patrolling the grounds with automatic rifles. There were also several large men who appeared empty-handed, and four light armored cars equipped with heavy machine gun turrets.

“When was this taken?”

“Just past 1700 hours. There might be more at night—maybe a whole platoon. I think we could take them if we’re clever, though.”

“I disagree,” Sousuke put in. “You see those large men in trench coats standing guard here and there? Those aren’t people. They’re miniature autonomous ASes.”

“Those ‘Alastor’ robots you mentioned, huh?” said Lemon. Sousuke had told him and the others in detail about Amalgam’s equipment—and his experience fighting them—during his time in the camp. The only thing he hadn’t told them about was Kaname.

“You need specialized bullets or rounds greater than .50-caliber to beat them,” said Sousuke. “And even if you do, they might self-destruct and release ball bearings. They gave my unit a lot of trouble in the past.”

“Hmm... But that confirms it’s an Amalgam facility, right?”

“Affirmative. And there’s another issue.” Sousuke indicated a few locations on the satellite photo. “I see six containers scattered around the grounds. They look like storage units, but they’re actually camouflaged AS hangars.”

“What’d you say?”

“Sagara’s right.” Courtney nodded. “I saw ’em at a weapons show in Nevada.

They open up on top.”

“That’s correct, Colonel,” Sousuke agreed. “Given the need for equipment and ammunition storage, there’s probably one AS for every two containers. In other words, three of them.”

“Hmm...” Lemon scratched his temple. “What’s the model? Savages?”

“If this is an important Amalgam facility? It’s likely to be Codarl-types.”

“The ones with lambda drivers?”

“I doubt we can fight them,” Sousuke decided. “Even multiple M9s with skilled operators have struggled to take out a single one... And even that tends to come with casualties.”

A heavy silence fell across the room.

“Boy,” said Courtney. “And we need to fight *three* of the damned things.”

“It wouldn’t be hard to beat them, if I had *him*...”

“‘Him’?”

“Al,” Sousuke clarified. “Mithril’s only lambda driver-equipped AS.”

“The ARX-7, right? Al the First?” Lemon’s eyes narrowed. He must have been thinking back on the white Savage, Al II, who’d been destroyed back in Namsac.

Now that his strength had returned and he could think more clearly, Sousuke felt even more sure that the Arbalest was the reason he’d been attacked on Hiva Oa Island. It had been damaged beyond repair back in Tokyo, but there was a chance that the lambda driver system—the core unit that included its AI—had survived, and if so, Sousuke was the only person in the world who could activate it. That was the only reason he could think of that an organization like Amalgam would go out of their way to put down a stray dog like him.

The revenge idea didn’t add up. To be sure, he’d killed his share of Amalgam executives—Gauron and Kurama for starters—but it wouldn’t be worth risking the ire of the DGSE with such a frankly slapdash attack.

There might be other reasons, as well. Maybe they didn’t want him giving information to Lemon and the others, or there was a crossed signal in the chain

of command, or Leonard Testarossa did it on a whim, or the families of Kurama and Gauron demanded it... Or it could be something more complicated, incorporating several of these reasons at once. There was no end to the speculations he could mount, but his connection to AI remained the most logical idea out of all of them.

“Well, regardless, what’s gone is gone... Let’s think up a more practical plan,” Sousuke said, shaking off his thoughts.

Lemon sighed. “I can’t think of how to mount an effective attack with what we have on hand, let alone capture an executive or a VIP like you’re talking about. The subordinates I’ve brought here are important to me, and I’m not going to send them on a suicide mission.”

“I’m not asking you to,” Sousuke agreed. “I plan to do this all by myself.”

“This again? Enough with the lone wolf act already!” Lemon shouted.

Colonel Courtney scowled. “Listen to you two,” he interrupted. “Going at each other like a bunch clucking hens...”

“We are not—”

“Shut up, cheater!”

“You—”

“Let me get this straight,” Courtney put in. “You just need to stop those fucking lamb-whatever ASes, right?”

“And I’m telling you, it’s not possible!”

“Hah! No matter how great the machine, it means jack fucking shit without an operator, right? Run an AS ambush and fuck ’em up with 40mm rounds before they even get moving,” Courtney proclaimed with a curious confidence.

“An AS ambush, huh?” Lemon mused thoughtfully. “But I don’t have any organizational support at the moment. I couldn’t even commission one standard AS.”

“But one is all he needs, right?”

“Yes. But it needs to be a proper AS, not some scrap heap you’d find running

around Namsac or the South American countryside.”

“All right. Sergeant, what’s your read?” Courtney asked, turning to Sousuke.

“To run an AS ambush, I’d at least need a second-generation model, quiet-running and agile,” Sousuke replied. “It would need to have a fire control and communications system at least on par with what’s on the battlefields right now. The Savage might be the easiest model to get, but it wouldn’t have the needed specs.”

The man had asked, so he’d answered, but he knew there was no way to get that kind of an AS in their current situation. He might have to infiltrate on foot from the ocean, and plant C4 on the Codarls. It would be exceedingly difficult, and their chances of success were low, but...

But Courtney just nodded. “Gotcha. I think I can make that happen.”

Sousuke tilted his head curiously.

Just then, they heard a strange sound in the distance: a muffled engine noise, the sound of irregular chopping through the air. It was an aircraft—a helicopter—and it was nearing the camp.

“Perfect timing,” Courtney said, with the others watching him dubiously. Then he led them out of their spartan barracks. The helicopter’s noise continued to grow louder, until a powerful wind began to bend the trees around the camp.

“Courtney-san. What in the world are you—”

“Just look,” Courtney ordered.

The jungle around the camp and the trees to the south were swaying hard in the powerful wind. Foliage swept into the sky above as a large helicopter appeared over the treeline.

It was a boxy machine, painted gray, resembling a modified CH-53. It was a transport helicopter from one generation prior to the MH-67 Pave Mares that Sousuke and the others used. Beneath that large helicopter dangled an arm slave with a stocky silhouette. Thick, sturdy limbs and dark gray armor... It looked like a stubby-legged man in a down jacket.

It was an M6 Bushnell—specifically a Dark Bushnell, the latest A3 model,

specialized for spec ops. It wasn't as good as its descendant, the M9, but it was extremely agile, and it had a generator that could run extremely quietly for short periods of time.

It would have been difficult enough to get the original version of the machine. To get a specialized version like this...

"Hah, it was easy," Courtney boasted as Lemon stared in disbelief.

"Wait," said Lemon incredulously. "Were you really going to go back to Arizona when you had something like this on the way?!"

"Who said I was going back to Arizona?" replied Courtney.

A figure leaned out of the helicopter hatch and waved at them. This was another old man, Colonel Roy Sears, an old friend of Courtney's who had also been at the dinner where he'd met Sousuke. He had apparently once been a big name in the Navy SEALs, and was still a man of considerable influence, but Sousuke mainly remembered his quiet attempts to hit on Tessa.

The helicopter dropped the AS and landed. Sears ran straight toward them, completely ignoring Sousuke, Lemon, and the others as he craned his neck all around the camp, and then shouted at Courtney, "I forged all the documentation and brought it right in! Now, where's Tessa?!"

"She's not here," Courtney told him calmly.

Sears toppled, mid-goggle. "What?! You said she'd be here! You said if I brought the M6A3, she'd give me a little TLC in a classic Nightingale nurse outfit!"

"Sorry," Courtney admitted. "I lied."



The main topics of the online conference were adjustments to the military and economic balance in the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Far East. Most parties wanted to maintain the current situation in the Middle East, while agreeing to more terrorist incidents over the allocation of mining resources in Central Asia. They also wanted to maintain current tensions in the Far East, in combination with an increase in each individual country's military spending.

Figures were given about estimated damage costs and the human casualties of each plan, paired with a report about the long-term advantages they would offer. Each man looked these reports over, and showed aggressive or passive approval as suited his objectives.

The world was already conquered.

Most people didn't realize this. There was no need for them to know, of course; their organization efficiently used funds, technology, and violence to make sure power was distributed in ways that satisfied most.

The world was already conquered.

There was no need for them to monopolize the wealth. Carnivores in the Savannah couldn't eat the grass, and herbivores couldn't grow too rare or too plentiful. What was needed was balance.

The world was already conquered.

This flow they'd set in motion couldn't be changed, not even by them. No one could even see the entire river; they just had to avoid rocking the boat... and always, always read the flow.

Ah, such nonsense.

The world was already—

"Mr. Silver, are you listening?" one of the executives said to Leonard, irritation in his voice, as the conference neared its end.

Of course, he'd been listening, but he paused before responding as if he hadn't. "What is it?"

"About the project. Given the scale of the issue at hand, we'll be requiring the cooperation of *everyone* involved." Mr. Gold was the one prompting him. The rule was that they never use each other's names, but Leonard knew this particular man's name, as well as his country of origin.

"You're absolutely correct," Leonard answered. "I came here to offer all the information in my power to disclose, of course."

"Then how long do you intend to leave the girl on her own?" Mr. Gold demanded. "You think you can just tell us she's 'under investigation' yet again,

and expect us to accept that?”

“I beg your forgiveness. It’s just, I feel there may be elements that our... previous approach has failed to uncover.”

“More of your ‘organic farming’ theory?” Gold said sarcastically.

Several of the other men laughed, but Leonard just smiled calmly through it.

“We want new black technology, as well. Not abstract concepts like the omnisphere. Real results,” Gold pressed him.

“I’m sure you do,” Leonard responded. “But I’ve given you plenty of real results, haven’t I?”

“I suppose.” Gold, speaking on a voice-only channel, let out a sniff. Then, as if changing the subject, he said, “I also have some information. I can’t be certain, but I think some organization may have tracked your girlfriend’s location. It may not be safe for much longer.”

“That’s the first I’ve heard of it,” said Leonard. “I’ll need to increase security.” Of course, he was lying; he knew that someone—someone who knew the system well—had hacked into a NATO military satellite from within, and taken shots of the Niquelo estate in the highest resolution available. They’d investigated his money laundering, too. He didn’t know who’d done it, only that they were a first-rate hacker. He knew that it was someone involved with France’s DGSE, too, but he hadn’t tracked them down just yet.

But that wasn’t all. There was another “someone” watching this all go down online and stealing all the acquired data right off the hacker’s plate. This second one wasn’t human; it was a massive and brilliant artificial intelligence. It had to be the submarine’s computer, Dana, who likely didn’t know the identity or whereabouts of the original hacker. Nevertheless, she had surely gotten what they needed. Gold was right; the estate was no longer safe.

Mr. Gold spoke up again. “We’ll gladly augment your security. We already have three 1502s and three 1059s en route.”

“I appreciate it,” said Leonard. “They did so well at Merida Island, after all.” Several men laughed at his sarcasm. But inside, Leonard was thinking, *He’s finally making his move. How annoying*, and clicked his tongue inaudibly.

The online conference covered a few more topics before coming to a close. Afterwards, Leonard left the conference room, which had been set up in the estate's basement. Once outside, he found Sabina Rechnio, his Polish subordinate, waiting for him.

"They've brought the machine in question," she told him.

"The ARX-8, was it?"

"Yes. Mr. Kalium is with it."

"Kalinin, eh? Let's go," Leonard decided, emerging from the basement and passing through the estate's corridors. He arrived at the heliport and saw a pallet of AS parts beside it, in front of which stood Andrey Kalinin. The man was dressed lightly in an undershirt, but a gray coat hung over his right arm. He must have come here straight from Alaska.

"Any thoughts about your first mission?" Leonard asked Kalinin.

"Not especially," said Kalinin, entirely unruffled. "Would you like to see the machine?"

"Hmm... I believe I would."

A waterproof tarp obscured the huge pallet's contents, and it took several men working together to reveal the AS beneath. There'd been a few slight alterations to the armor and other minor features, but otherwise it had few differences from Mithril's third-generation AS, the M9 Gernsback.

How unimaginative.

"*This* is their trump card?" Leonard asked incredulously.

"Yes," Kalinin responded without expression. "It looks different from the Arbalest because they recycled parts from the prototype XM9. But overall, it's most like an M9 Eseries." He paused. "Do you wish to see the lambda driver's core unit?"

"Yes, let's have a look."

Kalinin nodded, cueing nearby subordinates with a glance. The armor on the back was opened up, and several men worked together to remove the hip armor and expose the AS's internal systems. Just below the cockpit, in the place

where you'd find the generator and electronic warfare systems in an M9, sat a unit about the size of a refrigerator.

Leonard swiftly climbed the AS's frame, opening the unit to gaze inside. There was a reinforced glass cylinder, held in place with shock absorbers, filled with a fluid that shone with the metallic luster of structural coloration.

This cylinder was the core circuit of the lambda driver. When turned on, this "fluid logic element" would activate and emit a rainbow light like a DVD. Such devices could be found in their Codarls and Behemoths too, but this liquid processor had many times the capacity of Amalgam's version.

"Are you certain this is it?" Kalinin asked.

Leonard placed a hand on the surface of the cylinder and considered. The main circuit, the shock absorber system, the cooling unit, the fiber-optic cables coming out of both sides... It all seemed completely as expected.

But... No. Why should he care? Even giving it this much consideration meant wasting valuable brain cells on that man and his machine. The face of Bani Morauta flashed for a moment in his mind, and Leonard smiled self-reproachingly. "It is," he finally affirmed. "Now, destroy it."

"Yes, sir," Kalinin responded, and gave the order to his subordinates. It took about half an hour, but they eventually disconnected the stolen machine's power source, torched off the hip and shoulder joints, and dumped it all in a corner of the grounds. In a car, this would be akin to having severed the chassis and removing the engine.

Then they removed the cylindrical unit from the machine and smashed it in front of everyone. Fluid came spilling out, and the remains of the machine's "soul" were swiftly washed away with a bucket and a mop.

While they worked, Kalinin glanced up at the third-floor window of the estate. He'd expected to see her here, but... the girl, Chidori Kaname, was indeed there behind the glass, white as a sheet. She was watching the arm slave being dissected... and also watching Kalinin, the man supervising the operation. He couldn't see her clearly from this distance, but the moment their eyes met, she withdrew into her room.

Clouds hung in the southwestern sky, and thunder rolled in the distance. *A storm is coming...* With that sense of foreboding rising inside him, Kalinin turned his thoughts to the upcoming fight.



The low pressure system shook the transport plane mercilessly; up and down, left and right. *How long will this go on?* Sousuke wondered. He thought he'd gotten used to this kind of awful weather, but couldn't keep his stomach from lurching.

The passengers moaned like dying men each time they opened their mouths. A crew member in the cargo bay, clearly holding back a desire to puke, screamed as hard as he could into his headset. "One minute!!"

The landing point was approaching.

Sousuke manipulated the control sticks in the cockpit and ran his final checks. No issue with the parachutes. Fire control? Check. Communications? Check. Navigation? Check. Movement control? Check. All systems green. *Time to go, then...*

The large cargo hatch at the back of the transport began to open slowly, and a raging wind roared into the hangar. The M6A3 Dark Bushnell, which was mounted on the launch rail, activated its generator and steadied itself for the difficult battle to come.

Sousuke took a deep breath and addressed the transport's crew. "Uruz-7 here," he said tersely. "Ready to descend to mission site. Thanks for seeing me off. This is call sign Uruz-7... Ready to begin descent."

"Roger!" the captain called over his radio. "Good luck to you, Uruz-7!" Sparks flew. The rail locks released, and then Sousuke's M6 was thrown free into the sky.

4: On a Stormy Night

Sousuke's M6A3 Dark Bushnell descended in freefall through the dark over southern Mexico. It creaked in the buffeting winds, and the cockpit vibrated violently, punctuated by the occasional jolt that came close to breaking his neck. The digital altimeter showed rapid descent, and the meters trembled back and forth as the attitude indicator swirled around and around. His ECS was shut off; the M6A3 had one (though it lacked invisibility function), but it would have been useless in this storm.

The altimeter descended past three thousand feet, and he opened the first parachute: success.

The machine's descent slowed dramatically, and he opened the second parachute: success.

But just as the lifeline opened overhead, Sousuke found himself buffeted by a strong gust of wind, and the twelve-ton machine tumbled like a ragdoll, lurched through the air, and nearly lost its balance entirely. There were still fifteen hundred feet to go: at this rate, he was going to slam into the ground.

The sudden lurch had caused one of the parachute wires to catch around the M6A3's torso. Sousuke tried to correct his descent posture, but failed. In a split-second decision, he cut the parachute free. The ground was closing in. Resisting the urge to open the spare parachute right away, he waited one second and then did so successfully.

Another hard gust of wind blew past. He read it properly this time and kept his machine facing upwind, with careful movements of its arms and legs as the ground continued to close in. His gray night vision sensors showed a mountainous region covered in broad-leaved trees.

Three hundred feet left. Two hundred. One hundred. Fifty... Then the M6 was crashing through the canopy and hitting the ground. Sousuke immediately cut himself free of the parachutes before sitting up. Shock absorbent vapor, ejected by his machine's joints, rolled out into the jungle around him.

His next move was to run a swift, passive sensor sweep of the area: no sign of the enemy. The only heat sources came from the forest's nocturnal animals, fleeing the steel giant's sudden intrusion.

Landing successful. "Whew..." Sousuke confirmed all systems were still green, and then let out a sigh.

His M6A3 was currently lying on the jungle floor like a big black lump. The gas turbine engine released a muffled growl under the wind and rain buffeting its armor. He checked his location with the GPS: He was in the mountains, twenty kilometers northwest of the estate.

He'd quickly head south, then switch to silent running once he got within ten kilometers. He'd get as close as he could, and once the enemy detected him, he'd switch to full output and charge. His priority was the three not-yet-activated Codarl types: If he could destroy them before their operators got on board, their lambda drivers would be a moot point. *If* there really were only three, of course...

Lemon and the others were on standby elsewhere. The moment Sousuke cut them an opening, they'd land their helicopter on the grounds, and deploy infantry to lock the place down.

Of course, it was unlikely that everything would go so smoothly, but it was their only option. They'd considered a plan to descend right on top of the estate as well, but ground-to-air missiles were likely to hit the transport before the drop. A raid from the ocean was equally risky; there was too much visibility from the shore, so anything closer than eight kilometers would be spotted by the enemy's infrared sensors.

If only I had an M9... Sousuke thought regretfully, as the flexibility of a Mithril M9 would have opened up far more possibilities. Unfortunately, they were in no spot to be picky. If he was detected by the enemy and the Codarl-types managed to activate, they'd have to call off the mission and retreat.

Of course, that would cause the opponent to tighten security even further, and to abandon the estate shortly afterwards. The clue he'd worked so hard to get from Kurama in Namsac would be rendered meaningless, and he'd have to start everything over from square one. Kaname would be out of his reach once

more.

But then... is Kaname even in there to begin with? he wondered. Is she even still alive? If she is, and if she's in that house... does she even still care about me at all? I almost forgot about her in Namsac... That's what time and distance does. What if she's with him now? What if she looks at me like I'm a nuisance? What if she looks at me with pity and says, "Just leave me alone?"

Anxieties unrelated to the mission stung at his heart. It was worse than the pain from when Kurama had shot him.

No... I'm tired of all this introspection, Sousuke decided. None of that matters. Here in the moment, what's my responsibility? Get closer, avoiding enemy detection. Use everything this machine has to offer to achieve my objective.

"Let's go," he whispered, and began to move the M6A3 forward. The machine's control system didn't answer him... but of course, that was to be expected.

Kaname had done her best to restore it, but the laptop really didn't have any network function at all. It wasn't a software issue; the very hardware needed to establish a connection had been removed. After prying into the case itself, that was the conclusion she'd been forced to draw.

But of course they'd removed it. That was the only condition under which they'd give valuable data about Amalgam's activities to someone like herself, who remained uncooperative despite her surrender. Kaname continued to look for ways to convey her location to someone on the outside, but there was nothing to be found. The Alastor things roaming the grounds outside meant there was no way for her to slip away, either.

She gazed up at the starry sky on the terrace at night, and got her approximate latitude from vaguely-remembered triangulation methods: 15°N, 40 minutes. The mansion contained a rough world map, and she'd checked it for beaches matching that latitude. India, the Arabian Peninsula, or southern Mexico... *Probably Mexico*, she assumed.

Knowing her current location wouldn't help her escape, but it did give her a minor feeling of accomplishment. *But if I can figure that out this easily*, she

wondered, *why can't I accomplish another simple task?*

Kaname's next move was to begin wandering the estate, carefully observing things she hadn't given any thought to before. She hoped she'd find something that would spark an escape plan; maybe there'd be something she could use.

But even if she escaped, what then? Where would she go after that? The thought never left her mind. *Yes... Even if I do run away, there's no place for me to go.* But whenever that thought became smothering, Kaname would shake her head and head for the pool. She'd put her swimsuit on and dive in, swim ten laps, and feel a little better.

The people in the house seemed to be noticing the change in her, but Kaname wasn't especially trying to hide it. A little attitude change wouldn't alter the fact that the place was a prison.

Then, one day, *he* came to the house: Andrey Kalinin. He'd airlifted in a third-generation AS that looked to be Mithril's, went over it with Leonard, and then disassembled it. Kaname had watched it happen from the window.

