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Illustrator
Shikidouji

12

FULL METAL.. PANIC!

FOREVER STAND BY ME
PART 2




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A full-page illustration of Milla Melarini from the anime Full Metal Panic!. She is a young woman with long, flowing blue hair and red eyes. She is wearing a white and yellow tactical suit with black accents and red circular details. She is standing in a futuristic, blue-toned environment with large, curved structures in the background. The text is overlaid on the image.

**There is
no God.
There is
no salvation.
This is
real life.**

**““God’s
protection’...”
she snorted.
Such empty
words. If God
protected
anyone,
I wouldn’t
have to be
doing all this.**

**FULL METAL PANIC!
FOREVER STAND BY ME**






Kaname was only
passingly familiar
with Sofia's face,
so the other girl
looked just like
Kaname here.

“What are you
doing?” she
said to Sofia,
turning around
to face her.

“Let's see...” she
mused. This was a
space for her mind
alone, with nobody
else's presence. No,
that isn't true, she
realized. There's
someone else
here.



**“What’s wrong?”
Kalinin taunted.
“You can’t do
anything without
an AS?”**

**Sousuke
said nothing.**

**“I’ve taught you
so many things,
but it occurred to
me a long time
back...”**

“What?”

**“You have
no talent
for this.”**

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3: Pale Horse (Continued)

Kaname was deep in the last stages of her work when the ceiling above the outer control room began to shake, causing a nearby support beam to rattle. The battle must have started on the surface, its reverberations reaching her despite the distance.

She'd received a report that they'd engaged the enemy, but the underground cave housing the TARTAROS had been built to withstand most artillery fire, so she knew she'd be safe. There were dampers installed in the equipment's foundation, too, so any issues that did come up would likely remain within a tolerable range.

When the shaking died down at last, the only sound left in the room was that of Kaname's typing. This was soon interrupted by a knock from outside. "Come in," Kaname said shortly.

It was Leonard who entered. "How are things coming?" he asked.

"Almost there," Kaname replied, her eyes locked on the screen, fingers flying over the keys. "Should I hurry?"

"I think telling you to do so would be rather unseemly, since you're clearly already hurrying," said Leonard, with a hint of self-deprecation in his voice. "The enemy has made landfall and destroyed the Behemoths. It's only one machine, but it's a formidable opponent."

"The Arbalest's successor, I assume?" Kaname asked.

"The ARX-8," Leonard confirmed. "It's apparently called the 'Laevatein.'"

The successor machine and the remnants of Mithril had been making trouble all over the place, which was part of why their own resources had become so limited. Kaname wasn't sure why, but she felt no curiosity whatsoever about the identity of the pilot. "You can't stop it?" she asked.

"Of course I can," Leonard responded quickly.

Kaname stopped typing and turned back to look at him. He was dressed in his arm slave operator's uniform, likely about to sortie in the Belial. "If you can stop it," she said pointedly, "then why do I need to hurry?"

"I'll be frank," he told her. "There's... a ninety percent chance I'll stop it."

"I see."

"But still, ninety percent."

"Are you less than confident, perhaps?" Kaname questioned.

At this, Leonard smiled; not his usual half-smile, but rather a broad smile tinged with aggression and madness. It was the smile of a wild beast—a smile similar to Gauron's. "I'm perfectly confident," he said. "I'll tear him to shreds."

"Then why should I hurry?" Kaname asked again.

"Our opponent has a system for nullifying lambda drivers, and its pilot is one of the best in the world," Leonard reminded her. "And in a way, Merida Island is their home turf... Objectively speaking, there's still a chance I could lose. If we fought ten times, he might win once."

"You're surprisingly humble today," she observed.

"I'm always humble," Leonard said mildly. "But with that in mind, you should still hurry up. Even if it's only a ten percent chance, it could still happen, and we should be ready."

"Don't worry," Kaname told him. Then she turned back to the screen and resumed typing... a second row, and then a third. All the necessary equations and values. Then she put in the final command: *Execute*. "I just finished," she said, restoring the headset she'd thrown onto the table to her ear. To the head electrician, who was waiting nearby, she said, "Hook us up to the grid."

"Thank you," said Leonard. "You know what comes next, don't you?"

"Yes," she affirmed. "I've memorized the list of executives Kalinin-san brought me, as well as the other 'baggage'... Now I just need to change and hook myself up to the device." She stood up and stretched a little. "It's almost here," she mused. "Soon we'll have a peaceful, easy world to live in."

"Yes..."

“We’re going somewhere very different,” Kaname continued. “Somewhere far away. Passing through Tártaros, the world of the dead, to the infinite sky that lies beyond... I’m sure I’ll see you there, too.”

“The ‘infinite sky,’ eh?” Leonard thought for a moment, then closed his mouth. He seemed to be unsure whether he should say what he was thinking.

“What?”

“I want to see you, even on the other side,” he finally admitted. “No matter what form it takes.” *Even on the other side...* He meant the new world she would be creating.

“Sure thing,” Kaname told him. “We’ll grab tea together. In some peaceful city, under clear blue skies.” She smiled at him, beaming and innocent. “I’ll have lots of time soon,” she went on. “I’ll go to meet all kinds of people. I’ll probably see Tessa, too. She’ll have never experienced war, and you’ll be able to be close again.”

“I’m sure.”

“My friends at school, too. And my mom. They’ll all be hale and healthy. And at last, I’ll be happy.”

“You won’t go to see him?” Leonard asked.

Kaname didn’t know what he was talking about. “Who?”

“Oh, no one... Goodbye.” Shaking his head slightly, Leonard turned to walk off as another distant explosion rattled the ceiling.

Kaname stood in the empty control room for a while, meditating on his final words. *You won’t go to see him?* she thought. *Who did he mean?* She felt like she was forgetting something... Something very important.

After a moment she said, “Oh, Sousuke...” It was strange that she hadn’t remembered him right away. He’d been important to her, hadn’t he? When she’d killed him in those ruins in Siberia—Yamsk 11—she’d felt as though she might die of grief... But she’d completely forgotten about that by now. A result of her guilt, maybe? Perhaps a part of her was trying to forget the painful path she’d chosen at that crossroads in the ruins.

Get a hold of yourself, Chidori Kaname. Killing Sousuke was just a temporary thing, she thought. Once you're on the other side, he'll be fine and whole, and you'll be able to see him any time you want to. Really, this just makes it all the more important that you don't let them stop the plan. If they do, the two people you killed will stay that way forever, and your plans to save and see them again will be down the drain.

"Yes, I have to hurry..." *Go on, get changed,* she told herself, opening the bag she'd tossed into a corner of the control room to pull out the data suit she would use to connect directly to the TAROS.

She removed her jacket, camisole, and pleated skirt, and as she was reaching for her underwear band, she heard a voice through the wireless headset still attached to her ear.

"Chidori Kaname, can you hear me?!" It was a man's voice, mixed in with static. "I'm calling you on an open channel. If you can't answer, just listen! I'm here. I'm right nearby!"

She put her hand to the receiver and checked the band on the LCD panel: it wasn't encrypted. The speaker was calling on all channels, and her receiver was automatically picking up the signal through the emergency band.

"Sousuke...?" she whispered dubiously.

"I came to bring you back," he insisted. "You hear me? I came to bring you back!"

