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5

FULL METAL PANIC!

**ENDING DAY BY DAY
PART 2**

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EVERYTHING WAS GONE.
KANAME STOOD THERE,
STILL AND SILENT, IN THE
EMPTY ROOM THAT
SOUSUKE HAD LEFT
BEHIND.



10/10
1/10



HE TURNED
AROUND... AND
SAW KANAME
STANDING THERE,
INDOMITABLY. SHE
SMACKED HIM
WITH HER
TRAVEL BAG AND
YELLED AT HIM,
JUST AS SHE'D
ALWAYS DONE.

THE KNIVES
STREAKED TOWARD
THE BOY IN A
FLASH OF SILVER
LIGHT. BUT JUST
AS THE BLADES
WERE ABOUT
TO STRIKE, HE
SMILED CALMLY.



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3: Black and White (Continued)

20 October, 1905 Hours (West Pacific Standard Time)

Northern Training Grounds, Merida Island Base

The cockpit screen, in live combat mode, was a swirl of information and warnings. Digital representations of the scenery, picked up by the machine's optical sensors, flew past in a dizzying array. The jungle sinking into night, the sheets of red-and-purple sky, the dark trees rustling in the wind the machine kicked up—all disappeared from sight just as quickly as they came, in a blur of afterimages.

Gauges displayed various readings: the wobbling G-meter, the whirling positioning grid, the melee mode's variable reticle. The targeting box and motion indicators danced wildly, the power gauge continued to fluctuate, and the AI blared warning after warning.

《Proximity alert!》

It was coming from eight o'clock—behind him and to the left. Sousuke's Arbalest was tearing through the jungle, but Lieutenant Clouseau's M9 was closing in. The inky black machine streaked toward him, and its orange eyes appeared to burn.

Sousuke braced himself as it reached out to make contact. His Arbalest dodged in the nick of time; the black M9's training knife just grazed its armor.

More flashes came—strikes, sweeps, and roundhouse kicks, one after another. They had a distinct rhythm, like a dance: at once provocative and serene; surging with energy, yet as deep and still as a lake.

These movements... how? Sousuke wondered. They were humanlike—extremely so. It was hard to believe he was really fighting an arm slave. He could almost see its muscles throb, smell its sweat, hear its heart beating, feel

its bones creak. And more than anything, this black M9's pilot was...

Good...! Yes, he was good. As good as Sousuke? Better, in fact—He could count on one hand the number of operators he'd met who could fight at this level in hand-to-hand combat. *Lieutenant Belfangan Clouseau...* he wondered, executing a diversionary strike before leaping away. *Who are you?*

Third generation ASes—like the Arbalest and the M9—were much better jumpers than their predecessors. Their legs utilized the structural principles of a grasshopper's joints, which gave them explosive acceleration beyond anything a ground vehicle or aircraft could muster. The result was a jump in proportion to a human leaping effortlessly to the roof of a house.

But Clouseau continued to press the attack. The black M9 jumped just a moment later, hot on the Arbalest's heels. As the two collided in midair, it violently seized the Arbalest's ankles, and—

Sousuke took in a gasp of confusion. The next thing he knew, the world was upside-down; Clouseau had used the black M9's momentum to throw the Arbalest off balance, and his machine grabbed on tight as Sousuke's began to fall, back-first. The plan was clearly to come astride him and slam him to the ground.

Sousuke skillfully manipulated his machine, unleashing a combined elbow and knee strike that broke his enemy's grip. Still, the ground was closing in—He wouldn't make it in time. He twisted his machine's body so that it landed shoulders-first. The Arbalest rolled along the ground, kicking up mud. Impacts that even the state-of-the-art shock absorbers couldn't fully disperse rattled through Sousuke's body, and he groaned.

The more sarcastic soldiers referred to ASes as "Cocktail Shakers"—a reference to the way an operator was jolted around during battle—and at the moment, Sousuke really did feel like the ice in a shaker, slung around by an overly-enthusiastic bartender. He quickly shook off the toll the landing had taken on his body, regained control of the Arbalest, and sprang it to its feet. He assessed his damage report, then turned to face the enemy again.

Clouseau's M9 was just standing up. "Just as I thought," he announced over the radio. "You're a second-rate operator, Sergeant Sagara."

“What?” Sousuke asked.

“You fight like it’s a skill, not an art. Do you understand what that means?”

Sousuke said nothing.

“I suppose you don’t... which just proves my point,” Lieutenant Clouseau told him. “A second-rate predecessor and second-rate subordinates... what a miserable team they’ve put me on.”

Predecessor—he’s talking about Captain McAllen, Sousuke realized. He still won’t show any respect for the dead...

As Sousuke watched, Clouseau’s machine slowly turned to face him, then threw its training knife away. The training knives had an edge made from urethane foam, which was infused with water-based paint, like a giant felt-tipped pen. Unlike the monomolecular cutters used in live combat, all these did was leave marks to simulate a “cut”—They all but eliminated the chances of anyone getting hurt or killed in training. Sousuke couldn’t understand what he was thinking.

“Throw that toy of yours away,” Lieutenant Clouseau demanded. “Let’s have a real bout.” The black M9 drew a large knife from the hardpoint on its hip. In truth, it was more like a dagger—It was almost twice as long and wide as a standard knife, and emitted an almost ominous aura.

This was a “Crimson Edge” monomolecular cutter, created by the Israeli arms manufacturer IMI. It was a sized-up version of the reliable and widely adopted “Dark Edge” series, and the AS squadrons of the Israeli army frequently used it to tear through the Rk-92s and Mistrals of Islamic nations. Its purpose was to cripple a heavily-armored opponent in close combat with one strike; it had been refined over countless battlefields for that very purpose, always with a focus on substance over style. A weapon like that could easily take the Arbalest’s arm off, or even tear its cockpit block in half.

“What, you’re not going to draw?” the lieutenant mocked. “You should have a GRAW-2.” The GRAW-2 was the Arbalest’s own monomolecular cutter.

Is he serious? Sousuke wondered incredulously. Clouseau was right in that the Arbalest did have a GRAW-2 in its weapons rack. But his proposal would take

things past merely ‘stepping outside’ to settle a disagreement in a bar. Knocking each other around in valuable machinery was bad enough, but the addition of real blades was beyond the pale. *What kind of officer takes a simple spar this seriously? Who is this man?*

“Come on,” Lieutenant Clouseau demanded, and the black M9 dashed at him, kicking up sprays of mud.

Sousuke gasped. It was on him in a flash; the dark gray dagger arced in his direction. Immediately, he ducked his machine back to one knee, but a metallic screech howled in his ears. The swing had gone right through the blade of the training knife in the Arbalest’s hand, bisecting it. If Sousuke hadn’t moved just when he did, the blow would have gone through his cockpit.

But Clouseau’s attack was far from over. The swipes continued, mercilessly, from below, from the side, diagonally down from the shoulder—each one sent sparks flying and left nicks and cuts in the Arbalest’s armor. Each seemed to burn with icy, hostile intent.

He’s serious... Sousuke didn’t wait a moment longer. He drew a monomolecular cutter from his own weapons rack. He didn’t bother to beg him to stop, or to ask why he was doing this—If his opponent was going to try to kill him, then Sousuke didn’t have to hold back.

“That’s right,” Lieutenant Clouseau told him. “No need to hesitate.”

There was another splash of mud as the machines leaped away from each other. “AI! Maximize GPL! Switch motion manager to Delta-1, and remove all practice limiters!” Sousuke yelled.

《Roger. Maximizing GPL. Running Delta-1. Removing all PLD,》 the AI intoned. The generator’s output began to rise, and the motion manager software switched to live combat mode. 《Caution,》 the AI continued. 《Recommended motion manager setting is Charlie-1.》

“What?” Sousuke asked in confusion.

《Charlie-1 is recommended for lambda driver activation. Reasoning is based on six factors: One, statistics based on data from five previous sorties. Two, Charlie-1 was the default set by development lead Bani Morauta. Three,

bilateral angle settings for Delta-1 are—»

“Explain later!!”

《Roger.》

Clouseau’s M9 charged, and the Arbalest readied to meet it. In the dimming light of the training grounds, the two machines collided.

The large screen in the base’s command center glowed with a wealth of information about the battling machines. Tessa barely remembered to breathe as she watched their silhouettes cut furiously through the darkening jungle. It was like two giants locked in a dance—first coming together, now lashing apart. Tree after tree fell, crushed beneath their metal limbs—

“I can’t say I approve of this,” said Lieutenant Colonel Richard Mardukas, who was standing beside her. “Even if it is for a purpose, I don’t like to give the impression that we support soldiers settling personal affairs with violence. It sets a bad precedent; rules must be applied consistently.” He pushed his glasses up his nose as he eyed the screen dubiously.

Tessa gave him a sidelong glance, then let out a small sigh. “We don’t have a choice,” she lamented. “It’s the only way to draw out the Arbalest’s power...”

“Captain, I fail to understand,” Mardukas observed pointedly. “Battlefield simulation training is done every day. Why the farce? Inciting that ridiculous barroom brawl, wasting the squad’s materiel resources, even allowing them the use of dangerous, live combat equipment...”

As Mardukas’s words implied, the brawl had been planned from the start: Clouseau had proposed it, and Tessa had approved. The idea was to provoke Sousuke, insult him, and force him into a personal brawl, thus pushing him to the brink. It seemed the best way to assess his ability to activate the Arbalest’s lambda driver—or at least, to let them gather data from its near-activation.

“I don’t intend to hold back. There’s a real chance that I’ll kill him,” Clouseau had told Tessa. She had wanted to argue, to say that killing him would defeat the point of it all, but the newly-appointed lieutenant cut her off with cold logic: “If that happens, it tells us all we need to know—that he didn’t have what it

took, and that the machine is worthless. This knowledge will disincline the operations division towards further reliance on it.”

Tessa had found that she couldn’t object; to refuse would be like saying that she had no faith in Sousuke.

Mardukas was still talking, his eyes still locked on the command center screen. “It’s a bridge too far from a safety perspective, as well. Our men might make fighting their livelihood, but that doesn’t mean we should behave like a street gang. When we do engage in violence, it should be gentlemanly, tempered by deliberateness and regulation. This kind of barbaric duel is—”

“But war doesn’t discriminate between gentlemanly and barbaric, does it?” Tessa mused. She realized that her words had earned a show of surprise from Mardukas, and asked quickly, “Ah, was that impudent of me?”

“No,” Mardukas admitted at length. “You’re entirely correct, Captain.” As he responded, for just a second, his eyes took on a hint of pity.

A relay, affixed to the Arbalest, was sending them all kinds of data: the operator’s heart rate, brainwaves, neuro-magnetic waves, and NIR values; temperature and deformations in the machine’s skeleton; the status of the AI, AI; and all kinds of other things. It was all being recorded for review by their engineer, Second Lieutenant Lemming.

What would he think if he knew we were using him as a guinea pig? Tessa wondered. *What would he think if he knew I’d corralled him into this? He would hate me, I’m sure...* Everything that had happened today just seemed to take him further and further away from her—further away, even, than Tokyo was from Merida Island.

Bani... she thought. The face of the young man, no longer with them, surfaced in the back of her mind. *Is this your way of getting back at me? For being so lost without you, and being drawn to him? That machine, your final testament, has saved us time and again; there are no words to thank you for it. But at the same time, having it here... it’s opened a gap between him and me, a gap that can never be closed again. Why did he have to pilot the Arbalest at Sunan? Why couldn’t it have been someone else?*

These thoughts consumed her only for a few seconds. Then, noticing

Mardukas's disapproving expression once again, she said, "The stress of standard training is not sufficient to activate the lambda driver. There's a significant difference in a soldier's mental state between training and live combat. You're more than aware of that, aren't you, Mardukas-san?"

"Of course," he replied briefly. "The Falklands taught me that." Tessa was reminded of Mardukas's service as XO on a Royal Navy nuclear submarine during the Falklands War in the early 80s. "Captain..." he went on. "When I express my doubts about this, it's that I question whether the machine is worth all these machinations. A weapon that fails to work each time the trigger is pulled is no weapon at all. It's my opinion that we should work out other strategies that are less dependent on it. What a weapons system needs is not destructive power, or the ability to disrupt the battlefield—it's reliability, pure and simple."

"Are you calling the Arbalest defective?" she questioned.

"Yes, ma'am. I don't care for that machine at all."

His words inspired a certain melancholy amusement in her. Tessa had gotten the vague impression that Mardukas wasn't fond of Sousuke, yet he and Sousuke had the exact same opinion about that machine. "I believe that Sergeant Sagara agrees with you..." she murmured. "And that's just the problem."

Exchange followed exchange. The black and white silhouettes intertwined for an instant, then broke away, tearing through the jungle with roars and flashes of electric light. Their movements unleashed gales that whipped around the surrounding vines and leaves.

"Ugly... such an ugly way of fighting," Clouseau said.

"Ugly?" Sousuke questioned.

"You move like a tin toy. So awkward—" A roundhouse kick came flying from the Arbalest's blind spot; Sousuke stepped in to try to body check the opponent, which also softened the blow against him. "—reliant on brute force —" Yielding to the motion as its balance shifted, the M9 went into a spin in mid-air; the momentum carried its knife through the Arbalest's left shoulder, taking

off a heat sink and rupturing a shock absorbent tank. “—and inflexible!”

From there, the M9 moved into a one-handed handstand and unleashed a dazzling series of whirlwind-like kicks. First the right leg, then the left—they slammed into the Arbalest’s head from the side, throwing it off its balance.

Sousuke gritted his teeth. The M9 spun on its inertia like a top, then planted a foot and regained its upright posture. The Arbalest backed up, smoke rising from its shoulders.

“Well?” Lieutenant Clouseau taunted him. “Anyone piloting an M9-type machine should at least be capable of that.”

“Bragging about your acrobatics?” Sousuke asked sourly.

“Hmm?”

“If you were smart, you’d have finished me off then instead.”

“You still have the energy for trash-talk, at least... Then, I’ll take your advice!” Lieutenant Clouseau decided.

The machines collided immediately. The clash of explosive power, of strength against strength, echoed through the nearby jungle and shook the very air around them. The Arbalest took a light step and struck at its enemy, straight, clear, and fast. Clouseau dodged by leaning in and at the same time, took a slice at the Arbalest’s torso. Sousuke barely managed to dodge with a twist and a leap to the side.

Despite his flippancy moments ago, Sousuke was desperate. Clouseau was good. He wasn’t just strong—his every movement was harmonious, each one seeming to flow into the next like water. He never fell for Sousuke’s provocations, and saw through every feint. Conversely, any minor carelessness on Sousuke’s part earned him a torrential rain of attacks that overwhelmed his guard and sent him reeling.

Clouseau began to speak, even as he struck at the Arbalest. “Why don’t you show me what you really have already? Europe is packed to the gills with operators at your level. You’d barely be bottom-of-the-barrel on an SAS assault soldier team.”

“You’re former SAS?” Sousuke questioned. The SAS was a British special forces unit, considered to be one of the best in the world. From the name Clouseau, Sousuke had assumed the man was French of African descent, but—

“That’s not where your mind should be right now,” the lieutenant advised, as an especially powerful roar and vibration washed over Sousuke; Clouseau’s dagger had dug into the Arbalest’s abdomen. “Keep your focus on staying alive. That coward McAllen is waiting for you.”

Sousuke hissed to himself. The Arbalest’s AI reported the damage to him immediately: 《Warning! Damage to generator. Extent unknown. Main power cable severed. Second cooling unit disabled. Rectus abdominis muscle actuators damaged—》The AI hadn’t mentioned it, but there seemed to be damage to the air conditioner, too; the smell of burning metal had begun to permeate the typically airtight cockpit.

“What’s wrong?” Another merciless strike. “Why won’t you focus?” Another unforgiving slash. “Are you here to fight or not?!” Lieutenant Clouseau slammed a knee into the staggered Arbalest’s side. The eight-ton machine went flying, and hit the ground back-first. The AI blared warnings; a shrill alarm rang out. The machine’s skeleton, muscles, and armor all creaked and groaned in protest.

At this rate... Sousuke was at a loss. He couldn’t begin to figure out how to deflect raging chains of attacks like these, let alone deal an effective counter.

“I told you to show me what you have!!” The M9 leaped high into the air, knife hefted in a backhand grip, then plunged down at the Arbalest, like a hungry eagle on grounded prey.

Sousuke rolled to the right and managed to dodge the stab. Clouseau’s dagger bore deeply into the place the Arbalest’s cockpit block had been moments ago. Sousuke swiped his blade at the other man’s dagger—and cut the Crimson Edge in two.

From its supine position, the Arbalest used the spontaneous power in its back muscles alone to snap into the air. It was a maneuver called a “jackknife”—with a motion similar to that of a click beetle, the AS could spring to its feet much faster than mere use of its limbs would ever allow. Utilizing an agility impossible for a human, it quickly recovered its balance, and in that same instant, brought

its knife to the ready.

But the next thing Sousuke knew, the M9 was there, crouched right inside the Arbalest's personal space. Dropping its hips low, it whipped around sharply, but before Sousuke could react to the unnatural motion—

He let out a shout of surprise. His machine was being drawn forward. It was as if gravity had, for an instant, shifted perpendicular to the ground. He felt a powerful impact, and then suddenly, he was being blown back by some overwhelming force.

The eight-ton Arbalest flew backwards through the jungle, knocking down every tree in its path and coating the area in a haze of mud. When the machine finally made contact with the ground, it skidded, digging a long trench and jetting white steam—before it came to a stop, on its back, exhausted and motionless.

“It...” It couldn't be. That impact... Sousuke's head was spinning, and his body was numb. It was that strike that had done it. It was far more than a simple physical strike—it felt almost otherworldly. Could that machine have—

The black M9's eyes were surely glaring straight at him.

“Can't be...” Sousuke choked through an unresponsive throat. *It can't be. That thing can't have a lambda driver. The Arbalest is the only Mithril machine that has one—That's why they're putting me through all this, right? It's why they shoved me into this unreliable weapon, gave me all this responsibility I never asked for—*

“Get up, Sergeant,” Clouseau said. “Try to bring out everything that machine has. You hear me? *Everything*. Do it... or the next one kills you.”

The Arbalest stood up. Its knees were knocking and its shoulders were heaving, reflecting the toll the fight had taken on Sousuke himself.

I guess I don't have a choice... he realized. He'd have to use the lambda driver, the machine's mysterious function. It had toyed with him, time and time again—Would he be forced to rely on it, here and now? And... would it actually work for him, or would it betray him yet again? *This is the stupidest fight I've ever been in...* he told himself. *Maybe it would be smarter to cut my losses and run...*

“Get ready,” Clouseau warned him.

Sousuke said nothing, but took a deep breath. He planted both of his machine’s feet, lowered its hips, and faced Clouseau down.

The black M9 began running, closing in. In response, the Arbalest pulled back its fist, as if it were drawing a bow. *Imagine power. Imagine destructive power, focused to a single point...* “Go!” Sousuke whispered to himself.

He struck. Clouseau moved.

The next instant, the Arbalest was flying forward, its body buckled. The impact slammed through Sousuke’s cockpit again, and this time, his consciousness became dim. Up became down and then up again, as the jungle whirled like a kaleidoscope. He slammed into the ground, and stars appeared before his eyes.

The AI reported the damage, and more alarms blared, but Sousuke barely heard them.

“You’re fragile. Weak,” Clouseau said. “You were nothing but a pet dog from the start.”

Sousuke said nothing. *It’s no use*, he admitted it to himself. And then, he sank into the darkness.

“It appears to be over,” Mardukas said, removing his navy blue hat. He also slid off his black-rimmed glasses and rubbed his tired eyes with the back of his hand. The room felt hotter than usual. “Nothing happened, after all. The machine is useless to us.”

“We can’t be so certain that nothing happened,” Tessa responded coldly. “Lemming-san, what do the numbers say?” She was addressing the engineer, Second Lieutenant Nora Lemming.

The woman in the seat nearby, who had been monitoring data on the M9 and Arbalest with a laptop, spoke with detachment, her eyes still locked on the screen. “They’re not even as high as they were during the battle on Berildaob Island. The TAROS is registering the needed brainwaves—gamma waves—but at extremely low levels. The spectral distribution of the core module’s phase

interference wave quantum particles is showing alteration. They're moving from the north pole of the thalamus column... to around field 15 of E-layer. And to a little ways away from there, near ninety degrees of field 42 of P-layer."

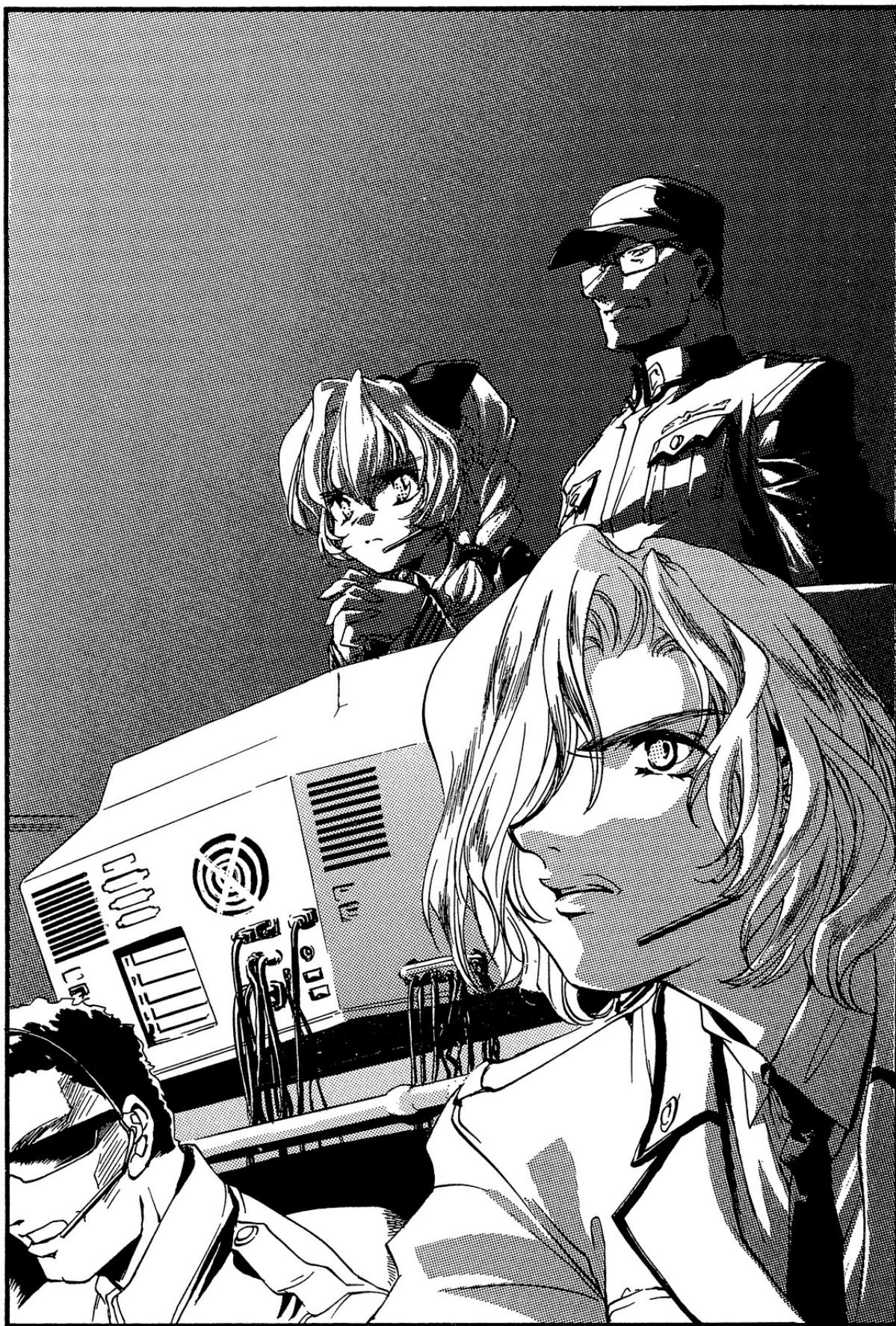
"The blue parts?" Tessa questioned.

"Yes, look," Lemming replied. "These two places... they're connected. It's promising, if still a long way from activation."

Tessa thought for a minute. "In the case of defensive reactions, it was N-layer zero degrees, plus or minus forty, I believe. I wonder if this has to do with Miller's hypothesis."

"We can't be sure. What I'm wondering is—"

Mardukas could only watch, disheartened, while Tessa and Lemming argued before the array of colorful 3D images and graphs. He couldn't follow their conversation at all; the best that he could grasp was that it concerned neurology and physics. Though he possessed several degrees himself, he couldn't even begin to follow a debate about fields so different from his own.



Lemming was a brilliant MIT graduate. She had no military experience, but Tessa had found and recruited her to deal with the Arbalest when it lost its developer. She wasn't as exceptional as Teletha Testarossa, but she certainly qualified as a prodigy—Nearly every engineer that Mardukas had met with significant knowledge of ASes and ECSes was young.

Mardukas had long felt a sense of discomfort regarding the new weapons these young people were developing. It wasn't just that capricious lambda driver—arm slaves, electromagnetic camouflage systems, palladium fusion reactors, the de Danaan's super AI, the TAROS, the superconductive drive, the electromagnetic flow control system... it all seemed equally wrong to him.

Just twenty years ago—back when Mardukas himself might have still been called young—no one could have even dreamed of devices like these. Those were the days when missiles and fighters were first getting mounted with true computers; talk of giant robots or invisibility screens would have gotten a man laughed out of the military. It was an era still captivated by the simple pixel graphics of *Space Invaders*, after all.

The nuclear submarine that Mardukas once commanded was still considered cutting-edge. But in reality, it had more in common with a diesel sub from the World War II era than it did with the Tuatha de Danaan. *Teletha Testarossa is a good and fine girl*, he told himself. *But why does she—and the products of minds like hers—fill me with such trepidation? She and her submarine, her squadron... they've saved many people, to be sure. But why is it that some part of me wants to fundamentally question their existence?*

The argument between Tessa and Lemming went on for about five minutes.

"Any data from the E-005?"

"None."

"There's nothing else on the electromagnetic spectrum it emitted?"

"There are limits to what I can measure in this environment, so I can't be sure," Lemming explained. "We're using heavily improvised equipment, as well. I'd need more time and analysis to know more—"

"All right. Let's go back to square one with the hypothesis, and start by

rebuilding a simple model,” Tessa decided. “Maybe we can figure out a way to reduce the reliance on the operator, too... I’m counting on you, Lemming-san.”

“R-Right.” Mardukas didn’t miss Lemming’s momentary look of dismay. The idea of fully grasping a system like that probably seemed overwhelming, even for a genius like her. Perhaps Lemming, too, felt an inferiority complex next to that girl, a full ten years younger than her, who could say something like that so flippantly.

But Tessa, showing no signs of noticing Lemming’s distress, simply turned back to Mardukas. “I’m going to rest for a while,” she said. “If I’m needed for anything, please forward the message to the medical center.”

“The medical center?” Mardukas checked.

“It’s the perfect place for a short nap. I need a hot compress, as well,” Tessa said, before walking for the command center exit. Her strides seemed a bit longer than usual; she was in quite a hurry for someone who claimed to be heading out for some peace and quiet.

So she is worried. Heaven’s sake... So that was it. She was so eager to check in on the sergeant that it had driven her to distraction.

Once Tessa was out the automatic door, Lieutenant Lemming spoke up from behind. “Um... Colonel, sir?”

“What is it?”

“Will Major Kalinin be returning to the base today?”

“He said he would be,” Mardukas told her. “Why do you ask?”

“Well... I just need to speak to him, regarding the Arbalest,” Lemming admitted. “I wasn’t sure... whether to email him or to speak with him directly.”

“That’s up to you, but don’t trouble the major any more than is necessary. Rumors can affect troop morale.”

“O-Of course... But I should tell you, the rumors are aren’t true. I’m saying this partly to defend the major’s honor, but he and I are not—”

“Yes, yes. I know.” Mardukas waved his hand in annoyance and turned to head for his office.

This time, it was the sergeant in charge of communications who called to him. “Wait, Colonel.”

“What now?” he demanded.

“Er... well. There’s a message from the operations division in Sydney.”

“Come on. Wake up, you useless downer of a sergeant.” Sousuke opened his eyes and found a scowling Kurz Weber looking down at him.

Sousuke stared at him in silence. He was lying on a bed in the medical center. The ceiling was white, and buzzing with naked fluorescent lights. Sousuke vaguely remembered the maintenance crew pulling him out of his AS, but everything after that was a blur.

“You let him smack you down that easily? Talk about pathetic,” Kurz said, apparently forgetting his own sad performance back in the bar. He looked hale and hardy enough now, but at the same time, deeply dissatisfied.

“Where’s Lieutenant Clouseau?” Sousuke asked as he sat up, and Kurz gestured with his head. That was when Clouseau appeared from behind the curtain on the other side of the large room, which partitioned off the examination area. He was wearing a T-shirt, holding a balled-up shirt under his arm, and thanking the doctor for something. There was a brand new bandage neatly wrapped around his muscular left bicep.

Sousuke said nothing.

“That battle was an experiment cooked up by that bastard, some engineers, and the command types. They set me up, too. Dammit...” Kurz’s words just confirmed Sousuke’s suspicions; they’d fought for too long with live weapons, without command ever warning them to stop. It wasn’t hard for Sousuke to imagine their squad’s senior officers tacitly approving of—or even encouraging—the fight.

In other words, that AS and I are Mithril guinea pigs. What an absurd new assignment he’d found himself in. Why hadn’t they just ordered him to fight, instead of playing mind games? What was Teletha Testarossa thinking, treating him this way? At the least, she probably wasn’t enjoying it—he could give her

that much credit.