What's he doing here? she wondered. *Did he betray them, or is he a double agent?* The sight of Kalinin had rattled her badly, but over the course of the next few days, she never once had a direct conversation with the Russian. They ran into each other from time to time, but she never knew what to say, and he seemed to spend most of the day outside with his subordinates, anyway.

From the glimpses she caught of their activities, Kaname could surmise that they were reevaluating the grounds' defenses. *Something's about to happen,* she intuited vaguely.

That intuition became a reality on the night of a storm, several days after Kalinin's arrival. The wind was raging outside, and rain pounded against the windows. The waves crashing on the shore became a chilling roar that echoed through her bedroom.

Kaname was lying in bed reading when Leonard Testarossa stopped by her room. "What do you want?" she asked brusquely.

Usually when she treated him this way, he would just smile and shrug. But tonight, Leonard wasn't smiling; instead, he just stood tensely in the doorway.

“I want you to get your things together,” he told her. “We’re leaving here today. Perhaps tomorrow... Soon, at any rate.”

“Why?”

“Circumstances have changed,” he told her.

“I sure would like to hear how,” Kaname replied, but Leonard didn’t respond. He rarely shared his true thoughts and feelings, and this time would be no different. He just stood where he was, apparently turning something over in the privacy of his mind.

“Yeah, that’s what I figured,” Kaname said coldly, still propped up on her arms in the bed. “Don’t tell me, then. Whatever. Keep treating me like a doll—like a bird in a cage—and then be surprised when I act the way I do.”

“It isn’t like that,” Leonard protested. “It’s just that you don’t need to know these things, and hearing them might upset you.”

“Like I said, a doll.” Kaname stretched lightly. A vague irritation was welling up inside her, and it added a prickliness to her voice. “I’m not like Tessa, you know? I’m not sensible enough to bend to you, just because you’re handsome and smart and rich.”

“She isn’t, either,” Leonard reminded her.

“Yeah, I’m talking about how she used to be,” Kaname retorted. “But if even *she’s* in full ‘screw you’ mode right now, my behavior can’t be surprising in the least, can it?”

He neither affirmed nor denied her statement.

“Nothing to say to that, huh? Y’know, I’ve been thinking these past couple days... you’re kind of a coward, aren’t you?”

After a long pause, Leonard whispered, in a self-deprecating tone, “Perhaps... perhaps I am.” There he went again, yielding the point with that ‘world-weary genius’ look on his face.

But Kaname stayed on the offensive. “Yeah, I bet you think you’re super cool right now,” she said scornfully. “That whole ‘I know, I’m so tragic,’ act? I bet it works on most people, so you try it on me. Do you really think I’m gonna fall for

it?”

“Sharing things with you won’t change your attitude,” Leonard observed.

“Hey, let’s give the boy a prize,” said Kaname with a mocking smile, her voice brimming with sarcasm and reproach. “Is that what the torture’s about: locking me away, taking everything I care about while you watch me and smirk? You think if you keep doing that, someday I’ll give in? Yeah, fine. I’m not made of stone, so maybe someday I will. But even if I did... would that really be what you want?”

Leonard said nothing in reply.

“I remember this total creep in the class next to mine,” Kaname reminisced. “He weighed about a hundred kilos, he was constantly sweating and leering at me and some other girls. I hear he did some real stalkery stuff too, and he brought tons of gross bondage and lolicon books to school. Of course, I don’t know how true all that is... but you know the type. I seriously don’t understand what goes through their minds... But now, here’s the problem: I tried to think about who I’d rather hang out with. That creep, or you. Who do you think I chose?”

Leonard didn’t answer, of course. He just stood where he was, watching her impassively.

“I asked you a question,” Kaname insisted. “Who do you think I chose?”

“I don’t like your tone,” he said evenly.

“Go on, guess.”

“Could we skip the vulgar hypotheticals and continue our conversation?”

“No,” she declared. “Now, this might knock your socks off, but I thought it over all day, and... I realized, I genuinely don’t know. When you boil it down, the only difference between the two of you is your looks. That’s how creepy you’re being right now.

“When Sousuke first showed up at my school, he was pretty creepy, too. But he wasn’t like you, snickering at people behind their backs. He engaged with life in good faith. Always. He never leered at me like you do... like he knew me, like

he owned me. He was always... genuine.”

“Enough,” said Leonard, approaching her slowly. His movements were as graceful as ever, but his voice was low and cold. “I’m always genuine.”

“Sure you are,” scoffed Kaname. “You said you love me, right? Was that genuine?”

“Yes.”

“But why? Why do you love me? Could you just explain it?”

“I explained it already,” Leonard told her.

“On the roof of that love hotel? What a load of bunk. I don’t think you even know what love is. That’s why Tessa turned on you too, by the way.” Leonard’s fists clenched tight in his pockets. But Kaname continued, not noticing the change. “You don’t open your heart to anyone. You’re all sarcasm and aloofness, and you only see women as objects. Where does that come from, anyway? Parental neglect?”

Suddenly, Leonard seized her by the shoulders. The delicacy of his build belied a terrifying strength. Unable to fight him off, Kaname found herself forced to the bed. “Look into my eyes and I’ll show you,” he snarled.

“What are you—”

“Look,” he insisted, and suddenly his face was all she could see: his striking features, trembling with restrained violence. Her instincts told her not to look... but she looked, and something lurking deep in his gray eyes, beyond where light could reach, flowed into her mind.

It was a torrent of thoughts; the resonance. Kaname groaned and her back arched, as if she’d been struck by lightning. The images that revealed themselves weren’t vague in nature, like the resonance she’d experienced before; they were violent, harsh, and terrible.

She was surrounded by fire. A flaming hallway. Smoke swirled around her, stung her nose. The flames were gray. A little girl was crying. Gunshots sounded out in sporadic rhythms, and screams echoed in her ears. The house was under

attack.

“Take them both to the basement!” the man shouted.

“No. We’ll be found right away!” cried the hysterical woman.

“Jerry and the others will bring backup soon. If we can just hold out ten more minutes... Go, Maria. I’ll hold off the enemies on the south side.”

“Wait, Carl. Stay with me!”

“I can’t. You have to go.”

“Please!”

And yet the man left. The woman continued to hold the two children as she whispered in a voice filled with rage. “He’s always that way. That’s why I...”

Why I cheat.

A grotesque sight flashed in front of Kaname’s eyes: two bodies, entwined on a bed. Ugly voices that made her want to block her ears. It was how the woman always debased herself, whenever the man left for distant tours of duty. In public she played the faithful wife, but behind closed doors...

Leonard had learned about it at a young age, and it was the sight he always saw whenever he closed his eyes.

The gunshots grew closer.

Frightened and choking on smoke, the woman fled to the basement with her children. They climbed down the stairs and headed for the back, behind the piles of wood and gardening tools.

There were gunshots upstairs. A body hit the floor. The feet of unknown men could be heard on the stairs. They were coming.

“Hide,” said the woman, the mother, to her children. She pushed the weeping girl behind a stack of wooden boxes, and piled ragged blankets on top of her. The footsteps were closer now, and there was no time to hide the boy.

The mother’s eyes met her son’s, and Kaname would never forget the expression on the woman’s face: irritation, uncertainty, and a kind of loathing. *He knows of my betrayal, thought the woman. He scorns me. He thinks I’m a*

whore. He looks down on me with his unsettling genius...

“Mom?” the boy said, but the mother didn’t respond.

She was a beautiful woman, but there was something about the way she furrowed her brow and avoided her own son’s eyes that was so raw and gruesome. It wasn’t the hatred in her face; that expression was mild. Instead, it was in the way she just turned her eyes away from him. That was what made her will so final, why it sent destiny spinning off the rails at such speed.

The men were here, and their rifles glimmered black in the light. “Where’s the other child?” one of them asked.

“With my family. Please, don’t hurt me!” The mother grabbed her young son’s shoulders and shoved him in their direction, as if she’d pulled her wallet from her pocket and thrown it at a mugger. The despair and emptiness of that moment... All of his feelings flowed sharply into Kaname and sent her thoughts into a maelstrom. Nothing that happened after this would ever matter again.

It had only been a few seconds, or maybe a few minutes. When Kaname regained consciousness, Leonard had already released her and withdrawn to a chair in a corner of the room.

Lying face-up on the king size bed, she picked herself up. She was still out of breath, and could feel the sweat soaking her back. The rain against the windows sounded especially loud in her ears.

“My sister doesn’t know about it,” Leonard said vaguely.

“But that’s no...” Her throat seized up.

“No what?”

The painful experiences of a sad past... Everyone’s had their share. Sousuke has, and so have I. It’s tragic, but it’s no reason to smirk while you toy with people’s destinies.

As if reading Kaname’s thoughts, Leonard let out a sigh. “I’m sure that’s what you’d say if I’d explained in words like normal people do. Fortunately, I don’t have to do that with you. And now that it’s happened to you, you understand,

don't you?"

He was right. It had happened to her, in a way; it felt like her own memory. Kaname had felt the pain and sorrow as if it were her own, and it made her feel nauseous. She retched a few times, but held back so as not to stain the sheets.

For some reason, she was reminded of a time when, as a child, she'd pulled up a large rock on the riverbank. Underneath it she'd found worms and crayfish and all kinds of ugly things squirming around... A sense filled her, of the shallowness and fraud of it all. Trust, love, friendship, justice... they were just empty platitudes. Humans were vile creatures. Everyone lied. Everyone hid things.

The feeling soaked through her to the marrow of her bones.

"I didn't tell you to earn your pity," Leonard said quietly. "I'm not trying to use my trauma to justify my actions, either. I have my ideas, and I act based on those ideas. My decisions are my own; they have nothing to do with my resentment of my mother."

"But then why..."

"You wanted me to open up," he told her, "so I did."

Kaname made no reply.

Leonard stood up and turned his back to her. "Killing is a terrible thing, but the world contains many terrible things," he said. "Things much more painful than a spouse or parent's betrayal, rejection, and loss to death; my father was better off not knowing any of it. As the model soldier, the model officer, and the model husband, he died protecting the family he loved—and that he believed to be loyal to him. Dazzlingly and heroically."

"But..."

"And, well... if it seems that I 'snicker,' as you say, at others, then perhaps that's why," Leonard mused. "'I wish I could see the world so romantically'... Something like that."

"But I don't understand," Kaname said, her usual prickliness when dealing with him now gone. "If that's how you feel, then why do you want me?"

“That’s a good question,” he said, and then headed for the door. Just before he left, Leonard added, “Anyway, hurry up and pack. There’s something I want to show you, as well.”

Just then, the glass in the windows and the furniture trembled, and it wasn’t due to the sound of the storm. It had been a distant explosion.

Things went smoothly, right up until Sousuke got within ten kilometers of the house. He then switched the M6A3 to silent running, and encountered the enemy security system as expected. Counter-ECS radar, infrared sensors, pressure sensors, simple tripwires, and more... The M6’s electronic warfare system could fool most of them, but he’d have to take a long detour to avoid the ECCS. He wanted to get at least two kilometers closer before being detected.

Just as Sousuke was setting his mind to the question of the best course to take, he heard an explosion, and looked up questioningly. It sounded distant, four kilometers to the northeast.

Sousuke stopped his machine where it was in the jungle, and raised the periscope mounted on its left arm above its head. He elongated the telescoping sensor and pointed it in the direction of the explosion above the trees.

In the night sky raging with wind and rain, he could see traces of fire and heat. It must have been a helicopter or other flying craft, taken down by the security system’s surface-to-air missiles.

Lemon and the others? Sousuke hesitated for a moment, then called up his allies on his radio’s encrypted channel.

Michel Lemon responded in a carefree voice, which told him they were still at their standby point. “An explosion? What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” Sousuke admitted. “I’m trying to find out.”

It wasn’t Lemon who’d been shot down. Who, then? The periscope sensor wouldn’t be enough to tell. There was no way to get more detailed information from a minor sensor designed for close-range urban combat, especially with the storm further reducing visibility.

While Sousuke fretted over what to do next, he saw more motion near the first explosion. This time it was on the ground, where fire illuminated the jungle trees.

The security system's surface-to-air launchers had been destroyed. Whatever force had just lost their aircraft must have dropped an AS moments before...

"There's a battle going on," Sousuke announced.

"What?" said Lemon, clearly surprised. "With whom?"

Cannonfire from various sources flashed in the jungle, and something broke through the canopy to dance in the sky. It was an AS, leaping around in combat maneuvers. After a rather long hangtime, it disappeared from his sight.

"An M9," Sousuke concluded after playing back the sensor readings with manual magnification. There was no question about it. With that slender silhouette, it had to be an M9 Gernsback. An M9, here, fighting... Whose could it be?

"The remnants of Mithril?" Lemon asked over the radio. As far as they knew, Mithril was the only organization with battle-ready M9s.

"I don't know," Sousuke told him, "but I doubt it."

"Why?"

"Even my M6 could make it this close undetected, and a next-generation M9 should be able to do even better. Mithril knows too much about M9s to be so easily caught."

Besides, the detailing on the M9 he'd seen was different from that of the Mithril M9s. The sensors on the head, the shape of the shoulders... The armor was also thicker than the M9s he knew, and the movements were a little slower. They lacked the sharpness he associated with the machine.

"Then..."

"The US military." Another voice broke in behind Lemon's. This was Colonel Sears, the man who had brought them the M6A3. "Bet it's the Army. Delta Force's arm slave unit should have requisitioned the M9 by now; it just hasn't been revealed to the public yet."

“What?” said Lemon again. “But what would they be doing here?”

“We were able to find this place. No reason they couldn’t do the same. But it’s too damned reckless...” Sears’s voice cracked with concern for the M9 unit. He was talking about his countrymen, after all.

Still, while it was one thing for Lemon and the others acting on their own accord, it seemed strange for the US military to be attacking one of Amalgam’s bases. Amalgam had enough political power to keep most national militaries off of their backs. He didn’t know what they wanted, or what they were after.

“There are too many unknown factors right now,” Lemon decided. “Sousuke, call off the mission. I have a bad feeling about this.”

“You’re right, but...” It was true that they’d planned to call off the raid if they ran into trouble, but Sousuke remained hesitant.

“But what?” Lemon demanded in exasperation. “Chaos like this will cause the enemy to activate those Codarl-types, right? Even if you get close, there’s no way you can destroy them in time.”

The satellite pictures they’d looked at just prior to the operation launch had made it clear that there were Codarl-type ASes near the estate. Sousuke hadn’t seen them personally, but the footprints seen on the beach after the rain and along the unpaved grounds were distinct from third-generation ASes.

Should he turn back, after all? That would be the smart decision. But *she* might be inside that estate right now, and if he just turned back...

“Stand by,” he ordered. “I’m going to charge.” That was all the consideration Sousuke gave it. Ever since the incident in North Korea, he’d caught the disease of being illogical. And right now, time was of the essence. If he was going to charge, he had to make it quick.

Sousuke swapped from his silent drive to the auxiliary power unit, and from there, activated the gas turbine engine. “The enemy will be focused on the M9 squadron,” he said. “I might find an opening.”

“Don’t do it, Sousuke!” Lemon shouted over the radio. “It’s too reckless!”

“Don’t worry. If it starts looking bad, I’ll turn back,” he responded. Then, an indescribable anxiety began to fill him, because something was waiting for him there; he could feel it. The rain pelted his machine as he ran it straight forward, breaking through the thick jungle. Branches and leaves scattered, and the engine howled through the air. Sousuke paid only minimal attention to the security network now; time was of the essence.

Chidori... He still didn’t know if she was here. But even if she wasn’t, he might find a clue. And... there was another feeling he couldn’t escape. *I think she’s there... I think she’s close by, waiting for me.* He couldn’t explain how he knew it. It was like a smell, an instinct totally different from the connection the Whispered shared.

Sousuke’s digital map told him it was two kilometers to the estate. The hilly terrain blocked it from view, but he knew he was almost there. His plan was to charge forward, then run around the estate clockwise, calling her name on his external speakers. Maybe she’d show herself. Maybe she’d call back to him. Then maybe he could grab her, and run away at top speed...

He heard an alarm. Direction: Eight o’clock. Distance: 300. Sousuke cried out, knowing that the M6’s reaction time wasn’t good enough to dodge it. The best he could do was take a defensive stance, turning the machine’s shoulder toward the incoming object.

A hard jolt shook his machine, and the cockpit trembled. Shells flew in from behind him and to the left, releasing showers of sparks as they hit his shoulder armor. His thermal sensors showed the heat signature of a lithe bipedal machine moving swiftly down the slope; in other words, an AS.

I was a fool, Sousuke thought, clicking his tongue as he considered his data on hand. An M9 would have told him the other machine’s type instantly, but this machine’s AI wasn’t that advanced. Still, he knew it was a third-generation—and from that, he could infer that it was a Codarl-type. He hadn’t expected it so soon.

There was no way he could continue with the plan, Sousuke realized. It would take all of his equipment and skill just to get away. Retrieving Kaname was out of the question now. It was frustrating and disappointing, but he’d have to give

up.

Another alarm sounded; the enemy Codarl was firing as it approached. Even one of these machines was more than he could deal with. There was nothing he could do to harm it. Sousuke tried to run, making use of the terrain to barely avoid the enemy's shots. The rain was a torrent around him. Shells landed all around the M6, as if herding it somewhere.

They must feel awfully confident... he thought, firing back a HESH round, partly in desperation. The Codarl stepped out quickly to block the shot in its own unique way; the air in front of it warped, and the shot came to a stop in midair. Then an ear-splitting sound rang out, and the round that should have hit it instead burst into flaming shards.

The lambda driver. That impossible, cheating device. Sousuke knew how foolish it was to oppose it in a normal AS, to a degree that only those who had faced them before could. *But...* he thought. If he focused on running, he might give it the slip.

Moving his control sticks smoothly, he activated the smoke bombs and chaff loaded in his machine's back. It opened, shooting out a large number of rockets that burst above his head. The blinding light and smoke they released covered the whole region.

Assuming that would be enough to jam the enemy's radar, Sousuke switched back to silent drive and charged due north. If he stayed mindful of his enemy's relative location and distance, he should be able to make it quite far. The other machine was faster, but if he kept running and hiding, using the terrain to his advantage, it should—

He gasped. He'd been a fool. The enemy machine was ahead of him. Distance: 300. They had known just what he would do, and had headed him off. The gray Codarl's red monoeye glinted as it approached the M6. Then it pointed its large carbine at him, and fired.

Sousuke felt the jolt as the 35mm shell smashed through his machine's armor. But he could still move. He started evasive maneuvers, and though he knew it was pointless, he tried to carefully return fire. As expected, the usual force fields repelled all his shots.

From just a few steps away, the Codarl drew a monomolecular cutter: it was going to skewer the cockpit. He fired again and again, but the lambda driver force fields continued to block all shots from the front. From the back, though, was another story.

Sousuke watched as a sudden explosion erupted at the Codarl's back, just after a high-caliber shell hit it out of nowhere. The enemy machine staggered forward, spewing smoke, but the wound didn't appear to be fatal. It tried evasive maneuvers of its own, diving to the side as it scanned around for the enemy that had ambushed it.

The enemy, a single AS, was right beside the Codarl, and had apparently been hiding behind the hill. A gray M9; it had been a perfect ambush from point blank range. The gray M9 now raised its large monomolecular cutter—a Crimson Edge—and plunged it into the Codarl's side. There was an ear-splitting screech of metal, and a shower of sparks.

"It can't be..." Sousuke whispered. That M9 wasn't from the US Army. It was the E-series; he'd know it anywhere. An E-series M9 with a blade antenna on the head...

With its core now destroyed, the Codarl slumped to the ground. After kicking its remains away in disgust, the gray M9 turned back to Sousuke and spoke through its external speakers. "Yeesh..." It was a woman's voice. "You looked real sad back there. It was hard to watch, you know?"

Sousuke recognized this voice, too; it was Melissa Mao. She was alive. "Mao," he said wonderingly.

"Sousuke," Mao replied, true joy in her voice. "I thought it was you. The way you kept your cool against that Codarl, those moves, and that shotcannon... I wondered if it might be possible, but..."

"See?! Told you so!" came another voice. Sousuke saw another M9 standing on a hill about eighty meters away, holding a large, long-barreled sniper cannon.

"Kurz?" he guessed.

"I knew you wouldn't die that easy. You big downer!" With that mercilessly

taunting tone, there was no doubt—this was Kurz Weber. He was alive, too.

“But what are you doing here?” Sousuke asked next.

“We’d like to ask you the same question, and more... But we’ve got reinforcements to deal with,” Mao whispered, crouching her machine down urgently. “Two Codarls, seven o’clock. Distance: 20. I doubt we’ll get the drop on them. Kurz and I are the only ones here, now. Think we can manage it, Sousuke?”

“Affirmative,” Sousuke responded, working swiftly to mitigate the damage to his own machine. A mixed squadron, two M9s and an M6, against two lambda-driver-equipped ASes: these were pretty bad odds. But... “It’s not an issue. We can take them.”

“Heh heh. We’ll show ’em how the masters do it,” Kurz said.

“Sounds great! Kind of unexpected, but the trio is back!” Mao said.