It wasn't a trick of her ears. That was really Sousuke. *How? Isn't he dead? I shot him right in the forehead... How can he be here now?*

I'm glad he's alive—was not what she felt. *He's come all this way for me*—was also not how she felt. All she felt was confusion, and the sense of wrongness grew stronger until she couldn't even read the nearby screen. Kaname's eyes grew unfocused, and she struggled to think clearly.

"I tried to think of some kind words to say, but it's going to be blunt and crude instead. That's just the kind of man I am," Sousuke admitted. "So, listen closely: what I want to say is, I thought you were a stronger woman than this. You hear me?"

What is he talking about? she wondered. If he was saying this all on an open channel, he'd be heard all over Merida Island. His pursuers would track the source of the transmission and surround him. Nevertheless, Sousuke didn't stop talking. To the contrary, he began rattling off a litany of complaints in a disgusted tone that she'd never heard from him before.

"I'll be honest," he was saying now. "I'm disappointed in you, Chidori Kaname. I always thought you were so impressive. No... I didn't, actually. You got on my nerves all the time, too. You smacked me around, you rejected my carefully considered arguments, and you frequently tried to control me. You never showed any consideration for a poor fish out of water in your peaceful homeland. When I think back now, that wasn't fair. You can be very cruel," he accused her.

"But that's not what I came to say," he went on. "That all just occurred to me, so I wanted to bring it up while I was here. What I really came to say is, are you really worthy of all I've done? Is saving you really worth everything I've thrown away to do it? It seems a little twisted, if I'm being honest. The year I've spent chasing after you has been one of incredible frustration. I almost had you in Mexico, and again in Yamsk-11... but I always failed, because *you* always hesitated. Were you ever even taking this seriously? Do you even really care? Or are you crying now because I said all this to you?" he demanded. "What kind of a spoiled princess are you? Are you just some stupid girl waiting for some stupid man to comfort you?"

Kaname was initially surprised by the change in his usual demeanor—this man of so few words launching into a diatribe—but then she realized what was going on. *They're so stupid. They think they can shake me like this?*

Her sense of wrongness was increasing, as was that displeasure she found it so hard to articulate. But she pushed all of that aside as she turned over the enemy's apparent plan in her mind. *A challenge? A play at my sympathies? It's pathetic, whatever it is...*

"Well, Chidori Kaname?!" Sousuke said, almost screaming. "You said we'd go back together, but I guess you're just a liar and a whore! If I'm wrong, come and hit me! Come smack me on the head with your slipper or your fan like before!"

She wasn't sure why, but the sense of wrongness was growing stronger. Her chest grew hot, her vision blurred, and, feeling annoyed, she felt a growing urge to scream back at him.

"Answer me, Chidori!" Sousuke demanded.

Kaname tore at her hair as if to drive away the strange feelings welling up inside of her. Then she flipped on her headset switch, chose her band, and opened a channel. "I can hear you," she told him.

Sousuke's monologue stopped immediately.

"You're using a synthesizer to imitate Sousuke's voice, aren't you?" she said accusingly. "Did you think that would be enough to shake me?"

"Sorry to inform you, but I'm the one and only Sagara Sousuke," he retorted.

"All right, let's assume that's the case," she agreed coldly. "Your efforts are still in vain. The preparations for the TARTAROS are complete. I'm going to create a new world. Everything you're trying to do... it's too late."

He didn't respond. He was listening to her words, carefully and silently.

"Leonard and the others will have you cornered soon. There's... There's nothing more you can do," she declared. "I don't know who you are. But if you really care about what I want...throw down your weapons and back off. Soon, we can all say goodbye to this cruel—"

"Shut up," he interrupted her, his voice quiet but certain. "*You* be quiet. I'm talking to Chidori Kaname."

"What are you talking about?" she demanded. "I *am* Chidori Kaname."

"No, you're not." The man calling himself Sousuke laughed at her over the radio, a soft, mocking laugh. "You're not her. You are *Sofia*."

Sousuke waited for a response as he continued on through the jungles of Merida Island.

"Sofia?" she questioned after a pause. She seemed to find his words genuinely baffling. "What are you talking about?"

He felt no hesitancy or surprise there; just suspicion, as if she was questioning his sanity. It was the reaction he'd expected given Tessa's pre-mission briefing, which suggested that they weren't going to be able to talk this out. But then, Sousuke had never intended to convince her...

"I am Chidori Kaname," she insisted. "Sofia is dead. You failed to play to my emotions, so now you're trying to shake me? That's pathetic."

"Shut up," snapped Sousuke, feeling irritation and anger rise inside of him as he continued to talk over the open channel. "Did you think I came all the way here in a fully loaded AS to plead for you to stop being stupid? Please, I came here to stop your plans cold. But as long as I'm here, I might as well say something to everyone listening in on this channel. Listen closely..."

He stopped for a second, then took in a deep breath. "I'm going to put this all to waste," he declared. "Arson and destruction are my specialties, so whatever stupid occult device you've been worshiping? I'm about to turn it into a mountain of scrap. Plead with me all you like. I can't wait to hear you scream and whine, 'No, stop it. This is our last hope!' By all means, cry too," he said mockingly. "Pour your heart out. 'No, we've been through too much pain, we want to erase this world.' I'd love to hear it. I'll record it all and play your pathetic words to the world. I'll make you a laughingstock for a century to come. Get ready!"

It was maybe the most he'd ever said at one stretch. Even Sousuke was surprised by how easily the words came to him.

"You don't understand anything, do you?" the girl whispered sadly, breaking her silence. "All we want is to make a kinder, gentler world. A world of comfort and balance and ease. A brighter—"

"Shut up, bitch," he snarled.

"What..."

"Comfort? Please. Ease? I'll smear that all over with bacteria-ridden shit. I know exactly what it is you want, and I've long since made up my mind about it," he told her coldly. "I'm going to do everything I can to stop you. That's the nature of war: simple applications of force and retaliations thereto. It's what I love best. So let's get started!"

Sousuke got a reading from one of the decoys' vibration sensors. Al announced, «Eight o'clock, distance three, two ASes!»

“Try me!” he yelled, hurling the invitation at both pilots. These enemy ASes were most likely the lambda driver-mounted Codarls. They'd already detected him and were heading in for the attack, so swiftly that the decoy had only just barely detected them. No need to talk to that woman anymore, then. The enemy were likely still somewhat divided among his decoys, but they would have caught on to his trick by now and begun their encirclement.

“Keep an eye on the western slope,” Sousuke ordered. “There are three good ambush spots there.”

«Yes, I remember.» Al knew the jungles of the Merida Island practice grounds well.

Sousuke selected his weapons while still on the move. First, the two Zeloses on his hips. He engaged them at maximum firing speed with no particular regard for accuracy, which sent hundreds of 20mm bullets tearing through the jungle. Trees collapsed, causing leaves and branches to scatter.

The two Codarls must have decided that using ECS would be pointless, because they showed themselves from the get-go. They came charging in, kicking up mud as they immediately opened fire with their carbines.

The Laevatein took a few steps to dodge and then returned fire with its 40mm assault rifle. Five shots landed on one Codarl's right side, but the Codarl blocked with its lambda driver to avoid the fatal blow. It stumbled, righted itself, and was about to attack again, when—

“Hah!” said Sousuke, pouring on more shots as if to assert his dominance via pure brute force. Overwhelmed by the torrent of 40mm and 20mm shots, the Codarl eventually fell over, riddled with bullet holes.