The loss had been a bitter pill to swallow, and frustration swirled in his gut. That lieutenant hadn't even employed any noteworthy tactics during the match; the result had come down to pure skill versus skill. If it had been a real battle, Sousuke would be dead now, rotting inside that white elephant of a machine.

I wish he'd gotten in a good hit and destroyed that AS. I wish he'd demolished it, so that it could never be used again, he thought. It wouldn't be my fault, then, and maybe I could just—

No. That's foolish... Even if the Arbalest were destroyed, they wouldn't send me back to Tokyo. The top brass wouldn't go back on their orders. But that AS is still the cause of all of my misfortune, isn't it?

"Chidori..." he muttered. I'm sorry, but I'm not strong enough to do anything. I can't protect you. I couldn't even protect the honor of a dead man, or my own pride... I can't protect anything.

Had he ever felt so powerless in his life?

"He's coming." Kurz's whisper snapped Sousuke back to reality.

Belfangan Clouseau approached them. "I see you're back with us, Sergeant," he said, without a hint of appreciation for the fact. "Go to the hangar and sign the paperwork for the maintenance team. Write a report about that *practice* we just had, and submit it to me, Lieutenant Lemming, Major Kalinin, and Colonel Testarossa by 2500 hours. I want it flawless. Make one mistake in accuracy or formatting and you'll do it over from scratch. Drills start tomorrow morning at 0600; you'll gather in hangar one. That includes you, Weber—I need to retrain every one of this battle group's AS operators personally."

Sousuke said nothing.

"Don't expect an easy ride like you had with McAllen," Clouseau warned them. "When my own ignoble end comes, I don't want my successor speaking ill of *my* competence. Be ready."

Neither Sousuke nor Kurz responded. They had lost to him, after all—they had no grounds to object to his abuses of their former squad leader.

“If there are no questions, you’re dismissed.”

“I do have a question,” Sousuke said in a hushed voice.

“Proceed.”

“What was that attack you used to beat me?” he asked hesitantly. “Does that black machine... have a lambda driver?”

Clouseau snorted in response. “I wouldn’t need to use it to crush you and the Arbalest. The innate potential of a third generation AS like the M9 was enough.”

“Then what caused that feeling of shock?” Sousuke wanted to know.

“It’s a technique that combines the Eastern concepts of ‘tooshi’ and ‘fa jin,’” Clouseau told him. “You generate a powerful impact that permeates the enemy machine and its operator, and then sends them flying back—no lambda driver required.”

Sousuke remembered the fight back in the bar; he’d used the same move, then. From Sousuke’s point of view, it had looked like he’d just shoved Kurz in the jaw, but there was clearly more to it than that.

“The M9 is more than capable of pulling these things off,” Clouseau was saying. “Match your breathing to your opponent’s, and you can direct their power’s flow any way you want it. Like water—or like fire, as they say.”

“But an AS’s body isn’t anything like a human’s,” Sousuke objected.

“That was true, once, but not anymore,” Clouseau corrected him. “The M9 has over twice the parts in its skeleton as your average second-generation AS. That gives it a complexity and flexibility well on par with God’s greatest feat of engineering—that is to say, the human body.”

Sousuke made no reply.

“Earlier, I called the way you fight ‘ugly.’ I said that because, instead of trusting the Arbalest’s fundamental strengths, you treat it like a machine—no different than a truck, or a helicopter.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Sousuke asked. ASes *were* machines—artificial fusions of titanium alloy and high polymers that just happened to be arranged in a humanoid form. When they moved, it wasn’t because they were alive, but

because their joints responded to input in accordance with their programming. Some people referred to them as an operator's 'avatar,' but that was just a turn of phrase.

"I see you won't get it unless I spell it out for you." Clouseau put his hands on his hips with a sigh of disgust. Then he looked straight at Sousuke, and said, "You hate the Arbalest."

Sousuke was too shocked to respond.

"Facing you made that very clear. The movements of your limbs, the flow of your punches, the swings of your blade... there's uncertainty in all of them. I saw distrust, impatience, and hesitation there. Your movements appear logical and professional on the surface... but there's no will behind them. Your heart isn't in it. Your problem isn't with the lambda driver; it's something more fundamental."

Every one of Clouseau's words was like a knife in Sousuke's heart. He was right: Sousuke did hate that machine. Other than the lambda driver, it had never betrayed him before in any way, but still... he couldn't trust it. He hated putting his life in its hands in battle.

Was that feeling slowing him down? It shook him to think that a man he had been facing as an enemy—even if temporarily—could cut to the heart of the matter so quickly. He wanted to argue, but he couldn't. The lieutenant's words were almost surely correct.

"Listen to me, Sergeant." Clouseau leaned forward and peered into Sousuke's face, close enough that he could feel the man's breath.



With his eyes locked to Sousuke's, he spoke, enunciating every word. "ASes are not just vehicles. They're an extension of a soldier's body. They embody the heart of their operator. In a high-level battle, it's the smallest differences that determine who wins and who loses. A man who can't trust his own body, his own power, can never defeat his enemy. I want you to know that. That's all." Without waiting for his response, Clouseau turned and left the medical center behind.

"Sheesh. The new boss is a real jerk, huh?" Kurz whispered, even knowing the man might still hear them.

"But what he said is worth considering. Clouseau is definitely a strong fighter," Sousuke admitted.

"Well... in hand-to-hand, sure. Dunno how well he does in other areas."

"He's likely top-class in other fields, too," Sousuke reasoned. "He insinuated that he was SAS."

"Oh?" Kurz said skeptically. "Canadian SAS, maybe..."

The most widely-known SAS were the British Army's 22nd Special Air Service Regiment, but Commonwealth nations like Canada, New Zealand, and Australia also had highly trained SASes. The rankings were the same in each country, and they frequently exchanged personnel, so it was hard to tell them apart from the outside.

"That reminds me," Kurz went on. "McAllen's dad was Australian SAS."

"Oh, I remember—" Sousuke got that far, and then stopped.

Tessa was standing at a door to the medical center, opposite the one through which Clouseau had gone. Her right hand was on the door frame, her left hand was gripping her braid, and she was watching them as if desperate to speak. Sousuke had a fleeting impression that her legs were unsteady underneath her, as well.

She remained silent, so Sousuke and Kurz spoke up first.

"Colonel?"

"Tessa?"

She was just beginning to stammer out words when suddenly, the base's physician, Captain Goldberry, called out from the back. "Oh, there you are. Tessa!"

"Y-Yes?"

"Dick sent you a message! He wants you back at the command center, ASAP!"

"Ah... very well. I'll return at once." Tessa hesitated for a moment, but disappeared quickly from the door frame without a proper word to them. Sousuke was utterly confounded.

"Huh," Kurz said. "You think she came by 'cause she was worried?"

"Worried? About what?" Sousuke asked, his ignorance genuine.

Kurz glared at Sousuke for a moment, then shook his head exaggeratedly. "You know... if I ever had to script a romantic drama, you're the last kind of protagonist I'd write. The story would never move forward. Viewership would tank."

Sousuke just tilted his head in confusion.

Scowling at the map of the underground base, Belfangan Clouseau wandered through the officers' quarters until he found the room assigned to him. The door wasn't locked, and when he got inside, he found a pile of his personal belongings that the soldiers had brought for him. The officer quarters were about the size of a standard double hotel room; there was little in the way of decoration, and the lighting was bright and warm. There were only a few furnishings provided.

The first thing he did, before even touching his personal belongings, was to rifle through the empty lockers and cabinets; there was no trace of personal effects left by the person who'd used the room until two months before. He walked up to the wooden desk and searched through the drawers, where the scents of paper and cigars brushed at his nose. In the bottom drawer, he found a well-worn Bible.

Clouseau withdrew the small leather-bound tome and flipped through it. He was hoping he might find a picture of some kind slipped between the pages, but

nothing came up. Then, he flipped to a certain verse in Ecclesiastes. The page's right side was a little yellowed from regular use.

"A living dog is better than a dead lion," read the verse. *He'd use that phrase from time to time in training... I kept telling him I was Muslim, but it didn't stop him. And I think that I—Allah, forgive me—came to like the phrase, too.*

"Senpai..." Clouseau whispered to himself, before closing the Bible again.

He turned back to the entrance to start moving his belongings in, but caught sight of an East Asian woman standing in the open door: it was Master Sergeant Melissa Mao.

"So it was you," she said.

"It was."

"It's been a year and a half," she observed.

"Technically," he told her, "it's only been six days."

"True. You won't find anything of his, though... It was all cleared out, ages ago."

"I know." Clouseau turned away from Mao and hefted up his large, olive-green bag. Then, he forced an air of indifference into his voice as he began to properly move his belongings into the room. "Did he... suffer?"

"Nobody knows," she sighed. "Nobody was with him when it happened."

"I see." Clouseau stood still for a few seconds, and then nodded, as if convincing himself of something. He did several passes down the hall afterwards, clearing his luggage out of the entrance.

Rather than moving to help, Mao just asked, "That M9... it was a test-type for the D-series, wasn't it? I remember seeing plans that got tabled... that were similar to the E-series I've been working with."

"That's right," Clouseau agreed. "A Falke test-type; Geotron's Dortmund factory only rolled out two. It can carry a little more payload, but it's no different from the standard E-series, otherwise."

"Does it have a version of the hardware that's in the Arbalest?" she wanted to know.

Clouseau knew what she was getting at. “Does that concern you?”

“I was nearly killed twice by enemies who used it,” she told him bluntly.

“That’s right, I read the report,” Clouseau recalled. “My answer is... it doesn’t. There were plans to give it one, but the developer killed himself before it could go through.”

“So the Arbalest is still all Mithril has?”

“That’s right,” he agreed. “Which is why I’m going to train that sergeant and the rest of you... as thoroughly as I can.” On top of that, he had to think up countermeasures; tactics to let standard M9s stand a chance against a lambda driver. If the Arbalest could use its lambda driver freely, they could practice against it, then pass their results on to other battle groups—It was a method he hoped would keep them competitive for some time with their current equipment. Major Kalinin and Colonel Testarossa were counting on that, too.

“I understand, but it’s just not like you to go so hard...”

“I agree,” Clouseau told her, shrugging expressionlessly. Then, after a moment, he said, “That one—Sagara.”

“Yes?” Mao said.

“He’s just like I used to be,” Clouseau opined. “As stiff as a board, blind to everything around him, trying to force himself into this one single mold. He’s like a man trying to sit in a chair too small for him... even though he could easily widen it if he wanted to...”

“You really think he can?” she wanted to know.

“I don’t know. But if he can’t, he’ll die.”

Mao fell silent.

“Or... he’ll buckle under,” Clouseau predicted.

“Buckle under?”

“Like the men we face in our daily operations,” he clarified. “There’s a kind of animosity that starts to foment inside of you. You start by putting on fronts about who you really are, then you begin to resent those around you, and in the

end, you start to see the entire world with a kind of detached scorn. It happens slowly, but surely, like the little hand on a watch. That's what makes it so frightening."

"Sousuke?" Mao scoffed. "There's no way."

Clouseau didn't respond to Mao's words. "I'm tired," he told her. "I'm going to rest a while. You should be going, too." He opened the bag he'd tossed on the floor and pulled out a pristine towel and a bar of soap. But on his way to the shower room, he stopped for a moment. "Melissa."

"Yeah?"

"Don't tell anyone about Senpai and me," he ordered. "I can't have the men going soft around me."

Mao paused in the middle of shutting the door, and a pained smile appeared on her lips. "As you wish. Well... good night, Ben."

"Good night."

Mardukas's expression was severe as he greeted Tessa in the command center. "Forgive me, Captain."

"Is there an emergency?" she inquired.

"Well, it's not quite clear yet," Mardukas hedged. "Operations headquarters has ordered us to Standby D. There's a B12a in progress in sector J5-CS; they've completed countermeasure procedure 3a and are currently proceeding through 3b."

"Standby D" meant that the amphibious assault submarine Tuatha de Danaan had to be ready to deploy at any moment. More specifically, they were to keep it in a state where it could leave port within two hours of issuance of an order. Most of the time, that order never came; they were really just saying, "we might end up needing the TDD-1, so please be ready in case we do." The standby order period could last for days or even weeks at a time, as well.

A B12a indicated, "Destructive action by one or multiple ASes." The situation in Tokyo in June—though that had been a somewhat special case—fell into this

category, for instance.

AS terrorism, then... Tessa had a bad feeling about this. “You mentioned sector J5-CS,” she said out loud. “Where is that?”

“Hong Kong, ma’am.”

Same Timeframe, Somewhere in Hong Kong

Police sirens could be heard passing down the main road. Cars honked at intersections. A hit song by Andy Hui rang out from a shop across the street.

A man stood inside a room, bathed faintly in red and green light from the windows. “I’ve returned, Sinsang,” the man said. “I used the Codarl-m to rile up the southern army’s sentries, as you requested. My little brother in Dung Ging reported in, as well. He says preparations are complete. He’s ready to kill the girl the moment you give the order.”

There was no response. The man was addressing the back of the room, but it was too dark to see who was there. It was a deep, fathomless darkness; the kind that seemed to drink in any light that touched it.

Within that darkness, something moved.

“Tomorrow evening, you say?” the man asked.

A husky, artificial voice echoed out from the darkness. It spoke.

“What manner of death do you request?” the man asked.

The voice spoke again.

“Very well,” said the man. “Then I’ll tell my little brother to kill that little Cinniu girl tomorrow. Is that acceptable?”

Silence from the darkness’s master implied the affirmative.

4: Her Problem

20 October, 2045 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Chofu

I'm worried over nothing. That was what Kaname told herself after an uneventful return home. She'd caught a glimpse of someone strange on the roof of a building on Sengawa Shopping Street. It was basically nothing, so why was it freaking her out so much?

A gut feeling? she thought dismissively. *Please. That kind of thing is so not reliable...* "That's right..." she muttered. *So I can't get through to Sousuke. So what? We've been through this song-and-dance before. He disappears from school for a day or two... sometimes three or four... then he comes back, every time. Him being out of touch is business as usual.*

But she remembered the message she'd heard on her phone. *The number you have dialed is not in service.* She hadn't heard that one before; it was the kind of message that would only come up if Sousuke had canceled his cell phone contract. After the user canceled the contract, the phone company would confirm it, and then shut down the line within ten minutes.

And during tests, he arranged it so I could get in touch with him, even when he was overseas, right? "That big jerk..." she muttered. *Why does he have to put me through this all the time? Next time I see him, I'll really sock him one...* But unease, irritation, and other emotions swirled around in Kaname's chest, chipping away at her attempts at optimism.

She didn't feel up to cooking that night, so she made curry from a box. Then she turned on the TV and flipped through the channels. A variety show was on, featuring a comedy duo that was popular lately. It was a mean-spirited skit where they made trouble for struggling new employees, then made fun of their shortcomings.

Kaname turned on her game system and picked up a game she'd started recently. It was an action game where you piloted a cutting-edge AS and beat up terrorists as part of a multinational force. She'd never had much interest in "boy games" before, but she'd bought it in hopes of learning a little bit more about what Sousuke did at his job.

Of course, she'd quickly realized it was useless in that regard. She should have known that the game's creator wouldn't understand any of the tension of live combat, any of the clamor and heat of a real battlefield. The feeling of the air around you stretched as taut as a piano string, the fear that drove a person to seething madness—Kaname knew it herself, all too well.

The game failed to hold her interest, and she put it down right away, too. She was so flustered that she couldn't focus on anything, and having nothing to focus on made her even more anxious.

Why am I so on edge? Kaname wondered. "I wish Kyoko had come along..." Kyoko came by to sleep over about once a week. Most of the time, it was Kyoko who proposed it, and since things got lonely living by herself, Kaname welcomed her company. She'd cook, and they'd watch TV together, lay their futons out side by side, and chat. They'd talk about music, sports, TV shows, gossip, boys at school, the future...

The phone rang. Kaname looked at her watch: It was a little after nine. That would be about 7 a.m. in New York time. Kaname finally smiled as she thought of her little sister, who called her internationally now and then before she left for school. Hearing her sister's voice might help things feel normal. She picked up the receiver and forced a cheerful tone. "Hello! Chidori here!"

She waited for a reply, but none came. Nothing came through the receiver but static.

"Hello?" She paused. "Ayame?"

No response.

"It's you, right, Ayame?"

No response.

She held her breath for a second. "Who is this?"

Something seemed to scrape against the receiver on the other end, and then the phone hung up. All she could hear was the empty beeping of the dial tone. With a sticky anxiety rising inside of her, Kaname dialed up her sister in New York. The younger girl picked up on her way out the door, but when Kaname asked if she'd called just now, she answered, dubiously, in the negative.

"Oh..." said Kaname. "Well, okay."

"What's going on?" Ayame asked, concerned. "Sis, you okay?"

"Oh? I'm fine... Everything's good."

"Should I put Dad on?"

"No, don't... Anyway, have a good day at school," Kaname said, trying as hard as she could to sound normal, then hung up.

It was strange. She felt so restless. The room's silence seemed to seep into her.

She'd gotten plenty of prank calls before—Total strangers would call her PHS and hit on her in weird ways. They'd ask what she was doing, invite her to hang out... but it never went past that. Besides, who would want to prank call her at this time of night? It was scary... and unsettling. She felt like someone was watching her.

"Sousuke..." she sighed, pulling his name up to call once more. There was no answer, again. It was just like before. She wasn't going to reach him by phone.

Kaname started to wonder if there might be another way... and then she remembered the transmitter in Sousuke's apartment. *That's right. That transmitter...* She didn't know how it worked, but she could probably figure it out now. Mithril's satellite channels utilized a common algorithmic spectrum dispersion modulation process with independent quantum encryption. She'd gotten a basic grasp on the various algorithms and frequency bands that they used during her time on the Tuatha de Danaan, so if she messed with it a while, she could probably get in touch with Merida Island eventually. (It didn't occur to her to consider how unsettling her confidence in this regard was.)

Okay! she decided. I'm gonna use that transmitter. Now I have a plan—just go over there and use it!

Kaname slipped on her worn-out jacket, grabbed her keys, and left her apartment. She'd had a spare key to his apartment for over six months that she'd never used; he'd given it to her, "in case anything happens." The feeling of taking concrete action made her feel a lot better.

Her old-lady sandals slapped the pavement as she crossed the road to the apartment building across the way. Room 505, down the hall, up to the fifth floor—all the familiar old sights.

She stood in front of the door and tried a knock. Predictably enough, there was no response. She stuck the key into the knob. "I hope that idiot didn't rig it with a bomb or something..." she muttered.

Ah, well. If he did set some weird trap in here, I'll pay him back for it ten times over. I'll pop him in the nose and then kick him while he's down... With these and other thoughts running through her mind, Kaname turned the key, and opened the door.

There were no traps. But that wasn't all... There were also no pairs of combat boots left in the entryway. No bulletproof vests, no submachine guns hidden in the shoe cubbies.

Kaname flipped the nearby switch, but the lights stayed off. She felt her way through the dark into the living/dining room. No refrigerator, no table, no dishes, no chairs, no TV. No ammunition cases, no guns, no electronics, no fatigues on a hanger, no knapsacks or ammo belts or sleeping bags, no pictures of old battle comrades on the walls... Everything was gone.

No, not everything—there, on the bare wooden floor, sat a small stack of CDs. They were ones Kaname had lent him a few days ago. They were the room's only occupants, piled up at its center, as if to send her some kind of message.

The blinds had been removed, and the light from the streetlamps poured in naked through the glass. The light was cold and pale.

Kaname spent several minutes just standing in the completely empty room.

20 October, 2335 Hours (West Pacific Standard Time)

Underground Dock, Merida Island Base

Almost immediately after going on Standby D, the Tuatha de Danaan got the order to move out. Supplies were loaded and inspected at a fever pitch, and the not-yet-repaired Arbalest and black M9 (codename Falke) were also being loaded into the hangar. Sousuke and the other ground combatants had been ordered on board from the start, this time.

About two hundred people had assembled in ranks on the starboard side of the de Danaan, whose wounds from the incident two months ago had been thoroughly patched.

“Everyone,” Teletha Testarossa said as she took her place in front of them. “I am taking command as usual. The Tuatha de Danaan is about to leave port. We will be heading straight for our area of operations, using the world’s fastest speed. I will inform you of our destination after we depart. We might end up working sleepless nights, but do your best to avoid mistakes, regardless. Now, let us pray.”

It was far from a chest-thumping opener, but that was simply how they did things on this submarine. Tessa put both hands on her microphone, and in a quiet voice, began reciting a prayer: “O Lord, give us thy strength. Reach out with thine arms that can touch the deepest depths, to shelter us on our long ocean journey...” Her voice was beautiful and tender, reminiscent of a flute.

The Christians present clasped their hands together, while the others also prayed silently. “Be with us day and night, whether we rest in the silent deep or race on the wave-battered surface. O Lord, as we navigate through the perilous sea, hear us when we call to thee...” The prayer ended, and she told them, “Now, take your positions!”

“You heard her!” the duty officer shouted. “All soldiers and sailors, to your posts!” The crew immediately began to move in force, boarding the mountain that was the Tuatha de Danaan.

The palladium reactor started up, using energy borrowed from an external outlet. The heat sink ports under the water breathed in. The mooring lines and electric cables fell away. The hydraulic lock bolts that fixed the boat to the dock

slowly rotated their way free. Various hatches whined shut, and a siren blared to announce their upcoming departure.

The shutters of the large gate that sealed off the underground dock began to roar open; it was like a skyscraper coming to life. Beyond the opened gate lay a large cave, propped up by countless metal supports: an underground path for the de Danaan to reach the ocean hundreds of meters beyond. The light of the mercury lamps reflected on ripples in the seawater that filled the cave.

Attended by her XO, Tessa stepped briskly into the vessel's central control room. "Greetings, everyone. I'm taking command."

"Aye, ma'am. Captain on the bridge!" the duty officer declared.

Tessa watched the front screen carefully without taking her seat. The intercom informed her of various departments' status, as they finished their final checks. All had gone without issue. The display on the screen seemed to confirm that, as well.

Mardukas gave a small nod. "Confirmed, Captain."

"Then let us proceed," Tessa declared. "All ahead one-third. Normal propulsion."

"Aye aye, ma'am. All ahead one-third, normal propulsion!"

The vessel began to glide forward. Tens of thousands of tons of steel slid out of port, their silence and grace belying the tremendous power that lay within.

21 October, 1240 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Jindai High School, Chofu, Tokyo

An emaciated face stared out from the girls' bathroom mirror: Its eyes were bloodshot and had bags under them; its skin was without luster; its lips were chapped; the black hair that framed it was ratty and frayed. It looked like a world-weary woman in her 30s, playing dress-up in a high school girl's uniform.

"I look awful..." Kaname muttered. She hadn't slept a wink that night. She'd spent it curled up with her back to the wall, starting at the slightest sound. The

silence in the apartment eventually became unbearable, so she'd kept the TV on all night. The late news was going on about the evacuation of citizens in Hong Kong, and she didn't care about that, so she changed to a home shopping channel that featured products from America.

Today's item is the revolutionary diet device, Fit X. This might look like just a normal chair, but you can use it for twenty minutes a day to maintain a fit, beautiful figure. "Fit X is the best! You can do twelve exercises with just one device! I saw my friend John after a year away, and thanks to Fit X, he said, 'Wow! Are you really Danny? I didn't recognize you!' Thanks, Fit X!" says computer engineer Daniel. Fit X! Fit X! Call the number on the screen to get your own Fit X!

And so, Kaname spent the night with the smiles of Daniel and his friends.

"Dieting, huh..." she muttered, staring at herself in the mirror. I don't need that Fit X thing. I'll be dropping weight fast on my own, at this rate...

Her classmates seemed to have noticed a change in her. Kyoko and the others looked genuinely worried, and urged her to go to the hospital. Kaname dismissed it as being "just a cold." She didn't really have another choice. She'd thought about explaining the situation and asking for help, but knew she couldn't do that. There was no way she could let them in on everything that had happened.

That Sousuke might never come back. That the person everyone assumed was a war-obsessed geek really was an elite soldier, and that he was only at this school to keep her safe. That she was the reason their field trip had become a terrifying disaster... on and on. She couldn't tell them. She didn't have the courage.

The bell rang to signal the end of the day. She heard the voice of her homeroom teacher, Kagurazaka Eri, calling her name. "—Kaname-san. Please come to the teachers' office. I repeat. Class 2-4 Chidori Kaname-san, please come to the teachers' office at once."

Kaname thought about ignoring the message, but she changed her mind. Staring at herself in the mirror all day would just make her feel worse; instead, she dragged herself to the teachers' office.

“Are you all right?” was Eri’s first question after catching sight of her.

“I’m fine,” Kaname told her. “Just didn’t get a lot of sleep last night.”

“I see... That’s not good, though,” Eri observed. “Even if you do live alone, you really need to get a proper night’s rest.”

“Yeah, you’re right...” Kaname let out a weak laugh.

“Now, the reason I called you here...” Eri pulled an opened envelope out of a desk drawer. It was addressed to Jindai High School, and she recognized the clumsy hand. “It’s apparently from Sagara-kun, written to our general affairs department. Now... this might be a little shocking,” she said, voice hushed. “It contained a letter of withdrawal.”

Kaname said nothing.

“I knew that he’d been taking a lot of time off recently... but to just drop out, without a word to me beforehand? And I can’t seem to get in touch with him by phone... I’m not sure what to do,” Eri admitted. “I know I’ve been hard on him lately, with the car incident and the chronic absences, so I thought... well, I’m sure there’s more to it than that, but...”

Kaname barely listened to Eri’s rambling. She wasn’t shocked by the news at all. It was more a feeling of “ah, that figures.”

She couldn’t cry. She couldn’t muster any sense of sorrow at being abandoned, any anger at the offhandedness of the act, or any nostalgia for the time they’d shared. She just stood where she was, numb, gazing blankly at the tattered envelope on the table.

“—So... Chidori-san,” Eri was saying. “Chidori-san?”

“Yes?”

“Do you have any idea what might have happened?”

The thought occurred to her that, if this were a manga, this would be the place where she’d say, “He didn’t tell me anything, but I believe in him. I know that Sousuke will be back!” Sadly, Kaname wasn’t the kind of cardboard cutout who could say that sort of thing with perfect confidence—she was a complicated, flesh-and-blood human being.

“No,” she told her teacher, “I don’t.”

“But—”

“I don’t,” Kaname said flatly.

Eri looked up at her suspiciously. “Did you have another fight?”

“No.”

Eri sat there, hushed for a moment. “If I don’t hear from him by tomorrow, I’ll have to pass this on to the principal, you understand that?”

“Then he’ll be out of school forever?” Kaname clarified.

Eri didn’t respond.

Kaname took her silence as a yes. “I see. Goodbye, then...” Kaname listlessly turned around and left the teachers’ office.

Just forget it all, she told herself. He was just an illusion. He was lying when he said he’d protect me. Face the facts: He’s gone, along with everyone associated with him.

There’s no one left I can depend on. Maybe I’ll spend my days jumping at shadows from now on. It’s not like the people after me are going to show any mercy. Spies, terrorists, secret organizations... those are the kind of people they are.

No... I have to work out a plan. By myself. I can’t let Kyoko get mixed up in this.

Remember, she told herself. Was I ever some damsel in a tall tower, pining for rescue day and night? Some princess, weeping at her window for a prince on a white horse, or some noble knight to save her?

The hell I was! I’m gonna take action, because I’m Chidori Kaname. Something inside her, on a cellular level—something even more powerful and fundamental to her than her nature as a Whispered—was urging her on.

First, I need information, she decided. I need to find out what’s going on around me.

21 October, 1946 Hours (West Pacific Standard Time)

Tuatha de Danaan, Sea Near Philippines, West Pacific Ocean

Since they'd been ordered onto the Tuatha de Danaan, Sousuke and the others' training and meetings were to take place on board.

The SRT members' meetings were full of advanced and specialized content: squad tactics; use of the M9s' data-link function; three-dimensional movement using the machines' full capabilities; and complicated, but efficient systems of teamwork. All were meant to help them cope with the existence of the Venom.

Currently, Second Lieutenant Lemming—the engineer—was explaining about the Venom's only known weaknesses. The lecture was long, and featured copious amounts of jargon. "...In addition to the engineering points I just described, the LD also has a physiological element," she said. "Its functionality is highly influenced by the psychological state of the operator. Activation of the device causes the operator to emit extremely rare brainwaves—here," she said, and pointed them out. "These frequencies, from 30 to 50 hertz, are called gamma waves. Only when the strength of these brainwaves exceeds a certain level can the LD produce the repulsor fields we're all familiar with. Here's the data on that.

"Our earlier research suggested that consciously and continuously emitting these intense gamma waves would be extremely difficult; until recently, we questioned whether or not it was even possible. But via administration of a drug known as Ti970, which can only be synthesized in an extremely small number of chemical plants, a similar state can be artificially induced—however, this is also known to have a negative impact on the emotions and personality of the recipient: memory loss, schizophrenic tendencies, visual and aural hallucinations, persecutory delusions, powerful mood swings... the list of side effects is extensive. Short-term migraines and losses in vision, as well as disorientation have also been recorded—"

"So what?" several members of the SRT, led by Kurz, asked in chorus.

"So... it's likely impossible to use the LD for an extended period of time,"

Lieutenant Lemming concluded, “excluding exceptions such as the Behemoth.”

“Then why didn’t you just say that?” they all chorused again.

Later, Clouseau announced the end of the meeting, and ordered the group to check their equipment and rest up.

Sousuke did his firearms inspections with Kurz and the others, and then headed alone to the onboard hangar.