At last, the M6’s sensors picked up the enemy signatures that the M9s had already done. Bearing: Eight o’clock. Distance: 1500. He had questions for both of them, but they didn’t have time for a leisurely chat right now. First, they had to deal with the immediate enemy.

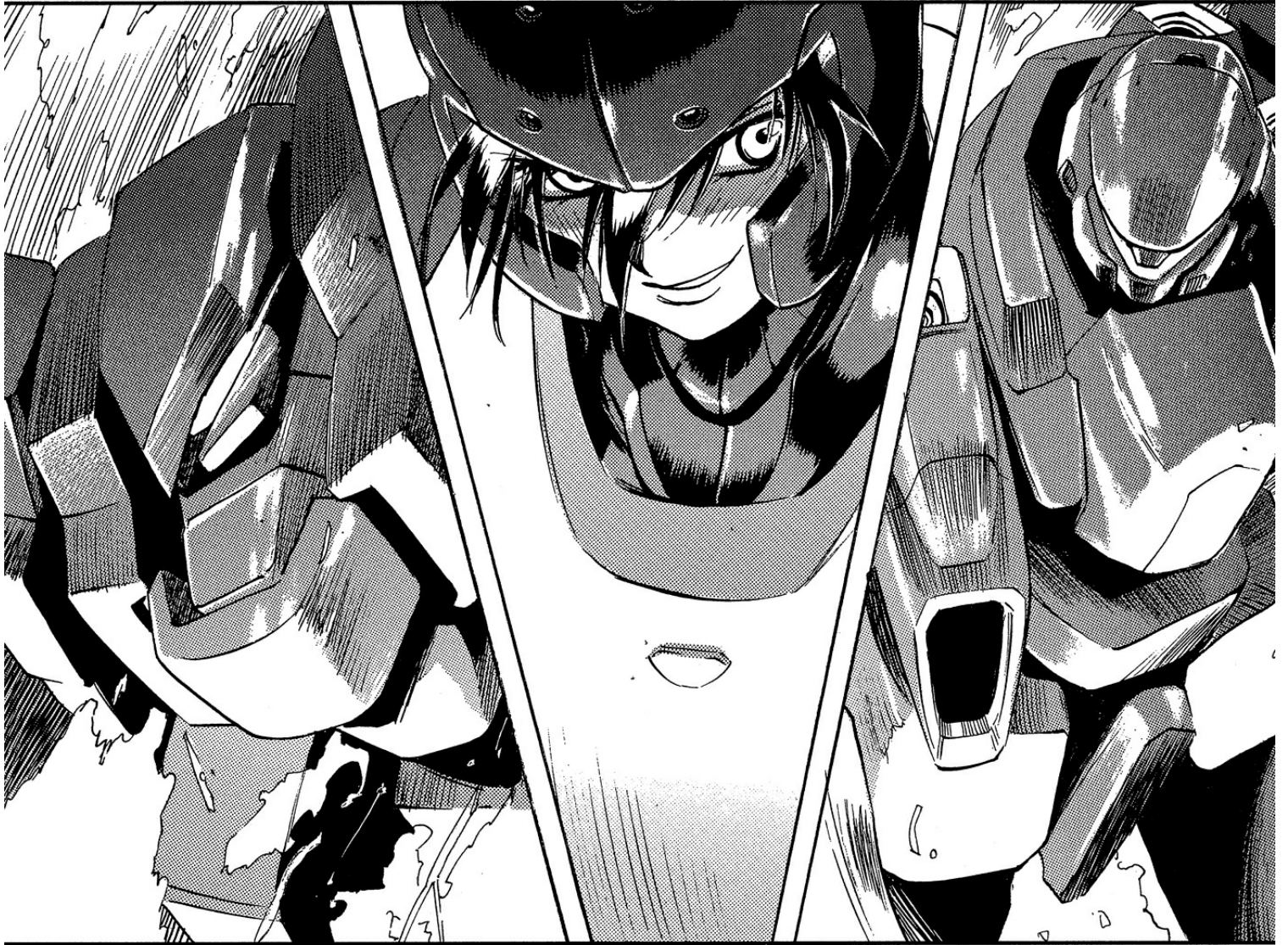
Mao gave them detailed directives in advance, then said, “Okay, let’s show those pieces of shit how it’s done! C’mon, you bastards! You ready to roll?!”

Kurz and Sousuke answered:

“Any time!”

“Anywhere!”

Then Mao cried out, “Okay, break!”



Their three ASes crouched down before leaping in various directions. The onscreen symbols crossed back and forth as they darted around, firing shells across the night-clad mountains. AS squad tactics were a little like a basketball or soccer match, in that all units weave around the field, moving skillfully and constantly—running, jumping, trying to catch the enemy by surprise. Sometimes flexibly, sometimes forcibly. Combat initiative was like the ball; machines passed and dribbled it, integrating feints. A machine assumed to be a decoy one moment would launch a fatal attack the next.

“Uruz-6, lure Alpha west!” Mao cried.

Kurz answered immediately. “Roger!”

Then, a few seconds later, “Uruz-7, lure Bravo south! How many seconds can you buy me?”

“Fifteen,” Sousuke answered.

“Go for it!”

“Roger!” With that short exchange, they understood each other perfectly.

One year ago, a single Codarl had brought them all to the verge of total destruction. But they hadn’t just been sitting on their hands since then, quaking in fear of the lambda driver. They’d been engaging in rigorous trial and error, testing the theory of fighting an LD-mounted machine... and in Hong Kong they’d formulated a plan that had gotten them just to the brink of destroying one. Since then, they’d acquired the fairy eye—a device that let them perceive the force fields—which further bolstered their simulation knowhow. The result of all of that effort was that Mao and the others no longer saw Codarls as an unbeatable enemy. Two of them at once would still prove extremely dangerous, but it wasn’t a hopeless battle.

Besides, they were together now. Mao, Kurz, and Sousuke were a team that knew each other’s rhythms perfectly when it came to AS squad tactics. On top of that, they probably had the most experience of any team in the world when it came to fighting lambda driver-mounted ASes.

Their skills haven’t diminished in the slightest, I see... Sousuke thought as he watched Mao and Kurz move. Of course, he seemed much slower, riding in an

M6 as he was. But there was nothing he could do about that.

Sousuke knew exactly what the other two would do next, and used a few minor tricks to keep the approaching enemy AS at bay. Little by little, he drew the Codarl's attention to himself. Just as it would think he'd gotten away, he'd turn around and hit it with a fierce rain of shots, along with another AS. Thanks to the real-time data he was receiving through Kurz and Mao's fairy eyes, he knew exactly when the enemy's lambda driver field was up.

One of the two Codarls leaped right into the place he'd hoped it would. It closed in on the bait—Sousuke's M6. He fired his shotcannon in response, and the enemy's force field deflected it. Kurz's machine fired, but this too was deflected; the enemy was on guard for attacks from other directions, as well. It would be harder to catch it by surprise than before.

The enemy machine opened fire on Sousuke, and he felt a jolt as the shotcannon he'd been using as a shield split in two. Despite having lost his one weapon, Sousuke shouted, "I'll do it!" And with that alone, the other two knew exactly what he wanted.

Mao and Kurz ran straight for the Codarl, bathing it in fire. The force field deflected said fire, causing the enemy machine's attention to focus entirely on the two M9s. Mao and Kurz's machines got close enough to slam into it, but then sped past at top speed. In that instant, they also threw their weapons high into the air.

From the enemy's point of view, it must have looked like the two M9s were suddenly unarmed. In fact, these weapons were now in the hands of Sousuke's M6, which had leaped in a spinning arc to catch them out of the air and land behind the enemy.

The M6, which had been presumed neutralized due to the loss of its shotcannon, was now standing behind the Codarl, two rifles in its hands. "One down," Sousuke announced, firing both weapons at full blast. There were muffled gunshots and bursts of muzzle flare as 40mm rounds and 76mm shells assaulted the Codarl from behind. They shredded its armor, pulverizing its reactor and cockpit, and nearly split the entire machine in two.

Once the kill was confirmed, Sousuke tossed the rifles back to their proper

owners.

“Hah! That’ll show ’em!” Kurz exulted, spinning around as he caught his sniper rifle.

“There’s still one left! You can laugh when it’s over!” Mao reminded them, unceremoniously catching her own rifle and letting out checking shots at the remaining Codarl. The three machines split up, launching into combat maneuvers to keep it on its toes.

The remaining machine was clearly uneasy. Its operator must have started out assuming victory was assured, only to watch his ally shredded in a shocking show of teamwork. What a terrifying trio of enemy machines. They were a force to be reckoned with—he must have realized that at last.

“Can you two handle it?” Sousuke asked, while still engaged in combat maneuvers.

“Think so. Why?” Mao asked.

“I think Kaname is in the mansion,” he admitted. “I want to look for her.”

“Kaname’s in there?!” Kurz said.

“Time is of the essence,” Sousuke told him. “Let me go.”

Sousuke’s M9 had lost its primary weapon, its shotcannon, and couldn’t be of much use here. Mao seemed to have realized that, as she immediately responded, “Understood. Be careful. Once we’ve cleaned up here, we’ll join you.”

“Thank you.”

“Hey, Sousuke! I’ve got a whole lot of questions for you,” Kurz yelled next. “You’d better not die! That’s an order!”

Confused, Sousuke furrowed his brow at his words. “Why an order?”

“Heh heh. I’m a master sergeant now!”

“Really? You?”

“You betcha!”

“They must be severely understaffed...”

Kurz was silent in the face of Sousuke's observation.

"We really are," Mao agreed. "Any port in a storm, as they say—"

The Codarl was approaching. The three machines saw a lambda driver shockwave rushing their way, and immediately dodged, splitting into different directions.

"—but this is no time for chit-chat!" she finished.

"Exactly," Kurz said, as the two M9s began their counterattack. "If you're going, you'd better go!"

"Good luck, then," said Sousuke, changing his machine's direction to make a beeline for the estate.

Tessa, sitting in the control room of the de Danaan, was delighted to hear Mao's report that they'd met Sousuke. Yet at the same time, there was a twinge of, *Ah, of course*. She was glad to hear that Sagara Sousuke was alive... very glad. But she knew the reason he was here too well for her heart not to ache in response.

Of course. He'd do anything for her. She recognized her pettiness as being simultaneously amusing and sad, and it came with a certain amount of resigned loneliness. *Ah, of course. Of course she means that much to him...* But now was no time to get caught up in regret; Tessa had to focus on their plan.

Leading up to this, Tessa had had the de Danaan's AI, Dana, working at top speed to track Leonard down. She'd been secretly monitoring various countries' secret services and surveillance systems, and the minute the AI found the slightest trace of a possibility, Tessa investigated it thoroughly with her own eyes.

Soon, suspicious activities in a NATO surveillance satellite got her attention. A few days ago, some small-scale organization had been detected scrutinizing an area in southern Mexico, near the towns of Pochutla and Niquelo. That same organization then, somehow, absconded with a single M6A3 from the US Army and brought it to northern Florida. Seeing Colonel Sears's name come up as the one who had purloined the M6 made Tessa think that he—Sagara Sousuke—

might be involved. The only members of Mithril with a connection to Sears and Courtney were her, Admiral Borda, Mardukas, and Sousuke.

Realizing Sousuke must have picked up a clue caused Tessa to turn her vessel right around and hurry to the south coast of Mexico. The estate had to belong to Amalgam, and Leonard was almost certainly there. Around the same time, she noticed movements in the US Army; under advisement from the CIA, they were deploying a squadron of M9s—recently allocated to the special forces—to investigate the estate in question. She still wasn't sure how the CIA had gotten information on the estate. It seemed unlikely to her that they could have done it on their own, but...

Mao, locked in combat, contacted her on the radio. "Currently engaged with one Codarl-type. Where's that cruise missile support?"

"Just fired," Tessa told her. "Sending you the data now."

"Understood. That should do it. Where's Uruz-1?"

"He's shaken off American special forces surveillance and he's heading your way. Just be careful."

"We know. We'll be fine, Tessa."

The symbol representing Mao's machine danced across her front screen, clashing with the enemy machine symbol over and over.

The storm is getting worse, Sousuke thought, readying his spare handgun as the M6A3 Dark Bushnell flew at top speed over the gently rolling hills. If his pre-mission information was correct, there should be no more Codarl-type ASes between him and his destination. He, Mao, and Kurz had taken out two, and one was still fighting; that should be all of them. The next thought he had was, *Is that it?!*

The first thing he noticed about the estate was the roiling night sea; the next was a large cultivated lot, which had been cut out of the forest before it. The estate stretched for about a kilometer from one end to the other, at the center of which was a white mansion. It was about the size of a Japanese school building, with a tennis court, pool, and gardens surrounding it.

Sousuke had memorized the layout based on satellite images. He had his M6A3's sensors search for anti-tank or anti-AS mines to the best of its ability, then slipped through the security network and headed for the estate at the center.

"Lemon, do you read me?" Sousuke called to his ally, who was still on standby. Lemon responded immediately, and Sousuke briefly explained about the run-in with his old Mithril comrades.

"I don't quite get it," Lemon confessed, "but I guess that's good news?"

"Affirmative," Sousuke answered. "We can trust them."

"Got it," said Lemon. "I have news, too. A certain someone just made contact, and we're heading your way to—" A wave of static came over the line. The storm was interfering with transmissions, and someone was filling the area with electronic jamming, as well.

"Heading my way to what?" Sousuke tried again.

"—read me, Sousuke? I can't be sure, but I—"

"I can't hear you. Repeat, Lemon!"

"—gets dangerous—standby at next coordinates—"

"I can't understand you!" Sousuke shouted urgently.

"—spare called—tain—"

"I can't hear you. What are you talking about?"

"—saying, don't know what kind of machine—I think—than nothing—"

"Lemon?"

"—red—third—strange—"

An alarm sounded. The 20mm sentry guns that lined the complex were taking aim at him, as part of the unmanned security system that reacted automatically to enemy intrusions. Sousuke gave up on getting the radio to work and focused on the radar readings instead, firing his handgun immediately. Its 25mm shells broke the sentry guns to pieces.

No infantry in sight yet, he thought. No armored cars, either. No, that wasn't

quite right... He did see a few of those human-sized ASes, the Alastors. They came flying out from the brush, firing their arm-mounted .50-caliber rifles at him.

But such simple shells couldn't even dent the M6's armor. He blasted one apart with his handgun and sent another flying with a kick. The Alastors that had seemed so terrifying at human scale were nothing before an AS.

Next, Sousuke turned his external speakers on and shouted. "Chidori!"

Where are you?

"Chidori!"

Show yourself...

A black sedan was rushing through the courtyard, driving north along a cobblestone path that cut through the garden.

That car...! Had they decided a helicopter escape was too risky? Sousuke ran his machine in pursuit of the car and fired a warning shot from his handgun. "Stop!" he shouted, but the car didn't even slow down. He switched the 12.7mm machine gun mounted in his left arm to semi-automatic, and aimed a few careful shots at the hood. His shots struck the engine block, causing the black car's grill to jet steam. It swayed left and right, then ran up on the curb and came to a halt.

"Hands up! Come out slowly!" As Sousuke gave the order through his external speakers, the door finally opened and the driver came out. His hands were up, and he was looking up at the M6A3 in terror. "Is there a girl in there?" Sousuke demanded to know.

"I... I don't know," the driver said, then took off like a frightened rabbit. Ignoring the fleeing man, Sousuke activated his sensors and ran his infrared scanners over the car. There was no sign of a human-like heat signature in the back seat. Given how low the car was riding, though, there had to be a few more people inside. Unless...

Something triggered his instincts. He jumped his machine backwards, shielding his cockpit with both hands as the car exploded. Several hundred kilos of high-performance explosives crammed into the back of the car had gone off,

and a powerful shockwave sent fragments flying at supersonic speeds. In human-scale terms, it was as if a grenade had gone off a few meters away.

The explosion blew his dozen-ton machine backwards, and a violent jolt tore through Sousuke in the cockpit. His machine fell end over end, landing on its backside, and went skidding through the garden trees to his right.

It was a trap, he realized: his screen had gone black; his head-mounted sensors were gone; his warning lights were blinking rapidly, and power was dropping. Hydraulic pressure was tanking, and parts of his machine were on fire. Nearly all the drive systems in the arms, which he'd used to shield his cockpit, were down. His cooling device had shut down, too, and his attitude control gyro had taken serious damage. Both his main and auxiliary control systems were severed in places.

Yet if realization had dawned just one moment later, it might have been worse. While trying to recover from the spinning of his head, Sousuke swiftly moved sticks and flipped switches to try and mitigate the damage, activating his spare optical sensors to keep an eye on the area around him. But the spare sensors, which were mounted in the machine's crotch, had functionality on par with a home video camera; they were only there to give you the most basic outside vision when you'd taken damage. They didn't even have night vision capabilities.

One way or another, Sousuke realized, *I have to get away*. He strained the machine's barely-moving legs and managed to stand up. But the enemy wasn't about to show mercy; infantry appeared here and there—where had they been hiding?—and fired handheld rocket launchers at him next. The shots were carefully aimed and highly controlled. If he hadn't been injured, he could have counterattacked with anti-personnel weapons or taken evasive maneuvers, but both options were beyond him now.

The shots hit his machine's legs, arms, and hips, as well as the armor in front of his cockpit. The M6A3's chest armor was designed to resist shaped-charge explosives, which kept the rockets' flaming gas charges from penetrating the cockpit. But they still tore apart his electric and control systems.

Unable to take another step, his M6A3 simply collapsed.

“Lemon. Do you read me?” he called to Lemon via radio, hoping to report his machine’s immobility. “Lemon. I’m—” It was no use. The radio was dead. No choice but to abandon ship.

Sousuke pulled the emergency escape lever, activating the explosive bolts, and blew off his machine’s destroyed head. The action stripped away his cockpit’s ceiling, and he snatched up the small German-made submachine gun stored next to the hatch before pulling the pin from a smoke grenade and throwing it out. Afterwards, the area around his highly-damaged machine’s remains was wreathed in smoke. It wouldn’t be enough to escape if the enemy had any infrared scopes, but it was better than nothing.

Sousuke set one last trap in the burning, ruined machine before crawling out of the hatch and climbing down from there. Just then, he heard a voice. “You’re surrounded,” it said. “Drop your weapon.” Eight o’clock. Thirty meters away. A calm male voice.

Probably the commander of the mansion’s defenses, Sousuke thought. *But wait a minute... That voice...* Hiding behind the M6’s right arm armor, Sousuke cautiously turned in the voice’s direction.

Beyond the drifting smoke, a man in battledress stood on the roof of the two-story corridor that wound around the building. He was a large Caucasian man, the hair gray both on his head and his face. He had deeply carved features and a piercing gaze, which was currently focused on Sousuke. There was no mistaking him; it was...

“Major,” Sousuke whispered, his eyes opening wide. In that moment, he even forgot to keep on the lookout for other enemies around him.

“I’m reminded of Afghanistan, Sagara Sousuke,” Andrey Kalinin said.

“What...”



“I win again,” he announced calmly. “You wouldn’t have fallen for a trap this simple if you hadn’t lost your heart to that girl.”

“Major? What are you—” Sousuke began to ask, still in disbelief.

“It’s just what it looks like,” Kalinin told him. “I’m a part of Amalgam now, and I will do everything in my power to purge those who interfere with Leonard Testarossa and his organization.”

“Impossible,” Sousuke protested. “You can’t—” It couldn’t be. For the major, of all people, to join the enemy... Was he on some other mission? Pretending to betray them in order to get close to Amalgam’s core?

“You might be thinking I’m here as a double agent,” said Kalinin, anticipating his thoughts. “I’m sorry to inform you, but I’m not: I came here of my own free will, as your enemy. If you resist, I’ll order your death without hesitation. The only reason I haven’t killed you already is because I want information.”

“But why?!” Sousuke cried out.

“You have no need to know,” Kalinin said, with his usual icy demeanor. It was painfully obvious to Sousuke that the man wasn’t going to give him any more answers. And yet...

“Where’s Chidori?” he asked, almost begging. “Is she here?”

“What if she is?” Kalinin returned.

“Let me see her.”

“No. She and Mr. Testarossa are preparing to escape,” Kalinin told him ruthlessly. “The United States Army, Mao’s team, and you... you’ll all be neutralized. But this place is too well known now.”

“Mao’s team?” Sousuke repeated in shock.

“Drop your weapon, Sergeant.” Kalinin raised a hand, and his subordinates all pointed their weapons at Sousuke.

“I would advise you to do what he says.” It was a new voice. Leonard Testarossa appeared behind Kalinin.

Belfangan Clouseau, pilot of the black M9 Falke, had traversed the storm-addled night terrain to approach the place where Mao and Kurz were fighting. He snuck up behind the enemy AS, the Codarl, and shouted, “Fire!”

Mao and Kurz had begun a complicated attack pattern, integrating feints. The ballistic missile hanging in the sky above them, fired by the de Danaan, streaked towards its prey. Clouseau was using all his firepower, making a hard sell from the flank of an enemy that had dodged all their previous attacks. He stuck his monomolecular cutter into the Codarl’s gut, grabbed its arm and threw it. The Codarl went flying, and Mao and Kurz added shots on top of it. The helpless enemy machine was riddled with the follow-up shots while still in the air.