“I've had enough of these games!” Sousuke declared. He blocked another machine's attacks with his force fields, then dropped the 20mm cannons as they ran out of bullets. He then ran at his opponent, exhausting the last of his remaining 40mm shots. The enemy pulled away, hopping left and right evasively while returning fire. The enemy's 37mm shots bounced all around the Laevatein as he continued to charge until his rifle's clip was empty.

《Remaining GEC-B bullets, zero.》

“I know!” he told Al. Then he snatched the rifle out of the sub-arms that held it to swing at the Codarl like a baseball bat. The air distorted between them, and there was a smack of contact as the rifle hit the enemy’s head and spun it hard into the ground.

As he was about to hit it again with the now-bent gun, Al blared another warning, 《Four o’clock!》

Sousuke grunted as he rolled forward to shield himself with the defeated Codarl. At almost the same time, a new enemy machine attacked from his four o’clock—coming in from the west, just as he’d predicted. He didn’t know how many; most likely three or more. Rounds of enemy fire peppered the Codarl he was using as a shield.

His other GEC-B was out of bullets, so he tossed it. While still blocking fire with the enemy machine in his left hand, Sousuke used his right hand to draw his Boxer-2 shotcannon and return fire. The enemies scattered.

《Incoming from the south as well, 》 Al reported. 《At least four.》

That meant they’d be taking fire on two fronts. Sousuke tossed aside the shredded enemy machine and, while using force fields to mitigate the damage, moved behind cover. The enemy was focusing their fire on him sooner than expected.

《The first two were likely there to delay you,》 Al observed.

“I agree,” Sousuke said grimly. “It’s the major commanding them.”

The major wasn’t going to let him pick them off one by one, and the decoys hadn’t bought Sousuke as much time as he’d hoped. He’d managed to overpower two of the enemy Codarls already, but it didn’t change the fact that he was at a clear disadvantage. There were at least eight enemy ASes out there, Leonard could be anywhere, and the major was commanding them... On top of which, the TAROS would be activating soon.

Major... He must have overheard Sousuke’s transmission before. Leonard likely had as well. His final declaration of war hadn’t actually been meant for that woman; it was meant for Kalinin and Leonard, as both a challenge and an

insult: I won't hesitate any longer. I'm going to crush you all with everything I have. You're all weaklings, clinging to your shady devices and foolish ideals. I don't care about your logic. It's your twisted methods I object to. I'm going to meddle in your plans as long as I can. I'm going to spite you with everything I have. Just wait until I get there...

Were they laughing at him for his claim? No, they weren't laughing at all. They knew they had to take him seriously. Anyone who would laugh him off wouldn't stand a chance against him.

Sousuke let out a shout as a rocket detonated at close range, causing rocks and earth to shower the Laevatein's armor.

《Three Codarl-types, en route to 21D.》

The enemy operators were setting up their encirclement. None of them seemed to be especially skilled, but their placement and the timing of their fire were extremely well coordinated. It was completely unlike the Codarls he'd faced in the past.

"Anything from the de Danaan?" he checked.

《No. Current status unclear.》

"They're herding me northwest."

《Right into enemy crossfire, I'm sure.》

"But we're sitting ducks if we stay," decided Sousuke. "Let's go!"

The Laevatein dove out from behind the rocks and ran into the line of fire.

The mountains were eerily silent, a stark contrast to the pummeling anti-air attacks of moments ago. Mao's M9 moved through the mountains, rendered invisible via ECS, her sensors all on passive mode. With her joints silenced, she snuck along like a stray cat down a back alley.

They're not attacking, she thought, but that stands to reason. The enemy had no reason to be aggressive; their priority was to buy time. Even so, they had to know that the mountain facility was vulnerable to an M9 infiltration. They couldn't want to entertain even the possibility of damage to the nuclear firing

mechanism.

Setting up an ambush, maybe? Or have they really not noticed me yet? The latter seemed unlikely. It had been over two years since the M9's ECS had made its live combat debut, so it was no longer the all-powerful stealth device it once was. It was still a powerful piece of equipment, but there was no reason that a cutting-edge Amalgam machine wouldn't already have her rough location and heading.

Biting back the urge to use active ECCS, Mao continued moving forward. She wanted to be cautious in her approach, but also knew that she was in a race against time.

She came to the foot of the mountain's south side, which would lead to the base's entrance. Then she began to search the area around her. She picked something up: a faint heat source, hidden in a hollow behind the brush near the rocks to the southwest. Its infrared pattern wasn't something you'd see in the natural world.

"Mao?" Clouseau's voice came to her over a short-range signal. The heat signature she'd picked up was his Falke.

She lowered the gun she'd pointed at him and responded on their shared encrypted channel. "Where's the infantry?"

"Yang is gathering them five hundred meters to the northwest," he answered. "Only one light injury, apparently a sprain during landing."

Mao realized she must have been the one who'd fallen the farthest from the group. "And Wu?" she questioned, asking after the soldier injured in the anti-air barrage just before they dropped. All she'd heard was that he was unconscious.

"I don't know," Clouseau admitted. "They left him in the plane. All I know is that he was pretty badly off."

"I see... Is Yang okay?" She was asking if he was in psychological shape to lead his unit. Yang was good friends with the injured Wu.

"I only talked to him for a minute, but he seemed fine," said Clouseau. "He's moving them along the planned route, so we'll come in from the northeast. Let's go."

“Understood,” Mao said shortly, casting a glance at her clock. *Twenty minutes left to the expected launch...* They didn’t have time to argue. She’d have to rely on Clouseau’s instinct.

Her AI traded data with Clouseau’s machine. Despite their invisibility, they could exchange location information in real time. The target symbol for Clouseau’s machine, labeled URUZ1, appeared on an otherwise blank location on her screen. She engaged all of her passive electronic warfare devices, then followed Clouseau up the slope.

“You don’t think it’s a little too quiet?” she asked.

“I do.” Clouseau knew that Mao’s machine had superior sensors, so after receiving and considering the data from her machine, he agreed.

“No sign of any traps, and less resistance than expected,” she pointed out. “That means...”

“Tessa was right?” he guessed.

“Yes. They’ve concentrated their remaining forces on Merida Island. This isn’t their main priori—”

Just then, music began to boom around them. Not an explosion—music. The mountain setting meant that all she could hear was the scratchy treble, but she could still tell just what song it was: Mussorgski’s *Night on Bald Mountain*, a symphony about evil spirits at play the night before the Festival of St. John. The source was immediately obvious: there were speakers installed all around the base, playing at a volume that would put a rock festival to shame.

“Reminds me of *Fantasia*,” Clouseau whispered.

“What’s that?” Mao asked.

“The first movie shown in stereo... ah, but never mind. Anyway, this screams Fowler to me.”

Fowler... Yes, this is just the kind of thing that wispy pretty boy would do, she thought. If this was part of a strategy to annoy the hell out of them, she had to admit, he knew what he was doing. *And he’s a skilled operator on top of that. While we’re distracted by this...*

An alarm sounded out, and Mao picked up a faint heat signature from the north slope at ten o'clock. She turned her gun towards it and backed up. She didn't have to warn Clouseau; he would already have her data. Her AI's ID system determined the heat source to be "within the margin of error," but Mao disagreed. There was no question in her mind that it was an enemy machine.