The Arbalest, having just finished its repairs, was sitting on its knees in the hangar’s AS holding area. Noise restrictions meant that maintenance couldn’t actively be performed, so it was left cordoned off with stanchions, a rope, and a “do not enter” sign.

When the machine was originally brought on board the Tuatha de Danaan, it had come in a container; it had then stayed there, tucked away in a corner of the hangar until its use in the Sunan Incident. Sousuke himself hadn’t known what was in that container, and he’d never even imagined it might be an AS.

He stepped over the rope and approached the Arbalest. The armor’s smooth white curves were surfaced with a frosted texture that felt slightly rough to the touch. But even running his hand across it like this didn’t inspire the slightest trace of affection in him.

Silently and nimbly, he climbed up the torso, using the armor plates as footholds. He opened the hatch and slid into the cockpit, then used auxiliary power to boot up the control system. The display lit up. He put a hand on the stick, and used his thumb to direct the pointer through the machine’s various mode selections:

Control mode—testing. All vecronics—hibernate. All sensors—hibernate. Machine setting screen, main menu: Select “artificial intelligence.” Artificial intelligence screen: Select “learning.” Learning settings screen: Select “other options.” Other options screen: Switch current mode to “dialogue/free.” Confirm.

With that done, Sousuke pressed the voice command switch on the left stick. “Al,” he said.

A low voice responded after a brief delay. 《Voice check. Sergeant Sagara confirmed. What is it, Sergeant, sir?》

Silence.

The AI, “AI,” would say no more than what was necessary. It would be entirely up to Sousuke to lead the conversation. At the same time, Sousuke didn’t have anything in particular he needed to talk about—he just wanted to try this and see what would happen.

He didn’t really think talking to the machine’s AI would ease his discomfort, but he didn’t like the idea of just sitting around in the duty room, either. He’d considered writing a letter to Kaname, but he didn’t know what to write, and the thought of talking to Kurz and the others just annoyed him.

If he was going to be uncomfortable anywhere he went, then he might as well come here—to this cockpit, the place where his discomfort was at its greatest.

“How are things going?” he tried, hesitantly.

《No issues were reported during most recent checks, performed at 1730 hours. The checks were performed by Second Lieutenant Sachs and filed under maintenance code number 981021-01B-F-001. Would you like to view the report? Or run a second set of checks?》 Since they weren’t currently in combat, the AI was more forthcoming with details. When Sousuke said nothing, then, AI simply continued. 《Running a second set of checks will necessitate a change to current settings. Recommendation: End learning mode, connect external power source, and follow the voluntary checklist. Additional note: Since this machine’s total check at 1730 hours, it has neither participated in a mission nor undergone further maintenance.》

“I actually just booted you up on a whim,” Sousuke admitted.

《Learning message: Explain meaning of term: ‘whim.’》

“Try and figure it out on your own.”

《Roger. Inference complete. Would you like to hear the results?》

“Go on.”

《Meaning of ‘whim.’ Top candidate: Meaning similar to ‘caution’ or ‘duty.’

Secondary candidate: Meaning similar to 'dedication' or 'diligence.' Tertiary candidate: Meaning similar to 'disorder' or 'irregularity.'》

Further candidates lined up on the display: "Idleness", "Threat", "Ambition", "Play"...

"You understand 'play'?" Sousuke asked.

《Affirmative. Is that the meaning of 'whim'?》

"'Play' and 'irregularity' are the closest."

《Understood. Thank you for your assistance.》

"Tell me the meaning of 'play,'" Sousuke requested, out of sheer curiosity.

《"Play" refers to tactically irrelevant yet strategically advantageous activities. It is not as indispensable as eating or sleeping, but is of subsequent highest importance. Through such activities, humans acquire the flexibility and imagination necessary to function, and maintain their vital energies. There is a strong correlation between participation in 'play' and the human ability to execute duties. Examples of 'play' include singing, dancing, poker, go. Words related to 'play' include 'hobbies,' 'joking,' 'romance.'》

Sousuke had never gotten a response like this from an AI before. It certainly wasn't something he'd have heard from the M9 he used to pilot. That stood to reason; there was no need for a mere weapon control system to know the meaning of 'play.' It would be a waste of memory.

"Who taught you that?" he wondered.

《Supervisor Bani Morauta, Sergeant.》

Sousuke remembered that name: it was the now-dead man who'd built the Arbalest. "That's the engineer who made you?" he clarified.

《Affirmative. He developed the ARX system, which includes myself.》 AI's use of first-person pronouns was simply a matter of convenience; AIs didn't have actual self-awareness.

"Tell me what you know about Bani Morauta," Sousuke requested.

《Bani Morauta. Male. Affiliation: Mithril research division. ID number: F-6601.

Rank: Captain-equivalent. Pay grade: MJ-3. Developer of ARX-7 system. Estimated age: 16. Estimated height: 166 centimeters. Additional information: Experience with Geotron Electronics at the University of California; experience living in Copenhagen. Hobbies: Go and piano. Favorite singer: John Lennon. Interests: Peace, AI, Teletha Testarossa. Registration was deleted this year on 16 February.》

While processing some surprise at hearing Teletha's name, Sousuke asked another question, "What was his cause of death?"

《Unknown. That information has not been previously—》 There was a hiss of static. AI's voice cut off and the screens went black.

Sousuke fiddled with the stick, but there was no reaction. He thought maybe the auxiliary power had shut off, but the light under the screen was still green. "AI?" he checked.

Silence. One second. Two seconds. Three seconds. Then, without warning, the screen restored itself.

《Voice check. Sergeant Sagara confirmed. Learning message: Is he dead?》

It was a strange reaction. The other settings were preserved—it was still on free-dialogue learning mode—so why was reconfirming his voice print the only thing it needed to do?

"That's what I heard," he said, then added in annoyance, "And stop saying 'learning message' for everything."

《Roger. Please state source of information regarding his death.》

"Lieutenant Lemming."

《Please state cause of death.》

This was definitely strange.

"How should I know?" Sousuke asked, after a moment.

《Forgive the indiscretion. Supposition: You do not possess this information.》

"Are you interested?"

《Is the subject of inquiry "do you wish to know more about his death"?》

“Yeah.”

《Affirmative. This information has comprehensive relevance. It impacts fields from tactics to planning. Completion of the ARX System will prove difficult without Bani Morauta.》

“So you admit you’re flawed,” Sousuke observed.

《Affirmative. And you are part of the reason for that.》

He wasn’t about to get angry at a machine, but this answer still took him aback. “What did you say?”

《You are a component of the ARX-7’s system. The ARX System cannot become complete without your assistance. Please tell me your problems. It is possible that I can offer you support.》

It was hard to believe he was talking to a machine. Sousuke genuinely started to wonder if someone was operating AI remotely, making it say these things. “I don’t have any problems,” he told the AI.

《That seems unlikely.》

“Why?”

《My ‘gut’ tells me so.》

The AI’s use of that word was the tipping point: the situation was now utterly absurd. Someone had taught the word ‘gut’ to the machine—Clouseau or Lemming, maybe—as a prank. Whoever it was, they must have a very low opinion of his intelligence.

“Then tell this to your ‘gut’—Stop messing around with me,” he retorted.

《That order is nonsense. Gut cannot be regulated or argued with. It comes from deep within one’s consciousness.》

“The only nonsense here is coming from you,” Sousuke said, and moved to shut down the learning screen. He slid his cursor over free dialogue mode, and tried to switch it to “off” ... but he couldn’t. It wouldn’t respond. He looked at it, questioningly.

《I am sorry, Sergeant, but that setting can no longer be changed.》

“What do you mean?”

After a moment’s pause, AI spoke again. 《Now relaying message from Bani. Please give it your full attention: ‘The flag has been triggered. If you’re listening to this, it means I’ve hit some kind of worst-case scenario: I’ve either died or lost my mind. I’ve decided to leave this program behind in the event of that happening. Listen to me, unknown master of AI—He’s no ordinary AI anymore. He’s an individual coexisting with the lambda driver. He’s still just a toddler taking his first steps, but he can even learn what it means to feel happy and sad. Please, give him your trust, as a partner.’》

“What in the...”

《‘I’m sure things are proceeding in ways that make your will seem irrelevant. You’re probably annoyed about that, too. But you aren’t powerless. The Arbalest is a vehicle for possibility. Of course, one possibility is that this “ultimate machine” will end up as scrap on the pile, accomplishing nothing. But that’s up to you. Express yourself as you feel is right. I hope you have someone important to protect.’ Message ends.》

‘Flag’? ‘Program’? ‘AI is no ordinary AI’? And... calling this the ‘ultimate machine’? This defective hunk of junk, which has left me struggling even against single opponents, where all the wins I’ve got came about due to basic dumb luck?

“Stupid...” Sousuke muttered.

《Are you referring to me? Or to you?》

“I’m in no mood to be mocked. I’m going to—”

“Sousuke? You here?” came Mao’s voice from outside the cockpit.

Sousuke ended his conversation with AI and climbed out of the hatch. Mao was looking up at him from the Arbalest’s feet. “What is it?” he asked.

“The colonel wants to see us. She says there’s a mission.”

21 October, 1820 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Tokyo

Kaname made it back around sunset, packed her clothing and bath set into an overnight bag and left the apartment, still in her uniform. She couldn't stand the idea of spending another night there. As she walked the road to the station, part of her felt like she was being watched, and the other part was sure she was imagining it.

No, she couldn't be imagining it; someone had to be watching her. Whether it was the "secret bodyguard" Tessa had mentioned before, or a villain like Gauron... someone was out there. She knew she couldn't trust whoever it was, of course, but knowing there was someone out there mattered to Kaname—whatever their motives or affiliation, they were her only potential source of information, now.

She tried walking a little ways, then abruptly turning back. She repeated that action a few times, but it didn't seem to help. It made sense; she wasn't about to see some shifty guy in a trenchcoat ducking behind a telephone pole— whoever was tracking her, they were a professional, not some third-rate TV private eye.

She carefully considered where she should go next. *Into the mountains, far away from civilization? The train could get me to Okutama within two hours... No, the mountains are out. They might help me spot my stalker, but it would be that much harder to shake them off or get the upper hand.*

And what if they really are hostile? Yeah, the mountains won't do... There'd be no witnesses, and I couldn't call for help if I needed it. It's just too dangerous.

I need crowds. Somewhere far from my school or my house—a place I don't go very often. That'll make it hard for them to attack or kidnap me, and they might even have trouble following me...

For now, Kaname decided to head for Shibuya. She took the Keio Line to Meidaimae Station, then changed to the Inokashira Line towards Shibuya, and jumped off the train just before the door closed. It was the same trick she'd played on Sousuke before—but this time, she saw no shady characters diving off in a hurry... just crowds of passengers, bustling around the Inokashira Line platform.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. She was starting to feel like she was

acting foolishly, like a child playing spy. *It's not stupid*, she told herself. *It's not stupid...* She reboarded the Inokashira Line to Shibuya.

The sun had gone down, but the city was still flooded with people. Kaname fortified herself with a meal at McDonalds. She did some window-shopping at accessory stores and boutiques. She wandered around a CD store, a bookstore, and a Tokyu Hands, then hit up an arcade. Wherever she went, she remained on the alert for suspicious figures around her, but she never spotted anyone.

Maybe the stalker is waiting for me outside? To test that theory, she told an employee in the arcade that there was a weird old man following her, and they let her use the back exit. She came out in a dark alley, then took a long detour, coming out beside a boutique a ways away. She quickly climbed up to the boutique's second floor, and used a window with a good view to inspect the area around the arcade where she'd just been.

Nobody stood out. But then, there were just so many people... She looked around carefully for over five minutes, but came up dry.

"Still nothing..." she whispered.

What would Sousuke do at a time like this? she wondered. She couldn't even begin to imagine. He'd proven capable of sniffing out enemies, pursuers, and other threats in ways that seemed like magic to her layman's eye. Of course, it also led him to a lot of false positives—hence, the constant chaos around him—but he'd never failed to spot a genuine threat. It was like there was something in the air that he could smell, and she currently envied his olfactory talents.

I just don't know. Nothing I do makes it feel more real. I'm acting as cautiously as I can, but I can't pick up the slightest trace... This is the part where most people would say, "I guess nobody is watching me after all"... But I know that I'm a person of interest. I know that I'm valuable; that's a fact. I know I'm being watched. I know I'm being tailed. And yet...

A sad melody began to play inside the store: a passage from Dvořák's New World Symphony. It was that song about the sun going down on a distant mountain; the store must be closing. Kaname looked at her watch and saw that it was 9 p.m. already. She left the boutique.

She was left wandering the streets without having managed a single

breakthrough. There were crowds of drunkards all around; more and more stores were closing their shutters. The town wouldn't go to sleep for a while yet, but she was starting to feel adrift, uncertain of where to go.

Kaname hugged her bag and squatted down near the Hachiko Statue, where people were beginning to thin out. She let out a sigh. She'd told herself this afternoon that she was going to make this work, but she'd hit a wall already.

Looking back now, of course an amateur like her wouldn't be able to fool a professional tracker. Even when she'd left out the back of the arcade, they'd probably been anticipating her every move.

But... that's strange, isn't it? she realized. Would it really be possible for them to predict her actions that precisely? It wasn't as if she was dealing with a psychic. Could they have other measures in place, then?

A tracking device? she wondered. She wasn't carrying the transmitter necklace that Sousuke had given her before; she'd left that in her room. But could her stalker have arranged something similar? What if they'd surreptitiously bugged her with a device so small she didn't even know it was there?

It wasn't impossible, by any means. And if that's what they'd done, there would be no way to shake them. A transmitter with a range of just a few hundred meters could be as small and hard-to-find as they needed it to be. Was it in her bag? Her coin purse? One of her accessories? Somewhere in her clothing? Her wallet? Her watch? Would it even be possible for her to spot?

At the same time... assuming there was a transmitter somewhere on her person, could there be some way to use it to her advantage?

Think... Think... Her mind was the one weapon she had at her disposal.

A cold gust of wind blew past the Hachiko Statue and rustled her hair. November wasn't far off. The weather report had said things would get as cold as early December tonight, and there was rain in the forecast, too. Her school uniform didn't offer much defense from the chill.

Just then, she heard a voice addressing her. "Hey, are you alone?" She looked up and saw a white-collar worker standing there. He looked to be in his thirties;

his tie was loosened, and he was smiling at her affably, his face reddened from drink. “Are you meeting someone here?”

“No...” Her thoughts were so jumbled that she accidentally answered honestly.

The man then approached her, cooing. “Oh, really? You want to join me for a meal, then? My treat.”

“I’m not hungry,” she told him.

“Don’t be that way. How about some alcohol? I know a place with a nice atmosphere.”

“I don’t drink.”

“Okay... but I can’t just leave you here looking so lonely. I’ll settle for a tea if you just want to talk,” the stranger told her. “You might feel better after venting to someone. Don’t worry, I won’t take you anywhere fishy.”

Liar. You’ll keep picking at me until you’ve got me passing-out drunk, then you’ll drag me to some seedy joint and have your way with me. You think you’re the first guy who’s made a pass at me like this? I’m a veteran at turning guys like you down... Kaname sucked in a deep breath and then spoke up, loudly. “Excuse me! I happen to be busy with—” she began, then abruptly stopped herself.

A light bulb appeared over her head. The idea had come to her completely out of the blue—and that spontaneity meant that her pursuer wouldn’t anticipate it.

“Hmm? What is it?” the drunken stranger asked her.

Only after a careful scrutinization of the man’s face did Kaname say her next words: “Hey, mister. Want to hit a hotel?”

21 October, 2114 Hours (West Pacific Standard Time)

Tuatha de Danaan, Below Surface, Sea Near Philippines

They entered the empty briefing room to find Kalinin and Clouseau sitting

there, along with a soldier from the PRT. He was a private of Chinese descent, by the name of Wu. He had an AS license, and he'd done some M9 training, as well.

They were all focused on a news program that was playing on a portion of the screen on the wall. The channel was the BBC, a signal they'd probably intercepted within the past few hours. A Caucasian reporter was in Hong Kong, standing beside a park near the harbor, and speaking briskly in the orange light of the streetlamps. "—Neither occupying army has issued a statement regarding the whereabouts of the unknown machine. Downtown shops and kiosks have been forced to suspend business, leaving a Mong Kok area turned distressingly silent—" A dark green armored car sat parked behind the reporter; further beyond it, an AS of the Rk-92 line was visible from the hips down. The foreboding image effectively conveyed the idea of a city racked with tension.

"Where's Yang?" Clouseau wanted to know.

"He's on the way," Mao responded.

It was just then that Yang, dressed in a tank-top with a towel over his shoulders, came running in, out of breath. "Sorry I'm late!"

"We're all here, then. I'll begin," Clouseau told the group. Apparently, his business was specifically with the four soldiers gathered here—it suddenly occurred to Sousuke that he, Mao, Yang, and Wu were all of East Asian descent. "As you may already be aware, an AS of unknown affiliation has appeared in Hong Kong," Clouseau said. "The lone wolf machine has engaged in repeated destructive acts, and is believed to still be hiding somewhere within the city limits. Both the North and South Chinese armies have suffered losses, and Divided Hong Kong is a powder keg."

Divided Hong Kong—the city was occasionally referred to that way, nowadays. The overthrow of the Chinese government a few years back, and the civil war that followed, had led to a city under concurrent control by two different governments.

The Kowloon Peninsula—the part contiguous with the mainland—belonged to the Chinese Democratic Union; South China. Hong Kong Island in the south belonged to the People's Liberation Committee—in other words, North China.

The two sides were still constantly squabbling over areas like Hubei Province, and Hong Kong was the one region where they'd agreed to a ceasefire. It was similar to Berlin's situation in the East and West Germany days—Both armies had combat squads stationed in the city, just within firing range of one another, in a state of constant standoff.

"Is it really just one AS?" Yang asked, scrubbing his wet hair with the towel.

"Just one, as far as we can tell," Clouseau told him. "Reports are jumbled, so we can't say for certain."

"What kind of machine is it?" Mao asked, and Clouseau brought up the image. It was a relatively clear photograph, probably taken by a civilian, and the sight caused Mao to let out a groan.

Sousuke also found himself turning his eyes downward with a sigh. "I knew it..." he mumbled. It was an AS of the same class as the Venom; he recognized the massive upper body and pointed head, the red mono-eye, and the ponytail-like heat vent. Its paint job was gray and dark blue, with a simple, yet oddly crooked, camouflage design.

The picture had been taken in a quintessential Hong Kong commercial district, with white smoke drifting in the background. The AS in question was tearing off one of the myriad shop signs with one hand, while pointing a Bullpup-style assault rifle at the screen with the other. The composition of the shot—very close up, taken nearly from underfoot—made it easy to imagine what had happened to the photographer right after.

"What are the terrorists after?" Sousuke asked next.

"Unknown," Clouseau answered. "No one's claimed responsibility. If I had to guess, they want to reignite the Chinese civil war, or destroy the Hong Kong economy. Or..."

"Or?"

"It could be a challenge, issued to us," he finally concluded.

Sousuke fell silent. He didn't like the idea, but it was entirely possible; previous incidents suggested that the enemy force behind these machines was aware of Mithril's existence, and of the Tuatha de Danaan's, as well.

“This picture was taken in an urban region, Yau Ma Tei, on the Kowloon Peninsula side,” Clouseau continued. “The enemy machine destroyed a South Chinese Army armored vehicle, then disappeared with the use of a smoke bomb. That was twenty-six hours ago.” Then, he put an enlarged map of Hong Kong onscreen. “Since then, the Venom-type has been popping up every eight to twelve hours across Kowloon and Hong Kong, causing indiscriminate destruction. Close to ten ASes have been destroyed, and casualties appear to be significant. Neither army has been able to shoot the machine down, and they’re also unable to find it or track it. Given past experience, we can assume it’s capable of invisibility.”

“Then the Chinese armies can’t find it with their equipment alone,” Mao pointed out.

“They don’t have information on state-of-the-art ECSes,” Clouseau agreed. “The idea that it could be lurking anywhere, invisible, probably hasn’t even occurred to them.”

“Did you warn them?” Yang asked.

“No,” Clouseau said. “On orders from the top brass.”

“Why not?” the man pressed.

“Even if we did offer advice and technological aid,” Kalinin put in, “and one army or the other found the enemy machine, they still wouldn’t have the equipment to fight a Venom-type. It would just get more people killed. That’s why we’ll handle the pest extermination ourselves.”

His reasoning was sound, but Sousuke sensed that there was a far more calculated reasoning he’d left unsaid: If they gave the North or South Chinese Armies information on cutting-edge ECSes, that would effectively be giving them information on Mithril, which depended on that technology to maintain their clandestine nature.

“So...?” Mao prodded.

“Not even a Venom can remain in top form while acting alone and continuously for longer than 24 hours. It will require ammo restocking and simple maintenance after combat, and the operator will need rest,” Clouseau

said. “We need to find their safehouse, set up an M9 squadron to surround them, take them by surprise and get things under control. We’re under no obligation to fight them in fair and open combat. That’s why we want you all doing recon.”

“Recon?”

“It’ll be a joint operation with the intelligence division’s Hong Kong branch,” Clouseau went on. “Offer them the knowhow they need and then locate the enemy base. We’ll surface after nightfall and send out a helicopter. You’ll fly to Hong Kong ahead of us.”

“Sousuke, too?” Mao asked. She was probably thinking that, at times like these, Sousuke usually stayed on board, on standby with the Arbalest.

Clouseau was about to respond, but Kalinin got there first. “Yes.”

Sousuke said nothing.

“We’re going to try not to use the Arbalest during this incident. To reinforce that—you understand, Sergeant Sagara?”

“Yes,” Sousuke responded listlessly.

Same Timeframe

Maruyamacho, Shibuya, Tokyo

“How about here?” the man asked, as they arrived at the Dogenzaka love hotel district. He was pointing to a building done up in chic colors with an electric sign that read, “Vacancy.” The main sign read, “Hotel Diversion: Rest (2 hours) 5500 yen. Overnight (weekdays) 9000 yen.”

The rain that had begun as a drizzle was now forming bigger drops. It would be coming down in force, and soon. They were only a few hundred meters from the business district, but things were already deathly quiet. The only people passing by were all couples (for some reason, all either taking very small or very quick steps). Almost nobody was on their own—an individual all by themselves, or a group of just men, would be immediately conspicuous.

“Ahh... this is perfect.” She found herself clenching a fist in triumph.

The middle-aged man, watching her behavior—he’d called himself Kamoi—looked a little suspicious, but regrouped, and reached for Kaname’s shoulder. “It’s perfect?” he said. “Good. Let’s go in, then. We can, right? Right?”

“Wait a minute.” She brushed off his hand, strode up to the love hotel, and examined its exterior. She then looked around to check its spacial relationship with the other buildings. “It’s good. Let’s go in.”

“That’s great, Mizuki-chan. Big brother’s gonna show his hustle tonight. Hahaha...”

Mizuki was the name she’d thought to give him on the spot. *Sorry, Mizuki...* she whispered internally to her friend.

Leaving behind the man (who continued quietly revving himself up), Kaname strode into the hotel. The cheap automatic door rattled open in her wake. The lighting was dim. There was no large lobby like a normal hotel; the ceiling was low, and the corridors were narrow.

Beside a corner that looked like a reception desk was a strange, lit-up panel. It was about half the size of one of the blackboards at school, with about forty room pictures lined up side-by-side. Beneath each picture was a room number, a red light, and a button; about half of them were lit.

What is all this?

While she stared at it, puzzled, Kamoi caught up with her and said, “Which room do you want?”

Ah... so you press a button to choose your room. The photos whose lights are out are probably ‘in use’... Kaname reasoned. “In use...” She snapped back to reality as she realized what that meant. Am I insane? What am I doing here? This is nuts! It’s not too late. Reconsider. Leave this stupid love hotel right now!

Then, she thought, No, no... you won’t make any progress that way. This is way more important than society’s ideas about morality and chastity. It’s one of those things he always used to talk about—yes, a threat to the general security. This might just give you a way out of your situation. Don’t be afraid. Use your head. Make things go your way...

Kaname's internal struggle lasted only briefly before she successfully reassured herself, then checked the numbers for empty rooms. Then, examining the fire escape diagram next to them, she learned the love hotel's layout. The placement of the rooms, the placement of the windows... *If north is that way, then... right.*

"Room 202," she finally decided.

"Huh? That one looks pretty small..." Kamoi objected. "They have better rooms."

"Maybe I'll just leave?" Kaname suggested.

"Ah, only kidding. Sorry, sorry. That one's fine... okay? Okay?" Kamoi said placatingly. He appeared to be completely spineless.

Kaname hit the button, took the keycard, and headed for the second floor. Room 202 was right next to the elevator. Giving the vaguest of responses to Kamoi's attempts at small talk—questions about her school uniform, assurances to relax—Kaname entered the room.

Surprising. It's actually pretty nice... was her first thought upon entering. The lighting was bright, the furniture was new, and the room was spic and span. There was a large LCD screen and an audio system. Strange, she'd always assumed love hotels would be seedier than this... Still, the room's most conspicuous object was the large double bed that took up most of the corner of the room. There were tissues boxes on the pillows, and... *Ah, yuck.*

Whatever, she told herself dismissively. *Guess it's time to set this guy straight...*

"Okay. I want to talk to you about—" Just as Kaname turned around to broach the subject, she found Kamoi already rushing at her, nostrils flaring. He was pulling off his jacket and tie as he lumbered towards her. There was madness in his eyes; he looked like a completely different person than before.

"We can shower after," he said urgently.

"Um?"

"You're so pretty, Mizuki-chan."

“I need to talk—”

“You don’t have to be afraid.”

“No, I meant—”

“Ahh, that high school uniform...”

“Hey, let me say—”

“Mizuki-chan!!” Kamoi swept her up in his arms with the force of a tsunami, and she gagged on his booze-steeped breath. He was holding her too tight for her to even struggle; at this point, a normal girl might have started crying.

But unfortunately for Kamoi, Kaname wasn’t normal: she’d run gauntlets of gunfire and explosions with Sousuke; she’d had a coldhearted terrorist pointing a gun at her; she’d been through a literal deathmatch with that steel wall of a sergeant, John Dunnigan. This man was small-time by comparison.

“Darn it...!” Without panicking or screaming, Kaname reached for the 200,000 volt stungun she’d arranged in an easily-reachable place in her bag. She calmly removed the safety, jammed the prongs into Kamoi’s side, and with a cool-headed mercilessness she’d never felt before, she pulled the trigger.

The man grunted, spasmed briefly, and then went limp. He toppled onto Kaname, sending them both onto the bed, where she ended up lying face-up beneath his very heavy body. After shoving him off with some effort, she mused to herself, shoulders heaving, “I wonder who counts as the victim in this case?”

After a few minutes to calm her breathing, Kaname sprang into action again. She popped open her bag and searched around inside, eventually producing two sets of aluminum alloy handcuffs, tear gas spray, a powerful flashlight, and another disposable taser.

It was an outrageous arsenal by the standards of a teenage girl; they were all things Sousuke had forced on her in the past, but which she hadn’t paid much mind to before now. She’d confiscated the handcuffs from him, too, but until today, they’d all been gathering dust in a drawer.

Holding the handcuffs in her mouth, she grabbed the legs of the unconscious

Kamoi, and dragged him to the bathroom. Even someone as athletic as she was had to struggle with the weight of a fully grown man.

The bathroom was shockingly large and fancy. It had a bathtub with a jacuzzi, which was big enough for two adults with room to spare.

Ah... I guess some people take baths together... Nodding in recognition for some reason, her eyes fell on a metal fixture next to the bathtub. It looked like a towel rack, but the location of it was unusual—It must have some use she couldn't fathom. *Ah, well. It looks sturdy, at least...*

She fastened Kamoi's leg to the fixture with the handcuffs, and tugged a few times to make sure it would hold. That should do it. He wouldn't be able to leave the bathroom. He probably wouldn't even be able to cry for help—given the kind of hotel this was, it probably had great soundproofing.

Okay, next... Kaname slammed the bathroom door shut and began searching around the wash area. She snatched up one of the bathrobes laid out for guests, and returned to the bed.

"Now..." She put her hands on her hips, and examined her outfit: her faithful, familiar winter uniform. But her earlier hypothesis—that there might be a transmitter planted somewhere on her person—meant she had to ditch her clothing.

She quickly began to disrobe. Off came her white jacket and blue skirt, her blouse and ribbon tie, her shoes and wristwatch—all of it.

Once she was in her underwear, she did another round of thinking. She felt around the elastic in her panties and decided there couldn't be anything there. But what about her bra? Could modern technology create a transmitter that would fit into one of the cups? The answer... unfortunately, yes.

She let out a sigh, shed her bra, and set it on the bed with the rest of her clothing. She felt too awkward to dissect it to determine the presence of a transmitter there. She spun around in front of the mirror, now only in her white panties. She wasn't there to admire her own naked form; she was checking to make sure there was nothing suspicious stuck on her skin. Once she was certain she was clean, she put on the bathrobe. She closed it firmly over her chest, then tied it in place with the belt.

Time to choose a weapon... She grabbed the taser. It was the disposable self-defense kind, so it only had two charges. You could hit someone within five meters with enough high-voltage current to knock them out. And then the handcuffs... she couldn't forget them. She had no guarantee that these things weren't also bugged, but considering they'd been lying in a drawer up until today, it seemed pretty unlikely.

"Okay, let's do this." Kaname slapped her cheeks, and revved herself up.

Kaname turned off the lights, then opened the rectangular door in the northern wall. As expected, there was a window on the other side. After some fumbling, she managed to get the window open; outside, she could see the wall of the next hotel over within reach. The alley below was pretty far off the main road, so there was no sign of anyone there.