“All done,” Kurz said.

“What’s up with the Americans?” Mao asked Clouseau. He’d been off on his own mission, observing the US Special Forces in combat.

“They seem to have withdrawn,” he replied. “It felt as if they weren’t fully briefed on their target, or the strength of the enemy, either. It’s almost like—”

“Like someone was manipulating them?” she finished.

“Yes,” Clouseau agreed. “There was none of the sense you usually get from special forces soldiers, that feeling of ‘I know exactly what I’m doing.’ A strange kind of hesitance showed in their formations and teamwork.”

“Yeah. I think I know what you mean,” Kurz said. “Like they weren’t trying hard enough... like they thought their orders were unreasonable?”

“Not so much that you’d be able to tell if you weren’t a soldier yourself,” said Clouseau. “But I’d expected a little more determination from them, and they withdrew almost immediately. Nobody wants to fight an operation they don’t understand, I suppose.”

“But then, what’s going on here?” The enemy seemed to be up to more than they’d anticipated... And with too few clues to go by, they couldn’t even speculate what it might be.

“I couldn’t say yet. The colonel seemed to have expected it, though... Now, what happened to Sagara?” Clouseau had heard that he was alive, but hadn’t talked to Sousuke in person yet.

“Oh, well—”

Clouseau interrupted the response with a cry as the alarms in all of their machines began to blare. There were attacks incoming simultaneously from three, seven, and ten o’clock: anti-tank missiles, medium-caliber rounds, and high-caliber artillery shells.

Mao activated her ECM. Kurz fired checking shots in the direction of the sniping, and Clouseau pulled an infrared countermeasure from his machine’s equipment rack and threw it.

“More enemy machines?!” Mao shouted as she entered combat maneuvers, attempting to dodge the missiles.

“Yeah, and three of ’em, at that,” Kurz said, diving behind an obstacle before quickly moving to get the enemy machines back in his sights.

“Be careful! They’re not like the others!” Clouseau warned, readying the carbine mounted on his back. They must have been lambda driver-equipped machines, because they repeatedly and inexplicably deflected his team’s attacks. The enemy should have been able to dodge, but they seemed to want to test their ability to block Clouseau’s team’s shots.

The three machines came charging at them from three directions. Clouseau and his men tracked their force fields with the fairy eyes and dodged as best they could. The enemy machines passed the M9s at blinding speeds before pulling away to a distance, as sparks went flying.

Clouseau felt a heavy jolt and a warning light lit up as the left arm of his machine went flying, cut off at the elbow. He’d been unable to fully dodge the offensive force field, and it had ended up severing the appendage, along with his drive system. The real time data link let him know that Mao and Kurz’s machines were also taking damage; some mild, some severe. Mao’s machine had almost lost its head, and Kurz’s had lost its sniper cannon.

Seconds later, they were facing off against all three machines, which were lined up atop a low hill and glaring down at them. The enemy didn’t charge immediately, suggesting incredible confidence. The three ASes resembled the Codarl’s basic frame, but differed in the details. They had thick upper bodies, and instead of a ponytail-like heat sink, they had a braid-like one running down

their backs. They presented a different strength from the Codarls of the past. Their silhouettes were bulky—deceptively so, given their tremendous ferocity and agility. It was akin to the difference between a jaguar and a lion.

Each machine was a different color: Black, white, and red. One carried an oversized monomolecular cutter, one a large Gatling gun, and one a high-caliber sniper cannon. “Welcome, remnants of Mithril. I haven’t seen you since San Francisco,” the central black AS said via external speakers. It was a familiar voice.

“Fowler, eh?” said Clouseau.

“Him again, huh?”

“Looks like he’s really raring to go.” Mao and Kurz both sounded tense.

“I’ve been impressed by your spirit,” Fowler announced grandly, “but it’s time to bring things to an end. This is born neither out of overconfidence nor of underestimating you... I’d simply like to issue a challenge to you at full strength, as a show of respect.”

“Get your head out of your ass!” Kurz let his head-mounted machine guns fly at full automatic, cutting off Fowler’s words. 12.7mm fire rained down on the black AS, but the bullets all whiffed, deflected in a shower of sparks.

“Goodness me. I thought you could at least act like a gentleman on the battlefield, but...” Fowler let out a cold laugh. “You seem to have grown even more boorish. Now, if you’ll kindly get ready...”

It’s coming, Clouseau thought, but he didn’t even need to say it as Fowler and the others’ strange ASes made a leap at their braced M9s.

“It’s been some time, Sagara Sousuke-kun.” Leonard said leisurely, looking down at Sousuke from the roof, where he stood, soaked with rain. There was no mockery in his voice. He merely gazed with a certain melancholy at Sousuke, who was crouched beside the demolished M6.

“Where is Chidori?” Sousuke demanded.

“No interest in me at all?” Leonard returned. “I could cry.”

“Shut up. Where is Chido—”

“Enough,” said Leonard, his voice like ice. “You seem determined to be as unpleasant as possible at all times, even despite your perpetual, appalling ignorance. It’s like you think it’s your right to shout whatever comes to mind. It’s awfully arrogant, don’t you think?”

Who’s the arrogant one here? Sousuke wanted to say, but couldn’t form the words. He had no obligation to justify himself to his enemy, or to debate him. “I don’t care. Give her to me.”

“Goodness me...” Leonard let out a sniff and cast a glance at Kalinin beside him. “...Well? As my head of defense, Mr. Kalium, what do you say?”

“Normally I’d want to take Sagara into custody... but we don’t have time. And Mr. Gold’s squadron will be here soon. I’ve seen no obvious sign of it yet, but...” Kalinin trailed off there so that he could focus on a report he was getting from the earphone in his right ear. “...And there they are. They’re on the move.”

“Showing his true colors, is he?” Leonard narrowed his eyes and turned them towards the sea. Sousuke couldn’t see much from his current position, but he could make out a silhouette—the familiar upper half of the machine he’d never forget: Behemoths. Three of those giant ASes were cutting through the waves, heading toward the estate. Countless transport helicopters flew in the sky above. They probably had more ASes on board.

Amalgam reinforcements? Sousuke wondered. *No, that doesn’t seem right...* His doubts immediately changed to confirmation. The Behemoth was pointing its massive rifle cannon—its muzzle about 300 millimeters wide—at the mansion. The transport helicopters in the sky began to dip, preparing to land on the property.

“He appears to want a fight,” Kalinin said.

“Indeed,” Leonard agreed. “Let’s shake him off and get going.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, that’s right, you never gave me your answer. What do you intend to do about him?” Leonard asked, looking at Sousuke.

A moment later, Kalinin turned his gaze back to Sousuke. There wasn't so much as a single fragment of emotion in his eyes. "Shoot him."

"That's fine," Leonard said, turning around. His black trenchcoat—the active bulletproof fabric—fanned out heavily behind him as he disappeared beyond the terrace. He said only one thing as he went: "For now."

Kalinin ignored him and told Sousuke, "You heard me, Sagara; it's time to die."

Sousuke didn't respond. He'd realized it instantly from his eyes, from his voice... The man was serious, and had no intention of showing him any mercy. There was no double meaning in his words. There was no performance, no act, no hidden motivation. Andrey Kalinin was being serious. This man, who had been like a father to him, now genuinely wanted to kill him. "Wai—" he tried to say, but Kalinin cut him off with a single word.

"Fire."

The first shot came from a sniper. He'd known the sniper's position from the start, so he threw himself behind the armor to dodge it. *Unbelievable*, Sousuke realized incredulously. *That really was aimed to kill...* The next shots to hit the area around him were also meant to be lethal. Several of them hit the armor of the damaged M6, and sent sparks flying.

"Major!" he cried, but no answer came. No obligation to justify himself to his enemy; Kalinin believed the same thing.

Sousuke hid deeper behind the armor and pressed the switch of the remote control he was holding. The last trap he'd rigged up when the M6 fell activated, and the M6's remaining fixed weapons—the 12.7mm machine guns, the smoke bombs, the small anti-personnel mines—all fired out randomly, smashing into the ground and blasting the walls of the mansion. Fragments and flashes, flames and smoke, went flying everywhere, throwing the enemy horde around him into a panic. Sousuke ran through the explosions despite the danger. If he could reach the enclosed space of the mansion nearby, he still had a chance of survival.

Right before he jumped through the closest window, he looked up at the terrace to find Kalinin staring back down in his direction, clearly unfazed by the

fragments and bullets flying around him.

Are you serious about this? Sousuke asked him with only his eyes.

Kalinin met his gaze head on and moved his lips just slightly. *Try and stop me*, he seemed to respond.

That was all Sousuke had time for before jumping through the window, with the enemy infantry hot in pursuit. Hanging in the air with the fragments of the glass as he broke through, Sousuke opened fire back at them.

Right now, he had no choice but to fight. If he could only survive...

The transport helicopter roared and shook as it wove around the mountains at low altitude. Lemon continued to encourage the radio technician, but all the tech could do was repeat, "I just can't connect to the channel! I don't know why!"

"Is it all right to fly like this?!" Lemon shouted.

"How should I know?!" Courtney shouted back with a grimace.

"We'll be fine!" Colonel Sears chimed in. "Even if we're hit by an anti-air cannon, we can do an emergency landing with autorotation! You know the Deadman's Curve?! We're hanging just above it, so—"

"It won't matter if we're in pieces, will it?!" Lemon yelled back at him.

"Quit your bellyaching, kid!" Courtney bellowed.

"If I'd known we were going to fly this recklessly, I definitely would have objected—" The helicopter shook, nearly causing Lemon to bite his tongue. "...Ngghh, screw it! Don't blame me for whatever comes of this, then!" Lemon cursed, then cast a glance at the East Asian woman sitting beside him.

The woman, looking pale and nauseous from the rough flight, nodded back at him silently before glancing in the direction of the cargo bay located in the back. "I'm fine," she told him. "He's the only one who can use our friend here, anyway."

"Then if Sousuke dies, what do we do with it... with the Laevatein?!" Lemon wanted to know.

“We toss it out, or destroy it,” the woman said bluntly. Then, speaking into the headset, she said, “You’re all right with that, aren’t you?”

《Affirmative.》The calm reply was delivered briefly in a synthetic voice.

Kaname, surrounded by bodyguards and Alastors, was being led down the hall of the mansion. She could tell the house was surrounded by a maelstrom of combat; the distant sounds of gunfire grew closer and closer, until she could hear the sounds of a second-generation AS engine nearby. It was followed by the rapid fire of machine guns, and more powerful explosions that peppered the estate grounds. The jolts and vibrations toppled furniture and sent broken glass from the windows to litter the floor.

“Where are we going?” Kaname asked. Her escort didn’t respond, but she already knew: the heliport—the large heliport beside the gardens. He was going to take her away. “Has someone come?” she tried again.

Again, the guards did not respond. But another voice did. “It’s him,” said Leonard, appearing from around a corner. Shaking out his soaked black coat, he swiftly strode past her in the manner of a man being pursued.

“Him?” she echoed.

“Yes, *him*.”

Sousuke... Kaname thought, reflexively coming to a halt. When Leonard seized her by the arm to pull her back into motion, she said, “Let me go.”

“No,” he told her shortly.

She tried to shake him off, but he tightly held on to her arm. His grip was as strong as that of the battle-trained Sousuke’s—no, somehow it seemed even stronger, more determined.

“I... I...”

“If you see him, what then?” demanded Leonard. “You’ll fly into his arms and run away together?”

Kaname found that she couldn’t respond.

“You don’t know, do you?” Leonard continued bitterly. “You’ve turned your

back on him once already, and you're not sure if you can go back to him now. He's putting his life on the line to find you, yet you're still hesitating."

Leonard is right, Kaname realized. He's here, yet I hesitate. Why aren't I working harder to shake him off and run towards the gunfire? Don't I want to see him? Don't I want to throw myself into his arms? She did. She wanted to see him, to feel his arms around her, and yet...

"You don't understand it yourself, do you?" Leonard asked, quietly observing her as she kept her eyes silently pointed downward.

At last, they reached the end of the corridor leading to the heliport. One large ECS-equipped helicopter was already there, waiting to take off. The engine roared all around them, deafening.

Are we going to get on that helicopter? Kaname wondered. And then go somewhere else? Somewhere he can't reach me? It wasn't what she wanted at all. But then, why was she just letting Leonard drag her along?

While she asked herself those questions, Leonard quietly brought his mouth to her ear and said, "Then let's make a gamble."

She gave him a questioning look as he ordered the Alastors and the guards to go on without them. The Alastors immediately moved to the helicopter on cue, but the men hesitated. "Sir..."

"Just go on," Leonard ordered, and the men acceded, running to the helicopter. Kaname and Leonard remained alone on the edge of the helipad, standing just by the mansion's door. He unceremoniously removed his black coat and threw it out into the wind created by the helicopter, where it disappeared into the night like a crow taking flight.

Kaname knew that that bulletproof cloth could repel most gunshots and blade strikes. She even knew how it worked, now: it was an "active" bulletproof coat, made by weaving the muscle packages of third-generation ASes—shaped memory polymer several times more advanced than super aramid fibers—with super-miniaturized radar elements. Both when that assassin had come after her and when Sousuke had attacked Leonard, it had stopped all of their attacks. Removing it now was a sign that Leonard was leaving himself defenseless, ordinary.

“Take this,” Leonard said, and held out a pistol. He cocked the hammer, then with practiced movements, he turned it around and offered her the grip. “Take it.”

It was an old-fashioned revolver—a handgun with a revolving cylindrical chamber—made of cold silver, with elegantly carved ornamentation. Kaname was surprised that Leonard had a gun, and that it was the kind you’d see in an old Western... but she was even more surprised by how practiced he seemed when using it.

“Go on,” he urged.

Kaname found herself taking it. “What are you—”

“I said we’d have a gamble, remember? Shoot me.” Leonard stood in the door, blocking her way. “Sagara Sousuke is beyond this door. If you want to see him, you’ll need to shoot me first. I’ll give you thirty seconds. Decide by then.”

“Are you... serious?” she asked hesitantly.

“I wouldn’t joke about something like this,” said Leonard, who sounded serious. “Twenty-five seconds.”

“You really think I won’t shoot you?”

“I did say it was a gamble,” he admitted.

“I could shoot you in the leg,” Kaname mused, “then step over you.”

“An excellent idea. Try it.” Then he added, with a smile, “Ten seconds.”

Kaname readied the gun in one hand. She put her finger on the trigger, and pointed the barrel between his eyes. The layout was easy to visualize: he was out there, just beyond Leonard, fighting. It would be so easy to get there. Just the slightest movement of her finger, and he’d be dead. The man who’d taken so many things from her, who’d tortured her day after day...

Her finger tensed, and her elbow trembled. She hated him; killing him would solve all her problems. This was her first chance—it might be her last. And yet...

“Five seconds,” Leonard reminded her.

Kaname couldn’t shoot him. She would happily smack him, or kick him, or

shove him around; she had recovered enough strength of will for those things. She wasn't exactly proud of it, but she was constantly dishing out that kind of treatment to Sousuke and the other jerk boys of her class.

But she couldn't shoot him.

Perhaps it went without saying, but this was simply a level of violence beyond what she was comfortable with. On a gut level, Kaname couldn't mortally injure or snuff out the life of another person willingly. She couldn't kill. She had no experience in doing so, for one thing, because Sousuke had always afforded her that mercy.

Because she was a girl, because she was a civilian... When the moment presented itself, Kaname wasn't mentally prepared to kill. She couldn't be. That was why, even with Sousuke so close, she couldn't shoot Leonard.

She hated to admit it, but the man had read her like a book. *But did he really read me, though?* she stopped to wonder. *He's not giving me that smug smile of his, he's just staring at this old-fashioned gun, and into my eyes...*

"Zero. You're out of time," Leonard said, very seriously. "I would have fired."

Kaname was speechless.

"He's fighting and killing to find you," Leonard went on. "But you can't even shoot a 'pretentious bastard' like me? I suppose there are limits to your dedication."

"You're wrong." Kaname drew back, weakly gripping the gun.

Leonard reached for her. "Let's go. I wanted to show you something, remember?"

"I—"

"You've lost," he said ruthlessly. "Come along—"

"Stop...!" she cried tremulously, unable to think. She just tensed up, while trying to shake off the hand he had grabbed...

Please, she thought. *I didn't mean to.* Yet, with the muzzle aimed upwards, her finger had tensed for just a second. It was only the tiniest bit, for just a split-second... But it had been more than enough to discharge the cocked, single

action revolver, resulting in a single hollow gunshot.

Fire flashed before Kaname's eyes. Her vision went white, and she felt the dull sting of recoil in her right hand as a spray of blood painted her cheek.

"God dammit!" Kurz cursed. With his spare weapon—a small machine cannon—in hand, he wove through the trees, swearing from inside his cockpit.

He, Mao, and Clouseau were now stuck in a difficult fight as the three lambda driver-mounted ASes, piloted by Fowler and his crew, were overwhelming their M9s. In every respect—maneuverability, power, teamwork—they were unlike any Codarl-types they'd faced before. They didn't have a single chance to fight back; it was taking everything they had just to stay alive.

The black AS—Fowler's machine, wielding a monomolecular cutter in each hand—pressed in with close-range attacks. Although typically unparalleled in melee combat, Clouseau seemed completely overwhelmed. Despite having lost one arm and facing an opponent with the lambda driver, the main drive behind Clouseau's losses appeared to be Fowler's sheer amount of skill.

The white enemy AS carried two large Gatling guns, and rained down bullets from mid-range. Despite its heavy weaponry, the white machine moved gracefully, in an almost feminine manner. Mao's machine was forced to spend most of its time hiding behind obstacles to stave off its constant fire. Though she frequently drew the short straw when it came to mission roles, her piloting ability was every bit as good as Sousuke's. Yet to see her completely helpless... Kurz didn't know who was operating that white AS, but they seemed to have incredible training.

And then there was that red enemy AS, which was equipped with a sniper cannon—in other words, it was being piloted by a sniper, just like Kurz. During their first interaction, the pilot had shot his own M9's sniper cannon in half. Kurz hadn't been using it as a shield; that enemy had been aiming at his weapon. *Why, he wondered, bother shooting my weapon when they could shoot my cockpit and finish me right there?* Was Fowler so desperate for a little pre-battle conversation that he'd ordered his team not to kill them right away?

No, he decided, the guy wouldn't care about that. He... that red enemy AS... is

playing with me. He saw my long-barrel cannon and knew I was a sniper like him. He shot my gun out of my hands to taunt me.

“Bring it on, then...” he whispered. But at the same time, the skill of the red AS’s operator had left him slightly shaken. It really was incredible.

Kurz wasn’t stupid. He’d been doing some pretty skilled maneuvering, keeping on the watch for sniping shots, when the ambush had come. It shouldn’t be possible to snipe a weapon out of the hands of a third-generation AS engaged in combat maneuvers. Only a handful of operators in the world could handle a trick like that.

Wait, he thought. “No way, it couldn’t be...”

But a new shot from the enemy wiped the speculation from his mind. It was precisely aimed, shooting through the trees to hit a precise point, right where he was hidden behind the rocky slope. The shot tore some armor off the thigh of his machine.

“Ngh!” Kurz choked out, as his AI gave a damage report: The drive system in his right thigh was seriously compromised, which would drop his maneuverability dramatically. It would be difficult to continue combat maneuvers.

At this rate, they were going to lose. He would die helpless and mocked, having been denied a single retaliatory shot.

Kurz readied himself for the next shot... But it never came. Three seconds, then four seconds. Ten seconds passed without a single follow-up attack.

Is he toying with me again? Kurz wondered. But he was wrong; the enemy was withdrawing. Not just the red AS that had driven Kurz to the brink, but the other two as well.

Kurz turned to watch questioningly. Fowler and the others had pulled away without so much as a parting word, disappearing into the storm-raged, night-cloaked mountains.

“They’re leaving. What in the world...?” Clouseau whispered over the radio.

“What would make them do that?” Mao asked, a sense of relief in her voice.

“I don’t know, but whatever it is, it saved our asses,” Kurz grumbled in frustration.

The battle that had been giving them so much trouble ended with a complete anticlimax.

The men kept up their attacks as they pursued Sousuke throughout the mansion. Their gunfire was merciless, and ricochets pounded the walls around him. It was like the enemy was herding him in a certain direction. The attack rhythm on display... Sousuke knew perfectly well how they’d come to be so well-trained, with such amazing teamwork.

The major... he thought. They were clearly under Kalinin’s command. As a hardened veteran and a commander, he never relied on mind games. Since Mithril operations were usually ambushes based on superior equipment and intelligence, it never stood out, but he always chose the most reliable strategies possible. He rarely used diversions or traps. If a squadron was putting on pressure from the right, it meant that the real threat was going to come from the right. Nothing was left up to chance or improvisation. You had to deploy your forces exactly where you needed them, or they’d be torn apart.

This was all basic strategy, but Kalinin was the master of it in practice. To liken it to baseball, he was the kind of manager who wouldn’t rely on home runs, but go for base hits and stolen bases to slowly run up the score, and immediately relieve a shaky starting pitcher in order to protect their lead.