But it wasn't firing.

"It hasn't noticed us yet?" she wondered.

"No—behind us!" Clouseau shouted, and at the same time, an enemy approached from the opposite direction. This one was still cloaked with ECS, too, so its form couldn't be seen. All she could see was something coming out of the rocks five hundred meters behind them, beaming active radar in their direction—a pincer attack. It was impossible for their machines to collaborate under these conditions; they'd just have to go one-on-one.

"I'll handle the front!" Clouseau yelled, his machine immediately turning with a leap to the side.

Mao turned in the opposite direction, dropped her now-useless ECS, and turned on almost all of her active sensors instead. It would be like beaming floodlights into the air around her, but the sensors quickly flooded her with information.

The enemy machines, which were previously just faint heat sources, were now plainly both Eligores; an improved model of the Codarl with advanced power and maneuverability. During their first meeting—the battle in Mexico—a surprise attack from one of these things had demolished her machine's head, and it had taken everything she had just to keep up evasive maneuvers.

Clouseau was facing the black Eligore, which likely contained Fowler. Mao was facing off against the white Eligore, the one she'd first met in Mexico. This mountain wasteland would be the site of their final reckoning.

She'd managed to avoid a surprise attack this time, but they were still at a disadvantage. Their opponents had lambda drivers, and they didn't; the two-on-two setup meant they wouldn't have the means to use decoy tactics or set traps; but most importantly, the enemy pilots were at least as skilled as Mao and Clouseau were, if not more so...

Mao's opponent, the white Eligore, had also dropped its ECS to attack. While tearing across the slope at high speed, it pointed its gun at Mao's machine.

"Raring to go, huh?" Mao observed, and put out a powerful jamming burst to temporarily interfere with her enemy's targeting. The enemy fired a burst shot regardless; it missed. Slipping through the shots, Mao leaped in a chaotic pattern while keeping the enemy machine in her sights. The moment she landed, she aimed and fired. She felt sure the shot would bounce off the lambda driver, but she checked to be sure, and...

Her jaw dropped. The white enemy machine hadn't used its lambda driver. Instead, it had put out a similar jamming wave to throw Mao's own targeting off. For a second, Mao's screen blinked wildly, but it immediately recovered.

The Eligore shook its head slightly and then took off for its next attack position. It was like it was mocking her, saying, *I don't need a lambda driver. I can beat you with electronic warfare alone.*



“Why, you...!” Mao fumed. Just who was that operator? She had no information to go off of, but... *Could it be... a woman?* she wondered. Mao wasn’t sure why, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that it was. It was pure intuition, but there was something about the white Eligore’s movements—the slight arch of its back, the bend of its knees, the flow from its jumps to its landings—that gave it a sense of elegance.

It was possible that Mao was overthinking it. But these machines did reflect the body language of their operators, after all. The motion manager translated all the personality, the humanity of its operator into the machine. With her allied machines, Mao could tell who was in which one just from watching them move.

Sousuke’s machines were always slightly hunched, head snapping side to side cautiously. Kurz’s M9 kept its chest puffed out, slowly and haughtily turning its head left and right. Clouseau’s machine was always ramrod straight, its stance like a martial artist. Mao was a practiced student of those motions, and her intuition now told her that her opponent might be a woman. Would knowing that give her an advantage somehow?

Hell no, dammit! The enemy shot at her again, and this time hit her left shoulder armor. Mao grunted. The damage wasn’t bad, but the impact had cracked one of her ECS lenses... That would make it harder for her to disappear again if she had to.

Shaking off the distracting train of thought, she fired a series of blasts from her assault rifle at the swiftly-moving enemy machine. The white Eligore integrated usages of its ECS with chaotic maneuvers and taunting shots. It would be difficult for Mao to land a clear hit from her current position.

She didn’t have time for this. And even if she did, was it even possible for her to beat this opponent?



One Codarl was gliding over the ground, ready to crash hard into Sousuke’s Laevatein.

《Proximity alert!》

Sousuke blocked the enemy machine's strike with his left hand, then fired at another with the shotcannon in his right. Then, from behind, another enemy charged him, brandishing a spear-shaped monomolecular cutter.

"Knee cutter!" he yelled to Al.

《Ready.》

The blade of one of the Laevatein's knee-mounted GRAW-4 monomolecular cutters activated while jutting out of his knee sheath. He just dodged the tip of the charging enemy machine and then, from a seemingly impossible position, unleashed a knee-jab. The cutter protruding from the knee skewered the incoming Codarl, causing sparks to fly from its armor.

Sousuke grunted as, at the same time, another enemy fired at him from a different direction. He twisted his upper half to use one enemy as a shield while swinging his right leg out. This cast the skewered enemy aside like a doll, sending it bouncing away through the mud. He then turned the shotcannon in his right hand against the enemy he'd been holding back with his left, blasting it to pieces at point blank range.

"That's right, keep coming at me!" He felt alive. He was moving with a skill and efficiency he hadn't felt since the barely remembered days of his youth. And there was one other thing that he realized...

I'm making trouble for Andrey Kalinin. He could identify the man's strategy. He could imagine what he'd order his men to do based on Sousuke's actions. They'd been together for so long, and he knew him all too well. *Will this decision make trouble for you? Will this action make things harder for you?* Sousuke mentally taunted him.

This wasn't your standard rookie confidence; it was completely unemotional. The major was still unquestionably more intelligent, but the fuzzier factors were on Sousuke's side. The Laevatein was a wildcard, raging with power that even its operator couldn't fully predict... It exceeded the common sense ideas of an old veteran like Kalinin.

But no matter how strong it might be, it would hit its limits eventually. *The difference in power*, thought Sousuke. *The mounting fatigue. The ticking clock...* Even as hard as he was fighting, it would be difficult for him to defeat all their

opponents and still make it to the TAROS in time. Maybe he could destroy most of the enemy forces, but it would still be over, sooner or later. The Laevatein's power would eventually reach its limit...

Well? Is that what you're thinking, Major? he paused to wonder. *But it's too late for you...*

《Signal from TDD-1 received. Shall I make the prearranged support request?》

"Do it!" Sousuke ordered.

《Roger. Executing. Launch detected. Displaying now.》

Ten symbols appeared over the ocean at the edge of his tactical map: the de Danaan had received their request. It had reached the shores of Merida Island, and from nearby periscope depth, launched ten cruise missiles all at once. He couldn't see them from here, but distance-wise, they were right under his nose.

《ETA thirty seconds,》 reported AI.

The Laevatein moved westward as enemy shells rained down around it. Sousuke avoided them with evasive maneuvers and use of cover, but still took a hit in the thigh. The wound wouldn't be fatal, but it slightly reduced his output.

Regardless, he ran on and eventually came out in a clearing in the jungle. It was a grassy spot, about three hundred meters wide with good visibility. Theoretically, this was terrain you wanted to avoid in an AS battle. But the Laevatein plunged right into it.

《ETA, fifteen seconds. Executing terminal guidance of TRAM 1 through 10.》

Sousuke blocked the enemy attacks and fired back, blowing one Codarl's arm off. Without flinching, the enemy tightened their encirclement, bearing down on him from three directions.

Eight enemies... He was literally surrounded on all sides. It would be impossible for him to handle them all at once. "Leave the guidance to me," Sousuke ordered.