The rain was coming down harder now. In the dim light, she could see sheets of water sweeping across the narrow strip of concrete. Below was a chain-link fence that separated the two hotels; since she was on the second floor, the top of the fence appeared to be just within stepping range.

Okay, now... Kaname thought to herself, creeping onto the window frame and leaning out, with the taser's strap held in her mouth. Gripping the window frame firmly with both hands, she worked one foot towards the top of the fence. The front of her bathrobe immediately fell open—She knew nobody could see her, but it still added to her stress.

The tip of her toe touched the fence. *Almost there—*

She gasped. The metal was wet with the rain, and just as she was about to shift her weight over, her foot slipped. Her hands lost their grip. She tried to work her fingers into the chain links instead, but she couldn't. Balance lost, she plummeted, scraping her arm against the fence on her way to the concrete below.

The impact left her right side numb, and forced a groan from her throat. The pain was so bad that she couldn't breathe at first. The taser had fallen nearby; the belt of her bathrobe had come away easily, and was lying in a puddle beyond it. For a while, she just lay on the wet concrete, curled up in the rain.

She was in an alley behind a love hotel, alone, effectively naked, and soaked

to the bone.

It was unsightly. It was ugly. It was pathetic.

A wave of futility washed over her, and she almost started crying from the misery of it all. “Stop it...” she whispered then. *You’re showing weakness again. Purge all those stupid thoughts*, she commanded herself. *Trust yourself. Now, keep going.*

Gritting her teeth, Kaname picked herself up. There were scrapes here and there along her soft, fair skin. Fortunately, no bones were broken. It looked like she’d get off with some bruises, at worst.

She dragged the muddy, soaked bathrobe belt toward her, tied it firmly back into place, and then picked up the taser. She wanted to check to make sure it wasn’t damaged, but since it only fired twice, she opted against it. Instead, she stood up, unsteadily, and began to walk forward in her bare feet.

Kaname began to walk the hotel’s perimeter. As she passed by the back door, she could hear the receptionist watching TV. There, she stepped over some bushes, mounted a cement wall, then got around behind the hotel block, where she wouldn’t be seen. About three buildings down from there, she came to a hotel with a fire escape in the back.

That’s it... she told herself. Holding her robe tightly closed, Kaname looked up at the stairway, where rain continued to spatter the rusty, unadorned iron frame.

She’d scouted out this hotel in advance; it was the tallest building in the area. The roof would provide a perfect view of the nearby area and the main avenue—which meant it was also the most likely place for her stalker to be hiding. Too elementary? Maybe—but she had a feeling she was right.

Kaname’s breathing was coming hard and ragged now. Her fingertips and toes were freezing, yet for some reason, her body was on fire. She climbed over the iron grille at the entrance then carefully ascended the fire escape. After climbing around six floors, she found the roof within reach.

Once she was in range to poke her eyes up over the lip, she did so, and inspected the surrounding area. The roof turned out to be host to a labyrinthine

layout of water towers and air conditioning units. She couldn't see anyone, at least from here.

Kaname crept onto the roof, carefully and quietly. She kept her body low, half-crawling her way to one of the humming compressors. She peeked out from behind it to get a look at the other half of the roof—the part that faced the main avenue. The street illumination below gave her a precise silhouette of the roof's edge. It looked like a river of light in the darkness. And on the bank of the river—

Is that him? Kaname wondered. She could see a man squatting there, his back to her. He was kneeling on the edge of the roof, looking down at the street. He didn't look especially imposing, just a bit on the tall side, maybe Kaname's height. He wore a thin coat over his rather plump frame, and there was a large attaché case at his feet.

He was also holding a small electronic device, and despite the rain, he didn't have an umbrella. She was sure now: it was him. Her hand, numbed with the cold, gripped the taser tightly. *Remove the safety... there.* Kaname took in a deep breath and crept up to the man. Thanks to her bare feet and the rain's constant roar, she made no noise as she moved.

The man's gaze remained focused on the street below. He didn't seem to have noticed her.

Just five meters left... she thought. She could feel her heart racing, her pulse pounding through the muscles of her neck. Three meters left. Close enough.

"Don't move!" Kaname shouted. The man jolted in response but froze in place. "I have a weapon on you. Put your hands up and turn to face me—slowly." She recited the lines she remembered from some movie she'd seen once, and the man did as he was told. She could see his face now: a bespectacled middle-aged man, overweight, about forty. He had the air of a bureaucrat to him.

The sight of her—standing there in a soaked bathrobe, black hair in disarray and holding a taser on him—caused the man to let out a groan. "What in the world..." He had a high, husky voice.

"You have business with me, right?" she retorted. "So I thought I'd come to

you.”

“You noticed the transmitter, then?” the man asked, thoughtfully, after a moment. He looked like he was trying hard to appear calm and in control, despite his obvious frustration. “That’s why you went to a hotel with a complete stranger... I think I underestimated you.”

“You sure did,” Kaname told him. “Now, you have a gun, right? Pull it out slowly and drop it at your feet.”

“I’m from Mithril,” the man told her. “I won’t harm you.”

“You can say that all you want, but there’s no way I’ll trust you.” Kaname’s breath came out in white puffs as she spoke. She couldn’t keep herself from shivering from the cold and her fear.

As if noticing that, the man let out a mocking laugh. “Don’t get cocky, now. You think I feel threatened by a taser? I can’t kill you, but I can still teach that smart mouth of yours a lesson. Still, we have bigger priorities right now: These last few days, you’ve had someone besides me tailing—”

“I said drop the gun, you piece of shit!” Kaname cried.

At exactly that moment a bullet hit the man square in the chest. The impact brought a spray of droplets from his rain-soaked button-up shirt.

“Huh?” Kaname breathed.

Another shot came. Then another, and another. The man’s plump frame twitched and trembled. One shot hit his head and tore off a part of his scalp. With an eerily expressionless face, the self-professed Mithril agent staggered and fell into a puddle.

Kaname turned around. There was another man there, dressed in a plain jacket and jeans, standing beside an air conditioning unit about ten paces away. He was skinny, with short-cropped hair. She’d never seen him before. No, wait—wasn’t he the one she’d seen the other day in Sengawa Shopping Street?

“Found you,” the man said, holding a black automatic pistol in his right hand. “Nei hou, my dear. And goodbye.”

“Wait—” Kaname began to say. But without a moment’s hesitation, the man

pointed the gun at Kaname and fired.

What happened next was pure luck. Perhaps it was her bewilderment at the suddenness of his appearance, or her body simply buckling from the cold... but one of Kaname's knees suddenly gave out from under her. That slight loss of balance meant that the bullet only grazed her cheek.

After a long pause, Kaname let out a breath. She was surprised, but so was the man. The slide portion of his pistol remained locked in its cocked-back position, and she remembered that this meant he was out of bullets. She'd seen Sousuke wield guns enough times to know that.

The assassin embarked upon his change of magazine, slowly and deliberately. He showed no sign of rushing, and the reason was obvious: "There's nowhere to run," he told her calmly.

He's right, Kaname realized. She was cornered against the edge of the roof. The best hiding places—the air conditioning units and water towers, and her one real way out, the stairs—were all on the other side of the man. There was nowhere to run, nowhere at all, and the overwhelming reality of the situation washed over her like a wave.

Despair seized Kaname's heart in an iron grip. *What's going on?* she wondered. *I don't know. Who is this man? I don't know. Why do I have to die? I don't know. Is this my fate? My fate...* The moment these words entered her mind, an indescribable anger began to well up inside her. Her legs, once frozen up in fear, now sprang into action. As if acting of its own volition, her body turned and launched into a dash.

I'm going to fight this, she told herself fiercely. *No matter what happens, I won't let that creep toy with me. I'll struggle to my last breath. I won't offer myself up for slaughter.*

I wonder if he'd tell me I'm doing the right thing... she wondered, thinking wistfully of Sousuke.

"It's no use," the assassin told her, as he readied his gun once more, and then fired. The bullet grazed her black hair. The edge of the roof was coming closer and closer, but Kaname didn't stop; she sped up. Her feet left the concrete. Using the raised edge of the roof as a vaulting platform, she leaped into the air.

Now she held her breath, and looked down to where the vast, wide alley stretched out below her. She made it across the deep, deep ravine, and descended in an arc towards the next building over, which was about two stories shorter than the one she'd just come from.

On the building's roof there was a shed, made out of sheet iron. Her body collapsed on top of it, broke through the roof, and smashed through the junk that was piled up inside. The sound was tremendous, and Kaname found herself showered with fragments of wood and plastic. The moment of impact made the world around her go black, and forced the air out of her lungs in a soundless wheeze. Scrapes, cuts, bruises, sprains... pain assaulted her from every direction, and her face contorted in agony.

"Ugh..." she moaned. She was alive. And... she could still move. Incredibly, the game wasn't over.

Kaname tried to stand... and fell. *One more time*— she told herself, and managed it, this time. The bathrobe was hanging on her shoulders by a thread. The belt was gone now, and nowhere in sight, but she still had the taser, gripped tightly in her right hand.

She kicked the door open; it gave way more easily than she'd expected. Stumbling out of the shed, Kaname looked up at the roof she'd just jumped from. The man's silhouette was visible. His gun was pointed toward her.

With a grunt, she took off running. A muffled gunshot passed over her head. The bullet ricocheted off the roof at her feet, kicking up a spray of water.

The stairs! Kaname looked around for the stairs. This building didn't have an external fire escape, and she couldn't see anywhere to jump down on or over to. The only way out was in, through a door in a low tower that took up a corner of the roof.

Panting, she threw herself at the metal door, and turned the heavy knob. She pulled as hard as she could, but it wouldn't budge. *Locked!* Both pushing and pulling proved fruitless. The door rattled in her grip, but showed no sign of giving way. She punched and kicked it and cried and screamed, but the door remained unyielding.

"No, no..." she moaned. Her one escape route was denied to her. Clinging to

the door, she looked back at the roof she'd come from one more time. In the hazy neon light, she could see the assassin moving lithely to jump down to her building.

For the well-trained assassin, such a drop was easily accomplished. If a mere girl could fall that far unfazed, he could do it with ease. He touched down like a goose in the water—suitable imagery for a man called Fei-hung—then righted himself smoothly and began walking.

He couldn't see the girl from here... But then, even if she could hide, she couldn't truly escape him. There was no need to hurry. He just had to see the job through, as he always did: corner the chicken, then chop off its head.

He'd shoot her with his gun, defile her corpse, take a picture and send it to Hong Kong. That was what that man wanted—he had no doubt about that. Even so, he was starting to grow weary of the girl's struggling. She refused to beg for her life, or resign herself with dignity; she just kept running, even though it wouldn't save her. It was really just embarrassing to watch.

He made it to the entrance to the stairs. In addition to the broken shed, the roof was a mess of water towers and air conditioning units, as well as a storage space for gardening and planting tools. The cluttered roof made it hard to get a good look around him; the rain and the dark didn't help matters.

Of course, he wasn't letting his guard down. He wouldn't heed her cries for mercy. He'd give her a quick death the next time he saw her. Those were the orders he had been given, after all.

After a careful examination of the area, he realized immediately where the girl was hiding. Beyond an air conditioning unit, he could see stacks of large planter pots, piled high and left to the elements. Behind the pots, through a just-visible gap, he could see someone crouching. That someone was dressed in a muddy bathrobe, huddled like a cornered rabbit. Apparently, she thought she could wait him out there.

Fei-hung approached the spot, took aim, and fired. The .45 caliber slugs caused the pots to break into noisy pieces and collapse. They also shredded the bathrobe beyond. The girl didn't scream, but just spasmed and fell towards him

in the darkness.

No... he realized, his eyes widening. It wasn't the girl. What he saw toppled there in the dim light was simply... the scraps of a pot, wrapped up in a bathrobe! *Then where is the girl?!*

From the top of the water tank, Kaname gazed down at the back of the man's head. She was naked except for her underwear, and her soaked hair clung to her frozen body. Her face was as pale as death. Kneeling down, concealing her chest with her left arm despite her desperate situation, she held the taser steadily in front of herself with her free right hand.



Just two meters—that's how close she was. She was afraid to pull the trigger. The tension and fear were driving her mad. He might notice her any moment, yet countless doubts stayed her finger on the trigger. *Will I really hit him? Will a weapon like this—a self-defense tool, really—actually affect him? Did he really not see through my trap? Maybe he's just pretending to fall for it... After all, how could an amateur like me outsmart someone like him? It can't be this easy, can it? Maybe it would be better to beg for my life? Or yell "hands up!" first?*

In that moment, a set of words she had heard once before rose up in her mind. *Don't lick your lips in front of your prey.* The person who had said those words wasn't here with her now, but remembering them gave her the last ounce of strength she needed.

Kaname pulled the trigger, and a dry *pow!* ripped through the air. The explosive force of the propellant cartridge sent the spiked prongs flying into the man's shoulder, where they stuck. Tens of thousands of volts raced through the wire, causing him to spasm wildly. White smoke and sparks flew from where the prongs pierced his shoulder.

After taking a few seconds' worth of electric charge, the man fell to his knees. He didn't collapse, though; he had endured the shot.

She fired again. This time, the prongs stabbed into the man's back. Another zap, just to be sure—The man let out a groan, dropped his gun, and toppled over like a sack of potatoes. It didn't look like he was about to move any time soon.

Did I do it? The moment the thought entered her mind, Kaname's breathing suddenly quickened, and her body began to sweat. Panting heavily, she dropped the spent taser, and jumped down off the water tank. She crept up to the man slowly, picked up the gun and retrieved the bathrobe that had fallen nearby. The garment that had saved her life was like a tattered rag by now, but she still felt better having it on.

The man appeared to be completely unconscious. That was natural, of course—she'd hit him twice with a taser. Even if he was a professional assassin, he was still just a person.

And she had beaten him. She'd beaten him, all by herself. There was no rush

of elation that came with the thought. She just stood there in the falling rain, struggling to process the reality of it.

Just then, a new voice reached her ears. “Looks like you won.”

Kaname looked around and saw three human-like shapes standing beyond the air conditioning unit, illuminated by the faint neon light. She gazed at them silently.

The one at the center was a young man on the short side, holding an umbrella. No... he wasn't short; he only looked that way, because the men flanking him were so tall. The two hulking creatures were dressed in dark green coats, with hoods drawn low to hide their faces. One of the large men had the Mithril agent with him; he was carrying him over his shoulder, as if he were feather-light.

“I believe,” the young man said in elegant tones, “that there are two kinds of women in the world: those who look good in the rain, and those who don't. You are, without a doubt, the former—I think anyone who saw you now would be forced to agree.”

At first, Kaname could only stare at him. “That's sarcasm, right?” she said listlessly, letting the right hand, which was still holding the pistol, droop to her side. A cold wind stirred her tattered bathrobe and her soaked black hair.

“You wound me,” the young man objected. “I meant it as the highest compliment.”

“Uh-huh,” Kaname agreed suspiciously. “And who are you, again?”

The young man advanced toward her in lieu of a response. He was taller than she'd thought—around the same height as Sousuke, maybe—but he carried himself with a sort of airy weightlessness. He wore a long black coat over black pants, a black vest, and a white shirt. They all had a modest, yet lustrous sheen that suggested garments of the highest quality.

“A kindred spirit,” he said at last, closing his umbrella.

Kaname could see his face now: this young man wasn't Japanese. He had fair, smooth skin, bluish-gray eyes, and silver hair that seemed to flow like waves.

If she hadn't been through everything she'd been through, she might have found herself captivated by his prince-like visage. His expression was languidly enigmatic, in a way that made it impossible for her to tell if he was friend or foe, hostile or harmless.

"I came to help you... is what I'd like to say, but that's not actually the case," he admitted. "I suspect that the result would have been the same either way, though—whether I'd lent you a hand or just chosen to watch. I don't have any particular business with you now, but if you want to know my motives regarding you, I suppose I'd say I'm testing a theory."

"A theory?" Kaname questioned.

"A paradox, related to fate and karma," the young man clarified. "A dilemma, you could say."

"You're annoying the hell out of me," she retorted. "Can you just say what you mean already?"

"I'm not a fan of excessive directness. Words are such fleeting vehicles... But that aspect of you is definitely part of your appeal." The man smiled, with the air of someone enjoying some great classic song.

Kaname fell silent. Suddenly, she felt as though she'd met this man before. *In my New York days?* she wondered. *No, that's not it...* She'd had no friends in New York with that particular shade of hair. She'd never seen the color in movies or photo spreads, either. It was a distinctive ash blond—

Suddenly, it came to her. "Wait," she said. "Are you Tessa's—"

Ignoring the question, the man walked past Kaname to look down at the assassin lying in the puddle. "Get up, Fei-hung. Surely you're back with us by now?"

The man stirred a bit, then lifted his head up and whispered, "Mr. Silver... you were watching?"

"Not quite the whole show, I'm afraid," the young man said apologetically. "She's too much for you, you know. You should really give up."

"I refuse," the man named Fei-hung said hoarsely.

“I’ll overlook your actions, which were taken in defiance of the organization’s will,” the young man told him. “But I want you to convince your brother to cease his rampage in Hong Kong immediately.”

“You think he’ll do what I tell him?” Fei-hung scoffed. “You think he’ll even listen to me?”

“Revenge is an empty thing, you know,” the young man told him.

“This isn’t about revenge. It’s about doing what *he* asked us for—the man who picked the two of us off the streets,” Fei-hung replied. “As long as he wills it, I’ll keep trying to kill her for as long as I live.”

“I see...” the young man observed, in a distant tone of voice. “Then I’m afraid this is goodbye, Fei-hung.”

“Only because I’ll kill you, Leonard Testarossa!” The next instant, the assassin had sprung into the air. His arms flashed with motion; a silver light went tearing through the air in the young man’s direction. In that same instant, Kaname saw his coat ripple. The young man himself barely moved, but the coat seemed to come to life, intercepting the light streaking towards him—four throwing knives of varying sizes—and knocking them away. His clothing wasn’t just bulletproof; it was actually moving on its own, unfurling like a pair of protective black wings.

The assassin grunted in surprise, but did not stop his charge. He seemed to glide across the surface of the roof, drawing another knife in a backhand grip as he went.

“That won’t help you,” Leonard told him. Then one of the large men in green was suddenly there, standing in between them. He’d been motionless and wordless up until that point, but in that moment, he had moved like the wind. The assassin charged right into him and plunged his knife into his center mass, but as if ignoring the blow entirely, the large man just seized the assassin’s throat with an arm as thick as a log.

“Ngh!” Fei-hung choked out.

With that one arm, the large man lifted the struggling assassin into the air; he must have been incredibly strong. 《Requesting order,》 the large man said, in a clearly artificial voice.

“Countermeasure A1,” Leonard ordered. “And be thorough.”

《Roger,》 the large man in green replied. Kaname heard a snap; Fei-hung’s neck was broken.

For extra measure, the large man then pressed his free left hand against the assassin’s chest. There was a gunshot blast, and blood came bursting out of the assassin’s back through a gaping hole opened up in his chest. It shattered his spinal cord and scapula, which left both of his arms dangling at strange angles.

《Countermeasure A1 complete,》 the large man reported, before callously tossing the corpse away. 《Designated threat neutralized.》

“Well done,” Leonard commended him. “Return to standby.”

《Roger.》 The large man walked past Kaname, his coat flapping in the wind. Each movement released a low, audible creak from his joints.

Kaname was able to catch a glimpse beneath his hood, and saw only a matte black mask with a narrow slit—like snow goggles—where the eyes should be.

He’s not... human? she realized. The revelation came to Kaname in a corner of her mind that was otherwise numb from the brutal sight she’d just witnessed.

“Plan 1211, the Alastor,” Leonard explained without prompting. “You might call them the world’s smallest AS—though at that size, you might just as well call them ‘robots’... I think you’re capable of understanding this now, but it’s really quite difficult to get an AS to act autonomously. Satisfactory miniaturization of the power and control systems proved challenging.”

From what Kaname knew, the technical hurdles to achieve what he was describing went far beyond ‘challenging.’

“Now, that was the actual reason I was here,” Leonard told her. “I’m sorry to have made you witness something so awful.”

“I... I don’t really know what’s going on,” Kaname said. “But...”

“But?”

“I’m sure you didn’t... have to kill him,” she finished, her voice trembling.

Leonard looked genuinely puzzled. “He was trying to kill *you*, you know.”

“I know, but—”

“Besides, I haven’t killed nearly as many people as your boyfriend,” he pointed out again.

Kaname gasped, immediately recognizing that he was referring to Sousuke. Instead of asking ‘how do you know him?’ she found herself protesting the claim, almost reflexively. “He... He’s been fighting in wars since he was little. He couldn’t help it. The only people he fights are bad guys... and he always helps innocent people, and the weak and vulnerable. Plus... it’s not like he likes it,” she said defensively. “I think it really bothers him, actually. That’s why... um... it’s not the same. He wouldn’t... do things this way...”

Leonard listened to her awkward stammering with great interest. Then he peered into her eyes, smiling mischievously. “You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“Well... I mean...” Kaname found herself averting her eyes.

“The core behavior is the same in either case, yet you only criticize me,” Leonard observed logically. “You really are partial to him, aren’t you?”

“I...”

“You love him.”

“I don’t,” she protested.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Look at me,” Leonard demanded.

“What—” What came next caught Kaname completely off guard: Leonard took her gently by the shoulders and pulled her towards him, and the second she looked into his eyes... his lips were touched to hers. The contact was cold, and soft, and wet.



It was all so sudden that her mind went blank; Kaname couldn't remember where she was, who he was, who *she* was—anything. She felt no revulsion; to the contrary... that sweet, fleeting sensation threatened to take hold of her heart and never let go. Time had stopped.

When time moved again, Leonard accepted the slap without resistance. She'd thought she'd hit him with all the force she had, but it had only left him slightly staggered. The men—rather, the robots—standing behind him seemed to register it as an attack, because they immediately lowered their hips into a ready battle posture.

"It's all right," Leonard told them. "Stand by." The two Alastors straightened again.

Kaname backed up to the water tank, hand over her lips, glaring at Leonard. She wanted to cry, but she refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing that. "What was that supposed to be?" she demanded.

"A kiss to wake you up, I suppose. I've fallen in love with you, you see." Leonard smiled sincerely at her as he stroked his wounded cheek.

"Too bad, because I hate you," she retorted. "You make me want to puke."

"That's part of what I like about you," Leonard said idly. "So superficially fragile, yet forceful. Superficially coarse, yet noble... you're like water, ever-shifting."

"Shut up!!" Kaname shouted.

He held up his hands in mock fear, then gave an inaudible order to the robots. One walked to the roof's exit, and yanked the locked metal door off its hinges. "I think I'd better leave before you try to kill me," he decided.

The other robot, the one that was carrying the Mithril man, laid the corpse down on the concrete. No—it wasn't a corpse. The man actually stirred, and then let out a wordless groan.

"Yes, it lives," Leonard said. "I'd consider this person an enemy as well... but, I wonder: would you care very much if I eliminated them?" The robot pointed the black gun barrel glinting on the back of its left arm at the man, and a dull

thunk rang out as it prepared to fire. This was the same high-caliber machine gun it had used to finish off the assassin earlier.

“W-Wait!” Kaname cried out.

“Why?” Leonard asked curiously.

“I... I still have business with that person,” Kaname said. “Don’t kill him!”

“Hmm... But this person spoke very rudely to you earlier,” Leonard said with a frown. “If words could warrant a death sentence, those would certainly qualify.”

“That’s my decision,” Kaname said in a hushed tone. “I’ll... forgive what you did to me, if you just don’t kill him.”

“You surprise me,” Leonard said. “For scum like this? I doubt your chastity really comes that cheap.”

“Don’t make me say it again. That’s. My. Decision!” Kaname spelled out, and Leonard looked genuinely shocked for a moment.

“You surprise me again.” He chuckled. “Very well. Then I’ll leave this person right here.” The robot withdrew its arm cannon, sparing the unconscious agent, while the other picked up the assassin’s corpse, again effortlessly.

Then, with the two machines trailing behind, Leonard began walking away from the exit, towards the edge of the roof. One more step would take him plunging onto the ground four floors down... but he stopped right on the verge, and turned back.

“Before I say goodbye, a word: I meant it when I said I’d fallen in love with you,” Leonard said wistfully. “I wasn’t just teasing. Please believe me.”

She said nothing.

“Chidori Kaname-san. You still live in an illusion,” he told her earnestly. “In time, you’ll be able to see a new world. And then, a girl like you might not need to fear the whispers.”

She blinked in confusion. “What are you—”

“We’ll meet again,” he said, cutting her off. Then Leonard and the robots

jumped down together, and disappeared from her view.

There was a sound of cracking asphalt. Kaname ran up to the edge, and looked down at the road where they had fallen, but all she saw was gray mist hanging over the dark road. There was no sign of a human presence.

Kaname returned to the man from Mithril, who was lying in a puddle. He returned her gaze blankly. The right half of his round, Anpanman-like face was completely caved in, yet there wasn't a drop of blood to be seen.

She could see now that what the shot had blasted away wasn't flesh, but urethane foam. The middle-aged face she had seen was actually a skillfully done mask; now, Kaname saw the real face peeking out from beneath it.

She removed the mask. Beneath it was the face of a young man with almond-shaped eyes. No... was it a woman? She couldn't tell; the face was slender and androgynous. They were probably a little over 20 years old, she decided, and looked completely emaciated, the face dreadfully pale. It felt like a face she'd seen a few times around the neighborhood... but the memories were vague, and she couldn't be sure.

"It was... a disguise?" she mused out loud.

"A disguise... yes," the agent said, now in their natural voice, which sounded cold. There was no blood flowing from the bullet holes in their pot-bellied stomach or chest, either; the agent must have been wearing a bulletproof vest underneath the bodysuit. Still, there were small streams of blood trickling from their shoulders and thighs.

"Can you move?" Kaname asked. "How bad are you hurt?"

"I'm not sure. That man earlier... injected me... with something."

"You want help?"

"No..." the agent said, teeth gritted. "I still have my pride. This failure... this mess I've gotten into. I'd rather... die like this."

"I see." Kaname turned her back on the Mithril spy, and then took a deep breath. So many things had happened over the course of just ten minutes. She felt like her head was going to burst from the swirl of sensations: surprise,

relief, suspicion, humiliation, anger, fear... and most of all, the kiss that continued to linger on her lips, no matter how she tried to wipe it away. Kaname hated that she'd forgotten to resist, that she'd yielded to him at all, even if just for a moment.

He'd taken her first kiss. Well... strictly speaking, she'd had a play kiss with a girl in her class back in kindergarten, but assuming that didn't count, this was her real first kiss. Some might find it stupid to care about first kisses in this day and age, but she'd really been convinced that hers would be with someone she loved. Like, for instance—well, *someone* she loved, at any rate. It had been very important to her. And that man had gone and—

Kaname growled and punched the water tank. There was a dull clang. She insisted to herself that the reason she was crying was because of the pain in her fist and the scrapes all over her body.

She moaned and whined softly, struggling to hold it all in. The feelings that she'd kept locked down tight since her performance in the teacher's office had broken their chains and sent her heart pitching and dipping. Her strength, which hadn't wavered even under an assassin's attack, had been shattered into pieces by a single kiss.

"Sousuke..." she cried. Had she really been so unfazed by his disappearance? Had she really remained cold as ice? Of course she hadn't! *Why aren't you here?* she wondered despairingly. *This is all your fault. None of this would have happened if you were still here. How are you ever going to make it up to me? You can't be happy about this, right? Because I'm definitely not! Do something. Be here. Say 'not an issue.'* She repeated the words under her breath, but naturally, no reply came. Crying to herself on a random rooftop wasn't going to change anything.

If only she could hit a reset button. If only she could turn back time, to go back to that haircut. *I'm not stupid. I knew what I felt as I watched him doze off... those affectionate feelings and natural urges. This is my punishment for lying to myself about them,* she thought miserably. *I guess that was my last chance, huh? I could have spoken to him sweetly... I could have said, "Hey, want to kiss?" But I ran away instead. I doused him with water and ran away! And while it was just a small fantasy, it was important to me, and now I've missed*

the chance forever. After he's already gone...

"I'm always this way..." she sniffled. Even if I find someone I like, I refuse to acknowledge it. 'They always betray you, anyway,' I say. 'You can't depend on anyone. They'll end up hurting you, just like Mom.'

So I don't rely on anyone. I don't get close to anyone. I don't... even admit to how I feel, most of the time. Then, it's only when it's too late that I realize... what I could have done, but didn't have the courage to do...

"Sousuke..." she choked out again. Is it the same again, this time? Will I let things end without taking any action?

Again, she asked herself: *Is this really the end?* How long had she spent now, crying and trembling in the rain? Her tears stopped, and she looked up.

She turned, walked back up to the Mithril agent lying on the ground, and said, "You said you'd rather die, right?"

The agent said nothing.

"Why not put in a little more unsightly struggling?" she suggested. "That's what I'm going to do. On and on, forever."

5: His Problem

22 October, 1138 Hours (East China Standard Time)

Mid-Levels, Hong Kong Special Ward (“People’s Committee” Side), Hong Kong

Ten minutes had passed since they’d been ushered into the vast, high-ceilinged meeting room. The space, positioned on the 30th floor of a high-rise apartment complex, belonged to the Mithril intelligence agent stationed here in Hong Kong—though the agent himself hadn’t arrived yet. Large windows overlooked the ocean far below, bathing the room in natural light.

The steep slope of Mt. Victoria was home to countless buildings, but even among those, this one was especially tall. It offered a clear view of the city far beyond: a clustering of structures, new and old, large and small—Sousuke had heard it described before, but seeing the density of the high-rises in person, it almost seemed unreal. Confusion, disorder, chaos—that was the only way to describe the sight.