But simply knowing Kalinin’s habits wouldn’t help Sousuke to turn the tide. The man was clearly trying to herd him to the south half of the mansion, and he had no choice but to let it happen.

Seeing how his enemies moved forced Sousuke to admit it: the major was serious, and there was no way to outthink him. If a fight seemed like a foregone conclusion, Kalinin would see it through exactly as devised. Psychological tactics wouldn’t work on him. He wouldn’t be swayed by overt optimism, or the allure of seizing a quick win. He wouldn’t let his guard down until the moment the battle was over and he was home with a hot cup of tea. If he could win, he would. If he was going to lose, he’d do it with maximum damage mitigation.

That was the kind of man he was.

Sousuke was sure that, in that moment, Kalinin had said, "Try and stop me." But that didn't mean he was going to make it easy for him.

But why? Sousuke couldn't understand it. His body reacted instinctively, and kept his shots on target, even as his mind continued to churn over the reveal of Kalinin's betrayal. *Why?* Sousuke didn't think he was that kind of man. He could be cold and quiet and sometimes cruel, but he would never do this. To join them, of all people...

I'm shaken, he realized, and that realization saved his life. *I can think about it later. For now, I have to fight.*

For now, Sousuke smothered his emotions and then glided along the floor, continuing to fire checking shots with his right hand. When he moved to the next room over, he saw a few grenades roll into the spot he'd been standing just seconds before. They exploded.

A shockwave hit him and white smoke rolled out, turning his already negligible visibility to zero. He considered using the opportunity to exit through a nearby door, but decided against it; the major surely had an ambush waiting for him there.

He ran to the other side instead. As expected, there were enemies waiting there, too. They took aim with infrared scopes and let fire with their submachine guns.

Sousuke moved quickly, but wasn't in time, and the enemy's gunfire peppered his body. He felt a dull pain in several locations on his upper left side; hits from a high-caliber handgun. Fortunately, his AS operator's uniform stopped them all. Had they been rifle shots, he might be dead.

He returned fire immediately, landed a hit to a man's center mass, but the man immediately withdrew around the corner. They must have been wearing body armor, because all he could hear was soft cursing.

Where is Chidori? he wondered, hiding behind a pile of collapsed bookshelves and looking around swiftly while changing his clip. *If she's here, she'd be in the direction of the heliport,* he decided. But how was he going to break through

their ranks and get to her when she was surely under heavy security?

Sousuke's hesitation didn't last long. He changed his clip and was about to stand up to move again when, suddenly, he was hit with the biggest jolt yet when a wall a few meters away, near where the enemy soldiers were hiding, was blown in. Even at his distance, Sousuke was rocked by the explosion. Parts of the wall went flying, and he was knocked to the ground.

"Ngh..." He groaned, and heard a ringing in his ears. As he sat up, dust and fragments of wall that had landed on his back slid to the ground. A hole had been opened, allowing the salty night air to blow into the room.

That attack just now wasn't aiming for me, he realized. It had been too powerful. That hadn't been an infantry munition; it was a blast from an AS, maybe, or a combat helicopter.

When Sousuke peered out the large hole that had formed in the wall, he saw several helicopters circling above. The three Behemoths he'd seen on the ocean before had gotten closer, and were now firing their shoulder-mounted rocket launchers sporadically. They were attacking the mansion.

He'd assumed both sets of forces worked for Amalgam... but then, why were they attacking each other? He couldn't understand. Between the American raid in the mountains to the north, and now this ambush... just what was going on here?

Sousuke exclaimed wordlessly as a Behemoth fired its machine cannons from the ocean. They shredded a corner of the mansion thirty meters away like confetti, raining fragments and flames down even into the area where Sousuke was hiding.

The motivations don't matter, he decided. He just had to use the confusion to go after Kaname. If he could break through the enemy forces and make it to the heliport...

Leonard Testarossa lay at Kaname's feet weakly. He'd fallen on his right side. The puddle of blood was growing wider under his head, staining his wavy silver hair.

“No...” She dropped to her knees. The distant gunshots grew hazy around her, as she peered down hesitantly at Leonard, who was motionless as if asleep. The bullet she’d accidentally fired had dug a deep gash in his forehead.

Is he dead? For a minute, an icy hand grasped her heart. But when she put her trembling fingertips to his neck, she felt a faint pulse. He was still alive. The shot had hit, but the angle had been shallow.

She shook Leonard’s shoulders, realized he wasn’t responding, and looked around for something to help her give first aid. *What should I do? Stop the bleeding? Disinfect? Give CPR?* She had no idea. She knew all about ASes, weapons systems, communications systems, and artificial intelligence, but no emergency medical techniques came to mind. It was a new reminder of the massive imbalance in her knowledge.

But wait... Kaname thought, and snapped back to her senses. *I don’t really have to treat him, do I? If I was just going to shoot him and move on anyway...*

Meanwhile, the guards, who seemed to have realized that something was wrong, were disembarking from the helicopter and coming toward her.

I need to run away... and I need to do it now, she thought urgently. There was some distance between the heliport and herself. *If I run now,* she speculated, *they won’t be able to catch me!*

“Stop!” one of the guards shouted.

Kaname wanted to turn around and rush into the mansion. She just had to keep running, and cry Sousuke’s name. *If I can do that, I know he’ll—* But her legs wouldn’t work. It was as if her sandaled feet were glued to the pavement.

Her eyes remained silently locked on Leonard, who was still lying there on the ground, covered in blood and drenched by the rain. His eyes, which were opened just a sliver, gazed up at Kaname where she stood. There was a calmness in them, and at the same time, a tremendous pain.

Is it the pain from the wound, or something else? she wondered, as a new realization seized her. *I shot him. I broke the rules.* Something about that knowledge kept her standing there. She was pervaded with a sense of guilt, as if leaving now would be akin to shooting him again while he lay there suffering,

like spitting on him and running away...

How long had she hesitated? She didn't know. But the guards were within steps of her now. Their guns were readied and pointed in her direction.

Her hesitation had proved fatal.

"Drop the gun. Now," a man said, and for the first time, she realized she was still holding the gun that Leonard had given her.

"I..." She backed away instinctively, but her shoulders collided with a thick, burly chest, and she turned to see the towering form of Andrey Kalinin blocking the door.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked.

"I..." she began, and then trailed off.

Kalinin looked at the gun Kaname was holding, then at Leonard lying there on the ground, and a shadow of sadness passed over the Russian's typically indifferent eyes. But it lasted only a second before he returned to his usual expression, and impassively took the silver gun from her. "We're leaving," he told the others. "Take her."

Kalinin pushed Kaname toward the guards and knelt down beside Leonard. He examined the wound, then whispered something to him. She couldn't hear what it was.

"Ah..." she sighed. The rain was pouring down hard. The roar of helicopters, gunshots, explosions... Kaname was being dragged through all of it.

Three ASes came to guard both the heliport and the transport helicopter waiting on it from three directions. One was black, one white, and one red. The black one was probably piloted by Fowler, and the white one by Sabina; she didn't know who was in the red one.

Kaname recognized the models, too: these were lambda driver-mounted Eligores. She'd seen bits of their data on the laptop they'd given her. They were based on the Codarl's frame, but the generators and drive systems had been enhanced to boost originally inferior electronic weapons to the level of the M9, or possibly even higher.

A guard grabbed Kaname and threw her into one of the helicopter's passenger seats, while Kalinin brought the injured Leonard on board himself. The helicopter's engine began to roar, and it slowly lifted off the ground. The three ASes continued their sporadic firing, trading shots with the approaching enemy army. Before long, the three escort ASes also left the heliport and sped away to the northwest as if to follow them from the ground.

Kaname looked down from the window of the ascending helicopter in time to see a man running out to the heliport. Thanks to the raging storm, the fire, the smoke and the dark around them, she couldn't make out his face, but he had black hair, and a black AS operator's uniform with red lines. That was all she could see... But it was enough.

"Sousuke?" she said.

The small, vanishing form of Sousuke was shouting something to her. She couldn't read his lips. But she had a vague idea of what he was saying. It was one simple word: *Chidori!*

At last, in that moment, she felt regret wash over her; what a fool she'd been. But she couldn't escape now. Why hadn't she run away in the first place? Why had she hesitated when she had her chance?

Why—she cast a glance at Leonard being treated in the corner of the cabin—hadn't she abandoned him and run off? And most importantly, why wasn't she resisting now? Why wasn't she crying, shouting, demanding to be released?

The helicopter picked up speed. Sousuke was fading behind the smoke, and the sight of him falling to his knees and pounding the ground shook her to her core.

The Behemoths making landfall on the beach didn't try shooting at the helicopter. They probably wanted to take either her or Leonard alive.

She was out of options now. She'd be a doll again, docile and compliant, like before...

No... That wasn't true. She hadn't managed to meet Sousuke, but there were still things she could do. Things she'd started preparing for over these last few days, even.

Yes, she told herself, *even if it's little by little...* Kalinin was discussing something with the cabin's crew. The other men weren't looking at her, either. *Let's try it*, she decided, and cast a glance at a pistol, which was currently holstered on the hip of the soldier next to her.

Sousuke watched the helicopter fly off. Even after it disappeared beyond the mountains, he continued to gaze into the northwestern sky. *It's no use now*, he told himself, and allowed himself one single curse. "Dammit..."

Kaname was on that helicopter. He'd seen her through one of the windows. In truth, all he knew was that it was a small figure with long black hair... but he'd known it was her, gazing back at him.

Chidori, he thought despairingly. *There's so much I want to talk to you about. If you reject me, that's fine. But I just want to talk to you. That's why I came all this way...*

Sousuke, helpless in the middle of the heliport, was quickly surrounded by soldiers. These weren't Kalinin's men, but rather the invaders who had come along with the Behemoths. There were about ten of them in all from what he could see, though he was in the open now, with no way to fight back. An even larger enemy unit fanned out around him, and three Behemoths were still in the ocean. Even if Kurz and Mao were still safe, it would be too dangerous for them to approach. Trying to run now would be a fool's errand.

Will I never see you again, Chidori? Futility and hopelessness weighed on his shoulders like lead.

"Are you Sagara Sousuke?" a man who appeared to be the enemy commander asked.

Sousuke didn't respond.

"Drop your weapon," the man ordered. "There are many things we wish to interrogate you about. But if you would rather die, you might as well do it now. We have *special* treatment for our hostages." The soldiers around him let out a low chuckle.

Sousuke looked around slowly at their vulgar smiles, then spat out the words,

“Do what you want.”

Just then...

Passing over the mountains hundreds of miles from the heliport, a large helicopter suddenly appeared, its engine and rotors kicking up a wind.

Sousuke looked up in confusion.

It was an MH-53, the large helicopter that Sears had used to bring in the M6. As it came closer and closer, it dipped its port side down and circled.

“Sousuke, get down!” Lemon shouted over the speakers, as a minigun on the helicopter’s port side began to pepper the soldiers on the heliport with fire. The shots sent water spraying as soldiers collapsed and scattered.

They came for me, Sousuke realized. It was a reckless move... The enemy Behemoths would shoot it down immediately. A helicopter with standard armaments stood no chance against a normal AS, let alone a Behemoth.

While fleeing the chaos erupting around the heliport, Sousuke called into his radio. “Stand down, Lemon! Run away! The plan’s a failure!”

The next thing he heard was Courtney’s scolding voice. “Don’t be stupid! At least give ’em a black eye first!”

“I don’t understand what you’re—”

Then suddenly, another voice—a woman’s voice, familiar—broke in, shouting. “Sagara! I’m dropping the Laevatein now! Use it to your liking!”

“The Laeva... what?” he asked, but recognized the voice as belonging to the former Mithril intelligence agent, Wraith.

“The Laevatein!” she yelled back. “That’s what he named himself!”

“From this height?!” one of the cantankerous old soldiers hollered. “Well, don’t blame me if it goes amiss!”

“Just drop it!” Wraith told him, clearly exasperated.

“Fine!”

The helicopter’s cargo hatch was already open, and now some kind of large black lump slid out of it and dropped. It was hard to make out due to the

darkness and smoke, but it was probably an AS.

There was a burst of fire as an enemy machine gun landed a few hits on the circling transport helicopter. The tail swung wide, and smoke began to spiral out of it as the helicopter suddenly slowed. All Sousuke could hear over the radio was static and Courtney's shouts.

He gasped as his comrades' helicopter passed over his head, tilted left, then right, and was forced to land in the garden on the grounds. There was a deafening roar, and a broken piece of rotor sliced through the air, scattering dust in its wake. Given the nature of their landing, it was possible that those inside were still okay; he wasn't sure about the two seniors though.

And then, the other object that fell—the unknown AS that Lemon and the others had been carrying—twisted lithely in midair, and landed about ten meters in front of Sousuke's eyes. It was an extremely smooth landing.

Sousuke watched it quietly. As the water spray cleared, he could see it kneeling there in landing posture. The illumination from the flames around it let him make it out in its entirety.

What is this machine? he wondered.

The rain-soaked armor. The taut, slender silhouette. It was probably a third-generation AS, like an M9, but it more closely resembled his old machine that had been destroyed in Tokyo, Mithril's only lambda-driver mounted AS... the Arbalest.

It had two sharp eyes just like the ARX-7, but this machine was larger than the Arbalest had been. The arms and legs were thicker and stronger, boasting incredible spontaneous power and strength. There were large cannons mounted on the shoulder armor, too large for a standard AS—yes, more like the heavy equipment you'd see mounted on a tank.

The armor was white. Or rather, the base coloring was white, but had been touched up here and there with red highlights. It was a blood-like red, dark yet burning. While the white-and-blue Arbalest seemed to represent wind or ice, the red on this machine brought fire to mind: the fire of anger; the fire of battle. It was the color of energy, of violence.

Forgetting for a moment that he was on a battlefield, Sousuke just stared up at the machine.

《It's been a while, Sergeant,》 said a dear old voice from the speakers. It was a male voice, deep and monotonous. It was the synthetic voice of the machine's AI.

"Is that you, AI?" Sousuke ventured cautiously.

《Affirmative,》 the voice replied. 《But this machine is called the ARX-8 Laevatein. Sergeant Sagara, I request permission to return to battle.》

That's right, Sousuke realized. I can still fight. I can still pursue, if I'm with him... "Of course," he said out loud. "Permission granted."

《I am honored. We'll discuss the details later. For now, please come aboard.》

The machine, the Laevatein, extended its left hand as several enemies fired at them, and the gunshots sparked as they bounced off its armor. Sousuke climbed into the AS's hand, then effortlessly climbed around to the machine's back.

《My new armor has been damaged already, 》 AI lamented. 《I was hoping to make my first sortie in a bit more style.》

"You're still a chatterbox, I see," Sousuke observed.

《I'm bored from having had no one to talk to for months.》

"Honestly..." Sousuke sighed. *What a snob.* He wondered why he'd ever been worried in the first place. That done, he snorted and slid in through the open hatch. The control system was roughly the same as that of an M9 or the Arbalest. He gripped and released the sticks a few times, checking their feel.

The hatch closed. He ran through the startup procedure. Master mode, bilateral angle settings... he completed them all quickly. "Now..." he said.

The front screen displayed information on the enemy infantry units firing at him, and the fact that the massive Behemoth ASes had already noticed him and were entering attack positions. The normal-sized enemy ASes, Codarl-types, were fanning out, too.

《Enemy AS warning. Three Behemoth-types, three Codarl-types. Two

platoons of heavily-armed infantry as well.》

It would be too much for any normal AS. Even one Behemoth would be a lot to handle, let alone three. But...

《Would you like to make a little trouble?》 AI asked.

Sousuke took a deep breath and gripped the stick; an elation washed over him that he hadn't felt in six months. No, maybe not since the fight in Hong Kong... A feeling of omnipotence that transcended logic ran through his body, and the machine's hidden power responded to that. Since leaving Tokyo, he had had so many difficult fights, been reliant on such unreliable machinery... But now, he could challenge them on even footing.

Six of those incompetent enemy machines? he mused. *That's perfect. It's time for a bloodbath.* The machine, its AI, and his own blood began to surge with that indomitable will to fight. "All right," he said to AI. "We'll clean them up in three minutes."

《Three minutes appears impossible. Perhaps four minutes, twelve seconds.》

"Oh, shut up," Sousuke snarled. "Let's go!"

《Roger, Sarge.》

They began. Dashing across the ground like a sword of fire, the Laevatein leaped at the enemy.

5: Flaming Sword

The Codarl's operator was disappointed by how easy it all was. He was part of the squadron sent here by the executive known as Mr. Gold, and in the pre-mission briefing, he'd been told to expect at least three other Codarls—lambda driver-equipped ASes—guarding the mansion. He'd been told that they might even face Eligores, a kind of AS that, under certain circumstances, could be far stronger. He knew that if they had Codarls on their side, their target must be a division of Amalgam, just like his squadron. But he saw no reason not to see his mission through, just because these men were his nominal allies.

Some might call it “eating their own,” but these men were mercenaries, after all: as long as their pay, safety, and freedom to plunder was ensured, they didn't care about the details. They'd even stopped questioning the drug they'd been injected with before missions. And the Codarl's incredible specs had resulted in a series of one-sided battles that had left them feeling bored, so the prospect of a challenge was appealing.

But now that they were here, there was almost no real resistance to be found. The enemy machines he'd expected to fight hadn't appeared, and the Eligore-type machines showed themselves only for a second before immediately withdrawing.

So bored. No killing at all... His mind, in its state of elevated emotion and focus, began to hunger.

That was when the helicopter of unknown affiliation had appeared. It launched a few sporadic attacks on their infantry, but before the operator could even get targeting information on it, the enemy chopper was shot down by one of his massive Behemoth allies.

The operator's hunger grew. *So bored*, he thought. *I want my prey. I want to kill. Bring me an opponent that will flee at the sight of me, try and fight back fruitlessly. A sad bit of cannon fodder eager to swing its limbs of polymer and steel and bravely fire its 40mm guns!*

An alarm rang out: his sensors had picked up an AS at the edge of the mansion, probably dropped by the shot-down helicopter. Its silhouette suggested a third-generation AS similar to an M9. *No problem. It's just an M9. My Codarl can handle it easily.*

He engaged infrared mode, and found that the kneeling machine's heat signature didn't match that of the M9 data in his archives. And the estimated output of the machine's generator continued to rise until...

"4800?!" he exclaimed. Estimated 4800 kilowatts— Twice that of a standard third-generation AS. This went beyond any land combat weapon, entering the realm of outputs you saw in large fighter planes and battleships!

The white machine slowly showed itself from beyond the sooty rain and smoke. Its armor glimmered with a dark, hot, smoldering red, and a haze of heat warped the surrounding air as tongues of flame licked at its burly form.

An order from command came in. "All units. An AS just landed on the heliport. Attack it. Do whatever it takes to shoot it down!"

The enemy AS was moving before the operator could even acknowledge the order. It looked at them, then bent over slightly in its kneeling position, as if storing up power. That minor movement told him immediately what was about to happen.

"—Repeat. Shoot that AS down at—"

The enemy AS leaped, like smoldering embers catching fire.

The power behind that first jump nearly knocked Sousuke out cold; his vision began to narrow and dim as the incredible g-forces behind the jump concentrated blood in his lower extremities. He gritted his teeth and regripped the control sticks with a groan.

Just barely managing to hold onto consciousness, he ran his eyes over the screen's g-force meter and altimeter: his instant gravitational acceleration was over 30 g, close to the force of a crashing plane. A human body could endure even more than that—as long as it was brief—but that didn't mean it was a pleasant experience. He was now eight meters up, far above the heliport he'd

been standing on moments earlier.

What is this AS? he wondered. *What is this power?* Sousuke didn't have time to ask AI, as the ground was approaching rapidly. He focused on maneuvering his machine's limbs into a bracing posture before landing it at the edge of the estate grounds. The pavement below went flying on impact, as if from an earthquake or an explosion.

"What *is* this?!" Sousuke croaked out, once he was sure he'd survived the shock of the landing.

《Learning message: Explain object referred to by 'this,'》replied AI's synthetic voice.

"This machine's jumping power and settings—"

《Just kidding. Impressive, aren't they?》

"You...!" Sousuke clicked his tongue. AI was just playing the standard inflexible AI.

《I apologize, 》said AI. 《The truth is, we never held a proper test drive.》

"You never *what*?"

《This machine was created clandestinely, under highly restrictive conditions. I requested practical tests, but Mr. Hunter refused on the grounds that we had neither the time nor the space.》

"Hunter? Gavin Hunter?"

《Affirmative.》

It was Sousuke's first time hearing that the head of the Hong Kong Branch of Mithril's intelligence division was involved with the machine. Knowing that the agent Wraith had brought the machine to him lent further credence to the idea that Mithril's intelligence division had been involved in building the ARX-8 Laevatein.

An alarm sounded. An enemy AS—a Codarl type—was rapidly approaching, armed with a standard 35mm rifle. Sousuke grunted, and carefully moved his machine. The Laevatein stepped lightly to the right, dodging the enemy's shot as the incoming shells tore into the ground and blew a nearby warehouse to

pieces.

“You can use it, right?!” he checked.

《Do you mean the lambda driver?》

“Yes!”