《Roger, 》 said AI. 《ETA, five seconds. Four... three...》

"Let's do this!" Sousuke crowed as the Laevatein squatted down to activate the Fairy Eye. Power flowed into the wing-like units protruding from both

shoulders. White particles danced from the blades, and a muffled hum echoed throughout the area.

The Fairy Eye was a lambda driver canceler, capable of neutralizing the lambda drivers of all machines within range. The nullification field instantly expanded to encompass the Codarls. At the same moment, the ten cruise missiles arrived overhead. AI provided the terminal guidance, and arrows of flame rained down at subsonic speeds from the dim sky above.

《Impact.》

A hit. A hit. A hit. A hit. A hit... A storm of explosions raged up around Sousuke. Some of his opponents didn't even notice the surprise attack; some noticed and tried to use their lambda drivers to defend. Nevertheless, they all ended up the same way; over half of his enemies were speared by the shaped charges. Some were blown to smithereens, while others caught fire.

《Five units destroyed, 》 AI reported. 《The rest dodged.》

“Great work,” Sousuke told him. The activation of the Fairy Eye ceased, and AI folded up the unit's heat sink plate as they moved in to clean up their remaining enemies.

They'd destroyed five of the eight Codarls, and the three remaining seemed to have just barely dodged or avoided fatal blows. One had actually lost a leg and was trying to crawl away... Sousuke unceremoniously fired his shotcannon at its back, destroying the Codarl instantly. The remaining two recovered from their panic, and after waffling over whether to continue attacking or run, they turned to face him, apparently having chosen the former.

“Get out of my way!” Sousuke snarled at them. He pulverized one with a shotcannon blast, then bisected the last in a vertical slice from his monomolecular cutter. All units destroyed.

Now... Major, I've polished off your lackeys. Did you plan for this, too? If so, what will you have in store for me next? Have you prepared a welcome committee of traps? Or are you planning to lure me towards the base, to attack me when I disembark to save Kaname?

Well, bring it on, Sousuke thought. *I'm on my way.* The Laevatein sheathed its

monomolecular cutters back in its knees and dashed towards the center of the base.

Kalinin wasn't at all surprised by the news of the destruction of his entire Codarl squadron. To the contrary, he felt a certain sense of inevitability about it.

It wasn't a failure of his leadership, by any means. He'd told them to watch out for the Laevatein's lambda driver canceler. He had even expected to see it used in tandem with cruise missiles. What he hadn't anticipated was such deft coordination; Sousuke and Tessa were both far more skilled than they had been a year ago. They'd been through countless trials and had come out stronger and sharper on the other side.

They might be too much for me after all, he thought. If only the Belial had coordinated with the Codarls, the outcome might have been different... "But it was never going to happen," he whispered to himself. Leonard's pride wouldn't allow it; he wanted a one-on-one fight. His superiority was his weakness, in a way.

He called Leonard on the radio and received no response. He probably couldn't expect one. But a dispassionate analysis still gave Leonard a ninety percent chance of victory; even with the lambda drive canceler in play, the Belial was still the superior machine.

Kalinin would just have to leave the Laevatein to Leonard while he focused on the placement of his infantry. If the de Danaan were to break through their defenses and make landfall, it would be on the base's north shore. He could set up a careful ambush there and deal a decisive blow to the amphibious invasion. No matter how hard the enemy tried, he could buy his people all the time they needed. Kalinin sent out a few secondary orders, and then began to instruct the infantry squadron on countermeasures.

As he ran through the jungle, Sousuke used an encrypted channel to call the de Danaan. "Uruz-7 here," he reported. "I've destroyed most of the enemy ASes. No sign of the Belial yet. The TAROS must have entered its final activation stage."

“This is... the de Danaan. Thank you,” Mardukas’s voice responded. He was breathing hard, and the static was severe. Sousuke could hear shouts and alarms blaring out behind him on the radio. They must have taken some serious damage.

“Colonel?” Sousuke questioned. “Where’s the captain?”

“She was thrown from her chair when the torpedo hit,” Mardukas told him. “She’s getting first aid now.”

“A torpedo? How bad is it?”

“It’s all right. We can still function, and so can she,” said Mardukas. “We’re going to try entering through the underground waterway. Our latest satellite information confirmed that the TAROS was built in our old underground dock. Sagara, you try to infiltrate from the surface.”

Through the underground waterway? he thought incredulously. It was a dangerous move. Reckless, one might even say.

You can stop pushing yourselves and just wait in the ocean... he was about to say, but then realized he couldn’t: they didn’t have that luxury. The TAROS would activate soon, and he wasn’t actually sure if he could make it there all by himself. He didn’t have time to clean up everything here before making his own run at it, either. Their best plan was to divide the enemy, with him attacking from the surface and the de Danaan from underground.

“Understood,” he said at last.

“Put me on!” It was Tessa’s voice. He could hear the headset being ripped off of Mardukas’s head. “Sagara-san,” she said. “The Belial... you haven’t seen it yet?”

“Affirmative.”

“Be careful. Leonard will try to buy time. He doesn’t have to beat you, just hold you in place until it activates.”

“Understood. But—”

“Don’t hold back. Do whatever you have to do to stop my brother. Dead or alive,” Tessa declared, seeming to realize what Sousuke was about to say. “I’m

going to tell you something that might just faze him, all right? Memorize this.” On the other side of the radio, her voice took on a hesitant tone. Then, with the reticence of someone about to drink poison, she managed to spit out the words.

It was a single, short phrase. Sousuke didn’t understand what it meant, but he didn’t have time to ask for clarity. His response was short: “Understood.”

“Please, do it. End communication!” The call cut off hastily.

That was the entirety of his conversation with Tessa. The enemy still had some surface aquatic forces, after all... they didn’t have time for a leisurely, careful exchange in the middle of combat.

The Laevatein ran in the direction of the base. Once there, the plan was to head south, enter Elevator No. 16 in the practice grounds, reach the basement, then charge straight down Corridor No. 0, the passage that served as the underground base’s backbone—that would be the shortest route. Corridor No. 0 was wide enough that even ASes could pass through easily.

As the jungle rushed by in his vision, it occurred to Sousuke that there was still a tiger on the island. He’d saved a Bengal tiger from a poacher while living in Tokyo, and with nowhere else to keep it, had brought the animal to live here.

That white tiger might still be here in this jungle.

I wonder if he’s safe... Sousuke had tried to keep it in his apartment, but this idea had been met with violent objections from Kaname. He’d ended up setting it free in the jungles of Merida Island instead, and despite his protestations that it would be useful in controlling the wild boar population that ran rampant on the practice grounds, she’d still looked worried.

《Sarge? Your focus is dropping,》 Al told him. He’d probably picked up on his emotional state through the machine’s mini-TAROS.

“No... I’m all right,” Sousuke told him, and shook off those idle thoughts. Elevator No. 16 was close, but Leonard still hadn’t shown up. There was no activity from Kalinin, either. He didn’t mind, though; perhaps they’d just suffered an equipment malfunction. Stopping Sofia had to be his priority right

now.

Then he was forced to stop with a gasp. *Ah, of course*, he thought. *I should have known*. There was an AS lurking on the crest of the hill that contained Elevator No. 16, blocking his way. The unblemished black and silver armor; the elegant curves; the asymmetrical head, which gave it an imposing, demonic aura. It was Leonard's Belial.