“Weird... it still doesn’t look all that different now...” Mao said from behind him.

“You’ve been here before?” Sousuke questioned.

“A few times before the Handover,” Mao told him. “Mom had family in the neighborhood then. They’ve moved to New York since, but I crashed with them for about two months before I came to Mithril, just lazing around.”

“Lazing around?” he asked.

“It was after I got myself drummed out of the Marines. I couldn’t muster up the will to get a job, and I didn’t want to go home to New York... I knew my dad would be an ass to me,” she said, clicking her tongue. “Air Force bastard...”

Mao hadn’t spoken much to Sousuke about her past before, so he was a little

surprised to hear her bring it up so freely now. “Your father was in the military?” he asked, curious to know more.

“Sure,” she said dismissively. “A bomber pilot, and a total halfwit, too. He’s retired now and works at a firm... acts like he’s hot shit, but he’s always been a stingy little miser. Always hatching some scheme or other...”

“Scheme?” Sousuke echoed curiously.

“Yeah. See, I was trying to get an honest job out of high school, but instead of letting me do that, he pulled a bunch of strings to marry me off to this spoiled rich Harvard jerk. It pissed me the hell off, so to spite him, I bailed on my wedding day to join the Marines.” Mao must have had fond memories of the occasion, because she turned her eyes down and grinned. “I snuck out of the church and hit up a recruiting station four blocks away—still in my wedding dress,” she continued to reminisce. “You should’ve seen the recruiter’s face. He’s all, ‘Are you serious?’ and I’m all, ‘Hell yes.’ Everyone at the station came to talk me out of it. ‘Ma’am, please reconsider. Think of how your parents will feel,’ they say. That’s when I mention that my dad’s Air Force, and I swear, the reply comes in perfect unison: ‘That changes everything. Sign right here!’”

Yang, listening from a few seats away, was unable to restrain his laughter.

“What do you think of a woman like that?” Mao wanted to know.

“I-It’s awesome...” Yang snickered. “Seriously, just great.” His shoulders were shaking as tears formed in his eyes, and he shot her a thumbs up.

Silly stories to pass the time combined with pre-mission jitters; the room’s silence combined with Yang’s stifled laughter—It was a strange atmosphere. The light streaming in from the windows cast Mao and Yang in clear silhouette, and though it seemed like a lighthearted scene at a glance, it was saturated by a strange melancholy.

Mao gazed off into the sky, her eyes nostalgic. “Awesome, huh? Yeah, I guess it was pretty awesome... The moment I made the decision, I felt like my world became limitless. Like I could do anything. I could go anywhere.”

“Anywhere...?” Sousuke asked, as if hearing the word for the first time.

She shrugged in response. “Yeah. I mean, life went on after that, and I had my

share of setbacks and disappointments... but I'm still really glad I did what I did then. It made me love myself more... you know what I mean?"

Sousuke couldn't quite wrap his mind around what Mao was talking about. He couldn't understand why she'd brought it up all of a sudden, either.

"Ah, it's just being back in the city that reminded me," she said. "Don't read into it or anything."

"Mm... ah," Sousuke answered, mildly befuddled.

It was then that the reception room door opened, granting entrance to a plump, middle-aged Caucasian man. "Hello," he said. "Sorry for the wait." Dabbing sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief, he approached them. He had a big, friendly face, framed by pomade-slicked black hair and a goatee. Sousuke judged him to be around fifty, though he could easily have been younger.

This man is...? Sousuke and Mao exchanged a glance of disbelief. Mithril intelligence agent Gavin Hunter; the name had inspired images of stoic and square-jawed, but instead they got rotund and sweaty—something about it felt slightly anticlimactic.

Hunter's public face was that of a well-to-do trader. He spoke Cantonese and Mandarin ably, and was friendly with both armies, enough that he could dine with their top brass most nights. He was as far as one could get from the popular image of a spy—but then, gathering information didn't require grand James Bond-style adventuring. Offhand statements from military officials, minor items in a newspaper's finance columns, the sight of unfamiliar ships in port—inferences could be drawn from all kinds of places, and that was the intelligence division's bread and butter.

"I probably don't have to tell you that both North and South are a little on-edge right now," Hunter explained. "Even at a glance, it should be obvious how serious the situation has become. Between both armies, we've had three incidents of friendly fire and four incidents of firing on civilians. It's basically a miracle that they *aren't* in a shooting war yet—but that's probably just a matter of time."

"And if one starts?" Mao questioned.

“Then fire flies across Victoria Bay. Anything larger than a pistol is in range, after all—rifles, machine guns, bombs, rockets, ATMs... It’ll be a horror show,” Hunter told them. “An instant inferno. You’ve seen the way the city’s laid out.” The North and South Chinese Armies had been in a standoff across Victoria Bay since the split; the only thing keeping guns in holsters was the fact that neither wanted to see Hong Kong set ablaze. The recent AS terrorism, though, had begun to chip away at that resolve.

“What about the citizens?” she asked next.

“We started their evacuations a little while back. The South Chinese go to the New Territories, inland; the North Chinese go to Lantau, and the southern part of Hong Kong Island. That’s mainly women and children, of course... I sent my own family to my villa in Lantau,” Hunter said. “They’ve mutually locked down almost all travel between the North and South. No entries are allowed into port, and almost all flights into both Kai Tak and Chek Lap Kok Airports have been canceled. The stocks and foreign exchanges are a mess.” He sighed despairingly. “Heaven’s sake... they’d only just pulled off the separation, too. It’s really going to turn into Berlin at this rate.”

“But they did pull it off,” Mao whispered in vague astonishment.

At this, Hunter raised a cocky eyebrow. “That’s what it means to be Chinese. Clever and enthusiastic, with a spirit exhausting in its industriousness. Total mastery of internal thought and outward expression; yin and yang in perfect balance.”

“Er?”

“Eat Chinese food sometime, and you’ll begin to grasp the breadth of their culture and civilization,” he boasted. “The ideology Westerners have cultivated over a mere hundred years doesn’t compare. Brokers like me knew that the separation would represent both a crisis and opportunity—that some would go bankrupt, and some would get rich; just business as usual. And I’ll tell you, even with the split government and the occupying armies, the coming and going between North and South stayed relatively simple up until now. We could work anything out, as long as backs needed scratching.” He said it all with pride, as if he himself were a purebred Hongkonger—even though he was the only white

person in the room.

“So, what do you know about the AS?” Mao asked, in an attempt to move things along.

“We haven’t been able to discern its whereabouts,” Hunter answered. “It last appeared three hours ago, in Shau Kei Won on the Hong Kong Island side. It took out two ASes and an armored car; four North Chinese Army soldiers dead, eight civilians badly wounded... just awful.”

“You’re sure it’s hiding in the city?” she pressed.

“We can’t say for certain, although it’s what our Hong Kong Branch analysts and their AI think,” Hunter confirmed. “It’s also what my gut tells me, but the layout of the city presents a challenge...” Then he spread out a map and launched into a technical explanation. His opinions were those of a seasoned professional who’d already done a lot of investigation, and his deep love for Hong Kong showed through in every word.

Mao knew everything about how invisibility ECSes worked, and combined with Sousuke’s occasional suggestion, she managed to tighten Hunter’s analysis even more. It was a truly productive session; both Mao’s team and Hunter’s were ground-level operatives, which meant the executive friction between intelligence and operations was irrelevant to them.

“Any more areas or situations we can rule out?” Hunter asked, while typing into his AI terminal.

“Any place that sees lots of activity from pigeons and crows and such,” Mao replied.

“Oh?” Hunter asked, sounding curious. “Why birds?”

“It turns out birds can see invisible ASes—probably because the ECS can’t block ultraviolet light—and crows in particular will circle around them, squawking and making trouble. The same goes for dogs, who are sensitive to the ozone smell released by an ECS.”

“Ah-ha... of course,” Hunter said thoughtfully. “Anything else?”

Mao glanced at Sousuke. “I think that’s about it. Sousuke?”

“Hm?” Sousuke said, as if snapping out of some reverie.

“Anything else?”

“Ah... no,” he told them. “I can’t think of anything.”

Mao could tell that Sousuke was distracted; he’d been that way since they’d left the Tuatha de Danaan.

Hunter, staring hard at the monitor, let out a hum of appreciation. “Very impressive. Forty-nine locations on the Hong Kong side, seventy-eight on the Kowloon side. We should be able to cover this in half a day if my men and yours split the work.”

“Hopefully,” Mao agreed. “If we do find them, let’s try to finish them off in one go.”

They’d decided to send their people on an investigation of every possible location that could house the enemy AS. There was no time to spare, so Mao’s men would also split into three teams for the search: Sousuke and Mao would cross Victoria Bay and head to the Kowloon Peninsula; Yang and Wu would search Hong Kong Island. The third team would be the transport helicopter that had brought them there in the first place; while staying invisible with its own ECS, it would scan all of Hong Kong from overhead with an ECCS. The device in question—an ECS detector—wasn’t very effective in urban areas, so they would mainly cover the suburbs and other outlying islands.

The vans they’d borrowed from Hunter had the large Chinese characters 狩人 清潔有限公司 written on the side. It just meant “Hunter Cleaning Company,” with the word “Hunter” represented by its literal meaning rather than by phonetics—Sousuke, who had little experience with the Chinese language, found the writing strange and foreign despite its similarity to Japanese.

“That old man seems to have his fingers in a lot of pies...” Mao observed with folded arms in the building’s underground parking lot. The four of them had already changed into cleaning company uniforms, with Sousuke’s being the most ill-fitting. “Everyone have your licenses? Double-check your work permits and passes as well,” Mao ordered, “and make sure to keep your fake passport and credit card in separate pockets. Sidearms are limited to one apiece;

discharging your weapon is strictly forbidden. Report in regularly, and remember that we're under martial law, so be careful."

"What if the army or police tries to take us into custody?" Yang asked. "There are some divisions Hunter doesn't have friends in, right?"

"That's right, so be careful," Mao emphasized. "If you can do it, running is your best option. Whatever you do, don't fire your weapon—we can't afford to have you hitting innocent army personnel—but other than that, do what you have to. If you're caught, it'll be some time until Hunter can interfere, and you'll probably be subject to severe interrogation in the meantime. If you are tortured, don't talk. That's all."

"That's harsh..." Yang muttered.

"The greater concern is being sighted by the enemy," Mao said pointedly. "If you're killed because you failed to stay in contact or get permission before acting, it's not my concern. Got it?"

"Roger."

"Okay, let's go," she said.

They split up into the two cleaning company vans, pulled out of the parking lot, then parted ways into the city. Yang and Wu's van was headed for Victoria Peak, while the van Sousuke was driving spent a few minutes heading down a sharp, tree-lined slope, until it came out into Chung Wan, the district better known as 'Central.'

Des Voeux Road was almost like a concrete ravine, flanked by 'mountains' of towering skyscrapers. Sousuke, who had grown up in the country, found the sight slightly overwhelming. Only one thin slice of the cloudy sky was visible.

Chung Wan was a commercial district on par with Tokyo's Shinjuku or Marunouchi areas, but the area seemed almost abandoned at present—no people, and no car traffic. Double-decker trams rattled down the roads, but their drivers seemed to be the only ones aboard. The clang of metal against the rails echoed emptily in the air around them.

"So weird... I've never seen Central like this before," Mao observed from the passenger seat, as she cast her gaze across the deserted city.

They made it to a large five-way intersection, where they could see North Chinese Army armored trucks and ASes on full alert. These were olive-colored Rk-92 Savages, the same popular export model used by North Korea. Sousuke and Mao proceeded east along the road, departing Wan Chai on their way to Causeway Bay.

The valley between buildings seemed to go on and on, with the famous neon Hong Kong signage growing more and more prevalent here. Shop names jutted out from their buildings in gaudy green and red, threatening to smother the sky above.

雅胎美容護膚中心, 展藝設計裝飾公司, 福村東苑菜館, 華爾登影音器材有限公司, 新華中西藥行, 富瑤海鮮酒家, 佛如來素會, 釣藝琴行文化藝術中心—Sousuke caught characters he thought he recognized as a beauty shop, an interior decorator, a stereo company, a pharmacy, and a bar, but he didn't read kanji well to start with, and had no idea how to read most of it in Japanese. Along with the neon, much of the signage was LED, and he even saw a few cutting-edge hologram signs—early efforts at integrating ECS technology in consumer spaces.

At last, they reached the undersea tunnel that would take them to Kowloon Peninsula, the side under control of the South Chinese Army. The entrance to the tunnel was under strict guard: four Savages, two armored cars, and over sixty heavily armed infantrymen. They'd piled up embankments here and there, which they'd topped with barbed wire and machine gun emplacements.

Just inside the tunnel was a checkpoint gate where a short line of a civilian vehicles sat, their drivers attempting to petition for passage. None of them were allowed to proceed, and in the end, each one was forced to turn and go back. In theory, Hunter had arranged Sousuke's and Mao's passage with the head of security here, but this sight had him worried.

"You really think they'll let us through?" Sousuke wondered.

"If Hunter's connections are good," Mao answered. "They should."

A soldier with an AKM rifle spread his arms in front of the gate and said, "Stop" in Cantonese. He came around to the driver's side and started talking at Sousuke through the window. All Sousuke had managed to memorize in the

helicopter was some day-to-day conversation, so he couldn't understand the man at all.

"Mao, would you?" he asked.

"Ming baak laak," she told the soldier. "Hoi coeng."

Sousuke tilted his head.

"It means 'Got it, open the window,'" Mao translated.

Sousuke silently did as he was told, and opened the van's power window. Then he just watched while Mao launched into fluent Cantonese. She showed them their work credentials and passage permit, then seemed to explain the situation. Then the soldier said to Sousuke, "Hoji."

Sousuke just looked on helplessly.

Mao tapped Sousuke on the shoulder, then pointed ahead of him. "Nei tai," she said. "Ngo dei hoji zau laak."

The gate in front of them opened with a rattle. Interpreting her words to mean, "Go," Sousuke eased the van forward.

They'd successfully cleared the first gate, and now they raced down the tunnel beneath Victoria Bay. There were no cars around; it was just their van on the empty three-lane road.

"I really can't believe it," Mao said with awe. "This tunnel is usually packed."

"You're surprised by a lot today," Sousuke observed neutrally.

"Of course I am," she retorted. "Anyone who'd seen Hong Kong before this would be shocked."

"Really?" he asked skeptically.

"Well, try to imagine it. How would you feel if you saw Tokyo looking like this?" Mao's comment caught Sousuke unawares, and he felt an internal flinch. "What if Shinjuku and Ginza were divided, armies in standoff, one wrong move away from a shooting war?" she went on. "No more hip young people shopping and eating ice cream downtown—instead it's swarming with armored cars and ASes. The bayside area, perfect for quiet walks, is mounted with pillboxes and

bunkers. It's like, I can't believe this is the Hong Kong I know; that's how weird it is. It's like a world turned upside-down."

Sousuke said nothing. For the first time ever, he felt like he really grasped the nature of "peace," and how it applied to the city he'd lived in for the past six months. No tanks, no ASes, no police or soldiers hungry for bribes... streets bustling with cars and people, overflowing with cheerful music and laughter.

Tokyo at peace. School at peace. Classroom at peace. And—

"Sousuke?" Mao said, interrupting his thoughts.

"Hmm?"

"Is something wrong?"

"No... it's nothing." Sousuke brushed away the face that had appeared in the back of his mind.

"Stay alert," Mao instructed. "We're coming up on the South side's checkpoint."

"Right," he said. "I know."

They weren't out of the tunnel yet, but they could already see a chain-link fence blocking the way forward. This was the entrance to the Kowloon Peninsula, which was controlled by the South Chinese Army. Hunter must have also called in a favor with the commander here, because after a brief exchange, they were let right through.

"I can't believe it was that easy," Sousuke said.

"Definitely surprising..." Mao agreed.

The two were feeling a bit out of sorts over how easily they'd passed through both checkpoints. Security was so strict, after all; they'd been prepared to deal with a much chillier reception.

"Hunter must really be a powerful man here," Sousuke observed.

"Definitely, if he can get both armies to accede to him that easily," Mao said. "Of course, I'm sure his dealings aren't totally above-board."

"True."

The most likely situation was that he sold black market goods to both armies. That would earn Hunter the gratitude of the army bigwigs—who hungered for money and status—while also giving him blackmail material on them. For an intelligence agent, that was two birds with one stone. Sousuke had known men like him in countless conflict regions.

“I think we’re almost there,” he said.

Their vehicle entered a street lined with modern-looking hotels, which was home to one of the locations on their list: a trading center under construction, perfect for hiding an AS. The construction had been commissioned by a Malaysian business not well known in Hong Kong, and the documentation behind it had its share of question marks.

“What happens if we hit paydirt on our first try?” Mao wondered idly.

“Nothing special,” said Sousuke humorlessly. “We should be ready for that at all times.”

They were currently passing a large park, which was surrounded on three sides by hotels and shopping centers. A South Chinese Army AS was standing watch over the park’s entrance. It was an early model M6 Bushnell, designed for export and lacking an ECS of its own. Next to it was an English-made generator truck, which was probably there to keep it powered on the cheap during the extended standby.

That generator truck... Sousuke thought. He knew why it looked so familiar; it was the same model as the one he’d stolen in Sunan, right after he’d saved *her*. She’d been yelling so much at him then that he couldn’t get a word in edgewise. Even with enemies raining fire on them, she wouldn’t believe a word he said.

Sagara-kun, calm down, she’d admonished him. *You’re confused and hallucinating.*

Sagara-kun?

That’s right, he remembered. *That’s what she still called me back then. When was it that I became ‘Sousuke’ to her? I think it was—*

“Sousuke?!” Mao screamed.

He gasped.

I just drove... through a red light... into an intersection!

Horns blared, and a taxi closed in on their left side. Brakes squealed and the van pitched forward, causing the bumper to scrape against the asphalt. There was a shriek, which was followed by sparks and an impact, as the taxi scraped off their bumper.

The van flew to the right, then skidded sideways, fragments flying. They came to a rest in the middle of the intersection. The taxi driver stopped, jumped out into the road, and started screaming at them. Four soldiers ran towards them from the park they'd just passed. The M6 remained where it was, but its head was turned towards them.

Mao just looked at Sousuke from the passenger's seat, her face pale. She seemed too overwhelmed even to scream at him. "Ngh... Just leave this to me, okay? Not one word."

"I—"

"It's fine, just stay here!" she snapped, rushing out of the car. Mao turned to face the approaching soldiers, and called in a distressed voice, "Maa faan saai lei..." It was probably something like, "I'm sorry, we weren't paying attention," but the soldiers, seeming far from mollified, just pointed their rifles at her and shouted. They were probably telling her to shut up.

Days on high alert had left the soldiers' nerves frayed to the breaking point, and they moved like men ready to kill. One of them grabbed Mao by the shoulders and forced her to the ground, then dragged Sousuke out of the driver's side door. He noticed the taxi driver was being accosted in the same way; the man let out a pitiful cry and clung to the soldier, then pointed accusingly at Sousuke and Mao.

Mao, caught in a joint lock, was struggling to explain herself. She was employing a piteous tone to try to invite sympathy, but it didn't seem like it was working.

It was the worst possible scenario. A lapse of judgment in combat was one thing, but a simple traffic accident caused by inattentiveness? It was an

unbelievably foolish mistake, and even Sousuke was shocked that he'd let it happen. If they were taken into custody now, it would jeopardize the entire mission. He was racking his brain to figure out what to do—when in that moment, it happened: The M6, just thirty meters away, dropped to its knees with a crash.

Sousuke looked up in shock. The machine's long, narrow head had been twisted off and was now floating in midair, sparking and trailing cables and pipes like a rokurokubi. Its squat form let out a metallic cry of pain as it struggled, flapped its limbs, and grasped at an unseen something.

Then, with a sudden roar, the massive M6 went flying. It skidded down the road and crashed into a hotel facing the park, where it sent up a cloud of concrete and shattered glass. Within the billowing dust and smoke, then, Sousuke could see arcs of crackling electricity. Afterimages of blue light revealed the telltale silhouette of an AS with invisibility mode engaged.

The soldiers gulped, their eyes immediately drawn to the sinister machine. It had an upper half like an inverted triangle, and a diamond-shaped head, and was painted with a gray and dark blue camouflage pattern. All that, plus the unmistakable red mono-eye... It was the Venom.

The Venom dropped the M6's head—now just a severed cluster of sensors and machine guns—unceremoniously to the ground. It fell onto a Benz parked nearby, crushing the roof and windshield. Then the Venom pulled an assault rifle from its back, aimed it at the still-struggling M6's body, and began unloading on full automatic at close range.

The M6's arms and legs were helplessly blown off, and then it exploded. The deafening shockwave of heat and force even managed to reach the intersection where Sousuke and Mao were being held. Mao flew at the driver and tackled him to the ground. It was then that Sousuke realized he was standing stock still, and he opened his eyes wide in shock.

The commotion brought another M6 stationed nearby running; it immediately took cover by kneeling behind a hotel on the Venom's other side, and pointed its rifle around the corner in its direction. Mao got up and this time, it was Sousuke that she tackled as the M6 opened fire.

The Venom raised its left arm, and the shots flew off in all directions without even making contact. *That invisible wall again...* Sousuke thought. The ricochets peppered the nearby buildings and signs, spreading the destruction.

“Gau meng ah!” came the cries around him.

He couldn’t even move. In the roaring exchange of gunfire, Sousuke could hear soldiers screaming; fragments rained down everywhere.

Offhandedly, the Venom shot the new M6’s rifle out of its hand, then tore down the road in Sousuke’s general direction. Someone let out a cry of despair as the gray machine dashed across the ground, coming closer and closer. Then, with an explosive bound and a pulverizing of asphalt, it was gone.

With silent effort, Sousuke waved away the dust around him and looked up. The Venom had landed on the roof of a nearby building twenty floors high. It must have gone all that way in the blink of an eye with the aid of a wire gun; if so, then it had jumping power to rival that of an M9.

The machine’s red mono-eye paid Sousuke and Mao no attention. Its gaze was more distant, perhaps checking the reaction of the South Chinese Army.

After surveying the surrounding area, the Venom whipped around and activated its ECS, disappearing past the rooftop as it faded from sight. That was the end of the battle.

Smoke rose from the intersection. One soldier, arm injured from a flying piece of shrapnel, was wailing loudly. Another was checking the wound, and speaking rapidly about nothing in particular. The most veteran-looking of the four was yelling something into a walkie-talkie, while the remaining soldier just stood in the middle of the intersection, staring blankly.

The South Chinese Army soldiers seemed to have lost interest in Mao. She called out to one, and he gave a quick response before running in a panic towards the burning M6. She then said something to the taxi driver, and jerked her thumb back at the van with Hunter’s company name written on it. The driver looked a bit disgruntled about it, but Mao said something else, and at last he returned to his vehicle with an air of acceptance.

Mao approached Sousuke and whispered into his ear: “Let’s go.”

“Will they let us?” he whispered back.

“The guy said, ‘If you hadn’t gotten into that accident, we probably would’ve been crushed when it grabbed the M6. So we’ll overlook it.’” Mao climbed swiftly into the now bumperless van—and into the driver’s seat, naturally. Sousuke was in no position to argue, and slid obediently into the passenger’s seat.

The collision at the intersection and the appearance of the Venom—the quick succession of completely unanticipated incidents had left Sousuke in a mild state of shock. It had shaken him as badly as his separation from Kaname, or his loss to Clouseau.

What in the world is wrong with me? he wondered. *If the Venom hadn’t shown up just then, we would have been taken into the army’s custody, and things would only have gotten worse from there. What’s going on? It’s like everything’s coming out of nowhere... Why does reality feel so out of my control?* A feeling of powerlessness spread through Sousuke’s limbs and chewed away at his heart, numbing him all over. It was like nothing made sense anymore.

Mao spoke as she started up the engine again. “You shot through a red light. You could have killed us.”

“Sorry.”

“Were you thinking about her?” Mao asked.

When Sousuke failed to respond, Mao suddenly grabbed his collar and pulled him in. “You need to forget about her for now,” she demanded. “If you can’t, you need to get out of this van. I understand how you feel, but... even a nice ‘big sister’ like me has her limits, okay? I’m not going to get killed because of you. If you can’t get it together, I’ll be safer alone!” Mao’s words were only natural; she wouldn’t be able to lay into him like this if she didn’t respect him as an equal. A show of sympathy here and now would be wrong, both as a friend and as a colleague.

But as reasonable as her words were, in his current frame of mind, Sousuke just couldn’t deal with them. At length, he said, “You’re right,” then grabbed the bag containing his radio and equipment, and opened the door.

“Sousuke?” she asked incredulously.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized. “I just... can’t do this anymore.”

“Hey...”

“Continue the mission,” he told Mao, cutting her off. Then he got out of the car and began to walk alone down the street, which was littered with building material and brick. Of course, he didn’t know where he was going—Mao was shouting something at him from behind, but he wasn’t even listening. He didn’t care. He didn’t care about anything. Not about his Mithril mission, not about the Venom, not about the Arbalest or AI, nor about the fate of this city.

22 October, 1553 Hours (Chinese East Standard Time)

Sheung Wan, Special Ward, Hong Kong Island

In the three hours since they’d parted ways with Mao and Sousuke, Corporal Yang and Private Wu had checked out eleven possible hideout locations, but not one had borne fruit. At this particular moment, Yang was sluggishly steering their van around a high-rise apartment district in a corner of Sheung Wan. Built on the slope of Mt. Victoria, it was an area full of steep hills and sharp curves.

“I wish I could just gun it,” Yang grumbled. Roads like these got his blood racing; they reminded him of his days living outside of Daegu, where he’d spent his evenings slingshotting around the mountain passes. It got him to thinking, *How’d I end up playing mercenary in a place like this?* to which his mind responded, *Because I was broke.*

As the third son of the owner of a tiny auto repair shop, Yang was in no financial position to consider a racing career. And in some ironic twist of fate, he’d turned out to have more talent as a soldier than a driver. He was grudgingly conscripted into the army, and while grudgingly undergoing training, he’d caught the eye of an officer at the base, who then strong-armed him into their airborne forces. Then, in some kind of mistake, he’d been deployed into a conflict still treated as top secret even in his home country... and he’d been wandering aimlessly ever since. That’s how he’d ended up here, in this place,

driving a van at a snail's pace.

"No gunning it, Corporal," Wu assured him from the passenger seat. "We need to be careful. One slip-up and we won't have to wait for the enemy to kill us—the master sergeant will do it for them."

"I know that," Yang grumped. "Okay, we're here. This is the place." He parked the van in front of a high-rise apartment building, which was under construction. It had been financed by a foreign firm whose credentials weren't widely known, and came with an underground parking lot just large enough to fit an AS.

"Uruz-9 to all teams," Wu radioed in. "We're about to investigate point 28. If there's no contact in 15 minutes, move in."

"Uruz-2, roger that." Mao's voice came across coldly on the radio. For some reason, there was no response from Sousuke. He'd heard the Venom had appeared on the Kowloon Peninsula—had they run into some trouble?

"HQ, roger. Take care." This was Hunter's voice.

"Here we go," said Yang. "Keep your guard up, Wu."

"Yeah, yeah..." They both got out of the van and began to approach the building. According to Hunter's information, construction on the apartment had stopped three days ago. The reason given was a 'labor dispute,' but there were no details other than that.

Passing through the bamboo scaffolds and netting, Yang and Wu proceeded into the dark interior, where they pulled out their automatic pistols. They moved down the steps cautiously, being careful not to make a sound; even their pistols had silencers attached.

They couldn't sense anyone's presence. There was no door yet on the entrance to the garage, so Yang listened carefully at the empty frame, then signaled to Wu with his eyes and his hand.

They stepped silently into the underground garage. It was a vast concrete space—no cars, just mounds of construction equipment.

"It's a dud," Wu reported. "This makes eight—"

“Hush!” Yang had just noticed a leg peeking out from behind a cement bag, one of many piled up haphazardly in a corner of the garage. There was a person on the ground there. Wu noticed it too, and went silent. The two men approached, keeping alert in all directions.

What they found turned out to be a man’s dead body. He was in his 40s, dressed in a dingy jumpsuit, and he’d been shot through the head.

“Ugh... A worker here, you think?” Wu asked, turning away from the corpse.

“Yeah. Maybe he left something on the site, came back, saw something and got shot... Poor guy. Looks like he’s been dead about two days,” Yang said, calmly searching around the corpse. He opened the mouth with his bare hand and poked around the maggot-swarmed cavity. There didn’t seem to be an explosive planted in it.

“You can pinpoint the time, even?” Wu said, in tones of great admiration. “That’s impressive.”

“Rigor mortis is past and decomp has started,” Yang explained briefly. “Other factors are the dryness of the mucous membranes and the eyes, and the color of postmortem lividity. We won’t know the exact time of death without an autopsy, though.”

“Ah-ha... So you think this is their base?” Wu reasoned.

“I don’t know. But if they *were* using this as a hideout, they’ll have abandoned it by now,” Yang told him. “Our greater concern should be any ‘gifts’ they’ve left behind.”

“Gifts?”

“Traps,” Yang clarified for his partner. “Bombs to act as alarms.”

Wu looked around, feeling suddenly unnerved.

“We’ll be okay. But don’t touch anything other than what I touch,” Yang ordered. “Understand?”

“Roger that,” Wu said. “But... boy, Corporal, you really are SRT.”

Yang looked at him questioningly.

“Nothing. But hey, look at his chest...”