《I don’t know...》Al admitted. The Laevatein slumped over in despondency, replicating Sousuke’s action with almost foolish accuracy. As the enemy attacked, though, he resumed evasive maneuvers.

“What do you mean, you don’t know?!” Sousuke demanded.

《Well, I’ve never used it before, so it would be irresponsible to simply say ‘affirmative’—》

An enemy shot grazed his thigh. Sousuke felt an impact on the machine’s shoulder armor, as well: shallow, but nevertheless it sent a violent jolt through the cockpit.

《Proximity alert!》

The enemy machine was charging, its monomolecular cutter drawn. He didn’t have much time to counter it. He didn’t even have time to choose from his weapons loadout—

Sousuke clicked his tongue and shouted, “Never mind! We’ll just try it!”

《At your leisure.》

A second later, two force fields collided. The Laevatein’s outstretched hand had caught the Codarl’s monomolecular cutter, and the air around them warped and screamed with a coil of steam and rubble.

The lambda driver had activated, that much was obvious. Sousuke could feel his own force field pushing against the enemy’s. *And I can do more*, he realized. *With this overwhelming power, I can fight back!*

With a grunt from Sousuke, the Laevatein—gripping the blade of the monomolecular cutter as if it were a harmless stick—stepped towards the enemy machine. They were so close now, eye to eye—sensor to sensor. The enemy machine’s head moved in a way that suggested a hint of fear.

Sousuke spun the manipulator action wheel to clench his machine's right hand into a fist... then reeled it back hard, and slammed it into the enemy's torso. A shower of sparks followed. The Laevatein's fist had ripped through the Codarl's force field and pierced through its armor, allowing Sousuke to grab the generator inside and yank it out. It came out, trailed by an intestine-like series of cables. While crushing the sparking nuclear fusion battery in one hand, he landed a kick into the machine's side. The Codarl, having lost its power source, flew away, split into two pieces.

Shards of titanium alloy, sprays of shock absorbent, and rising flames danced in the Laevatein's sight. *One down*, he told himself. So much destructive power, and with only his bare hands...

《Test successful. That worked out better than I expected.》

"I was in a cold sweat the whole time!" said Sousuke.

《Activating cooling system.》

The back of the Laevatein's head snapped open and ejected a flurry of hair-like heat sinks. It was a ponytail-type unit like the Codarl's, but rather than streaming forth in a single long trail, it gushed, like hot water bursting from a faucet. The "hair" blew in the updraft, shedding white sparks.

Then the Laevatein, still kneeling, went in search of new prey. Its optical sensors quickly caught something new: two more Codarls were approaching.

"Arsenal options?" Sousuke checked.

《Varied. Why don't we start with this?》

The arms control panel came up, displaying a simple diagram of the machine. The knees on the diagram were blinking, accompanied by the letters GRAW-4/MMC. Two large monomolecular cutters—they must have been an upgrade to the GRAW-2 used by M9-types.

"All right."

《Roger.》

The armor of the Laevatein's seemingly oversized knees opened with a shower of sparks to reveal two retractable monomolecular cutters. The

Laevatein grabbed their grips, drawing them decisively, and then thrust them out to its sides like an eagle spreading its wings. The movement alone sent eddies of muddy rain swirling before his eyes. These GRAW-4 cutters then snapped to full length, their blades letting out a low hum.



《Mike-3 approaching. 10 o'clock, distance—》

The Codarl—designated M-3—was also wielding two large monomolecular cutters as it approached with a complicated series of combat maneuvers. The other, designated M-2, approached from his blind spot to the right. It would be tricky to deal with both of them at once...

《I'll handle Mike-2,》 Al offered.

Sousuke looked questioningly at the screen.

《Continue engagement.》

There was no time to debate his AI, so Sousuke charged his machine head-on at the enemy Codarl coming from his front. Lambda driver force fields collided, igniting sparks of plasma in the air around them.

As Sousuke strained, the other Codarl, M-2, dashed in from behind. Though the Laevatein's arms were occupied, the underarm section that would have held a weapons rack in a standard M9 opened up swiftly, revealing smaller manipulators within.

Hidden arms?! Sousuke realized in shock. An AS functioned by imitating the movements of its operator, so it was fundamentally impossible for one to have more than two arms. But these extra arms moved with perfect skill and grace, as if there were another operator controlling them. One of said hidden arms pulled a hand grenade from one of the machine's hip hardpoints and threw it at the Codarl approaching from behind.

An explosion followed, and the enemy machine behind him lost its balance, throwing off the timing of its surprise attack. In the meantime, Sousuke used the machine's primary arms to slash at the enemy in front of him, before dropping to the ground to sweep its leg. No, it wasn't just a leg sweep—The Laevatein's absurd power exploded the Codarl's leg on contact. It flipped through the air, sparking from its head as it scraped along the ground, before plowing through a set of cars parked nearby.

Sousuke whipped around and leaped, charging straight for the other machine, which lay struggling in a prone position as a result of the hand grenade's explosion. The enemy machine fired, but Sousuke merely glared at the barrel,

and the shot before him was deflected. His machine's right and left arms flashed in an X-slash that tore through the Codarl, and his enemy's severed arms spun through the air before landing on the ground.

Two down, thought Sousuke. In a corner of his vision he could see the other machine struggling to stand with only one leg. *It still wants to fight?* he wondered. *Or maybe to run...*

《Use this,》 Al said, chiming in as the Laevatein's left 'hidden arm' drew an anti-tank dagger from its elbow and tossed it to the front of its chest. The move was perfectly timed, completely anticipating Sousuke's reflexes.

Sousuke snorted, but snatched the anti-tank dagger out of the air with a sideways sweep of his machine's arm, to snap it out at the final Codarl. The other machine tried to stop the dagger with its lambda driver force field, but Sousuke forced the weapon through with sheer willpower. The anti-tank dagger collided straight with the enemy's chest, and the sound of shredding metal was followed by a flash as the Codarl was blown to bits.

Three down, Sousuke noted as the Laevatein landed out of its spin, and then straightened. The heat sinks wafting out of the back of its head followed the motion, tracing a graceful arc as they cast sprays of light all around.

"What's with the arms?" he asked.

《Support arms,》 Al informed him. 《They will aid in attack, ammunition reloading, and other precision tasks. I control them myself.》

"Four arms, huh?" Sousuke commented. "Feels a little unsettling..."

《I like them. Your personal preferences are irrelevant.》

Sousuke had nothing to say to that, and the remaining enemy force consisted of the three Behemoths: those absurdly powerful giant ASes. In fact, the Behemoth closest to the shore was staring straight at the Laevatein...

Fortunately, the transport helicopter carrying Lemon and the others was solidly built. Its design had been refined over thirty years of live combat, so it wasn't likely to have been so easily destroyed.

“Didn’t I tell you?! We won’t die that easily!” Courtney yelled out from his place of hiding, behind the vanquished machine.

“Oh, honestly!” Lemon had to shout back in order to be heard over the gunshots and explosions around them. “I didn’t think the alternative would be, ‘surrounded by enemies slowly picking us off!’”

Lemon’s complaint was entirely reasonable. Several of the helicopter’s passengers had been injured in the crash, but none had died. The machine ended up toppled over in the middle of the garden, its crumpled body immediately surrounded by enemy soldiers. Lemon and the others were taking cover behind the fuselage as they returned fire, but they had no real chance of escaping, and they were quickly running out of ammo.

“Hah! Reminds me of Khe Sanh!” Courtney cackled. “Gimme your best shot! Wahahaha!” Then he fired off his machine gun, apparently on some kind of strange adrenaline high.

“Khe Sanh, eh? That was a tough one,” Sears whispered, scowling as he fired off his carbine.

“Hey, I tagged along because you said you’d get me there safely... How’d we end up stuck in a hopeless shootout in the Mexican countryside?” whispered an East Asian woman wielding a submachine gun. She’d called herself Wraith, but he didn’t know what her real name was, or to what organization she belonged.

Wraith had made contact right after Sousuke witnessed the arrival of the US Armed Forces. A large trailer had arrived on the outskirts of the deserted village where their transport helicopter was on standby. Lemon and the others had pointed their guns at her cautiously, but she’d come out unarmed and shouted, backlit by her headlights, “Is Sagara Sousuke here?! I have something for him!”

It didn’t seem like the setup to a trap, and she seemed to know Sousuke very well. Lemon and the others, suspicious, peered into the trailer, and saw that it was an AS—a third-generation AS they’d never seen before.

“Believe me or don’t, it’s your call. But if you’re going to Sousuke, take this machine with you,” Wraith had told them. When asked how she knew about their standby point, she’d said, “I didn’t. Al told me you would be here.”

There was still a lot they didn't understand, but they also had no reason to refuse. So Lemon and the others had loaded the new AS onto the helicopter and flown to the mansion with Wraith, but...

"I didn't know there'd be so many of them. We're dead. We're definitely dying here," Lemon cried to the sky, cowering behind a crumpled duralumin sheet.

"Dunno about that, kiddo!" Courtney said. "Look, that Sagara kid just took out three of those things!"

"Wow, he did!" Lemon marveled.

There was an explosion from a small grove, just a few hundred meters from their landing point where the red AS—the Laevatein—had just taken out an enemy AS with an anti-tank dagger.

"I don't know what those lamb things are all about, but I've never seen power like that in one machine," Sears said. "He's moving with a good rhythm, though... Is that really his first time in that thing? He rides it like a faithful old steed."

"Of course he does. That machine is like his wife," Wraith told him, all while ducking the bullets flying at close range.

"But can he take those Behemoths?" Lemon cast a glance at the supermassive Behemoth, which was still firing occasional shots from the shoreline. Shaking violently, it charged onto shore, heading for the Laevatein as it fired weapons from its shoulders, arms, and head all at once. Large and small machine cannons, rockets, and anti-tank missiles roared, blanketing the white AS's silhouette.

"Oh, no..." said Lemon. At that distance, with that amount of fire laid down, the Laevatein wouldn't be able to dodge in time. It tried, but lost its balance from the force of the shelling and explosions, pitching forward and falling to a knee.

The Behemoth charged with unthinkable speed to the Laevatein's side, and then stomped down. There was a crash, and sand went flying everywhere. The Laevatein, like a child standing before a tsunami, was helplessly crushed under

the Behemoth's massive foot.

"Ahh...!" Lemon cried out in despair, and even Courtney gulped, scowling.

But not Wraith. Her almond eyes, once narrowed in concern, now widened again, and when she spoke, her voice was tinged with amusement. "No," she said. "Look..."

Particles of light poured out from under the foot of the Behemoth. The heat sink system roared, and the air around it began to shimmer with heat haze.

"Is that..."

"A Roth & Hambleton PRX-3000," Wraith confirmed. "A prototype super high-output generator. When its power—greater than any land weapon—is combined with the lambda driver..."

The Behemoth began to tilt. Its stomping foot swayed and the Laevatein hidden beneath it slowly came back into view.

"Hey..." said Lemon. *The Laevatein wasn't crushed*, he realized belatedly. It had caught the foot of the Behemoth with both arms and, with its body wreathed in particles of red light, was now struggling to lift the massive machine.

The roar of the machine, the blaring of alarms... The Laevatein's generator output reading was at maximum. The cooling system was also operating at its highest possible level, and the electricity running through its electromagnetic muscles made it seem like lightning was coursing through its body. Its planted legs dug deeper and deeper into the earth below, and its entire frame was screaming.

«Current estimated load: 1500 tons,» Al said, as calmly as could be. «For reference, this is the weight of approximately thirty standard tanks. In other words, it far exceeds our recommended weight limit. We should withdraw at once, Sarge.»

"Shut. Up!" Sousuke growled from between gritted teeth. He felt like it was his own arms holding up all that weight. Was it because of the lambda driver? "If I could, I'd have done it already!" While continuing to struggle against the

incredible weight, Sousuke took in a short breath, and mustered all the power he had into his abdomen.

He screamed with effort, and the force field surrounding the Laevatein flashed red hot. Instantly, with explosive force, he pushed back as hard as he could against the Behemoth's crushing foot. A shockwave burst out and the massive leg crumpled into scrap from the ankle down. The Behemoth lost its balance and toppled onto its back.

"Finish it!" Sousuke ordered.

《Roger.》

The Laevatein redrew the monomolecular cutters stored in its knees and leaped. It traced a short arc in the direction of the Behemoth's head and jammed both monomolecular cutters into its neck. The blades tore through the force field, digging deep into the metal within. Once, then a second time, and a third. Sparks flew and oil flowed in waterfalls. The head-mounted cockpit was sliced free, and the Behemoth went limp.

Four down, thought Sousuke.

AI made a report: the remaining two Behemoths were approaching from beyond the cape. One of them was just several hundred meters away, and the other was several kilometers beyond it.

The closer of the two opened fire at him, forcing the Laevatein to take shelter behind the enemy machine it had just destroyed. 30mm shaped charge rounds showered the area, kicking up flames and explosions.

"I'd rather not have a repeat of last time!" Sousuke yelled. "Don't we have any other weapons?"

《Certainly,》 said AI. 《Try this.》

The weapon control panel opened, and the symbol for a back-mounted artillery blinked. "Demolition gun... One hundred sixty-five millimeters?!" Sousuke exclaimed.

His distress was understandable, because using a 165mm shell as an AS weapon was unthinkable. Typical AS rifles were 40mm; the boxer shotcannon

Sousuke preferred was 57mm; the smoothbore cannons Kurz used for sniping maxed out at 76mm. Your typical tank gun, far more powerful than any of those, was only 120mm. This was a weapon fireable only by 50-ton tanks, and he was supposed to use it in a 10-ton AS?

“Isn’t this a military engineer firearm?” he asked. Demolition guns were traditionally used to clear away structures and other man-made objects, but this one seemed to be for combat purposes.

《This firearm is for combat,》 said AI. 《Be careful; it packs quite a recoil, but the lambda driver makes it usable.》

The arm attached to his back hardpoint moved, and the short-barreled, high-caliber demolition gun snapped into firing position under his right shoulder. Seeing it on his screen, Sousuke was stunned by the sheer scale of it. A massive brute like this... “Will it work?” he whispered, as he manipulated his machine’s arm to test the feel of the demolition gun.

《I don’t know,》 AI admitted. 《We haven’t test fired it.》

“So I get to try and find out, huh?”

《Precisely.》

“Fine,” Sousuke grumbled. Climbing on top of the Behemoth’s remains, he readied the demolition gun and leaped towards the enemy, which was now making landfall.

The enemy Behemoth returned fire immediately, and there was a series of blinding sparks. Those shots he couldn’t fully dodge, he repelled with the lambda driver.

It won’t be that easy! He landed, then jumped again immediately, and spun through the air as Anti-AS missiles approached. He fired his head-mounted Gatling guns at full automatic. *Intercepted!* He manipulated his machine’s arms and legs, assisted by the lambda driver’s power, to alter his arc of descent and dodge through the enemy’s incoming barrage. He was about two hundred meters away now.

If I fire this at close range... Sousuke thought, making calculations. He made a third jump, this one on a low arc that sent a powerful jolt and dizzying g-force

running through him. The enemy machine's feet drew near, and he passed between them. He thought about aiming for the slits at the back that were now visible, like he had at the battle in Ariake, but...

"Not yet!" he muttered as the Laevatein rolled forward, kicking up sand on the beach as it made another jump, this time vertically. In an instant, he was sailing over the Behemoth, spinning in midair. He was near the giant AS's head now.

The enemy's lambda driver roared to life, firing force fields at the Laevatein. Normally, it would have torn him to pieces. But instead, Sousuke gritted his teeth in concentration, and the Laevatein's force field blocked the Behemoth's, diverting it to either side like a strong wind.

Holding the demolition gun in one hand, he stuck its muzzle against the back of the enemy's head, focused, and pulled the trigger. A flash and a shockwave exploded in front of him as the high-explosive projectile tore through his enemy's armor, plowing deep into the Behemoth's head and detonating from deep within.

The recoil from the 165mm cannon sent the Laevatein rising several meters up. Sousuke lost his balance, and rolled down the Behemoth's back.

《Success,》 Al's reported quickly, using the Laevatein's limbs to right its posture and land on the beach.

"Well?!" Sousuke demanded.

《I told you, it was a success.》

Sousuke looked up and saw the Behemoth, which was billowing smoke from its upper half, as it began to fall face-first in slow motion. Unable to use the lambda driver's force fields to regulate its own gravity, it was collapsing under its own weight. The Behemoth kicked up clouds of sand as it fell, releasing a death rattle that pierced the heavens above.

Five down, thought Sousuke. "What a recoil..." he whispered, while reloading the demolition gun.

《Greater than expected, 》 Al agreed. 《I didn't expect you to fire it like that.》

“We’ve been together... how many years now?” Sousuke asked. “And you don’t know how reckless I am?”

《Approximately one year and two months. Not long at all.》

“Fair enough.” Sousuke sniffed, and looked over the last remaining Behemoth.

The Laevatein was currently resting in front of the mansion, on its knees in the sand. The final Behemoth was about three kilometers out to sea, and seemed to have already lost the will to fight; it was retreating at high speed while firing intimidation shots in his direction.

《Mike-6 is retreating,》 Al observed. 《It appears to be leaving the theater. Shall we fire at it?》

“I’d like to,” Sousuke admitted, “but I think it’s too far away.” The demolition gun was a short-barrel firearm like the Boxer: it was fine enough in a close-range fight, but lacked the accuracy to take out an enemy from this distance.

《No, it is possible,》 Al disagreed.

“What do you mean?”

《Activate spare arm D.》

From in front of Sousuke, the weapons control panel blinked. The last piece of equipment mounted on his back, a detachable gun barrel, lowered itself down in front of the machine and attached itself to the demolition gun. There was a sound of gears spinning and locking into place. With this barrel attached, the demolition gun, which was very short despite its high caliber, became longer than a tank cannon.

《Conversion to gun-howitzer mode complete. Maximum range is thirty kilometers using high-angle trajectory.》

A long-barreled howitzer... on an arm slave? Sousuke felt vaguely flabbergasted by the nonsensical concept for a moment, and then stopped to reconsider. *This machine is made of nonsense*, he decided. The absurdity of the lambda driver negated common-sense ideas about recoil and penetrating power anyway, so wasn’t a ridiculously jumbo-sized cannon like this perfect for

the Laevatein?

“All right. Let’s try it,” Sousuke whispered, with a hint of self-reproach.

《I thought you might say that.》

“Shut up,” he snarled. He knelt the Laevatein down, switched his master mode to precision aiming, and set sensor magnification to maximum. He could see the Behemoth, which had turned and was retreating from the theater at full speed, swaying in his night vision.

Various data appeared on his screen. Temperature, humidity, wind speed, barrel heat, and more. Sousuke had decent skill as a sniper, but he couldn’t perform miracles like Kurz. AI didn’t have much sniping data either, so he’d just have to go on instinct.

The target symbol overlapped with the reticle on the screen, and a soft beeping sounded out.

《On target,》 said AI. 《Fire now.》

“Not yet,” Sousuke whispered, and moved his machine’s arm, which was now set to maximum sensitivity. *Almost there*, he thought. *Yes, almost...* He fired.

As before, there was a powerful recoil, and a fireball taller than the machine itself blasted away the sand in front of him. Sousuke lost the footing that had felt so solid just moments ago, and the Laevatein was blasted onto its backside. It was like a five-hundred-pound bomb had gone off in his face.

Nevertheless, the Laevatein’s lambda driver activated. The shell was expelled from the muzzle and, backed by Sousuke’s will, raced perfectly along its intended course, slamming the retreating Behemoth in the back of its head.

Sousuke’s magnified vision showed him the giant AS’s head blown off and wreathed in raging flames. The sound of the distant explosion followed soon after. As the muffled echo sounded out, the final Behemoth slowly collapsed and fell forward into the ocean.

He’d taken out the sixth machine. After letting out a long sigh, Sousuke said, “...AI.”

《Yes, Sergeant?》

“How many minutes was that?”

《Five minutes, fifty-two seconds.》 An awkward silence followed that statement. After a moment, Al said hesitantly, 《I know that you were very confident, but it would be impossible to beat that many in three minutes.》

“Shut up,” Sousuke told him. “We couldn’t do it in the four minutes twelve seconds you mentioned, either.”

《Impressive memory for a mere human,》 Al taunted. 《Are you, in fact, the type to hold a grudge?》

“Where the hell did you learn phrases like that?!” Sousuke demanded.

《I’m sorry to say, but having been abandoned by my operator for months, I had plenty of time for viewing television and browsing the internet.》

Sousuke said nothing.

《If you wish, I can speak in even more uncouth language,》 Al suggested enthusiastically. 《I could even speak with a Southern dialect from North America, if you like.》

“Please don’t,” Sousuke said plaintively with a sigh, knowing full well that Al always had a comeback. He was as irritating as ever, as well. A minute later, he said, “But, well... I’m glad you’re all right.” He meant it, too.

Something about Al was fundamentally different from the typical AI that came with an M9. It felt strange to admit, but he’d begun to regard his tactical support AI as being a true comrade-in-arms. Sousuke had begun to feel that way since just before the operation in Hong Kong, but he felt it even more strongly now.