The rain was still falling lightly around them, so Leonard wasn't bothering to use his ECS. The Belial had some kind of weapon in its hands; as long as the machine was tall, and shaped like a sliver of a crescent moon. This it rested on one shoulder as it looked down at Sousuke haughtily.

Is that... a bow? Sousuke wondered incredulously.

"I expected you'd make it this far," Leonard said over his external speakers. "Though I thought Kalinin's leadership would hold you off a little while longer... Never trust an old man to do a young man's job."

"I wonder," Sousuke replied. "If you had been in command, I might have arrived here five minutes earlier."

"Well met." The Belial's shoulders bounced once, but it was more of a shrug than a laugh. "I heard your little speech earlier. Very entertaining. So, you know she's really Sofia?"

"Of course. Tessa told me." Sofia—the original guinea pig who had been ripped apart mentally and physically in the Yamsk-11 experiment eighteen years ago—had materialized as another consciousness within Kaname via the omni-sphere.

The worst part was that she didn't even realize it. Sofia wasn't controlling Kaname; she thought she *was* Kaname, acting of her own volition. Furthermore, she had all of Kaname's past memories and believed them to be her own. That made it pointless to try to reason with her, or to appeal to her past.

Sousuke knew that Kaname's will—if it was still in there somewhere—was the only thing that could fight that fight, which left the question of what he should say to spur it on. *Go for it? I'm coming for you? I'm still thinking of you?* Of course not; such words rang hollow. What stronger words did he know, then?

The answer to that question was the rant he'd ended up with.

Sousuke didn't know how to profess his love to somebody, but he knew how to jeer and provoke. When someone was struggling on the ground, there were ways to help them besides kind encouragement.

"I see," Leonard mused. "You thought that would be an effective method of calling to the real her. How typically straightforward of you."

"What about you?"

"What?"

"You appear to have some special feeling for Chidori as well," Sousuke pointed out. "But that isn't her, not really. How can you be all right with what's happening?"

"I believe you know," Leonard replied.

"You still intend to reject the world we live in?"

"To restore it to its proper shape, you mean."

"We're going around in circles." Sousuke stopped speaking and began to load a magazine of armor-piercing rounds into his shotcannon, feeling that there was an emptiness to the whole affair. There was no particular animosity between himself and Leonard, and that itself was a problem; the lack of any strong feelings towards his opponent left him with no real investment in the upcoming fight. This wasn't some kind of predestined battle. It was just two people who wanted different things, each trying to clear the other from the board. Sousuke just had to beat Leonard and then proceed onward. The other man's philosophy was irrelevant to him.

It would be the same if they met in another world, whether they were enemies or allies. They were fundamentally irrelevant to each other, with nothing to build on, no basis for developing a strong bond of hatred. You couldn't change a person's nature, and some people would never mix, no matter how you played with destiny.

The realization was simultaneously crushing and amusing. He could feel it in his bones. *Leonard*, thought Sousuke. *Maybe if you'd felt like a mortal enemy to*

me, I might have been able to agree with you. But out loud, he said, “There’s no time. Let’s begin,” and then fired.

The Belial didn’t move. The armor-piercing round stopped en route as the air around it warped severely, force field meeting force field. The round itself was no more than an intermediary to both parties; a vehicle for the images of destruction their minds could conjure.

At last, the shot was blown apart, scattering like confetti as the air compressed and trembled from the shockwave that shattered the ground below.

“Yeah, thought so!” Sousuke clicked his tongue and began to prepare himself for what was coming, fully aware that Leonard wouldn’t settle for a similarly mild greeting.

The Laevatein was a powerful machine, but the Belial was inevitably superior. Now it came tearing through the smoke to dance in the dawning sky above. “You made quite the speech before, Sagara!” Leonard jeered at him. “‘Put it all to waste’? ‘Foil our plans’? Well, do it, if you can!”

The Belial assumed an attack stance, confirming that its weapon really was a bow—an enormous longbow, eight meters tall. Leonard held the weapon in its left hand, elegantly pulling the mechanical string taut with the fingers of its right.

There was no arrow to be seen, but Sousuke could tell that it was there, invisible, and pointed at him. *I can’t block it*, he felt, and instinctively threw himself to the side in order to dodge. Then he sensed it as the Belial’s bow fired something that pierced through the Laevatein’s shotcannon and left shoulder. The shockwave washed over him, and Sousuke felt the explosion ripping through the air before he heard it.

But if the sound of the bow’s firing had come *after* its destructive effects... “A railgun...?” Sousuke exclaimed, sensing that this was something fundamentally different from a shell.

《Unknown,》 said AI. 《The shot hit as soon as it fired. It was hypersonic, or even faster.》

Sousuke didn't have time to consider Al's observation. The weapon's speed wasn't as dangerous as the fact that his force fields didn't work against it. The attack had taken out his shotcannon and destroyed the fairy wing on his left shoulder; if he hadn't dodged, it might have also skewered his torso.

"Excellent instincts," Leonard taunted. "But what about the next one?!" The Belial flew freely, readying its second arrow.

While we're fighting, Kaname—rather, Sofia—is activating the TAROS, Sousuke thought. *I don't have time for this.* And time wasn't his only concern—he was at risk of total destruction.

4: Lovers' Dilemma

The Tuatha de Danaan was critically wounded, having already taken hits twice on its starboard side and one on its port. One of those on its starboard had been a direct hit from a mini-torpedo—the fore starboard compartment, just by the hangar deck. They couldn't stop the flooding, and no matter how they flushed water from the ballast tanks, they couldn't maintain their pitch. There was also a fire raging in the machinery room. The automatic fire extinguishers couldn't keep up, and they didn't have the manpower necessary to do it manually.

Thankfully, the submarine's size and structure kept it from dropping to the bottom of the sea, but they were fast reaching their limits.

“Activating ADSLMM. Mike-18, hit!”

The last Leviathan had fallen for their trap. It had been closing in, hoping to finish off the slowed and depth-limited de Danaan. But in doing so, it had come into range of one of the autonomous mines that its prey had secretly launched earlier in the battle.

The senior sonar technician's announcement of the Leviathan's destruction came after a distant explosion, but nobody was about to breathe a sigh of relief. By then they were already on their next attack course, targeting the submerged gate that would take them into Merida Island's first waterway. This would give them a direct line to the base's underground dock, but they first had to break through the sturdy alloy steel fence that guarded it.

Holding a wad of bloodstained gauze to her head, Tessa gave her order. “Fire all!”

“Aye, fire all!”

One of their tubes had taken too much damage, but the other five simultaneously fired out torpedoes. Two of them took the lead as they were programmed to do, detonating in a staggered fashion to take out the enemy's

floating mines. The remaining three torpedoes then plowed through the curtain of bubbles they produced, the de Danaan fast on their heels.

The enemy tried a counterattack from the shoreline. Projected mini-torpedoes rained down on them, but they sped up to try to outrun them. There were explosions all around them. One hit and the floor bucked, casting Tessa out of her seat as one of the control room screens blacked out.

A damage report came in: the machinery room, the living quarters—everything was either on fire or flooded. They'd lost their second starboard rudder, but they were still mobile. They ignored the damage and accelerated.

Their torpedoes hit the fencing first. There was a series of explosions as the boat plowed into the crumpled fence, jolting them hard. A panel fell from the ceiling and hit Mardukas; someone screamed, and the lights flickered. Then their 44,000-ton mass broke through the gate and proceeded into the tunnel.