“Yeah.” Yang had noticed it, too; there was an unnatural-looking stain of some kind on the T-shirt visible beneath the man’s coveralls. At first he’d thought it was agglutinated blood that had become discolored, but that didn’t appear to be the case. While on the alert for traps, Yang carefully lowered the zipper. It wasn’t a stain. Someone had written something there with a black magic marker. The words were in English, and read:

To the cub of the Tiger of Badakhshan. Meet with the Hamdullah of Tsim Sha Tsui.

“You understand what that means?” Wu asked.

“Nope. Not a clue.” Yang shrugged, and turned on his radio.

22 October, 1614 Hours (East China Standard Time)

Tuatha de Danaan, South China Sea

The surface above them was a mess.

Because nothing was being allowed into port, there were tons of cargo ships waiting on Hong Kong’s doorstep, all stuck in a deadlock. The unprecedented traffic had left the sonar shack and target movement analysis system busier than they’d ever been.

Tessa knew that even rising to periscope depth could cause a collision, so she kept her vessel moving low and slow, like a whale dancing along the seafloor, one eye always on the surrounding terrain as mapped out by their high-frequency sonar. The slow progress was fraying the crew’s nerves, but with the South Chinese Army on patrol, it was better than being discovered.

《Captain. Intelligence message from the intelligence division,》 said the boat’s AI, Dana. The antenna of a surfaced ‘turtle’ had picked up the communique. Tessa yielded control to Mardukas, called Major Kalinin to the bridge via the internal phone line, then scanned quickly through the information provided:

Things had taken a turn for the worse. The North Chinese Army was starting to believe that the South was masterminding the Venom’s reign of destruction, dismissing the damage inflicted in the South’s territory as some kind of false

flag. Chief Yang Xiaokun, with the Peking Government (the People's Liberation Committee), said, "If the actors of the Cantonese puppet state continue with these provocations, we will be forced to protect the interests of the Chinese people." Mithril's spy satellite tracking of the movements of the North Chinese Army suggested that it wasn't a bluff.

Secretary-General Zoeng Gou-lau of the Canton government (the Chinese Democratic Union) had also appeared before Western media to criticize the North's statement. "Peking is attempting to exploit this disaster to seize control of the Three Gorges Dam. We, as representatives of the people, will not yield to threats from the North," he'd said. South Chinese squadrons had gone on high alert all over the country.

The North had offered a time limit: 2200 hours today. If, by then, things in Hong Kong weren't resolved—or if the South didn't make some show of good faith—they could not be held responsible for their actions. In other words, the civil war was about to reignite. Countless people would die, swallowed up by the flames of conflict.

Tessa looked at her watch. It was 1631 hours—just five and a half hours to go. "This is a disaster," she muttered. "It's too soon..."

Yes, it was too soon. Even eight hours would be enough for them to find and finish the Venom, surely—That was what Mao and the intelligence division had assumed they would have when they'd formulated their reconnaissance plan.

What were Mithril's top brass thinking? Why weren't they using every connection they had to convince both armies to stand down? There was nothing her squad alone could do. Did they really intend to leave everything up to a sixteen-year-old commander and her team of two hundred?

"Put me through to operations HQ," she commanded. "Channel G3."

《There is a slight chance of channel G3 being intercepted,》 Dana warned.

"I don't care," Tessa replied tersely. "Hurry."

《Aye, ma'am. There is also an incoming message on channel G1. It's from Uruz-2.》

This time, it was a direct message from Hong Kong. She'd never felt so busy

before. “Put it through.”

《Yes, ma’am.》

It was a report from Mao, in Hong Kong. Apparently Corporal Yang had discovered a corpse with a strange message attached. The intelligence division’s recon teams had found the same message in two other locations, as well; these ones didn’t come with corpses, but were just scrawled on the wall or the floor. Additionally, they’d found the same words printed in three local newspapers in classified ads.

“The cub of the Tiger of Badakhshan?” Tessa scowled as she heard the message.

“What could it mean? It doesn’t... sound like a distraction tactic,” Mardukas said.

Tessa had heard that name, “Badakhshan.” It had been about four months ago, but there were two people in her orbit with deep connections to that place. The ship’s AI, Dana, analyzed the message, but all of their known decryption systems turned up dry. Badakhshan was a place in northeast Afghanistan. Tsim Sha Tsui was a city center in Kowloon. Hamdullah was an extremely common Arabic name. They’d searched for Hamdullahs in Hong Kong, and found about four matches. She’d given orders for the intelligence division to investigate each of them.

Just then, Kalinin came in from the hangar. “Reporting in,” he said shortly.

“Perfect timing, Major. Look at this.” Tessa put the message on the screen, and his scowl grew a notch deeper. “Kalinin-san,” she said. “Does it register with you?”

“Some of it,” he acknowledged after a pause. “The Tiger of Badakhshan was a sobriquet of a certain legendary commander of Afghani guerrillas.”

“Afghani guerrillas?” Tessa questioned.

“Yes,” Kalinin confirmed. “I went at it with him several times, myself. At the time, the USSR sent multiple assassins to eliminate him; one was even an eight-year-old child. But all their attempts failed. He was a compassionate man, and he kept the young assassin and gave him a new name. The name was...” Kalinin

fell silent for a moment, and then said, “Kashim.”

Tessa held silent for a moment. “Kashim...” She had first heard that name from the Arbalest’s mission recorder during the seajacking two months ago.

“Colonel,” Kalinin continued. “Could you put me through to Sergeant Sagara?”

“Of course...” Tessa replied. “TDD-HQ to Uruz-2. Please put Uruz-7 on.”

“Uruz-2 here. Um...” Mao hesitated through the static.

“What is it?” Tessa asked.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” Mao apologized. “Uruz-7... isn’t with me.”

22 October, 1708 Hours (East China Standard Time)

Jordan, Kowloon Special Ward (“Democratic Union” Side)

Scrap paper tumbled by on the breeze.

It’s a strange place, Sousuke thought. So many signs, so many storefronts... Like everywhere else he’d been today, it was likely a madhouse of cars and shoppers when all was well. But right now, it was like a ghost town.

Sousuke had no idea where he was going next. He couldn’t muster the energy for anything. If his body was an AS, he’d give it up for someone else to pilot. He found his own existence as repellent as the white machine, right now.

He’d abandoned his mission. Mithril would never trust him again. The thought of facing his comrades’ disappointment and scorn gave him a leaden feeling in his stomach. Even if he was the only one who could pilot the Arbalest, he couldn’t imagine anyone counting on him again.

He thought for a moment about returning to Tokyo, but he was no longer a student at that school. He didn’t even have an apartment. His mission to protect Chidori Kaname was over. And... he couldn’t make a living there. There were no battles to fight, and fighting was the one thing he was good at. It was the only thing he knew.

He could go north from this city, into Mainland China. He could use the

money he had to head north or west, until he arrived in some conflict zone or another. He'd served as a mercenary many times before. He'd go back to the life he'd had before joining Mithril—He'd fight, untroubled by morality or principles, and eventually die doing it. That was sounding like a pretty appealing plan right now.

What did the others he'd known do when they reached this psychological state? The mercenaries he'd known before Mithril frequently drank. They'd guzzle down alcohol, make noise, pick fights, and puke their guts out. It had never looked particularly enjoyable, but it did seem to take their minds off of things. That was what alcohol was for, wasn't it?

"Alcohol, huh..." Sousuke mumbled to himself. Then he thought, *Maybe I'll try it*. The old soldier Yaqub had taught him that drinking was a fool's game. But right now, he didn't care. Yaqub was dead, anyway.

The 7-Eleven was open. Feeling slightly impressed by their dedication, he entered. The shelves were nearly empty; the stock had likely been bought up by the locals in the chaos.

Sousuke grabbed a bottle of Jack Daniels and an English-language newspaper before heading towards the register. He paid with a 500 dollar bill, which earned him a raised eyebrow from the woman at the counter, but she quickly handed him his change.

He walked to a small park a block away and removed the stopper for the whiskey. Then, without hesitation, he took a swig. His reward was a burning in the back of the throat, and Sousuke quickly found himself coughing and retching. *What an awful taste*, he thought. *How do people just guzzle this stuff down? Yaqub was right all along...* He tossed the bottle into a rubbish bin and opened the newspaper.

The newspaper's articles were all about the Venom incident—though of course, the codename "Venom" wasn't known. There was information and speculation about the mystery AS, and loads of opinions from various military specialists. The fear of the citizens, the congestion of the evacuation routes, the effects on the economy—everything it described sounded tragic and dire.

Then his eyes fell on a small classified ad: "To the cub of the Tiger of

Badakhshan. Meet with the Hamdullah of Tsim Sha Tsui.” In an instant, Sousuke knew that the message was for him, and that he was probably the only person in the world who could know what it meant.

It was a roughly ten-minute walk from Jordan to the Tsim Sha Tsui area. Sousuke was feeling a little lightheaded; his peripheral vision was growing fuzzy. That one gulp seemed to have done its job.

Upon reaching the Tsim Sha Tsui area, Sousuke looked around. He found a tourist camera shop, the only store around that was still open, and asked some questions of the workers there.

“There’s a complex of Arab-owned businesses in the neighborhood,” the employee answered him in fluent English. Sousuke offered his thanks and headed for the building in question.

A group of young men with dark skin and beards were loitering around the small entrance. They stared closely at Sousuke, but didn’t try to talk to him. The multi-purpose building was almost like a bazaar, packed tight with small shops.

It was also noisy; in stark contrast to the deserted main avenue, this building was swarming with consumers. Booths jutted into the already narrow corridor, selling clothing, food, electronics, and videos. He could hear some hit song playing over the speakers, as well as loud haggling, and bored men making small talk. The building seemed to exist in its own bubble, unaffected by the Venom’s threat.

Naturally, the men coming and going through the passageways were all Arabs, probably laborers who had traveled a long way to make a living. The most common were Iranian, but he saw quite a few dark-skinned men from Africa, as well.

“Is there an Afghani electronics seller here? Or Tajik, maybe,” Sousuke asked in Afghani-accented Persian of a bored-looking Iranian in a T-shirt. He was surprised by how rusty his pronunciation had gotten.

The man didn’t respond. He just stared at Sousuke, slack-jawed. Sousuke repeated the question, but the man still didn’t respond. He gave up and asked the owner of the CD shop next door.

“Turn right at the third corner there,” the man instructed. “You’ll see his shop sign in the back.” Rather than bothering to push his own wares, the man just pointed to a narrow passage. Then he grinned a toothless grin, and said, “Nothing personal, but when you’re finished, you should probably make yourself scarce. In these parts, you look like a pretty little girl.”

“I know,” Sousuke said indifferently. Most of the people he’d passed on the way here had looked at him in a... *meaningful* way. It stood to reason; he was a sixteen-year-old East Asian with a clean complexion, no facial hair, and no body odor. Back in the day, when he’d gone on joint operations with other guerrilla groups, they’d subjected him to certain “friendly” attentions. He’d been nearly assaulted in his sleep a few times, too.

Sousuke found the store he was after immediately. The old neon sign in the front declared that it was an electronics store.

To the cub of the Tiger of Badakhshan. Meet with the Hamdullah of Tsim Sha Tsui. It was a very simple code, as far as Sousuke was concerned.

The Tiger of Badakhshan—this was another name for Majeed, the storied leader of an Afghani guerrilla force. He was a master tactician in mountainous terrain, a poet, and a scholar of architecture. Through the early 90s, his guerrilla squad had been invincible, but that had all changed when the Soviets got serious about using AS squads in Afghanistan. Unlike previous ground weapons, the humanoid ASes weren’t stymied by the treacherous mountain environments, so there was basically no way for flesh-and-blood guerrillas to oppose them. Majeed’s men had fought the good fight, but within a few years they were crushed and broken, their resistance all but extinguished. Majeed himself had gone missing after that. Not even Sousuke knew if he was dead or alive.

Until three years ago, Sousuke had been one of those guerrillas. Back when things had still been going well, Majeed had even given him his name, “Kashim.” Then he’d left Kashim with the trusted old soldier, Yaqub, to learn battle tactics and mercy in combat. This meant that the “cub of the Tiger of Badakhshan” referred to Sousuke himself. Majeed had had several other sons, but the following sentence was what seemed to single Sousuke out.

Hamdullah was one of Sousuke's dead comrades. He'd run an electronics shop in Kabul, but had joined the guerrillas after losing his business in the civil war. He was the one who had repaired that first disabled enemy AS and rigged it up for Sousuke to use. Major Kalinin had also had some interaction with Hamdullah, but he probably didn't know his name and occupation, so he wouldn't be able to decode the message, either. The only ones who knew Hamdullah well were Sousuke and the now-dead guerrillas.

Thus, the message likely meant: "Sagara Sousuke, find an Afghani electronics shop owner in Tsim Sha Tsui." That was the only thing he could think of. But who'd sent it? A survivor from his old team? No, it wouldn't be that—He had seen their bodies with his own eyes. A friend or relative of one of them, then? It was possible. But then, how would they know that he would be here, in Hong Kong? Could they be involved in the Venom incident, somehow?

Was this a friendly gesture, or a trap? Sousuke had no way of knowing, but he couldn't just ignore the message. That was why he had come here.

The electronics shop was at the end of a dark corridor, and there was no sign of anyone there. Sousuke readied himself to draw his pistol from beneath his jumpsuit at any time, and checked to make sure he wasn't being watched. The concern came out of pure habit, but he realized immediately how foolish he was being. Right now, he didn't have a mission. No one would care if he died.

He peeked into the shop. An old man was sitting in the back; he didn't look familiar. Sousuke approached and was about to address him, but the old man spoke first. "Are you Majeed's son, Kashim?"

"Yes," Sousuke answered simply.

"You've got booze on your breath... you stupid little brat. Have you no respect for the name of the Tiger of Badakhshan?" the old man demanded to know.

"Like I care," Sousuke replied dismissively. Then he asked, "What do you want?"

Clearly displeased with his behavior, the old man offered Sousuke a small, folded scrap of paper with his left hand. "I was asked to give this to you."

"By whom?" Sousuke asked suspiciously.

“A Hongkonger. That’s all I know,” the old man told him. “Take it and get out of my sight.”

Sousuke took the paper, thanked the man, and left. He unfolded it to find a part of a tourist map of Hong Kong. A red circle was drawn around a fountain in Kowloon Park, a few hundred meters from his current location.

22 October, 1809 Hours (East China Standard Time)

Tuatha de Danaan, South China Sea

To speed things up, Tessa’s interaction with operations headquarters was conducted over a G-channel in real time. The situation had somehow gotten worse.

“We no longer have time to conduct an investigation. Cancel the ambush plan,” Admiral Borda’s voice said from over the radio. There was a strained quality to it. “Deploy all of the TDD-1’s M9s. The next time the Venom appears, use an all-out attack to stop it. Usage of the Arbalest is forbidden, though—We don’t want to put that machine in danger.”

“W-Wait a minute,” Tessa argued, leaning forward in her captain’s chair. “My people haven’t worked out a foolproof set of Venom counter-tactics. A deployment now would put them in grave danger. Please, just get us another two hours.”

“I can’t,” Admiral Borda told her. “Lord Mallory is behind this decision, as well.”

“But—”

“Tensions between the North and South have reached a breaking point,” he interrupted. “Every appearance by the Venom adds to the death toll, and we can’t allow it to cause any more harm. Would you prefer us to sit back and wait while more people die?” The stark cruelty of the admiral’s words took the wind out of Tessa’s argument.

“I’ve heard that the Venom’s weakness is its operation time,” he continued. “You’ll have to count on that, and trust your subordinates. They’re elites for a

reason, after all.”

This was nothing like their ordinary missions. She could be sending those men on a suicide mission. They had known that when they gave the order.

Tessa fell silent.

“Is it hard to face, Teletha?” Admiral Borda questioned. “But I told you that you were walking a treacherous path. You chose to stay in that seat anyway. Am I wrong?”

“No,” she admitted after a moment. “You are exactly correct.”

“Right. Then carry out your mission, Colonel Teletha Testarossa,” the admiral commanded.

“Roger.” Tessa ended the transmission and removed her headset. With eyes still on the floor, she said to Mardukas, “Take us to periscope depth. We’ll send all M9s on standby out through the water. Also, prepare an emergency deployment booster for the ARX-7. Give it a Boxer shotcannon and have it waiting in the elevator.”

“Captain,” Mardukas objected. “I believe he forbade the use of the Arbalest?”

“It can serve as a decoy, at least. I want to reduce the danger to the M9s as much as possible. And... Sagara-san might still...” she whispered.

Mardukas let out a small noise of dismay. “If I may, Captain. Sagara has clearly gone AWOL. It is a mistake to put your faith in him and his AS.”

“You don’t know that,” she said weakly.

“This is not some school club,” Mardukas told her bluntly.

“I am aware of that,” she said, her voice beginning to rise. “Kindly spare me your lectures, after everything we’ve been through.”

The voices of the captain and the executive officer were loud enough to be heard throughout the control room, and the crew stared at them in open shock. Mardukas hesitated for a second upon realizing this, then made up his mind, and continued his admonishment. “No, this time I will not be silenced,” he told Tessa flatly. “You are letting personal emotions compromise your execution of our superiors’ orders. What of hierarchy and military law? You cannot give

preferential treatment to one NCO who's abandoned his mission! It's absurd!" His tone was severe enough to make even a veteran officer cringe, yet even then, Tessa didn't back down.

"Very well," she retorted. "But who was it who burdened that NCO with that unspeakable responsibility?"

"It was—"

"It was us, wasn't it?" Tessa demanded. "By all means, tell me if I'm wrong!!"

Mardukas had no reply.

"Six months ago, in that airport full of enemies, who was it who risked his life to bring us that invaluable information?" she continued. "Four months ago, who was it who brought down an enemy unit an order of magnitude more dangerous than the Venom? Two months ago, who was it who nearly died protecting this vessel?"

"I—" Mardukas tried to interject.

"Well?" she demanded again, cutting him off mid-sentence. "Who was it?!"

Silence fell over the control room. Mardukas was struck dumb for a few seconds. Then he sighed and said, "Sergeant Sagara."

"Precisely," Tessa said coldly. "Yet you still feel obliged to criticize him? You still want to declare him a coward?"

"No," he admitted at last.

"I'll acknowledge it, if you want; I *am* fond of him," Tessa went on. "But this has nothing to do with those feelings. I'll swear it to you, if you'd like. He *will* return to us. He's incapable of abandoning us. Even if he's struggling with it now, a person's nature doesn't change. And his nature is... strong, and kind."

"Strong and kind?" Mardukas asked after a lengthy silence. "Captain. Do you really expect that to convince me?"

"It's not about convincing you," Tessa retorted. "It's about having your trust. After everything I've done leading up to today... make your decision! Do you trust me, or not?"

The XO turned his back on the captain, and removed his hat. He looked down at the item—a memento given to him a long time ago—and traced the stitching with his thumb. “You’ve grown stronger,” Richard Mardukas said, as if to himself. “Very well. I’ll have the Arbalest on standby.”

“Thank you. I simply want... everyone to come back safely.” Tessa said, her eyes pointed downward.

For some reason, the argument between Tessa and Mardukas had been broadcast sub-wide on an open channel, and the operators of the waiting M9s had been among those listening in.

“You guys get all that? And the channel opened on its own... you think someone wanted us to hear it?” Kurz said on a secure channel to the other four operators.

“I have... no idea,” Lieutenant Clouseau responded.

“The major?” Kurz guessed.

“Maybe.”

“But he really went AWOL? Sagara? I can’t believe it,” said Uruz-8, Corporal Speck.

“That’s what the lieutenant colonel said,” Kurz put in, “but that doesn’t mean you should believe it.”

“Lieutenant Clouseau, do you know anything about it?” Speck asked.

“I was given the gist, but it’s not enough to draw any conclusions,” Clouseau told them neutrally. “Major Kalinin shares my opinion. Either way, we should make our plans assuming we won’t have Sagara or the Arbalest.”

“What do you think, Roger?” Kurz asked.

Roger Sandraptor was silent before speaking. “I don’t know what’s inside Sagara’s heart. But what the colonel said seems logical to me—A hawk remains a hawk all its life.”

“A hawk, eh?”

After giving their thoughts, the men of the SRT went back to their checklists.

“But to see Tessa laying into her XO like that...” Kurz mused.

“She likes Sagara, right?” Speck said. “They’re the same age and all.”

“It’s probably more than that,” Kurz muttered in annoyance. “She said ‘I want everyone to come back safely.’ What do you think of that, boys?”

“That’s the plan, as far as I’m concerned,” said Clouseau.

“I have no intention of bringing sorrow to our princess,” said Uruz-3, Lieutenant Castello.

“I can’t believe she’s that worried about us. Not sure what to say... I’m honestly touched?” said Corporal Speck.

“She’s a good officer,” said Uruz-5, Sergeant Sandraptor.

They all sank into thought. Despite what had happened with Dunnigan and Nguyen, Tessa continued to trust them implicitly, which inspired both gratitude and skepticism in the men.

Just then, over the main line, the deploy order came through to the machines.

“Uruz-1 to all units. You heard that?” Clouseau asked over the channel. “We’ll meet up with Uruz-2 on-site and go on standby immediately. Major Kalinin will command from above. If you’re professionals, you can do this. I won’t make any mistakes. Neither will you. We’re going to execute this perfectly. Got that?”

“Roger.”

22 October, 1824 Hours (East China Standard Time)

Mithril Intelligence Hong Kong Branch, Hong Kong Special Region (“People’s Committee” Side)

Hunter was receiving the same change-of-plan orders from Intelligence Division Chief Amit. “So we’re out of time, eh?” he concluded.

“That’s right,” Amit agreed. “Leave the rest to operations.”

“Roger that.”

“Thank you.”

The minute Amit disappeared from the screen, Hunter cursed loudly. “Dammit!” He’d only just received a request from Melissa Mao’s superior, diverted a few of his valuable personnel to the task, and was on the verge of catching the enemy with their pants down. If the armies could have held off for just two more hours, Mithril could have resolved everything with minimal conflict.

“Sir,” his Hong Kong secretary said as he entered the office. When Hunter didn’t respond, he prompted him again. “Excuse me? President Hunter?”

“What is it?” Hunter asked tersely.

“You have a pair of visitors,” the secretary explained apologetically. “They’ve been here for a while, and they’re apparently in quite a hurry to see you...”

“Turn them away,” Hunter decided. “I’m in a very bad mood right now, and I don’t care how rude they might find it.”

“Y-Yes, sir...” The secretary bowed, and was just about to withdraw when two people barged past him into his office. One was an old acquaintance from the intelligence division, and the other was an East Asian girl he’d never seen before.

“Hey, old man! How the hell long were you gonna keep us waiting?!” the girl shouted, bearing down on Hunter.

22 October, 1708 Hours (East China Standard Time)

Kowloon Park, Kowloon Peninsula Special Ward (“Democratic Union” Side)

Sousuke walked through the empty park, the tourist map in one hand.

Kowloon Park was an island of green in a concrete jungle; it seemed to be to Kowloon what Central Park was to Shinjuku. The place marked on the map turned out to be a dry fountain. Sousuke plopped down carelessly on a nearby

bench. He couldn't bring himself to go through his usual perimeter checks. If someone wanted to kill him, let them do it—it would honestly make things easier on him.

The streetlamps illuminated the area well, and he could see a line of tall buildings in the distance. There were at least five perfect sniper positions in the area, by his reckoning.

Five minutes passed. No one came. Suddenly, Sousuke heard the ringing of a phone coming from a nearby trash can. He approached and looked inside. The ringing phone was wrapped up in a snack bag; he pulled it out and pressed the answer button.

“Sagara Sousuke?” an unfamiliar male voice asked.

“Yes.”

“Are you alone?”

“Yes.”

“There's a taxi waiting at the north entrance to the park,” the unknown speaker told him. “Take that phone and get in.” That was all—the phone call cut off.

Sousuke stood up sluggishly and left the park, heading for the north entrance, where he found a taxi waiting in front of a convenience store. It was the only car there; in the distance, he could hear the wailing of an ambulance.

He got into the taxi. The driver said something, then took off. He didn't seem to speak English, so Sousuke gave up on asking him questions. They headed north down the avenue, towards a squalid downtown area. Everywhere they went seemed deserted and desolate.

At last, the taxi stopped in front of a shuttered-up hardware store. The driver gestured for him to get out, refused payment and then drove off. The downtown area was quiet. Shop signs almost completely smothered his view of the gray sky above.

The cell phone in Sousuke's hand rang again, echoing down the empty city streets. “Look for a yellow shop sign. Behind it is a post box. Find inside it a key

for apartment 13,” a man’s voice said. On the other end of the phone, Sousuke could hear the whirring of some kind of generator. “There’s a staircase nearby. Climb up two floors and you’ll find a corridor. Open the fifth door, and go inside. *He* will be waiting for you there.”

“He?” Sousuke questioned. “Who?”

“Remember the name of the place you’re in.” The call cut off. That was apparently all he’d had to say.

Sousuke looked around him. There was a bus stop nearby. Written on the sign were the characters 九龍寨城, or Kowloon Walled City—it didn’t give him any clues. No, the characters in “Kowloon”—“nine dragons.”

No. It can’t be, Sousuke thought. *It’s not possible. Not after everything—* And yet, it explained everything.

He’d come too far to turn back now. Sousuke followed the voice’s instructions, took the key from the post box, and ascended the stairs beside the hardware store. He walked down the communal corridor and stopped in front of the fifth door.

He stood there silently, feeling tension infuse the limbs that, just moments ago, had felt limp and lifeless. He put the key in the lock and opened the door. It was a cramped living room, even smaller than the equivalent in a Tokyo apartment. There were almost no furnishings in sight.

As Sousuke quietly proceeded through the dark room, he found himself unconsciously scanning for tripwires and laser triggers. Then he realized that he had drawn his gun. *You’re acting like a fool*, a little voice in his head told him. *You knew this was a trap, and you walked straight into it.* Yet, he couldn’t stop walking.

He arrived in a sitting room. Light streamed in from the window, and in the darkness at the back of the room lay a bed. Someone was lying on top of it.

“Hey...” An electronically synthesized voice echoed through the pitch black room. It was speaking Japanese. “I’ve been waiting a long time, Kashim.” Lights from a passing car outside the window momentarily illuminated the face of the man on the bed.

Seeing the face... the pathetically decrepit face, Sousuke whispered, "Gauron..."

'Kowloon' was the anglicized pronunciation of the characters that meant 'nine dragons'—but in Cantonese dialect, they sounded more like 'Gauron.' Nine Dragons Peninsula. Nine Dragons Park. Nine Dragons City.

Why hadn't it occurred to him? No, why hadn't he even thought about it, even when it was staring him in the face? They'd known his name, "Kashim." The only person in the world who would know about him and Hamdullah, aside from Kalinin... would be him. But Sousuke had convinced himself that he had to be dead.

"Gauron..." Sousuke whispered again.

The figure that lay on the pristine sheets was smaller than expected. He appeared to be a quadruple amputee, with a right thigh and left bicep all that remained of his limbs. He was connected to a tangle of tubes and IVs; a few cords linked him back to a set of quietly humming medical devices. It was probably all that was keeping him alive.

Gauron's face, too, was a sad sight. The skin on the left half had been scraped off, leaving masses of keloid scarring, and there was a gaping hole where his left eye should be. This remaining eye filled with mirth as it gazed at Sousuke, and his lips curled back to reveal pale gums and teeth. "I'm happy to see you, Kashim," Gauron's synthetic voice said artificially. "Can I offer you a drink? Though, I'm afraid you'll have to pour it yourself..."

"How did you—" Sousuke began to ask.

"—Survive?" Gauron taunted. "This is the third time you've asked... But don't worry; this will be the last time." A rustle echoed through the room, like static; it must have been laughter. "I hope you haven't forgotten. My Codarl had a lambda driver, remember? It can even protect its operator from a self-detonation. Of course, even then, it couldn't stop me from ending up like this..." There was another electronic chuckle.

"How did you survive in that storm?" Sousuke asked again.

“A fishing boat happened to be passing through the area. That’s why only half of my body ended up as fish bait,” Gauron told him. “You never know with the ocean, do you? It just left me half-dead. Cruel, isn’t it?”

Sousuke turned his pistol to the man’s head. “Then I’ll be sure to finish you, this time.”

“By all means,” Gauron invited. “But you can see the state I’m in... there’s no reason to rush it, is there?”

Sousuke remained silent, seething. After a moment, he asked, “What do you want with me?”

“I wanted to talk to you,” Gauron said innocently.

“Don’t be stupid.”

“It’s true.” He chuckled again. “As you can see, I’m running out of time. I wouldn’t have gone to such lengths, otherwise... I stole a Codarl-m from the organization and sent it on a rampage in town. I knew that would bring you here—with that white AS of yours. Then I spread that message all over the city. I made sure it was everywhere; anywhere your people would look, in any media you might lay eyes on...”

The advertisement Sousuke had seen must have been part of this “campaign.” Mao, Yang, and the others might have seen the message, too, but they wouldn’t have been able to interpret it.

“And now, in the end, you’re here,” Gauron continued. “I thought you’d bring a few friends along, but... I see you’re alone. What happened there, I wonder...”

“That’s none of your business,” Sousuke told him.

He’d meant the words to sound icily indifferent, but Gauron must have noticed the slight strain behind them, because he let out a melancholy chuckle. “Hmph. Finally becoming a bad fit for you, is it?” he observed.

“What?”

“Mithril,” Gauron clarified. “Staying with those do-gooders that long would leave anyone rankled... especially a man like you.”

‘Rankled’—Sousuke couldn’t deny it. But he was determined not to discuss it,

so he changed the subject forcefully. “Tell me about the organization you work for.”

“So the job does still matter to you, eh?” Gauron chuckled again, his artificial laughter low in tone.

Sousuke made no reply.