Al responded, almost as if reading his mind.《Yes, Sergeant, I feel the same way. I mean that from the bottom of my heart.》

“Hmph.” *A mere machine*, Sousuke thought, *talking about ‘heart’...* Why was it, then, that he found himself rather liking the idea?

Standing his machine up and keeping on the lookout for enemies around him, Sousuke switched his sensors to active mode. *What happened to Kurz and the others?* he wondered. And he had to save Lemon’s people, too... If infantry was

all that was left, it would be easy for the Laevatein to put them down. Though it would be impossible to follow Kaname's helicopter now...

In the cabin of the helicopter, still in flight, Kaname waited patiently for her chance. The men in battledress, Leonard's personal soldiers, had completely relaxed by now. Some were attending to the critically injured man, while some were watching out the window. Kaname just sat there, stained with blood splatter and looking exhausted, while nobody paid her any mind.

The one sitting next to her leaned forward to talk to someone in the back of the cabin. They spoke in Spanish, so she couldn't understand what he was saying, but he seemed to be asking about Leonard's condition.

It has to be now, she thought, as her mind raced through various dilemmas. Would her desperate ploy work? Could she achieve her desired outcome? What about Kalinin? What about... poor Leonard, lying there suffering because of her?

Stop being stupid! she told herself, and shook her head violently. When had she started thinking like that? She should know by now that those moments of pity could cost her her life! She closed her eyes tightly, let out a deep breath, and pursed her lips before opening her eyes to see that the soldier had stood up from his seat, but the automatic pistol was still in its holster.

All right, just do it— Kaname reached for the gun, drew it out, and then scooted away from the man. He reached for her a moment later, but she just managed to avoid him, and turned the gun toward him again.

"Don't move! I'll shoot!" She hadn't shouted like this in a long time. The men froze in place, and she shouted at them again. "Call the pilot right now! We're taking this helicopter back to where it came from!"

"Got it. Hang on..." one of the soldiers said, muttering something into his headset.

It wasn't the pilot who arrived shortly after, but Andrey Kalinin. He saw Kaname, who was pointing the gun she'd stolen from his subordinate at his chest, but didn't seem particularly surprised by this scenario.

“How spirited of you. I’d assumed you were still in shock from shooting him,” Kalinin said. “Ms. Chidori, remove your finger from that trigger and slowly return the gun. Then we can end all of this.”

“Don’t order me around,” she scoffed. “I *will* shoot him!”

“You know that you won’t,” Kalinin said softly. “Those who lack the will to fire shouldn’t carry guns. It’s a waste of time, and it can cause unpredictable accidents... I think you learned that just a few minutes ago.”

“You think I don’t have the will to fire?” Kaname took in a deep breath so as not to cry; so as not to lose. So that this old veteran, her superior in every way, couldn’t mock her. She gathered up her nerve and stared straight back at the man. “Are you gonna tell me you could really shoot Sousuke, then?”

She didn’t know a lot about Sousuke and Kalinin’s relationship. She hadn’t even seen them talk very often. But Kaname knew. She knew the trust that came into Sousuke’s voice whenever he calmly said those words: “the major.” He said it in the same way he said, “Mao said,” “Kurz said,” “the colonel said,” “the president said”—no, with an even greater sense of assurance.

Could Kalinin really be unfazed by the thought of taking on Sousuke as an enemy? she wondered. Could he really claim he could shoot him? And after admitting that, could he really lecture me from some high horse?

“I could,” Kalinin responded immediately, and the indifference of his response somehow gave it more weight. “In fact, I ordered it not long ago. That’s how motivated I am in pursuit of my goals. Of course, someone of weak conviction like yourself likely wouldn’t understand...”

“Liar,” Kaname spat back.

“Think that if you want,” he told her. “But if you keep this foolishness up, you’ll see exactly what I mean, and it won’t be pleasant.”

Kaname said nothing.

“The price you’ll pay will be the life of the foolish man in front of your gun,” Kalinin decided. “Fire, then, if you wish.”

Every word from Kalinin was like a knife in Kaname’s heart. A girl with no real

training, who had lucked into stealing a gun, pointing it at a member of a helicopter's crew, hysterically shouting demands... She looked around, wondering how the other mercenaries in the cabin were reacting to it.

There was no fear in their expressions, but no mockery, either. No sign of anger or irritation—they were just watching her impassively. She would never have been able to imagine it before, but she felt like now, she could vaguely tell what they were thinking.

It was something along these lines: *Is there really a bullet in the chamber? If there is, what kind of bullet is it? If she does fire, will the bullet come out the other end? If it does, will it ricochet and damage the helicopter's core mechanisms?*

They weren't worried about their comrade who'd foolishly let his gun be stolen away. Keeping a hostage was pointless if the person's life wasn't valued in the first place.

"You're right," said Kaname. "Here's what I'll do, then." She turned the muzzle away from the man and pointed it at the cabin ceiling instead, and the soldiers immediately tensed up. Directly above the cabin were the auxiliary engine, the hydraulics system, and the drive system for the main rotor. Even in a military helicopter, the inside of the cabin was almost defenseless to bullets, and a few shots, even from a mere handgun, could do massive damage or even start a fire. "How about now?" she suggested. "I can shoot this."

"I see. Exploiting our weak spot," Kalinin hummed, his face earnestly thoughtful; it was the expression of an experienced teacher, receiving a unique answer from a student. "But we're currently at 300 feet, moving at 120 miles per hour. It would be difficult to use auto rotation to land safely, and we'd all certainly die in the crash. Even in the best-case scenario, it's highly unlikely that everyone but you would end up injured to a degree that would allow you to escape."

He was right. Kaname was well aware of it now—at this altitude, at this speed, they didn't have the potential or kinetic energy to safely crash land a rotorcraft. She wasn't even wearing a seatbelt; she'd probably be thrown clear on impact and die.

“If you find that acceptable,” Kalinin told her, “feel free to shoot.”

Kaname didn’t know how to respond.

There was no violence in his words, no attempt at guilting her. Still, she felt awash in an indescribable feeling of failure. Andrey Kalinin wasn’t some silver-tongued con man who could talk a person down with words alone. He simply spoke the truth—the unshakable truth. The truth that stealing a single gun wouldn’t give Kaname any power over the current situation.

All the cleverness she’d shown during dangerous moments in the past—her bluffs, her little schemes, her defiance—the desperate struggles of a seventeen-year-old girl, one who was in over her head, just wouldn’t work against a veteran soldier like him.

Why does someone like him have to be here, taking the enemy’s side? she wondered. *Why won’t he just say, “I’m sorry about all this. I’ll take you to Sagara now”?* *Can’t he at least wink at me in a way to let me know he’s really after something else?* *Why does he gaze at me instead with such hard, sad eyes?*

“You really mean it, don’t you?” Kaname asked. For some reason, his sadly indifferent eyes turned bloodshot. “Then tell me. Will I never see him again?”

“Correct,” Kalinin responded. “Never again,” Coming from him, it was like a prophet foretelling doom: no matter how she struggled, no matter how she screamed and begged and wished, she’d never see him again. At least, not without someone getting hurt...

It was just like the bet Leonard had made. Every time she tried for Sousuke, tried for her freedom, someone would die. Everything that had happened here in this helicopter reinforced that dilemma.

“You’ve done quite enough,” Kalinin told her. “Give me the gun.”

“No...” This time, Kaname pointed the gun at her own temple. She could feel its thick, heavy steel. The urge to pull the trigger ran through her. *Yes, just pull it,* she told herself. *It would be for the best. You’re tired of everything, aren’t you? One little squeeze and it will all go away... My anxiety, my pain, my guilt over shooting Leonard, my hopelessness and humiliation...*

Deep inside her mind, something was screaming, “Don’t do it, not yet,” but with superhuman will, she stifled that voice. Hope had no place here; hope must be rejected. This couldn’t just be a performance. She had to sink into true despair, to genuinely desire death. She had to want it. To become an empty, unthinking vessel, ready to perform the simple act of pulling the trigger...

“Wait.” Kalinin stopped her. For the first time, there was panic in his voice. A deep fear appeared in his eyes. He must have noticed the scent of death wafting up around her—as someone who had been around death all his life, perhaps he could sense such things. “Don’t do it. I’ll do what I can.”

She believed him. “Take the helicopter back,” she pleaded. Her eyes were unfocused, and her voice was like that of a dead woman.



“That would be... difficult, in our current circumstances,” Kalinin admitted. “Leonard needs treatment. If we turn back now, he could die. For now, calm down, and remove the gun from your head. Point it at me instead.” He was more loquacious now; trying to persuade, to negotiate.

She’d taken the initiative. “Then let me say goodbye,” she decided.

“What?”

“On the radio,” she explained. “I want to say goodbye to him... let me do that, and then I’ll stop.”

The rain had lifted, and a post-battle silence had fallen over the mansion. It was as if the Laevatein’s unspeakable power had driven the storm clouds away.

After polishing off the enemy ASes, Sousuke moved to clear up the last of their ground forces, scattering the infantry who had surrounded Lemon and the others. After seeing it take down those Behemoths, no one else wanted to tangle with the Laevatein.

Lemon and the old soldiers seemed safe, at least. They waved up to the triumphant Laevatein with considerable ease. The woman from the intelligence division, Wraith, was with them, but she was sitting off by herself, wreathed in a sense of exhaustion from the prolonged gun battle.

The M9s of Kurz, Mao, and Clouseau came running as well, soon enough. They helped to clear out the last of the enemies and round up prisoners. They recognized at a glance that the Laevatein was a derivation of the Arbalest, and though in awe of the terrifying power of the machine and its pilot, they had decided to save more detailed discussion for after their withdrawal.

Still, Kurz muttered over the radio, “Wish you’d had that thing on Merida Island...”

“What do you mean?” Sousuke wanted to know.

“Kurz. Stop it,” Mao cut in.

“We’ve had quite a time, Sergeant. But we can discuss all that later,” Clouseau cut in. “Anyway, that machine... the Laevatein, was it? I’d rather not

let the POWs see it, if possible. Use ECS to go invisible.”

Clouseau’s right, Sousuke thought. They’d seen more than enough of its battle capabilities already, but that didn’t mean he had to give them an eyeful of his machine up close; seeing its finer details would allow for deeper intuition of its functions...

“Roger,” he said. “AI, activate ECS. Invisibility mode.”

《Unable to comply,》 AI said.

“What?”

《Unable to comply. This machine is not equipped with ECS.》

“What?” Sousuke asked. “What are you talking about?”

《What does it sound like? Extraordinary output, extraordinary capacitors, and a massive cooling system to compensate for an exceptional drive system. All that, plus the lambda driver. We had no room for superfluous functions.》

Sousuke was stunned.

《For your information, I should add that not only does this machine lack ECS, but ECCS as well. Its radar functions are minimal, and it has no laser or infrared jamming capabilities, which leaves it vulnerable to missile attacks.》

“Wait a minute. Doesn’t that make it just like a Savage?”

《No. It’s superior to a Savage, roughly equal to an M6.》

“What in the world...” Sousuke sighed as it finally dawned on him that the electronics screen display was nearly all blacked out. The optical sensors and such were the latest models, as in an M9, but the machine was lacking almost everything else. How was he supposed to survive modern combat with such poor electronic warfare systems?

《Still, it’s fortunate that you met up with Lieutenant Clouseau and the others. Sharing data link functions with them will allow us to compensate for many of our weaknesses. Chin up, Sergeant.》

“I can think of another superfluous function we could clear out,” Sousuke muttered.

《What might that be?》

“You! I’d like to yank you out, throw you in the garbage, and replace you with an ECS.”

《Nonsense. Without me, this machine would be a defective, dead weight M9. But if that’s truly what you want, I won’t stop you.》

“You’ve got an argument for everything, huh? You really are—”

《New radio signal incoming,》 Al reported, interrupting Sousuke’s attempted insult.

Sousuke looked up questioningly.

《129.22 megahertz. AM wave VHF band. It’s an unencrypted frequency. It’s been calling you for some time.》

“For me?”

《Affirmative. Shall I switch to channel 8 and put it through?》

“Yeah, put it through.”

《Roger. Complete.》

Sousuke listened in on the digital transmission, anxiety welling in his chest. It was a woman’s voice. A voice he knew well, calling his name... “—Sousuke. Can you hear me?” It was Kaname. He felt his heart race and sweat rise up on his back. Just hearing her voice again was like a vise clamping his heart.

But while he recognized her voice, it sounded timid, and weak, and fleeting... This wasn’t the Kaname he knew. No... it was the version of her he’d seen last, the one in the courtyard at school. She was shouting into the void, not expecting a response.

“Sousuke, if you can’t hear me... then anyone who can, please pass this on to him. I repeat: Sagara Sousuke... Can you hear me? I’m currently—”

“Chidori...” His fingers moved before he could think. He switched his radio to her frequency and cried her name. “Chidori!”

Dizzying silence and static followed. At last, she responded in Japanese. “Sousuke? Can you hear me?”

“Yes, I hear you. It’s me. I came to get you. Where are you? No, first... are you hurt? Are you safe?”

“Yeah... I’m okay.”

“Good,” he said. “Tell me where you are and I’ll come and get you now. I finished off the enemies here, so it’s fine. I have Al... and a new machine. We won’t ever lose again. Everyone else is here, too. Mao, Kurz, the others... So you don’t have to worry anymore. I will—”

“Sousuke, calm down.” Kaname’s voice was detached and emotionless.

But he kept talking into his headset, regardless. “I am calm. There’s so much I want to tell you. So much has happened. I don’t even understand all of it... I lost my way so many times, but I made it this far. I couldn’t not come. So, Chidori... Right now, the only thing I want to hear is where you are. If you don’t know your exact location, describe the surrounding terrain. If there are enemies nearby—”

“Sousuke, stop,” Kaname said, interrupting him.

“Why? I can’t come get you if I don’t know where you are.”

“That’s not what I mean...” Her pained, cracking voice rang in his ears.

“Please... stop chasing me.”

“What? I don’t understand...”

“Don’t chase me,” she specified. “I’m inside a helicopter with Kalinin-san now, and Leonard. I think I might have killed him. I feel so bad for him... I thought about running so many times anyway, but I realize it’s pointless now. I can’t beat these people. The more I fight them, the more people will get hurt. So... I’m sorry. Really, don’t chase me. I’m really happy you came this far for me. But I don’t think—”

“Chidori?” Sousuke asked, cutting her off. “What are you saying?” A long silence followed. The static was deafening. Nothing she was saying made any sense. He couldn’t understand why she would tell him not to chase her. No... That was a lie. He did understand.

Nami’s face flitted up in his mind. Of course, Kaname didn’t know about her,

but Nami was a representative of more than herself: that every time Sousuke pursued Kaname, the death toll rose, whether they were enemies or bystanders. It was a simple fact, so of course Kaname would know it. That was why they'd parted ways in the school courtyard in the first place.

"Don't chase me." He'd already known she would say that. The more he struggled, the more she suffered. Sousuke had just been trying to ignore that fact.

"So... Sousuke... forget about me already..."

The world around him was turning black. He felt like he'd been cast into the vacuum of space, floating aimlessly, surrounded by blackness. "Wait, Chidori. I —"

"Just get it through your head already," she insisted. "I can't..."

Helplessly, Sousuke gripped the sweat-soaked sticks as he heard Kaname muttering something on the other side of the radio, like a woman in the grips of a fever.

"No, never mind," she said at last. "Never mind any of that." Her voice grew stronger. "Sousuke. Can you still hear me?"

"Yes."

"As former student council vice president, I'm giving you an order. You hear me?" He heard a snuffle. She was crying on the other end of the line. "Come and save me. Do whatever it takes. No matter how many people die: hundreds, thousands, millions. I don't care. Just come and get me! Use whatever it takes—all those useless, stupid, lacking-in-common-sense soldier skills of yours. Beat up all the bad guys, find me, and hold me! You can do it, can't you? Can't you?!"

"Yes. I can," Sousuke responded firmly, feeling passion surge up inside him. Of course. Why should he hesitate, just because a few million might die? To hell with what might lie ahead... If it meant getting her back in his arms, what did he have to fear?

"I'll be there," he promised. "Wait for me."

"Okay..." Kaname said, her voice cracking. "Sousuke... I love you."

“I love you, too.” He was surprised by how easily the words came to him.

“Glad to hear it... I guess that means we’d better kiss the next time we see each other. Long and hard, no matter where we are. Okay? Do you promise?”

“Yes, I promise.”

The static grew worse. They were leaving the helicopter’s communications range. And with that, he’d lose any hope of pursuing her.

For now.



“I’ll wait ten years, a hundred years...” she promised, sniffing.

“Don’t worry. I’ll find you.”

“Right. Oh, and search the refrigerator in the mansion’s kitchen. There’s a hard drive—” Kaname said something more, but he couldn’t hear it. It was drowned by a wave of static, and then the line fell silent.

After the radio cut off, Kaname removed the headset, and moved her finger off the trigger. “I’m done now.” She returned the gun to the mercenary.

Kalinin, the only one there who understood Japanese, furrowed his brow severely when her transmission was finished. “You gave me a real scare, there,” Kalinin said.

“What do you mean?” Kaname asked.

“I truly thought you’d lost all hope,” he told her. “That you’d really shoot yourself.”

“I had,” she said, her face haggard. Kalinin’s careful eye would have seen through her if she hadn’t. It was psychological warfare, driving herself so far that she could ride the line between performance and the genuine article. “I don’t consider this a victory. I can’t escape my circumstances, either. And I really did go into it planning to say goodbye to him. But...” She turned her eyes down. “I changed my mind. That’s all.”

Kaname knew what an extreme thing it was she’d said to Sousuke. She’d told him to “do whatever it takes” about an impossible situation. She’d be throwing him into terrible danger. Many people might die for them. She knew how irresponsible and arrogant she was being.

But I still want to see him, she thought. That’s the truth. It’s one thing I can no longer control.

“Are you telling me you’ve resolved yourself?”

“Yes.”

Kalinin stared straight at her, then sighed. “He’ll never hesitate again. Even if I try to stop him, he’ll shoot me. It’s an incredible power you’ve given him...”

That's why I didn't want to let you use the radio. Giving in to your show of despair was my downfall," he mourned. "This is my loss."

"How sportsmanlike of you to admit it," said Kaname.

"I may need to ask about that hard drive you left them, as well."

"I don't think it'd do you any good to hear it," said Kaname, letting out a snort. "Nobody except me, Tessa, and that guy over there would understand it."



"Man," Kurz muttered as he got down off his M9 in the Tuatha de Danaan's hangar deck. "'Sousuke, I love you.' 'I love you too.' I can't keep up with this. I hope you die. I hope you rot in hell."

"Your first time seeing me in six months, and that's the first thing you have to say?" Sousuke whispered in exhaustion. He'd forgotten that his conversation with Kaname was on an open channel, and Mao and Kurz and the others had ended up teasing him the entire way back in the Pave Mare transport helicopter.

Lemon, his DGSE guys, Courtney, Sears, and Wraith, had accompanied them back to the de Danaan. Lemon seemed to have overheard the transmission, too, and while Sousuke had assumed he didn't know Japanese, he must have gotten the drift of it, because when they finally met up again, he'd looked at Sousuke scrutinizingly, and finally just whispered, "Now I get it."

"Sorry, Lemon."

"Oh, it's fine," Lemon said dismissively. "Anyway, I was hoping you'd introduce me to your superior officer. We sort of ended up tagging along, but I'm still not actually sure if we're considered friend or foe to the Mithril remnants..."

Lemon and the others had been taken to a corner of the hangar deck and forbidden from moving. They were inside a top secret submarine, after all; the de Danaan's crew wasn't stupid enough to let some other country's intelligence agency stroll around at their leisure.

"Sure," Sousuke agreed. "She's probably busy on the bridge right now, but I'm

sure she'll be by soon." *Superior officer...* Sousuke hadn't seen Tessa in ages, either. Not since those two hectic days with the old soldiers in Guam.

"Sagara-san." He heard a voice behind him, turned, and saw Tessa there. She must have left the bridge to Mardukas, as she'd come by sooner than he'd expected.

"Colonel..."

"It's been a while." She gave him a quiet smile. Tessa had always been slim, but now she looked a little haggard. He hadn't heard all the details yet... How hard must things have been for her since the all-out attack on Merida Island?

"It has," he said after a pause. "I'm glad to see you safe and well, Colonel."

"Indeed. It's been an eventful time... but I think we're all right now. I'm glad you're safe as well, Sagara-san." Tessa's manner was completely subdued. She wasn't being cold to him, nor was she overflowing with emotion, nor did her voice seem to long for more. She was happy to have one of her many subordinates back; that was all her behavior suggested. Was she holding back emotion in view of the others, or was this how she really felt? Sousuke couldn't be sure either way.

"Then... will you return to my team?" she asked.

"Well... ah, I intended to, but I haven't worked it all out for myself yet," Sousuke admitted. "I'd like some time to think."

"All right. We'll talk another time, then." Tessa didn't look especially disappointed.

"Also, the ones who've been helping me," Sousuke said, by way of introduction. "Michel Lemon of the DGSE, and the friends of Admiral Borda—"

"Tessa-tan!!" The voice rang out through the hangar as the two old men charged Tessa. They moved so quickly that Tessa's personal guard couldn't stop them in time.