"Is the next round loaded?!" Tessa screamed.

"Loading now. Two...one...ready!" The torpedo launch tubes displayed on the still-working screen switched from yellow to green one after the other. The word 'ARM' flashed over each.

"Fire!" They fired their remaining five torpedoes at the second gate blocking their way into the tunnel. One was a dud, but the other four accelerated, rocketing towards their target.

All of them hit.

The shockwave was transmitted through the water in the tunnel, hitting the de Danaan's prow head-on. This sent it veering off course, their starboard side scraping hard along the tunnel wall. It let out the scream of a giant beast and the floor of the control room shook wildly.

"Reactors one and two have surpassed maximum heat levels! We can't keep going!" Mardukas yelled.

"Maintain maximum speed!" Tessa cried back. "Let them explode if they're going to!"

"Aye aye, ma'am!"

The second gate was fast approaching: three hundred meters, two hundred meters...

“We’re plowing through! Prepare for impact!” Tessa shouted over the ship’s intercom, but the message didn’t go through. *Are the channels down due to flooding and fire, or are the speakers broken?* Tessa wondered. *I don’t know.*

“Don’t worry! Everyone’s perfectly braced!” bellowed Mardukas, who had blood on his face.



A second later they slammed into the gate with a tremble and a roar. Tessa couldn't tell what else had happened. She knew she'd been thrown out of her seat and hit the pilot's chair ahead of her, but after that, her vision was spinning and her ears were ringing and she wasn't fully sure whether she was even still alive.

"Ugh..." she groaned. Emergency lamps were blinking, and a terrible headache and tinnitus consumed her thoughts. Mardukas was looking into her face, shouting something. Beyond him, she could see the pilot cradling the fire control officer on the floor.

At last, sound broke through. "...tain. Captain!"

"Did I lose consciousness?" Tessa asked. "For how long?"

"Just thirty seconds."

"Status?"

One of the starboard screens was still working. As Mardukas helped her up, Tessa staggered to her console panel. She tried to work it and found the screen to be responsive.

They'd broken through the second gate and arrived in a dry area, skidded for two hundred meters, and then come to a stop. Seawater was flooding in through the broken sluice gate, and now the tunnel was filled up about one-third of the way.

The damage done on this last run would prove fatal to the submarine. The palladium reactor had undergone an emergency shutdown. The machinery room fire was still raging and had spread to the area near the fore torpedo tubes, giving a chance that it might light into their ammunition stores. The flooding in the hangar had stopped, but now there was a poison gas leak. They'd lost most of their rudder, and the outer hull was peppered with too many holes to count.

Tessa tried the bridge periscope. It was still working, so she zoomed in using the optical sensors' night vision mode. There was more tunnel ahead of them. About three hundred meters out from their current position lay the final gate. This one was sealed off with concrete, and the service tunnels for people to

pass through were all welded shut. Beyond that barrier, they'd find the drydock that had once been used for de Danaan's maintenance, and which now housed their target: the TAROS device.

Tessa prepared a shipwide broadcast on the still-working backup line, and spoke into the microphone. "All hands, abandon ship. Prepare for hand-to-hand combat."

They had no time to waste. The nearby members of her crew all responded in the affirmative and ran off from the control room to the next block over, which contained the weapons lockers.

After watching her subordinates leave, Mardukas stopped in the exit. "Captain!" he called to Tessa, who had remained behind.

"Go on. I'll catch up soon," she responded in a voice that seemed almost inappropriately calm. Mardukas, who seemed to catch onto the meaning behind her words, nodded once and then disappeared through the exit.

Tessa looked around the control room with its blaring alarms and blinking emergency lights. She wanted to sear it into her memory. Then she used the console to punch in the words 'THANK YOU.' But perhaps the interface had been taken by the fire, because the ship's AI, Dana, did not respond.

Tessa crouched down, put her hands on the dust-covered floor, and gave it a kiss. A long, long kiss, which was the least that a mother could do for her dying daughter. About five seconds passed, and then she stood up, wiping the tears from her eyes as she swiftly left the control room behind.

Arrows of destruction came streaking towards the Laevatein. One after another, the shockwaves they produced blasted through boulders on the hill and houses on the urban combat practice field.

He couldn't block Leonard's attacks. He couldn't even begin to imagine a shield capable of stopping the longbow's invisible projectiles. Sousuke's Laevatein was just barely managing to dodge the rain of arrows through careful evasive maneuvers, but soon he'd reach the limit of what he could do. Sooner or later, one would spear through his cockpit.

In that case, he thought reluctantly, there's no reason to keep pitting strength against strength. It was time to use the equipment designed for just this sort of occasion. "We're using the wing!" he announced.

《Ready,》 Al told him.

He couldn't use it for long. Leonard knew that, too. Sousuke had wanted to time its usage for just the right moment, but that man wasn't going to let him have the choice. Any hesitance to use it would be the death of him.

Use it, he told himself. All of it. Focus and imagine. As he did so, the Laevatein's remaining wing—the right-side lambda driver canceler—activated, and the heat sink trailing from its head began to emit a light like molten steel.

It was active. The enemy's lambda driver was nullified, and Leonard's Belial, having lost its flight capability, plummeted to earth... But then suddenly righted itself in midair to land effortlessly.

"I thought you'd use that," Leonard remarked. "However..." Upon landing, he folded up his bow and leaped to the side to enter standard combat maneuvers. "—How can you attack with it active?"

The Laevatein had already lost its shotcannon and rifle. It still had the demolition gun on its back, but the recoil was too great to use without his own lambda driver for support. He'd used up his anti-tank daggers and grenades in the fight against the Codarls.

The heat output of the fairy wing was increasing, and Sousuke knew he could only keep it active for a minute longer. Meanwhile, Leonard fired at him with his arm-mounted 40mm machine cannons, shot after shot, precisely herding the Laevatein along.

"And your machine has a weak point," Leonard observed. As he spoke, the Belial disappeared into midair. The rain had stopped, and he'd activated his ECS.

Sousuke couldn't pick up Leonard's position. They were on rocky ground, and he seemed to be carefully sticking to the rocks. There was no trampling on grass or cutting through smoke to give his position away. He was keeping his machine hidden, quietly and cautiously.

He must have realized it after all... The Laevatein, with its specs heightened

through sheer brute force, didn't have an ECS counter-sensor.

"Your lack of electronic combat readiness... Did you think I wouldn't realize?" Leonard asked from some unseen point. Sousuke could pick up electromagnetic waves from here and there, but he couldn't trace them back to their source.

"Wouldn't realize..." While carefully reading his optical sensor information to search for his invisible enemy, Sousuke turned on his external speakers. "But there's something you certainly *haven't* realized." He remembered the words Tessa had told him earlier. He still didn't know what they meant, but if he was going to use them, now had to be the time.

"Oh?"

"Tessa told me... She knows what her mother did. You hear me? She *knows*."

A long silence followed. He couldn't afford to wait to verify his enemy's reaction, but they seemed to have indeed been magical words.

"What..." It was the first sign of uncertainty his opponent had shown. "That's nonsense. You're lying."

Where is he?

The wing was reaching its limit. Fifteen seconds...