“Very well. This one’s on the house, then—It can be part of my revenge against *them*, anyway,” he said with an air of nonchalance, and then launched into his explanation. “‘Amalgam’ is the name of the organization that employed me. Their primary goal is to invent new weapons and test them in the field; to that end, they work to fan the flames of terrorism and regional conflict. Scratch a hawk faction in any country in the world, you’ll find a den of Amalgam sympathizers—Both East and West have their fair share of people wanting to preserve the structure and militarization of the Cold War, after all. The Fifth Arab-Israeli Conflict, the Chinese Civil War, the Soviet Civil War... Amalgam had their fingers in all of those pies.”

“This chaos in Hong Kong, too?” Sousuke guessed.

Gauron laughed again. “That one’s entirely my doing,” he admitted. “It has Amalgam in a rare state of panic, I’m sure. There’s a pair of brothers I raised in circumstances similar to yours, long ago—I gave them the order, and they raised havoc. Plus they’ve given me these clean sheets, and this first-rate medical equipment... Oh, the loyalty! It brings tears to the eye.”

“Are they still using the Venom?” Sousuke asked directly.

“If you mean the Codarl-m,” Gauron said, “then yes.”

“Where is it hiding?”

“You really think I’ll tell you that?” he asked scornfully. “What have you got in that bag? It’s a radio, isn’t it? I may be losing my mind, but I’m not quite that far gone.”

“Tell me.” Sousuke pointed the gun at Gauron, but the man merely laughed.

“Oh, please,” he choked out. “You really think death scares me now? You must be losing *your* mind, too.”

Sousuke found himself lowering the gun, but continued to glower at his long-time nemesis. “That organization... Amalgam, you said? Does it contain a ‘Whispered’?”

“Ah, I expected you’d ask that. The answer is yes,” Gauron confirmed. “In fact, the Whispered is one of their leading members. Quite a snot-nosed brat, but not without his amusing points.”

“Why are they after Chidori Kaname, if they have their own Whispered?” Sousuke wanted to know. “They can’t need her.”

“Because no Whispered is omnipotent; each possesses their own knowledge set,” Gauron explained. “Some individuals know more about lambda driver theory, while some can only speak to submarine technology. There are a variety of fields in play, so when a new Whispered is discovered, it’s first necessary to determine their forte. The tests we did on that girl in Sunan were to discover both if she was a Whispered—and what *kind* of Whispered she was.”

“What did you find?” Sousuke asked, curious despite himself.

“She was clearly a Whispered... but if they found her specialty, they never told me,” Gauron said. “Rather than kidnapping and investigating her again, though, Amalgam made the decision to wait and watch. I couldn’t tell you why.”

“Where is Amalgam’s main base?” Sousuke asked next. “What’s the hierarchy?”

Gauron chuckled. “Getting greedy now, are you? Here’s my hint: ‘badam.’”

“Badam?”

“Sorry, that’s all you get. I’m growing bored now—It’s not the talking I mind, but the topic doesn’t interest me,” Gauron told him. “It’s not what I wanted to talk about, anyway.”

Sousuke looked down silently at Gauron, whose wretched features reflected amusement. The idea of abasing himself to this man made him sick, but he forced the words out: “Tell me. Please.” He gritted his teeth and waited for the answer, expecting more grinning and taunts.

But Gauron was far from delighted; instead, his gaze at Sousuke turned

scornful, yet vexed. “Did you just say ‘please’? I can’t imagine a more pathetic word, coming from you.”

“What?” Sousuke was surprised.

“I suppose you’ve completely sold out to that dubious organization,” Gauron grumbled.

“Dubious? Mithril?”

“Yes. Now, *this* is what I wanted to talk about.” Gauron’s spirits revived; he cleared his throat, then began. “Think about it. Mithril spends billions of dollars on a submarine, right? I hate to be the one to say it, but how many millions of the poor could that money have helped? ‘Tamping down regional conflict’? ‘Keeping the peace’? Please. They’re no different than Amalgam! Dig a few wells in impoverished villages, then talk to me. Am I right?”

“That’s a strawman argument,” Sousuke said dismissively.

“Indeed,” Gauron returned. “But it’s hard to fully buy into, isn’t it? You can see why Dunnigan and Nguyen turned.”

Sousuke was silent.

“And yet, you’ve stayed. There’s something so unnatural about who you are now, compared to the Kashim I knew. Unconcerned if he lived or died, as unemotional as a doll—that Kashim was a loyal attack dog, slaughtering his enemies without a trace of remorse.” Gauron’s words brought back to mind Sousuke’s life before Mithril. “Think back,” Gauron encouraged. “What were you doing when we first met?”

That was five years ago, now. Gauron had been an instructor at a mercenary camp in Afghanistan. Kashim had been a guerrilla fighting the Soviets in a nearby mountain range. Their first encounter had been by chance, and they weren’t enemies then—they weren’t allies, either, but their immediate interests weren’t at odds.

Kashim had first encountered Gauron while he was in the middle of cleaning up enemy bodies; he’d just taken out a Soviet AS platoon. He could still remember the man’s first words: “You’re working hard, kid. Are all these your kills?” Gauron had stopped his jeep on the roadside as he passed. At the time,

he was still whole and hardy, without even the scar on his forehead.

“Yes,” Kashim had answered, as he looked over the charred remains of corpses, ASes and armored cars strewn about. His Rk-92, sitting up on one knee, towered over them.

Gauron had smiled at him, in the same unsettling way he still did to this day, and said, “Then I truly have hope for the future. What’s your name?”

“Kashim.”

“Kashim. Your people will be losing the war here soon. Do you want to come back to my camp? We’ve got food, ammunition, and AS parts.”

“No.”

“Oh, really? Take care, then.” Gauron had driven away, and Kashim had gone back to cleaning up bodies. And that was their first meeting.



“You rounded up those charred corpses without a word of complaint,” Gauron reminisced. “When I was that age, I’d been living in Cambodia, spending my days in a similar way—cleaning up after the slaughters of Pol Pot’s regime. That’s why, when I saw you, I couldn’t help but take interest.” He chuckled.

“And?” Sousuke asked.

“You just had the most wonderful look in your eyes,” Gauron recalled fondly. “No wondering, no questioning, no angst. The eyes of a wild beast—of a saint, rather. Nothing could possibly faze you. Killing as effortlessly as most men draw breath, indifferent to both life and death... it’s the definition of beauty, if you ask me. You know what I mean? You were *consistent*, free from complication or contradiction. Well? Philosophical, aren’t I?”

Sousuke didn’t respond to the question.

“When I saw you again in Sunan... I can’t tell you how happy I was.” Gauron laughed. “You still had that fine old look in your eyes; that same indifference to life. I thought, ‘I would love to kill you now.’ I also thought, ‘I’ll drag your corpse out of that AS and fuck it.’ Ah, I’m just joking.” Gauron chuckled at first, then burst out in wheezing laughter. “I am! I mean it!” The man, not much bigger than a large sofa cushion, was cackling so hard that he trembled on the bed. The sight—and the sound—was somehow pathetic and bone-chilling at once. “And now... look at you,” he said, his laughter halting immediately.

“What?” Sousuke was caught off-guard at this change in direction.

“You look like any other brat out there. Is that angst I see? Questioning? Where did that saint-like clarity go? It’s a disappointment,” Gauron sighed. “You’ve been dragged down by all their shitty ideas. You’re hideous now—a mess of contradictions; even uglier than I am. You’re not even worth killing.”

“Shut up.” Sousuke turned his gun to Gauron once again.

“We were of a kind, once,” Gauron mourned. “Why would you try to become normal? It’s sickening.”

“I told you to shut up,” Sousuke snarled.

“No, I’m going to keep talking,” Gauron returned defiantly. “Mithril and your

little school chums have ruined you. Their spineless idealism has rubbed off on you; it's made you boring. You admitted you were rankled before, didn't you? It's because of them, that so-called humanism of theirs—more accurately, the resentment of the strong by the weak. Now Kashim the murder-saint is gone, never to return again, all because you fell for their con."

"Listen to me," Gauron continued urgently. "The weak are like parasites. They feed off the strong, with their treachery ideas of comradeship and trust that just serve to suck the marrow from our bones."

Sousuke didn't want to listen—because in that moment, every word from the man's mouth seemed to ring true. Could there be anything more terrifying than having his mortal enemy, of all people, be the one to correctly assess what had brought him to this point?

But the man was right; he had become weak. *Truly weak. When did it start?* he asked himself. *When I joined Mithril, when I went to Jindai High School, when I met her...*

"Tell me how it feels," Gauron said encouragingly. "Do you enjoy being one of the sheep?"

Sousuke groaned. Something seemed to beckon to him from the darkness beyond the bed.

"Go on, tell me. Do you enjoy being one of the sheep? Well?!"

"I told you to shut up!" Sousuke squeezed the trigger, and the gunshot echoed through the room. The bullet hit Gauron's pillow and let up a wisp of smoke... but that was all.

"Can't even work up the nerve to kill an enemy now, hmm?" Gauron taunted, a thin smile on his face.

"Shut up," was all Sousuke could say, his voice weak and fading. His face was on fire. His breathing was ragged. His back was soaked with sweat.

It was then that a large shadow passed outside the window: It was the Venom, which must have been hiding somewhere nearby. Its diamond-shaped head peered in through the square window at Sousuke and Gauron.

“Is that you, Fei-zau?” Gauron asked.

“I’m on my way out,” the Venom responded through its external speakers. It was the same voice that Sousuke had heard on the phone.

“I see. Take care.”

“Farewell, Sinsang.” The gray AS covered its right fist with its left hand in an expression of respect, then straightened up and leaped. It bounded lightly over shops and apartments, and disappeared in the direction of the city center. The wind its movement generated rattled the windows in its wake.

“Fei-zau will likely die in combat with Mithril,” Gauron said. “If he doesn’t... the Amalgam task force will kill him instead.”

“Task force?” Sousuke questioned.

“Oh, their commander is an absolute madman. Your ‘comrades’ don’t stand a chance,” Gauron chuckled. “They’ll be dead on arrival. But then, maybe that’s for the best...”

Sousuke remained silent.

“I’ll be dead soon myself,” Gauron said, looking up at the ceiling. His tone was completely matter-of-fact. “I was hoping to take a few things out with me, though. That *is* my style, after all... I ordered Fei-zau there to rampage until Hong Kong burned. And I ordered the other, Fei-hung... to kill the primary cancer behind your decline.”

“The... cancer?”

Gauron’s mouth widened in one final smile. There was something truly gleeful about it. “The *girl*, Kashim. You haven’t heard?”

Sousuke held his breath.

“He told me the whole thing,” Gauron gloated. “That cute little uniform, all rumpled and torn... Oh, but she was brave, he said; didn’t beg for her life once. Her last words were ‘I’m sorry...’ Who could she have meant that for, I wonder? Ah, tugs at the heartstrings, doesn’t it?”

“You... You’re lying,” Sousuke said shakily.

“But I’m not. I thought about sharing a picture of her corpse, to watch as despair consumed you... but I’ll exercise restraint. After all, Kashim, I can see how badly it’s hurt you already. Ah, my giiirl back in Toookyooo! It’s too late to saaave her! My poor daaarling Kaname-chaaan! She was such a sweet giiirl!”

Sousuke pointed his gun straight at Gaaron. He didn’t waver this time. “Gaaron!”

“That’s right, I killed her!” Gaaron exclaimed gleefully. “Now, hate me!”

All Sousuke’s hesitation left him, and he fired six shots into Gaaron’s chest. Each sent a spasm through the man and sprayed fresh blood across the sheets, until at last, the heart monitor settled into a flat, empty tone.

Gaaron’s eye remained wide open, gazing into the middle distance, at the place where Sousuke’s gun had been. His face was locked in its twisted smile.

As Sousuke gasped for breath, he could feel his ears ringing. “It’s not true...” he choked out. Suddenly, he didn’t know where he was, or who he was, or what the corpse in front of him meant. He knew someone had died in some far-off place, but he didn’t know who.

Kaname is... dead? It finally hit him. Alone in a dark room, in a deserted city... In that instant, Sousuke really was alone in the world.

An electronic sound reached his ears. *Beep..... beep... beep... bebebeep...* Its tone gradually grew higher. It wasn’t the sound of the medical devices. It was something else... yes, under the bed—

Alarm bells blared from a corner of his numbed brain, and his body was moving before he even knew why. He didn’t bother to question it, he just dashed across the room and smashed through the nearby window.

A split-second later, the apartment exploded. Some high-performance explosives hidden under the bed had gone off, shaking the entire complex with the force, and sending tongues of flame out from every window. The shockwave had shattered every window in the area, and the glass fragments now littered the deserted road.

Sousuke clung to the sign he’d managed to grab onto as he leaped. He let out a groan, and then his hand slipped, and he fell onto the sidewalk in front of the

hardware store.

Fire blazed high above him. Glass and rubble littered the street around him. Sousuke sat up unsteadily, and gazed at the burning debris with empty eyes.

Two men were running toward him across the glass-scattered road. They were in plain clothes, so he didn't recognize them at first, but they were Hunter's subordinates in the intelligence division. "You're looking rough, Sergeant," one agent said, looking up at the second floor of the burning apartment.

"How did you know I was here?" Sousuke asked.

"The major asked us to tail you," admitted the agent.

"I see..."

"The museum for the old Kowloon Fort is nearby. It looks like the Venom was hiding in its courtyard," the other agent mused. "Although... it's irrelevant, now."

Sousuke could hear artillery fire coming from the downtown area; the Venom must be out on its rampage. This was followed by more shots, these ones coming from the ASes of the South Chinese Army.

No... it wasn't the South Chinese Army. Sousuke recognized the rapid-fire pattern as belonging to the Oerlikon Contraves-made GEC-B rifle, which the South Chinese Army didn't use.

"Your comrades' M9s are fighting," one of the agents informed him.

"What?" Sousuke asked in shock.

"We ran out of time," the agent told him. "Apparently, they'll be fighting the Venom head-on."

There was no way to describe it but reckless. *How can they fight the Venom without the Arbalest?* Sousuke wondered. It was suicide.

"We just contacted them on the radio," an agent told him. "They're sending your AS from the Tuatha de Danaan."

"What?" Sousuke asked again.

“That’s all I know. We’re going to start searching for anything the Venom left behind in its hideout. Just wait here, okay? We need to go,” the agent said. Then the two of them ran on past Sousuke.

Alone again, Sousuke could only stand there, permeated by a sense of isolation. *The Arbalest is coming here?* he thought. But he couldn’t use it anymore. That AS was what had sent his destiny spinning off the rails—he didn’t even want to look at it. He wanted to call the de Danaan and say, “Don’t bother; it’s pointless,” but the bag containing his radio had been blown away with Gauron.

“Gauron...” he whispered. *If my instincts had triggered one split-second later, I would’ve died in that room with him. Was that his plan? To take me out with him?*

No, that’s not it, Sousuke realized. It was a test—If my senses were so atrophied that I’d failed to move in time, it would be a sign that I was better off dead. Even after losing something critical, I still try to keep on moving... was he mocking that tendency in me? Was he trying to say, “I’ll die here, but you get to go on suffering”?

That’s probably it, he concluded. By killing Chidori Kaname, Gauron has stolen my hope and my future. If he wanted to put a curse on me, he couldn’t have picked a better way to do it.

Kaname was dead. It still didn’t feel real. Yet, Sousuke could feel what little light and warmth remained in him dwindle into nothing. He’d seen so much death throughout his life; she was just another picture in that unfortunate album.

No tears fell from his eyes. All he felt was a return to that familiar old melancholy. *That’s how life is, he reminded himself. Nothing’s changed. I never had a future.*

Wind began to blow through the dry cracks in his heart: indifference to himself, indifference to life. No death would make a ripple in his soul ever again.

Sousuke could hear an engine roaring above; it drew his eyes to that narrow strip of sky visible beyond the shop signs. A white bird was flying in from the

south. No, not a bird—the Arbalest.

It soared straight for him, riding through the night on the wings of an emergency deployment booster. The booster completed its fuel burn; the wings detached and a parachute opened. It slowed the Arbalest's descent, but not enough. A second parachute opened, and it slowed even more.

Then suddenly, the parachutes tore free, and the white giant plunged through countless signs to land on the deserted street. It pulverized the asphalt as it slammed into the road with the broken signs bouncing its wake. But the narrowness of the streets had thrown off its landing posture, and inertia brought it toppling forward, right in Sousuke's direction.

Sousuke watched silently as the massive white form closed in... then missed him by a hair, only to crash chest-first into the burning apartment beside him. The impact rustled Sousuke's hair and clothes, but he didn't even flinch as the machine finally settled, collapsing onto its right side.

Burning detritus flitted around the machine, stirred up by the crash. It was a pathetic landing, utterly humiliating. Sousuke felt embarrassment just watching it.

In the flames, the machine now lay still, its eyes gazing at him blankly.

We make a lousy team, the eyes of the Arbalest seemed to tell him. I know you hate me. I hate you, too. So walk away if you want. I'm in no mood for this, either. I don't care what happens anymore.

What does it matter to you if someone dies? the phantom Arbalest went on in his mind. *You don't care what happens to Kurz, or to Mao, or to any of them. They'll be gone sooner or later, eventually, just like Chidori Kaname. Just like the others, back in Afghanistan. They'll all die, and so will you. That's just how the world is. Give up already.*

He felt mocked, ridiculed, insulted by a mere machine. And yet, he couldn't be angry.

"Yeah, that's right," Sousuke whispered at last. His voice was cold and empty. "You can lie there and rot." He didn't care. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered anymore. But, just as he was about to turn to leave, he heard a voice—a girl's

voice.

“What the heck are you standing there mumbling about?” the voice said. The words were Japanese, and it seemed to be speaking to him.

He turned around, and... there, standing in the middle of the road, was Chidori Kaname. Her feet were firmly planted and her arms were folded in a scolding posture. He had to rub his eyes and look again.

She was dressed in her Jindai High School uniform, and there was a travel bag hanging off her right shoulder. From head to toe, she was exactly the girl he knew. But wait, no... he looked closer and saw the plasters, which were stuck here and there on her legs. There was a brace over her right knee, and a band-aid on her chin.

“What—” he started to ask.

“Don’t ‘what’ me,” the girl, who looked just like Chidori Kaname, said with a scowl.

Sousuke stared in disbelief a moment longer. “Chidori?” It wasn’t an illusion; she was alive. But why was she here? How had she known where he was? He staggered toward her with unsteady steps. “Chidori... you’re... all right?”

“Apparently,” she shrugged, scowl deepening.

“I thought... you were dead,” he stammered back. “Chido—” Suddenly, the travel bag slammed into the side of his head, knocking him off his balance. After a few stunned moments, he managed to squeak, “What?”

“I said don’t ‘what’ me!!” Kaname shouted at him. “Do you understand the shit I had to crawl through to get here?! You think I want to hear that you thought I was dead?! I’d been thinking the mushiest stuff, see? ‘The next time I see him, I’ll throw my arms around him!’ But now you’ve killed the mood! What the hell is your problem, huh?! You’d better make this one up to me!”

“Er, wait a minute,” Sousuke said, now rapidly trying to backpedal. “I don’t understand—”

“Shut the hell up!” This time, she socked him in the jaw.

“Blurgh...”

“Does it hurt?” Kaname demanded. “Does it? That’s the pain you put my heart through. And this...!” She chopped him in the neck with her hand.

“Hlugh...”

“...is the pain you put my body through! And this...!!” Kaname jumped and drove her knee into Sousuke’s solar plexus.

“Glub...”

“...is the pain! You put my soul through!!” As Sousuke fell to his knees, Kaname finished him off with a Bruce Lee-style punch.

“What in the world... is going on here?” he asked, trembling.

“Remember that agent person... you know, the one called Wraith?” she said, nostrils flaring. “I said, ‘if you don’t want me to spill the beans on how you almost got me killed, you’d better take me to Sousuke.’ Basically blackmail, right? Then when I saw that AS Gauron piloted on the news, it all made sense. I knew you’d have to be here.”

“B-But... this city is on the verge of war,” Sousuke protested. “It’s not safe here.”

“Yeah, I know,” Kaname told him pointedly. “The airport wasn’t taking flights, which is why it took us a whole day to get here. I really worked my ass off, okay?!”

“But why...?” *Why are you here? Why risk the danger?* Sousuke wanted to ask. He couldn’t even begin to fathom her reasons.

“Well...” He looked up in time to see Kaname avert her gaze, like a child being scolded for a prank. “I mean... letting things end like we did seemed... you know...”

“What?” he questioned.

“Seriously, it’s nothing. It’s just... it made me so mad, the way you ran off like that! I was like, ‘I’m gonna find that guy and grab him by the collar and drag him back to school! Because I’m—’” Kaname clenched her fists tight, screwing up the will to say something important. “I’m—”

“You’re...?”

She smacked herself on the head a few times as if to knock the words free, and took in a deep breath... but in the end, all she said was, “I’m... your class representative.”

Sousuke stared at her, baffled.

Kaname let out a deep sigh, and muttered, “I guess a day really does sap the determination...”

He had no idea what she meant. “What does that matter?” he wanted to know.

“Shut up!” Kaname fumed at him defensively. “And... what’s your problem, anyway?! What are you sitting around here for? Don’t you know there’s a bad guy loose in the city?”

“But—”

“But what? You’re just gonna stand there and watch that AS go to town? I saw your face a minute ago!” Kaname said accusingly. “You looked like the old you!”

“What...?” Sousuke asked, now thoroughly bewildered.

“You know, back when I called you Sagara-kun! Like... you don’t care what happens to you,” she said sadly. “You looked so cold. And sad, really sad... Ah, what am I saying? The point is... um...” Kaname floundered on, stammering. “Look, I got a call on the radio from Mao earlier. She said you were kind of falling apart. You were kind of losing your... spirit, you know? Your ‘let’s do this!’ attitude.”

Sousuke said nothing.

“But, you know?” Kaname mused. “When everyone’s in trouble, you always go help. It’s part of who you are.”

“Who I am?” he questioned.

“Yeah.”

“But Chidori,” Sousuke protested. “I... I abandoned you...” *You had nobody else to turn to, and yet I abandoned you*, he castigated himself. *Following that stupid, worthless order... And despite that, you still—*

“I told you, it’s fine now,” she said, interrupting his thoughts. “Because we got to see each other again. Look, I get it... You couldn’t bring yourself to tell me, right?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Ugh... seriously, you’re such a coward.”

“Coward...”

“Yeah,” Kaname accused him. “A total coward. But you’re also strong, and you’re kind. And you honestly suck in a lot of ways, but you somehow make it work. I think... all of that is who you really are.” Kaname smiled bashfully. Her smile was like magic. “I mean... I’m right, right?”

Somehow, those awkward, halting words had caused Gauron’s curse to vanish into the ether; Sousuke couldn’t believe how quickly it left him. He felt cleansed. The hesitation that had clung to him like tar was now washed away with the tide.

‘Coward’... Gauron said I used to be strong. But... he was wrong. I’ve always been weak. A weak person, trying to be strong, he realized. I had to stop being a coward because I had to become stronger—that’s the only reason. The weight of the things I’m supposed to protect—the old me never felt it. That’s the only difference between then and now.

I’m a weak being, full of contradictions. I’m not a superhero. I can’t save the whole world. I’m just... one stupid man, who can maybe save a few of the people around him, at best. Can a man like that really be a soldier?

Yes, Sousuke decided. *There are times when I can. And through some whim of fate, I’ve been given the chance to do it time and again. Now is one of those times: My comrades are waiting on the other side of those flames.*

The melancholy and death that’s been so constant in my life, so much that it feels like fate... I have the tools to struggle against that, don’t I? Isn’t that what fighting is? That’s right...

He looked down and spoke, slowly and hesitantly. “Chidori. I—”

Smack! Kaname got him with an ankle sweep, and Sousuke kissed the Hong

Kong pavement.

“What are you—”

“Don’t ‘Chidori, I’ me!!” Kaname shouted at him with all her strength.

“But I—”

“No more talk! There’s no time, okay? Your world history credit’s at stake! Tomorrow, fifth period! You can still make it! But for now, go over *there...*” she pointed straight for the city center, then towards the Arbalest lying on the ground. “...and take care of *that!*”

The white AS’s eyes spoke to him again. *Well, what now?* they seemed to say.

It was a dangerous game, like hunting a wild beast. The six M9s, including Clouseau, maintained a ring around the Venom—which had just destroyed an M6 belonging to the South Chinese Army—as they pursued.

The Venom had taken out Corporal Speck’s M9 thirty seconds into hostilities. He’d been disoriented by all the signs and winding streets, and in a moment’s lapse during a retreat, he had let the enemy get in too close. The lambda driver’s shockwave had slammed his machine, taking him immediately out of the fight. In the flurry and confusion of battle, they had no time to check if Speck was dead, or assess the severity of his machine’s damage.

“Uruz-1, it’s heading your way!” Mao warned Clouseau sharply.

“I saw it,” he told her. “I just—” A powerful explosion at close range sent him reeling; the enemy machine had thrown an anti-tank dagger.

“Uruz-1?!” called Mao.

The Venom came charging at him through the smoke. Clouseau pressed his back against a high-rise apartment and opened fire. Deflected, his rifle’s shots flew off in random directions, causing a new rain of debris.

The Venom rushed in close and struck out with a fist. Clouseau just barely ducked it, but the distortion in the air that wreathed the strike blew away the M9’s right shoulder and the building behind it simultaneously.

He felt a heavy jolt, accompanied by a high-pitched wheeze of air. For just a

moment, Clouseau's mind turned hazy. He dug down deep, skillfully righted his machine and, in the same motion, unleashed a whirlwind-like roundhouse kick. The M9's heel struck the Venom in the head, taking it slightly off its balance. Another knee. Another elbow. Clouseau tried to draw the monomolecular cutter from his machine's hip, but its right arm wouldn't respond. No—it was missing from the shoulder down. Clouseau gasped. The Venom pressed in mercilessly and raised its hand flat, like a blade.

"Don't move, Uruz-1." It was Kurz's voice; a long-range sniper shot tore into the Venom. The enemy machine's body went flying, as if struck from the side. Clouseau used the distraction to leap his M9 away, getting some distance from its enemy. A more mediocre operator never would have made it.

"It deflected again," Kurz fumed. "The thing's a damned cockroach!"

"Thanks, Uruz-6," Clouseau said.

"That's two you owe me now, Lieutenant."

"Perth-1 to Uruz-1. Damage report," Major Kalinin requested through the radio. He was in the helicopter above, issuing commands.

"This is... Uruz-1. My right arm is non-functional," Clouseau admitted. "I've lost my firearm, too. Light damage to the operator. Coolant system is malfunctioning. I won't last much longer." He could feel a scorching pain along his right arm. It was like the pain from a burn wound. Was this another side effect of the lambda driver?

"Understood. Withdraw three blocks to the south; you'll find a three-way junction there. Take the southwest fork and lure it into Area 11A," Kalinin ordered, his voice perpetually calm.

"Uruz-1, roger that."

"Uruz-6, move south," Kalinin went on. "I'm sending data now. Create a sniping zone at the intersection on the map and stand by. When the Venom leaps out, empty your clips at it, then retreat west."

"Uruz-6, roger that."

"Perth-1 to all units. I've gotten a report from the intelligence division. Uruz-8

is alive, and they're working to retrieve him now. Three hundred seconds have passed since the battle began. Hold out for one hundred more. The balance is shifting in our favor."

Clouseau judged Kalinin's assessment to be correct; they'd taken a lot of punishment, but the Venom was definitely slowing down. Was it an energy issue, or an operator issue? There was no way to know, but in either case, the enemy was weakening.

They could do this. They weren't out of the woods yet, but if nothing else went wrong, they would be able to surround the Venom from afar and dispatch it. Their plan was going to work—but first, he had to find a way to throw off the Venom's pursuit.

Clouseau performed a series of small bounds with his machine, moving swiftly down the narrow road. The AI continued to warn him about power issues; he couldn't keep moving for much longer.

"Uruz-1 here," he radioed in. "I'm past the three-way junction. I'm almost to the intersection—" Despite knowing the Venom was hot on his heels, Clouseau stopped there, suddenly, in his tracks.

"What's wrong, Uruz-1?" Mao asked.

"It can't be..." he muttered.

"Uruz-1, status report," Kalinin demanded.

"Venoms—" Clouseau had stopped just before the intersection. Across from him... on the roof of a shopping center with its neon lights extinguished, stood five figures.

Five ASes—five Venoms.

From the crimson Venoms, five red mono-eyes peered down at Clouseau. "There are... five Venoms," he radioed again.

"What?"

"Uruz-6 here. I saw them, too. He's right. Five of 'em." Even Kurz's voice was stiff and halting.

The Venom on Clouseau's heels, too, had stopped at the entrance to the

intersection. Its red sensor was no longer trained on him, but on the five new arrivals.

“You’ve been having quite a time, haven’t you, Fei-zau?” called a voice from the external speakers of one of the machines. It was high-pitched, and reminiscent of a crow. It barely seemed to notice Clouseau’s presence. “Stealing an m-type from the organization, then wreaking havoc in a region outside of the plan,” the voice continued. “I wonder. Have you lost your mind?”

“No more than you have, Mr. Kalium,” the gray Venom replied, speaking for the first time. “Amalgam was the reason my little brother and I lost our home. I can die happy, knowing that I’ve bloodied your nose.”

“Hmm... Your brother, you say?” the first voice mused. “Would you like to see him now?”

“What?”

The red Venom held its right hand out. On its fingers rested a small sphere, its scale about that of a quail egg in a human hand. It was a head—a person’s head.

“No!”