"C-Courtney-san and Sears-san?" Tessa asked Sousuke in bewilderment, freezing up as if she'd stumbled upon a grizzly in the woods. "Wh-What are they doing here?"

Her soldiers restrained the two old men, all while they went on carrying on with statements like, “I missed you!” and “What are you doing here?” and “Were you following me?”

“Oh, well... I didn’t have anyone else to turn to...” said Sousuke, in his own defense.

“I understand *that*, but... Why did you bring them *here*?” Tessa asked.

“It would’ve been a little cruel to leave them.”

“I suppose...”

After recovering, Sousuke attempted to introduce Lemon. “More importantly, Lemon here is a DGSE agent who has useful information. He’s smart, and he saved my life, so he’s trustworthy. Lemon, this is my—” He turned back to look at Lemon. He was standing there, mouth agape, gazing at Tessa as if in a fever dream. “...Lemon?”

Lemon just stared.

“Lemon,” Sousuke tried again. “This is my superior officer—”

“Huh? What?”

“You wanted me to introduce you.”

“Um, but... But... For real?” Lemon asked, somewhat vacantly. “You’ll introduce me to her?”

“Hey...”

Kurz, Mao, and Clouseau, all of whom were watching from behind, whispered things like, “love at first sight?” and “so obvious” and “so the fan club grows...” and such.

Just then, Tessa got a call on the shipboard phone, seemingly from Mardukas in the control room. They had a brief back-and-forth, and then Tessa turned to address those present. “All right,” she said. “We haven’t had a proper hello, but we’re about to withdraw to safe waters on silent running. Please keep quiet until then. The Tuatha de Danaan welcomes you all.”

Just then, a voice came from the external speakers of the Laevatein, which

had just been carried out from the hangar of the Pave Mare. 《Am I included in that welcome, Ms. Testarossa?》

“Of course, Al. I’m glad you’re safe, as well.”

《Thank you, Colonel.》

Epilogue

Gavin Hunter found a girl sitting beside him as he regained consciousness in his hospital room. She had short hair and eyes hidden by the brim of a baseball cap, and was dressed casually in jeans and a trainer jacket. She looked to be about sixteen or seventeen.

“Mira, eh?” He tried to smile, but the most he could manage was a slight twitch in the corners of his mouth.

“Easy, now,” the girl said kindly. “I just got word from Wraith-san; they got him to safety. They apparently showed greater power than expected.”

“I see...” he said with a wheeze, then coughed lightly and looked around the hospital room. The EKG monitor beside him beeped in a regular rhythm. “I’m glad. I didn’t believe we’d actually finish it, but we really did make it in time. Thank you. We owe you.”

“Not at all,” said Mira. “I owe him... Sagara-san, that is, for saving me. If not for him, I’d be a hollowed-out shell somewhere in Siberia around now.”

“Well, maybe so,” Hunter agreed.

“But all I did was lend a hand,” she insisted. “It was him—Al—who really did it. He’s a remarkable AI, to be able to design his own body. That Bani person was truly incredible...”

“I see... The ultimate AS, wasn’t it?” Hunter whispered, gazing absently up at the ceiling.

For an artificial intelligence to develop something like human personality and instinct, just being hooked up to a network wouldn’t be enough. It needed a real body and sensations, even mechanical ones, to develop the necessary creativity and flexibility. It had to stand on the ground, feeling heat and wind, and also the extremes of combat. That’s why they’d mounted it on an AS—the most advanced artificial body in existence.

From what he’d heard, the entries in the ARX series through the ARX-5

weren't even ASes, just collections of special materials brought together in a lab. And he'd heard that they were only just able to perform "paranormal phenomena" that were barely detectable to even the highest precision instruments. The revolutionary change had come with the ARX-6. Once loaded into an artificial body, a modified M6, the system functioned properly for the first time. Then came the seven, then the eight, and each time, its evolution was exponential.

The ability to create those strange force fields might have been militarily important, perhaps, but when Hunter considered the evolution of the ARX series, he began to wonder. Was even the lambda driver a purely incidental step towards achieving something greater?

Yes... Could that have been what Bani Morauta, the late Whispered, had been after? When he proposed that theory to Mira, the other Whispered in front of him now, her expression had clouded over.

"Maybe you're right," she said, nodding her agreement. "That occurred to me, too, as I was helping to build the ARX-8. What Bani was reaching for..." She trailed off.

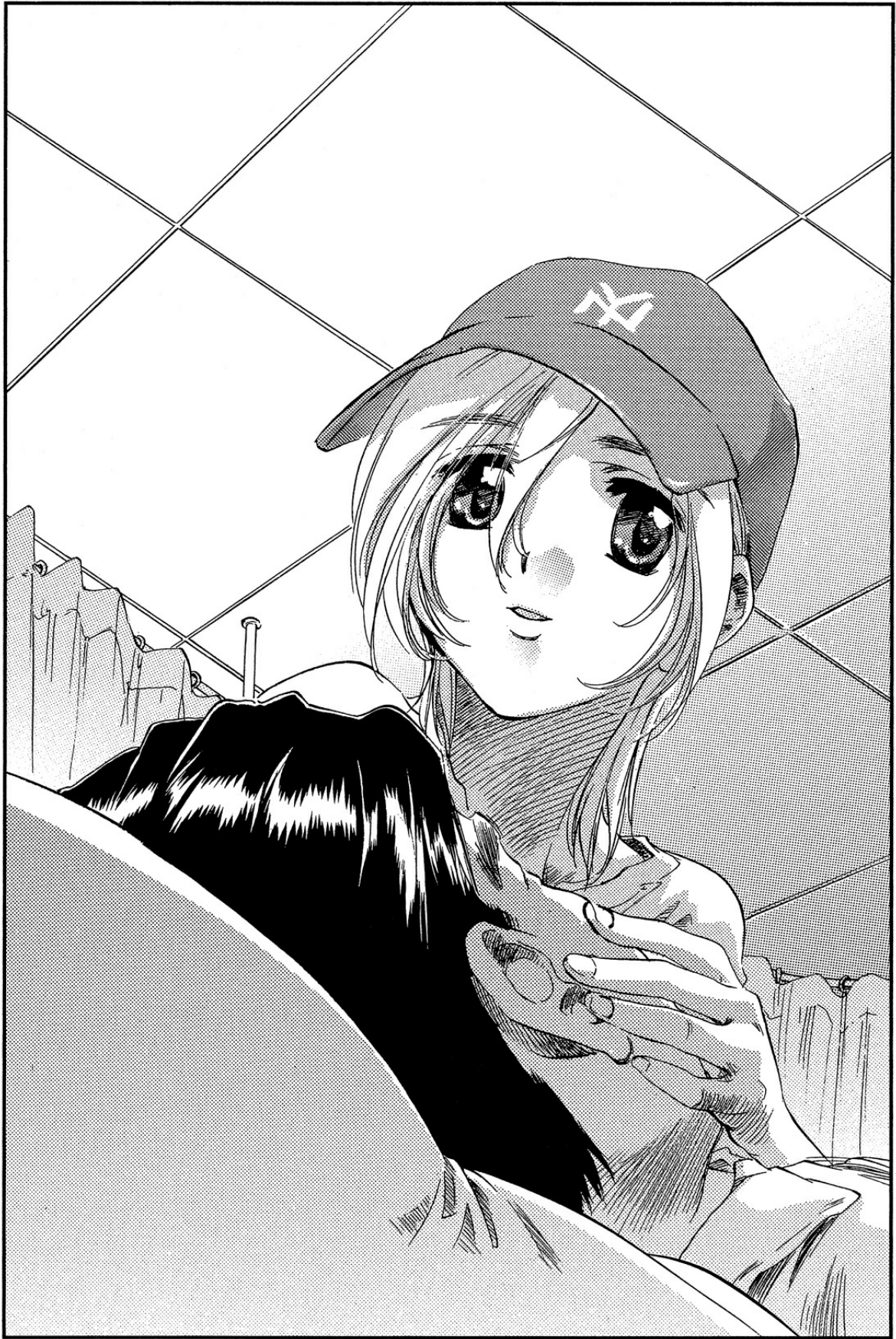
Hunter waited patiently for the answer, but Mira didn't continue. Although her rehab was complete, he was still worried about too much strain on her mind, so he changed the subject. "It seems you came with me," he observed.

"Yes. I was worried, after all."

"I'm all right now, Mira," he said reassuringly. "Get yourself somewhere safe."

"I will. After a little while longer, I will." Mira gave him a small smile as she lightly stroked his haggard cheek.

To be continued



Afterword

Hello there. I was telling the story like normal, and it ended up being the bulkiest volume yet. (*Day By Day* was longer, but it was split into two volumes.) We have more characters now, and they're all acting independently, so that eats up a lot of word count. The upcoming stuff is going to be tricky, too...

If I have to give an MVP award to anyone this time around, I would have to give it to old man Courtney (runner-up: Al). He really brightened the mood for Sousuke and Lemon, who were in a dark place with the loss of Nami. I feel like Courtney picked up the “yin” role that Kaname usually serves. I didn't go into it deeply, but he's a career soldier who served in Vietnam, and he's probably seen a lot of tragedy. I like that he uses a philosophical view and optimism to keep from dwelling on that, and I hope I become a bullshit-spouting old fart just like him some day.

This is Courtney's first appearance in the novels, so if you're not familiar with him, please look for “The Old Soldiers' Fugue” in the short story collection *Seven Uncertain Tools*? There's a lot of troublesome old men in that one, and unfortunately, Tessa takes the brunt of their attention.

Speaking of Tessa, it feels like she has a bomb strapped to her somewhere. What's going to happen next? I worry.

Sousuke seems to have gotten over one hump, but he won't exactly have a smooth road ahead, given who he's facing now. There might be more trouble in the wings. Kaname seems to have steeled her resolve, but she's due for more trouble, as well.

Still, when Kaname and Sousuke get together, they just seem to take over the story. Kaname is a mysterious character who sometimes even defies the will of her writer.

I was a little hard on Leonard this time, but... that accident came to me when I was thinking of what to do with him next. Thinking about the location of his injury, it's not good.

Lastly, we finally debuted the new machine, the ARX-8, and after a lot of thinking, I named it the Laevatein. The one who coined that name was Takemoto-san, the director of *Fumoffu* and *TSR*. I had him give me everything he could think of, and I liked the sound of it, so after a year of stressing I went with this one. I'm grateful to him for doing that for me.

The machine's designer was Ebikawa-san, who is also the designer of the anime-version Arbalest. The exchange I wrote about in *One Man Force* was basically a joke! It can't really have those specs! I had them do a lot of rough sketches and thought hard on a few factors, and we settled on "an evolution of the basic Arbalest." It's bulked up in a lot of places to look much more powerful. It has a ponytail from the Codarls, too. To separate the Laevatein's design from the Arbalest, I went with a white base with points of red. The concept was burning fire!

Other famous second-generation robots with red added in include the L-Gaim Mk.2 and the Bilbine, and that's the image I wanted to convey. I hear the color illustrations in *Dragon Magazine* were well received, so I'm extra grateful to Ebikawa-san.

Now, for my new machine's debut, I wanted its first fight to be glorious. A long time ago, there was a robot anime where the hero's long-awaited new machine finally arrived, but all it did was shoot a few beams and chase the bad guys away. My youthful heart found that incredibly disappointing, so since I was debuting the Laevatein, I really wanted it to go nuts. It does have a lot of weak points, so that should help us maintain the balance going forward, but I wanted it to have a pretty good showing.

And the Eligore Ases—piloted by Fowler and the others—that debuted this volume are what the red Venom that appeared in the anime is supposed to be. A basic Codarl type would have that ponytail in the outer appearance. Sorry it's gotten so annoying.

As for my plans for the future, *Make My Day* will be the last volume serialized in *Monthly Dragon Magazine*. From now on we're strictly straight-to-novel. I wish I could submit another volume by the first half of '07, but I still have a lot to plan out, so I'm not sure if I can... (sweats.) When you're this far into a long-running series, you end up thinking about so much stuff, but for some reason

it's hard to write these afterwords nonetheless. As for what Sousuke and the others will do next, and how the story will reach its finale, I want to convey that in the story itself.

My own life situation has changed a lot since I wrote volume one, too. I realized that the elementary schoolers who sent me fan letters in the series' early days might be out there with jobs now, and it freaked me out a little. All around me, people will get married, have kids, and be born themselves. Life keeps moving, as they say. I can't continue to act like I did at my debut, just gliding along. I want to finish this up before it gets to year eleven. I have a vision of how I want the ending to go, so I hope you'll keep cheering for Sousuke and his friends.

Thanks to everyone in my life. I'm afraid I've caused a lot of trouble for Shikidouji-san again, but I can't find the words to thank you for all the amazing illustrations you've given me again. I hope we can keep working together.

And to S-san, my editor. Thank you for all your help for so long, and congratulations. I'm sure it's going to keep being hard, but I pray for your full recovery after a nice rest.

See you for another round of Sousuke in all kinds of hell.



ARX-8 LAEVATEIN

Monomolecular Cutter

A retractable monomolecular cutter, designed for melee combat.

The head contains the sensors and anti-personnel weapons, but it's more spartan than that of the Arbalest.

[Specs]

- Height: 8.7m
- Base Weight: 10.3t
- Power Source: Palladium Reactor (Roth & Hambleton PRX3000)
- Maximum Operation Time: 30 Hours
- Maximum Land Speed: Unknown
- Maximum Jump Height: Unknown
- Integral Armaments:
 - GAU-19/S 12.7mm Gatling Gun x2
 - XM18 Wire Gun x2
- Optional Armaments:
 - Seward Arsenal 165mm Multipurpose Demolition Gun
 - Geotron Electronics GRAW-4 Monomolecular Cutter
 - Royal Ordnance M1108 Anti-Tank Dagger
 - Alliant Techsystems M1097 AS Grenades
 - Oto Melara Boxer-2 76mm Shotcannon

The Laevatein with standard loadout. Though it carries over design elements from the ARX-7, it's been upgraded with an overall sharper and more massive frame, calling fire to mind. It also has individual points of difference, such as the retractable monomolecular cutters housed in the knees.



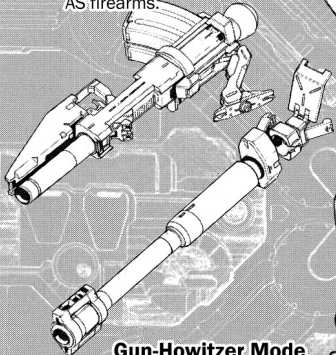
ARX-8
'LAEVATEIN'
Laevatein Mecha Design Docs
Mecha Design: Kanetaka Ebikawa

ARM SLAVE CATALOG

ARX-8 LAEVATEIN

Demolition Gun

A short-barreled demolition gun. Its size is unprecedented among AS firearms.



Gun-Howitzer Mode

An optional barrel attachment that allows for a long-range, high-precision firing mode.

AS-Grenade

A standard, highly reliable AS grenade.

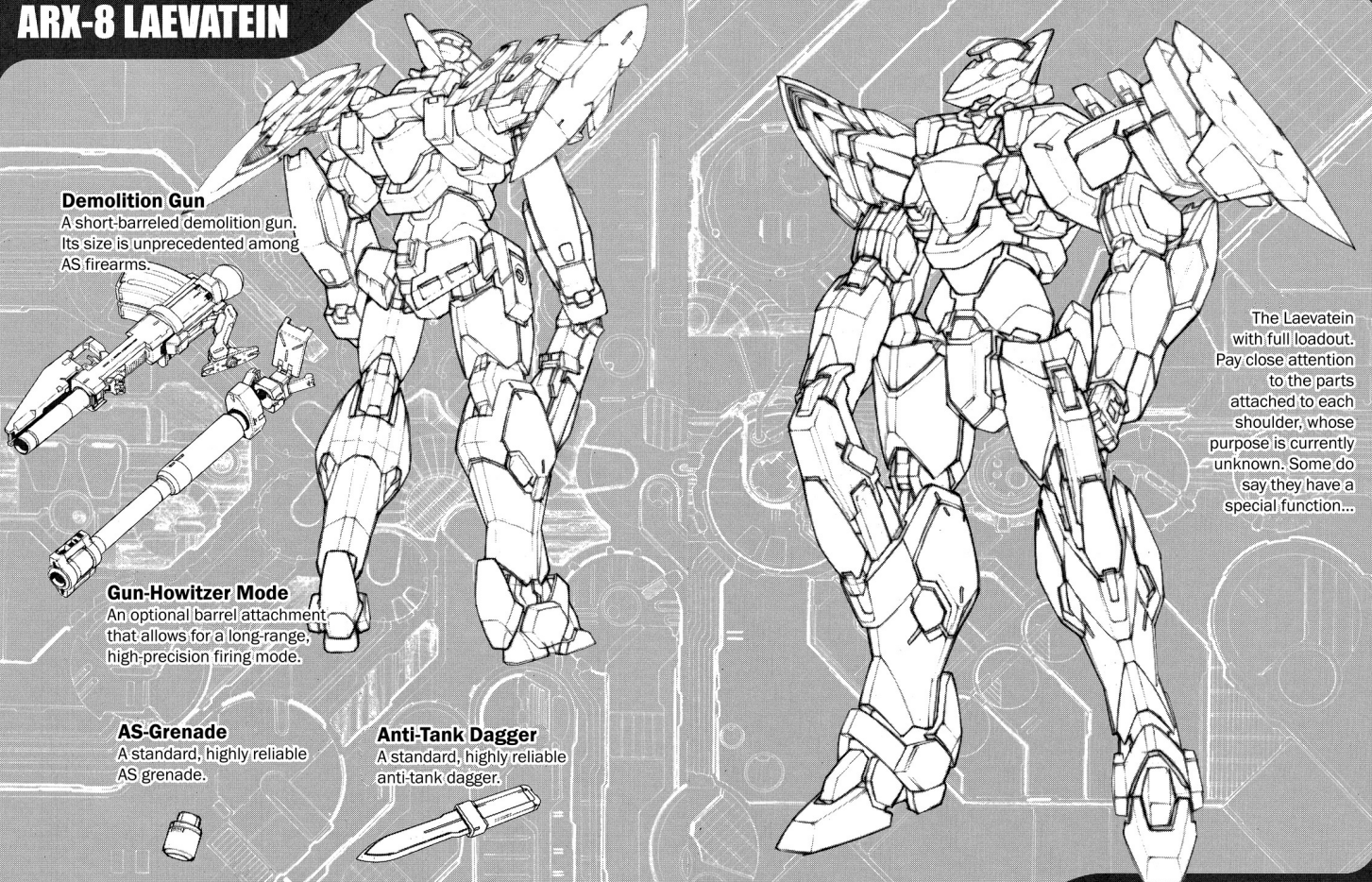


Anti-Tank Dagger

A standard, highly reliable anti-tank dagger.



The Laevatein with full loadout. Pay close attention to the parts attached to each shoulder, whose purpose is currently unknown. Some do say they have a special function...



ARM SLAVE CATALOG

CHAPTER 1

Unbelievably, Tessa appears reduced to an empty shell. What could have happened to her?

GATHERING MAKE MY DAY SPECIAL
SHIKIDOUJI ILLUSTRATION COLLECTION





CHAPTER 2

Tessa turns her eyes bravely upward.
Behind her, Clouseau and his M9 represent the
stubbornly persisting de Danaan Battle Group.



CHAPTER 3

Battered and injured and wrapped in bandages,
Sousuke's eyes still brim with fighting spirit.
Code name Uruz-7 has returned!

CHAPTER 5

A symbolic depiction of Sousuke and Kaname's choices to keep moving. Though apart, their feelings connect them. Even if it's hard, even if all seems hopeless... keep running!!





CHAPTER 6

A stern depiction of our male characters.
Despite the broad array of personalities,
nationalities, and ages, they still fight together.
Old soldiers don't die—they keep fighting!



CHAPTER 7

Sousuke in the M6's cockpit, brimming with tension before his descent. The mission to retrieve Kaname... is about to start!!



CHAPTER 8

Kurz, Sousuke, and Mao: Reunited!!
The rejoined trio begin their counterattack
against the wolves that stalk them...

CHAPTER 9

Kaname points the gun straight at Leonard. Can she pull the trigger?
It's an edge-of-your-seat dramatic scene...





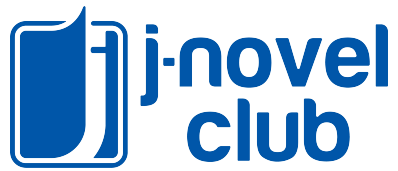
CHAPTER 10

The new AS has finally arrived! Sousuke, take the ARX-8 Laevatein... tear through the coming enemies, and save Kaname!!

CHAPTER 11

Sousuke and Kaname... the awkward duo have never been able to truly convey their feelings to each other. Will they ever be able to join hands again?





Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 10 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

Full Metal Panic! Volume 9 Gathering Make My Day by Shouji Gatou

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis Edited by Dana Allen

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © Shouji Gatou, Shikidouji 2007

Illustrations by Shikidouji

First published in Japan in 2007 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: November 2020