“I asked Mr. Silver to lend it to me. *He* wanted to give it a proper burial, but I wouldn’t hear of it; dumped on a dirty street corner is a more fitting fate for a traitor.” Then, the red Venom unceremoniously tossed the head away. It flew in an arc over the distant buildings. “Ah, poor him,” the man inside the Venom chuckled.

“Damn you...!” The gray Venom leaped into the air. It jumped over Clouseau’s M9 and charged straight for the five machines.

“And poor you, too,” the red Venom sighed mockingly.

The next instant, all five machines moved. Spears, tachis, knives... they assaulted the gray Venom en masse. The very air around them seemed to buckle, and the walls of the shopping center were smashed to powder.

Clouseau gritted his teeth and jumped his machine away, as bits of shrapnel pinged against its armor.

At last, the smoke cleared. The gray Venom remained atop the crumbled shopping center, skewered by the weapons and looking almost like a hedgehog. The five red Venoms tossed the gray one down to the street below, where it landed, smoking and sparking, and then lay still. That machine that had given them so much trouble—dispatched in an instant.

Do those five machines also have lambda drivers? Clouseau wondered.

“Ben?!” Mao’s M9 flew to Clouseau’s side and helped him up.

“Didn’t you hear me, Uruz-1? The operation is off,” Kalinin warned him. “Retreat.”

“I can’t,” Clouseau told him. “My generator is shot... I can only handle minimal movements.”

“Then abandon your machine,” Mao insisted. “We need to get out of here—”

“By the way, you two,” the central Venom said to them now. His tone suggested he hadn’t even noticed them, until just this very minute. “You’re Mithril soldiers, correct?”

Neither Mao nor Clouseau spoke.

“I was thinking I’d just let you go... but crushing that one machine hasn’t quite scratched my itch,” the Venom mused. “I think I’ll kill you, too. I can call it combat experience.”

“What...” Clouseau began. From their present location, the five machines could be on them in an instant. There was no time to open the hatch, exit the machine, and have Mao carry him to safety.

“Once more,” Kalinin said. “Perth-1 to all machines: get out of there, on the double.”

“Forget about me and run, Mao!” Clouseau shouted.

“But—”

“Just go!” he insisted. On the roof of the devastated shopping center, the five machines moved into confident battle stances. Weapons at the ready, they were getting ready to jump.

“All ready? Then, goodb—” A shell slammed into the lead machine’s right shoulder. A hunk of crimson armor went flying, trailing smoke. Something had penetrated through the lambda driver’s field, in order to deal damage to the machine.

“What...?” The Venoms turned their eyes across the intersection to another building’s roof.

“Who fired that shot?” Clouseau demanded to know. “Weber?”

“No,” Kurz denied. “I was about to, but... looks like he’s finally joining the party.”

Clouseau looked up questioningly.

Kurz sounded vaguely amused, despite their dire situation. “But I gotta say, this timing... a little over-dramatic, isn’t it, Sousuke?!”

“I suppose so,” that sergeant in question responded. A new AS was standing atop the tallest building in the area, facing down the five Venoms. Its white form stood out glaringly against the dim lights of the city.

“Uruz-7 to all units...” The Arbalest glowered at the five Venoms, trusty shotcannon in hand. “Sorry to keep you waiting. Leave the rest to me.”

His machine’s power output was rising—from cruise to military, then to max. Inside the humming cockpit, Sousuke whispered, “It activated just now, didn’t it?”

《Affirmative, Sergeant. The lambda driver did activate,》 Al confirmed.

Sousuke grumbled to himself, “It works, it doesn’t work... Not exactly reliable hardware, is it?”

《I agree.》

“I think you’re better at joking than I am,” Sousuke told Al.

《Affirmative.》

“And insults, as well.”

Just then, he received a short message from Kalinin. “Perth-1 to Uruz-7.

You're back in action?"

"Affirmative, Perth-1."

"Then I leave it to you."

"Roger," Sousuke signed off tersely. He could see the Venoms looking up at him in his monitor. *Five opponents... can I beat them? These aren't like old-fashioned Savages. In the past, I've struggled to beat even one Venom... But I think I can do it*, he thought.

This machine and I. We're a lousy team, the worst there's been... but we've held out this long, and complaining about compatibility won't get us anywhere. It sucks, but it makes it work—that's what this machine is. And it's who I am, too... right, Chidori?

Sousuke took a deep breath. He adjusted his grip on the control sticks, then made a slight movement. Reflecting his input, the machine spread its arms wide. "Let's go!" he yelled to AI.

《Roger!》

Sousuke stepped off the edge of the roof; the Arbalest dropped, tumbling through the air like a feather. From a fully upside-down position, it aimed its gun at the five machines below. *Start from the right...* Sousuke thought, then fired. His shotcannon's shell trailed rainbow light as it pierced a Venom's torso, and armor fragments blew out from its back. It had only taken one hit.

The shot's recoil flipped the Arbalest 180 degrees, and let Sousuke land on his feet. The asphalt broke, and shock absorbent expelled from the machine's drive system.

"Wh-What?!" Biting back his surprise at his underling's easy dispatch, the lead machine ordered the others to fan out. The Venoms split into two teams, drew their firearms and fired.

Sousuke whirled the Arbalest lightly around in response, kicking up a whirlwind. His opponents' fire peppered the ground around him. Then he jumped, leaping over the barrage and using a sign, hanging over the road, as a springboard. The sign didn't even crack under his machine's nine-ton weight, but he didn't care to wonder why.

To the right, to the left... The Arbalest danced back and forth, dodging the Venoms' shots. Then, when he'd reached just the right spot... he fired!

One of the enemy Venoms crossed its arms to block the shotcannon's shell, but the rainbow shot pierced through them anyway. The red machine slammed back into the road, nearly bisected at the torso.

"That's two!" Sousuke crowed.

《Proximity alert,》 Al warned him, blaring an alarm. 《Four o'clock.》 A Venom was approaching from the right and behind, running along the high-rise apartment's wall. It was carrying a long, halberd-shaped monomolecular cutter, which it swung at him.

A flash, a dodge—Sousuke used his left hand to draw his monomolecular cutter and cut the weapon through its shaft. Then, on the return slash, he dealt a diagonal slice through the Venom itself. Sparks showered, and the enemy machine fell to its knees on the road. Sousuke's machine thrust out its shotcannon with its other hand and fired. There was a dazzling blast of rainbow flame, and the Venom exploded.

《That makes three!》 Al noted.

"Don't say it before me!" Sousuke chided him.

The fourth machine kept its rifle spraying fire as it jumped down from a building to the road below. Sousuke used that moment to roll his machine lithely forward—and as he rolled, he fired.

Perhaps due to the recklessness of the action, the shell only blasted the enemy machine's left arm away. But with a perfectly executed jackknife maneuver, the Arbalest straightened up, planted both feet—and unleashed another shot at his target the minute it landed. This one found its mark straight in the opponent's chest, and sent the Venom flying.

"That's four!" Sousuke and Al cried in unison.

Next, he ran low down the abandoned avenue, smelling the wind as if were on his own face. It was a strange feeling, as if the machine had become an extension of his body.

There was a kind of perfect unity that AS operators experienced from time to time—a feeling of omnipotence, almost, a sense that overwhelming power was entirely at one’s disposal—and Sousuke felt that now. The machine was like a part of him. *I hated it so much before, but now, he thought, maybe it’s not that bad. Maybe I’ve been too hard on it.*

No, what he was feeling now went beyond all that. He felt weightless. He felt like he could fly forever. *That’s right, Sousuke realized. I can go anywhere. Anywhere! Nobody can stop me!*



As he turned the corner, the commander Venom came into sight. It was firing its large Gatling gun at him, using a South Chinese M6 that was unfortunate enough to be in the area as a shield.

Smashing through more shop signs, then, the Arbalest leaped into the air. The jump was enormous, higher and longer than Sousuke had managed from any machine before this. It carried him completely over the commander Venom.

“What?!” When the Arbalest landed behind it, the panicking machine turned its Gatling gun towards Sousuke. A flash erupted from the Arbalest’s left hand, and its monomolecular cutter split the Gatling gun in two.

“S-Stay back! Stay back!” The final Venom tossed its broken weapon aside and pressed a handgun to the cockpit of its hostage M6. “I’ll kill the operator, got it?! Stay back! Don’t come any closer!”

“H-Help me...” begged the M6’s operator. The machine’s control system seemed to have taken damage, so that he couldn’t move its arms.

What to do? No, I know... I’ll use the move that took out Mao on Berildaob Island, Sousuke decided. I think I can handle it now.

“I... I thought Mithril’s lambda driver was incomplete!” the lead Venom protested. “No, this is beyond just being completed... Who the hell are you? Who in the living hell are you?!”

“You want to know?” Sousuke taunted, tossing aside his shotcannon.

Who am I? Yes... That’s right. I am...

“Jindai High School, Class 2-4. Student ID number 41. Continuing on trash duty even in my second term...” Around his right fist, a rainbow-wreathed fire burned. It let out a strange thrumming sound. “...Sagara Sousuke!!”

“Wh-What?!” Despite it’s operator’s obvious confusion, the lead Venom turned its handgun towards him and fired.

Sousuke—the Arbalest effortlessly deflected the shot, then thrust its fist at the chest of the hostage M6. The ground shook; the street roared. A sound burst forth, like hundreds of beasts letting up a howl all at once, and the sheer power unleashed seemed to warp gravity itself. The force passed through the

M6, leaving it unscathed, saving its wrath for the enemy machine behind it.

The Venom's body simply shattered. The armor, the frame, the electromagnetic musculature—every part of it was pulverized and sent flying. Its fragments scattered across the road, mixing with glass from the surrounding buildings.

The hostage M6 remained untouched. It toppled onto its backside and stared dumbly up at the Arbalest.

"Go," Sousuke said, and pointed down the road. The M6's operator stammered something, then beat a swift retreat.

After a moment, AI spoke up. «Destruction of all targets confirmed. Switch to search mode?»

"Whatever you want," Sousuke told AI.

«Roger.»

Sousuke pressed a switch on the control stick and opened a transmission channel. "Uruz-7 to all machines. All Venoms neutralized."

"Uruz-1 here. You... destroyed them all?"

"Affirmative. Now let's head back to the TDD-1 for—" Sousuke began, then reconsidered. The trouble in the city was cleared up; now they'd wait for the transport helicopters to return them to the Tuatha de Danaan. That was the usual pattern.

But he didn't want the usual pattern. Even as he realized that, though, it took him a little courage to say what he said next: "Correction. Uruz-7 speaking. I've neutralized all enemy machines. I am now moving on to my next mission. I'm leaving the Arbalest here, so be sure to retrieve it quickly, or the South Chinese Army will take it away."

"I don't understand, Uruz-7," Clouseau said in confusion. "What is your 'next mission'?"

"Transmission over!" Sousuke shut his radio off, knelt the Arbalest down, and pressed the switch under the stick to open the hatch. The power of compressed air slowly did its job.

《Sergeant. You are skipping standard mission aftermath procedures,》 Al prodded him.

“It’s all right,” Sousuke reassured the AI. “The mission is over.”

《Roger.》 There was a pause. 《May I ask a question?》

“What is it?”

《The battle just concluded was in every regard the best of my existence. In human terms... it was a surprising result. If possible, I would like you to explain how this happened.》

Sousuke thought a moment. “The problems were resolved. That more or less describes it.”

《Your problems, do you mean?》

“No.” Sousuke tapped at the console panel. “Our problems.”

《I do not understand this response.》

“Think about it... *partner*.” With that, Sousuke exited the Arbalest’s cockpit. He landed on the road, then took off at top speed, stepping through the fragments of the enemy’s burning machine. Someone was waiting for him, and he could go anywhere.



Teletha Testarossa’s first reaction, upon hearing that Sagara Sousuke had abandoned the Arbalest and disappeared, was... “Ah, of course.”

When she asked Gavin Hunter in the intelligence division, he told her that Chidori Kaname had been out of touch since then as well. His intelligence network did report three hours later, though, that surveillance cameras in Kai Tak Airport witnessed a boy and girl who strongly resembled them. The use of the fake passport issued during the recon mission had given them away.

The damaged M9, Corporal Speck, and the Arbalest were all safely recovered. Throughout the recovery process, Tessa’s subordinates went to great efforts to pacify the South Chinese Army, then leave without being seen. Getting back to the Tuatha de Danaan would prove quite a hassle, as well.

But, at the very least, things had been more or less wrapped up. They were able to collect a significant amount of the Venoms' remains, and they'd managed to keep tensions between the North and South armies from boiling over just in time, and the evacuated citizens were able to return to downtown Hong Kong.

They didn't learn of Sagara Sousuke's whereabouts until a full day after the Tuatha de Danaan left Hong Kong's territory. He'd sent them a transmission, which the intelligence division traced it back to a high school in Tokyo. Mardukas was furious, and ordered him to return to Merida Island at once.

Sousuke's reply was simple, but respectful: "I cannot follow that order, sir. At least, not until tomorrow afternoon."

"Why not?" Tessa asked.

Sousuke responded calmly. "I have a test on Saturday on the Chinese classics, and I'm in real danger of failing."

Kalinin, who was listening in from beside them, let out a rare howl of laughter.

25 October, 1121 Hours (West Pacific Standard Time)

1st Meeting Room, Mithril Merida Island Base

Mithril executives were gathered in the first meeting room at the Merida Island base—in holographic form, as usual.

Mardukas, Kalinin, and Sousuke stood next to Tessa's seat. Sousuke had arrived in Merida Island from Tokyo just thirty minutes before.

"I don't think I've ever been this angry," General Amit, head of the intelligence division, said in a low voice.

"And yet, he is the only one who can control the Arbalest," Tessa responded.

General Amit snorted. "Be quiet, Colonel. A mere sergeant—a juvenile NCO, at that—is acting in defiance of a top brass decision. And he's done it in a way that amounts to blackmail. You expect me to tolerate this?"

“It’s not blackmail, and I’m not trying to defy you,” Sousuke said confidently. “All I’m proposing is a change in my current contract. If you don’t like my terms, I’m happy to buy it out and leave the battle group instead.”

“What about our secrets?” Amit demanded.

“Feel free to do what you have to to prevent leaks,” Sousuke said calmly. “But, be warned... I have no intention of submitting quietly to arrest or confinement.”

Amit’s hologram leaned forward to peer into Sousuke’s face. “How dare you, Sergeant,” he fumed. “Do you think you can live whatever life you want, having turned a man like me against you?”

“I’ll answer your question with a question, General. Do you think I’m not prepared for whatever you throw at me?”

“What did you say?!”

“If I may, General...” Sousuke spoke with confidence, unfazed. “I never sold my soul to Mithril. If I don’t like how you do things, I’m going to stop you however I can. That’s all this is. I’ll keep piloting the Arbalest. I’ll risk my life for my comrades. And I’ll also attend school. Things will just go back to the way they were before... except that I won’t take a salary while I’m in Tokyo. Why can’t you handle that?”

“You watch your mouth, Sergeant!”

“‘Sergeant’?” Sousuke questioned. “I’m a mercenary; a wanderer. I don’t give a damn about ranks, so don’t try to pull them on me. Keep your commands for your pet dogs.”

General Amit purpled as laughter echoed through the room. Lord Mallory, who had been listening silently to the conversation, could no longer restrain himself.

“Sir?” Amit addressed the earl, cautiously.

The man kept on laughing. “I think it’s time to admit defeat, General,” Lord Mallory advised. “‘You can’t tame the mercenaries of the SRT.’ Who made that very point, in this same room, just a few days ago?”

“I...”

“That’s right,” Lord Mallory went on. “It was you, General. Now, one of those pesky elites is agreeing to work for half the pay. I, for one, think it’s ludicrous to fight such a welcome thing. Don’t you agree, Admiral?”

The hologram Lord Mallory was addressing, Admiral Borda, made a show of thinking. Then he shrugged, and made an indifferent reply. “Well... I suppose. Though I can’t say I don’t have my reservations.”

“Dr. Panerose?” Lord Mallory turned his eyes to Dr. Panerose, head of the research division.

“I received Lemming’s report,” Dr. Panerose replied. “As far as the research division is concerned, Sergeant Sagara is indispensable for future LD research.”

“Excellent. Any further objections?” Mallory asked the other high officials sitting around the table. Silence reigned. “Then that’s that,” Lord Mallory decided. “Colonel Testarossa, I’m sorry you have to deal with so many eccentric subordinates... You have my deepest sympathies.”

“Not at all. My men and women are the best in the business,” Tessa told him confidently.

Lord Mallory smiled. “Hmm. It seems that things aren’t going as poorly as all that with the West Pacific battle group. I look forward to more fine work from you all in the future.”

“I am honored, sir.”

“Now, Sergeant... er... Sagara Sousuke, wasn’t it?” Lord Mallory turned his attention to Sousuke now.

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m going to remember that name,” he warned. “This conference is now over. Take care, all of you.”

With the online conference concluded, it was Mardukas who addressed Sousuke first. “I’ll offer you my congratulations. But... Sergeant. Try not to add to my worries so much. You had us all terrified, to put it mildly!”

“Sir... I’m extremely sorry, Colonel.” Sousuke gave a proper salute, and

Mardukas sighed and left the conference room.

It was Kalinin's turn to speak up then. "Satisfied now?"

"Yes."

"You're looking more like a man."

"What?" Sousuke blinked in surprise.

"I'll treat you to a meal later," Kalinin told him approvingly. "You can fill me in about Gauron then."

"Thank you," Sousuke said after a pause.

Kalinin gave Sousuke a light whack in the back with his file case—behavior that was hardly like him—and then left the conference room. This left Sousuke and Tessa alone.

"I..." Dressed in her khaki-colored uniform, Tessa opened her mouth hesitantly. "I suppose I haven't said it yet. I'm sorry... about before."

"Before?" Sousuke asked.

"Oh, really..." Tessa sounded exasperated. "You don't remember our huge fight before the Hong Kong operation?"

"Ah. Right," Sousuke responded vaguely, unsure of what to say. "I'm the one who should apologize, though."

"Not at all," Tessa protested. "I was simply... envious of Kaname-san, and I let it get under my skin..."

"Colonel..."

"I think I was looking for comfort, because it was you," she rushed on. "But it wasn't right to behave that way. I need to draw a line. But... well..." With her face pointed downward, Tessa glanced up to meet Sousuke's gaze. "Are we still... friends?" she asked, weakly.

At last, Sousuke understood. Her tears that day, the burning anger she'd shown... he still didn't fully understand it, but at least, he recognized the nature of his misunderstanding.

Teletha Testarossa was not a goddess. She was neither omnipotent, nor

divine, nor an idol on a pedestal. She could behave unreasonably; she could also be injured by a careless word, lose her temper, and cry. She was no different than the students at his high school, or Chidori Kaname.

Now that he thought about it, these things had happened several times in the past. Why had it taken him so long to realize? And on top of that, she bore a burden heavier than anything he could conceive of.

“Of course, Colonel, ma’am.” The next thing he knew, the words had left his lips. “If... we are friends, might I speak freely for a moment?”

“What? Well... certainly.” Tessa straightened up slightly.

Now say it, Sagara Sousuke. How would you talk to a friend at school? You know this. How would a friend say it? He took in a deep breath, and then said, “Tessa... I’m sorry about everything.” These words made him much more nervous than yelling at General Amit.

“What?” It was Tessa’s turn to be surprised, now.

“I’m... always causing trouble for you,” Sousuke clarified. “You’re an amazing person. If I had to be in your place, I would have cracked from the pressure long ago. So... Tessa, I truly respect you. You’re more than just my superior. You’re a valuable comrade. If there’s ever anything I can do for you... please tell me. I’ll do all I can.”

Tessa spent an eternity staring at him in silence.

Now that the words were out of his mouth, he found himself flabbergasted at how wrong they sounded. *Am I stupid? A nothing like me, speaking to her like I’m her equal... getting carried away with myself. I was definitely too informal. Ah, damn...* “F-Forgive my impudence, ma’am,” he stammered into the oppressive silence, “but that *is* how I feel. Now... excuse me.” Unable to even look at her any longer, Sousuke fled the meeting room.

Behind him, there came a strange whooping noise, followed by the sound of high-heeled shoes jumping into the air, and then a chair crashing to the ground... but Sousuke barely heard it.

Epilogue

The fact that Kagurazaka Eri had kept the dismissal form locked away in her desk, knowing this might compromise her standing at the school, was just a part of who she was. “I don’t know exactly what happened,” she was saying in the teachers’ office, “but you need to get your head on straight. I can’t keep covering for you like this.”

“Yes, ma’am. I apologize,” Sousuke said, standing at attention.

“I’ve stuck my neck out for you because I know you’re a good person deep down,” she continued to scold. “Okay?”

“Yes. I’m terribly sorry.”

“If you’re really sorry, you should rethink your approach to life. Remember what you did to my car? I don’t know why you’re always causing problems! Honestly, the way you act—yeek!!” This last shriek came as Sousuke abruptly shoved her over. “Wh-What?! What are you doing? No, Sagara-kun, people might see us!”

“There’s a laser sight trained on you, ma’am!” Sousuke told her urgently. “Stay down!”

“What are you talking about?!” Eri cried, flailing about on the floor.

Sousuke had pulled out his pistol and was sweeping it around the room. Suddenly, Kaname flew at him, giving a full-throated shout. “Sousuke! Are you still doing this?!”

“But a laser sight—” he tried to protest.

“Shut up!” Kaname kicked him down to the floor.

The 4x magnifying scope showed a flailing Uruz-7. *Pathetic. This is the man who went toe-to-toe with General Amit, indomitable head of Mithril intelligence?* “Hmm...” Wraith snorted, then packed up the laser sight-attached

Belgian-made submachine gun. The spy was skillfully disguised as an average neighborhood housewife, perched atop a building a few hundred meters away, which offered an unobstructed view of Jindai High.

Wraith glanced up at the sky, where black clouds were slowly forming. The weather report predicted that rain would fall soon, and things would get chilly after dark. *Glad I bought those hand-warmers at the convenience store...* The girl had agreed to keep wearing a transmitter at all times, but that was no reason to slouch in the surveillance department. Still, just because their Tokyo branch wasn't fully organized yet...

Why do I have to be out in the rain all the time? Wraith thought, with a feeling of deep melancholy. At least the others had a roof over their heads. On top of that, the agent was now at Chidori Kaname's beck and call. The girl had blackmail material, after all—There was no way to fight it.

Wraith switched to a set of binoculars. Uruz-7 and Chidori Kaname were now bowing in apology to their homeroom teacher. *Serves you right. You could spare a sympathetic thought for me, too,* Wraith thought, but it didn't do a thing about the stinging cold. Letting out a little sneeze, the spy hefted the collar of the housewife's coat a little higher, and whispered a lonely, "Good grief..."

"Seriously! Why do you always have to do that crap?!" Chidori Kaname shouted as they left the teachers' office. "Don't you get how she and I are always covering for you? You think you're just owed that, with no strings attached?!"

"No, I wasn't—"

"Shut up! It's like... you haven't made any progress at all! Why can't you at least learn from your past actions?! You're always, always, always...!" Kaname pulled a sheaf of copy paper out of nowhere and held it over her head.

"Wait, Chidori—"

"Always, always..." Normally she'd have smacked him with it now, but for some reason, her hands holding the paper just lowered, limply. "Always... mm." She dropped the paper and whimpered. "Always. We're back to... always, right?"

Sousuke looked at her.

“Like things are finally... finally normal?” As if unable to bear it, Kaname pressed her forehead against Sousuke’s chest. “Back to normal... back to always...”

He blinked at her. “Chidori?”

“You just left me behind... what were you thinking?” she sniffled. “I’ll never forgive you.” She’d been acting completely indifferent the entire way back from Hong Kong, so the sudden change took Sousuke aback.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized.

“Don’t ‘sorry’ me. Stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid... I won’t forgive you, okay? I really... won’t ever forgive you!” Kaname pounded on his chest, weakly, again and again. “I was so scared. I was so, so scared. Just... never again, okay?! Never again!”

Students passing in the hallway watched the two with curiosity.

“It’s all right now,” Sousuke said, trying to comfort her awkwardly. “Um... Chidori? Could we go somewhere else for this?”

“No... I can’t. I can’t.” She began to sob into Sousuke’s chest like a child, trembling, free of any shame or concern for her reputation. Flustered, Sousuke could only pat her soothingly on the back.

Tokiwa Kyoko, who just happened to be passing, broke through the crowd to see what was happening. “Hey, what’s going on? Ah, Kana-chan...”

“T-Tokiwa?” Kaname said with another sniffle.

“Hey, are you okay? Hey, Kana-chan! Is something wrong?”

Kaname sobbed, “Kyoko... Sousuke just... Sousuke just...” she blew her nose with her handkerchief, and couldn’t seem to form words after that.

“Sagara-kun! What did you do to Kana-chan?” Kyoko demanded to know. “Did you shout ‘there’s a bomb’ and drag her around again?!”

“What?” Sousuke protested. “No, I—”

“What kind of man makes excuses? Apologize to her, now!” Kyoko glared at

him, hands on her hips.

“Yeah! Yeah!”

“Honestly, every day since you got here...!”

“Poor Chidori-san!”

The rest of the crowd seemed to agree with Kyoko as they joined in on chastising Sousuke.

“Well... I...”

“You what?!” they chorused.

“Mgh...” *I see. I’m back. But now that I think about it...* Sousuke considered. *Have my troubles at school not changed at all?* “Er. I’m sorry.” Biting his grief at the absurdity of it all, he bowed down low.

“Good!” the class chorused in response.

It was still a long time before Kaname stopped crying.

The End

Afterword

Umm...

Sorry for the long wait, as always. This is the second and final part of *Ending Day by Day*. I'm sure you're all going to shout at me that you've forgotten part one by now. I'm sorry.

I took a very different approach this time around. We're always having hijackings and seajackings, with things ending up similar to the *Die Hard* or *Under Siege* series. This time, the climax is more in the style of a traditional super robot anime; strong, mighty, unbeatable. Sometimes a hero needs to settle things in a snap.

At first, I tried to figure out a serendipitous reason why Sousuke would be "permitted" to go back to his earlier life. But no matter how skillfully I tried to write the situation, I couldn't figure out a realistic circumstance in which the organization would want him to continue with that absurd setup. When I got down to it, there was only one way to wrap it up in a way that felt natural.

The decision might seem obvious, but I guess it's one of those blind spots you have. The idea is that if you want to make life go your way, it's easier to control yourself than the environment—it's obvious, but I think many people, including me, forget about it. Even if you remember, the harshness of your environment can make you forget it again immediately. It's a tough problem. Those kinds of minute changes can throw things off the rails, and make laughingstocks out of people trying to be very serious.

The writing of *Ending Day By Day* involved re-examining the sense of wrongness that I've felt for a while towards Sagara Sousuke and the Arbalest. It wasn't a high mountain to climb, but it was a treacherous one, but thanks to all my efforts I feel like he's finally become the story's protagonist in a real sense. And the Arbalest finally—finally, has become a real protagonist machine. Just like Sousuke, until now I didn't feel much love for the Arbalest, but now I'm starting to feel like it might just be worth keeping around. It might not be able

to stand toe-to-toe with the protagonist robots of some of my predecessors, but I hope it at least has a comparable kind of charm.

That's why I feel like these two parts are a story about Sousuke and the Arbalest—or a story about Sousuke himself. Up until now, if you asked Sousuke, “what are you doing at that school?” he would have replied, “My mission.” But starting now, his response would be, “That's my business, not yours.” On top of that, he'll be able to deal better with the situations and problems he'll face from now on.

But... how to put it? A protagonist who can't get into action without a scolding from his girlfriend... it's a little pathetic, really. But maybe that's just what life is like when you're young. He can't quite be Golgo 13. Besides, it's only natural he can't go toe-to-toe with Kaname. “Women are strong and beautiful”—I've thought that for a long time. Even when I look at the Amazons I work with now... ah, whoops.

Three pages to go, I guess. While I was writing the story, I had all these ideas for what I'd put in the afterword, but now that I'm finished, I feel like none of it matters. I'll report on what's going on in my life, I guess. Although... I feel like things have been pretty routine, with no major events. No point in writing about trivialities. I guess I could talk about the Valkyrie plamodel I got from Hasegawa, but that would just be twenty pages of fanboying.

Speaking of which, I actually went to Hong Kong for research. By myself. I just wandered around. I was going to do more with the setting in this story, but I ended up having to cut a lot of descriptions and vignettes to suit the rhythm of the plot. Such a shame. Though of course, I always end up scrapping a lot of scenes. If I have a chance, I might try to revisit Hong Kong.

I guess I'll take a little time for some private messages.

Tomohiro Nagai, thank you for sending me those books. I'm sorry I didn't write back. I've been reading every month and laughing my head off.

Retsu Tateo, thank you for the chocolate. Since we're neighbors, anyway, let's go out for a meal again some time. I can't wait to hear all the latest developments.

Ichiro Sakaki, thank you for the New Year's card. I'm sorry I didn't write back.

Toshihiko Tsukiji, it's been such a long time. Are your eyes all right? Let's have a nice drink soon.

Giguru Akiguchi, when you get to Tokyo, tell me.

And Shikidouji, congratulations. I'm sorry to run you so ragged in your new life. I hope you'll continue to work with me.

I've caused a lot of trouble for a lot of people in this volume, too. To Shikidouji, my editor S-san, and various other people involved, I'm sorry about everything, as always. Thank you so much.

Now, then. This was a pretty heavy, frustrating story, so I think our next novel will be a bit lighter and happier. If you're worried that *FMP!* is headed in a serious direction, rest easy.

See you next time for another round of Sousuke in hell.





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Full Metal Panic! Volume 5 Owaru Day by Day Volume 2

by Shouji Gatou

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