"You think I'm lying?" Sousuke asked, while wondering again, *Where is he?*

"But... if Teletha knew, then why did she try to stop me? She must be mad. Completely mad. She knows she's the daughter of a whore?" Leonard demanded to know. "That's... Don't be ridiculous. I've never heard anything so absurd!"

A few clumsy steps clinched it: the broad-leafed trees shook unnaturally, the grass below bent in an impossible pattern, and falling leaves hit an unknown something and changed their course. Sousuke couldn't see the Belial. It wasn't on radar either, but it was definitely there.

There... Sousuke chose his weapon: the demolition gun, in its short-range mode, rotated into place from behind. He grabbed it with his right hand and quickly took aim. With the wing still active, and without the aid of the lambda driver...he fired.

His right arm flew off at the elbow as recoil sufficient to shake a fifty-ton tank went racing through his intricate humanoid machine. The Laevatein corkscrewed through the air, slamming into the ground, while the demolition gun flew farther; it tumbled end-over-end with his right arm still attached.

The 165mm shot hit its target in a massive explosion. Smoke burst outward, and sent dust showering down upon the Laevatein. Sousuke shook his head, which was swimming, and stood his machine up.

“Ngh...” He groaned, before checking the amount of damage done: he’d lost his demolition gun and his right arm. The fairy wing had burned itself out; he couldn’t use the lambda driver canceler again.

When the smoke cleared, he saw the Belial was still standing. Its left arm had been blown off, it had shed armor in places, and it had lost its longbow, but that was all.

Sousuke shook his head. “Dammit...” He’d put all he had into that attack, but the hit had been just off-center. The Laevatein’s last chance had fallen just short of a finishing blow.

The cracked sensors of the Belial’s asymmetrical head glared at Sousuke. “I didn’t know you were that kind of man,” Leonard said accusingly, with deep anger in his voice. With his lambda driver working again, the air around the Belial warped.

“You’re still on that chivalry crap?” Sousuke asked.

“Shut up,” snarled Leonard. “This ends now.” And with that, the injured Belial charged him with the speed of a gale.

Night on Bald Mountain continued to echo through the peaks as the fiery clash continued between Mao’s M9 and the white Eligore.

Keeping their distance, they traded shots and jamming signals. Super high-speed transmissions sought each other out in a battle to seize the upper hand. Electronic decoy clashed with electronic decoy, each with hundreds of codes to decipher.

Mao fired, knowing it was unlikely to hit at her current distance and relative

velocity. Indeed, the white Eligore dodged the 40mm shot easily enough. It went leaping up the treacherous slope in short hops, and then opened its armor to reveal its ECS lenses.

Is it going to disappear again? she wondered. But no...it didn't turn invisible. Instead, its white form trembled and split in two. No, not in two... A second double of the Eligore appeared, then a third. When it emerged from behind the rock, there were five duplicate images in total.

Projections?! Mao understood the principle in play. Instead of using laser holograms to hide your machine, use them to project duplicate images of it into the surrounding environment. Mao had experimented with the concept herself, but had found it to be an inefficient use of the M9's output.

Besides, it was all a bluff. Laser holograms lost visual integrity exponentially with distance, which made it hard to project over any kind of range. Thus, the central machine would always be the real one. You just had to fire at that.

Mao knelt down to get a stable footing. This time, she wouldn't miss. *Make her use the lambda driver*, she told herself. *Then the real fight will start.* She steadied her aim with both hands and fired.

The 40mm shot pierced through the enemy machine, but that was all. There was no sign of damage. Meanwhile, the five enemy machines moved in unison, returning their carbines to their backs and drawing an anti-tank dagger in each hand.

"Hey..." Mao muttered. Then she thought, *The center is a projection? But how? Wait... what if the enemy's hologram unit output is just that incredible? Could her machine be the one on the far left, projecting the remaining four all to the right? But there's no way to confirm while locked in electronic combat—*

The enemy's movements seemed to play out in slow motion, like a penalty kick in a soccer game, as Mao's reaction speed stretched itself to the limit. The five Eligores spread their arms wide, arched their backs, and whipped around. Ten anti-tank daggers in total... and she couldn't jam them. You couldn't jam thrown weapons.

Dodge, then... To the right? To the left? Or above?

She made her decision—above. Then the throw came, and ten of the daggers came flying at her. No... eight immediately disappeared. Only the two on the far left continued flying towards her.

She anticipated my next move, Mao realized. It's no use, I can't dodge. "Hng..." All she could do was cross her arms over her chest to try and protect the cockpit. The anti-tank daggers hit her arms, which were sent flying, shattered, along with her rifle as the tandem-charge shaped explosives unleashed their force.

The world around her went white from the impact.

You're falling, Mao told herself. You have to take a landing position. Swing your arms and right yourself! But she had no arms. She'd lost a humanoid weapon's most important feature.

She hit the ground back-first, let out a weak moan, and then looked at the time display in the corner of her screen: fifteen minutes until the estimated launch time. Only fifteen minutes left, yet here she was...

Ahead of her, the white Eligore dropped its projections, pulled its rifle from its back, and pointed it straight at her. It fired.

Now! Mao told herself, using the jackknife maneuver to snap her machine's back, leaping it up and evading the attack. Nevertheless, she still took hits to her back, her right thigh, and her right shoulder.

Her machine continued to move valiantly despite its loss of balance, even as alarms blared and her output began to drop. Something was on fire. She had no arms. *What about communications? Yes, electronic warfare is still active. At least I can warn everyone...*

"Uruz-2 here!" she called. "I've taken major damage! I'm having trouble taking out the enemy machine! I think I might bite it here... sorry!"

"Uruz-1 here. Don't give up!" Clouseau responded, sounding short of breath. Data about his machine flowed into hers... Damage to the chest. Major damage to the cockpit block.

"Ben!" she cried out.

“You have to... hold out somehow! I’m not doing well either, but if I can clear this up, I can come—” there was a wave of static, which was accompanied by the sound of tearing metal. Then there was silence.

That was it. She’d lost contact with Clouseau.

“Ben?!” she tried a second time, but didn’t have time for a third now that the white Eligore was in hot pursuit, kicking up dirt and snow. Her enemy—the lambda driver-mounted enemy machine—was completely unharmed. *What should I do? What should I...*

Fowler’s black Eligore was approaching Clouseau. With its back to the moonlit sky and a single sword in its hand, it resembled an evil spirit stalking after the Falke.

The sword it carried wasn’t even a monomolecular cutter, just a chunk of metal styled after a katana, carved out of alloy steel; nevertheless, its blade had torn a diagonal slice clean through the Falke’s chest. Clouseau’s quick reflexes had kept him from sustaining a fatal injury, but the tip of the blade had still cut clean through his armor and into his cockpit shell.

Smoke was filling his machine with the smell of scorched steel. The screen was just barely hanging on to life, but the smoke was so thick that Clouseau couldn’t see it properly. Follow-up attacks had destroyed his head radar and blade antenna, causing him to lose contact with Mao in the middle of their conversation.

“Uruz-2! Do you read me, Mao?!” The backup antenna in his machine’s torso wasn’t working, either. Restoring communications in this terrain was impossible. He had to focus on the enemy in front of him first—

Clouseau braced himself as another slice came at him. This one bisected his rifle, which he threw away just before the ammunition inside detonated. He ran through the smoke to gain some distance before drawing his monomolecular cutter, the kukri-shaped Crimson Edge. This he held in a backhanded grip, hunched over in a blocking stance.

Of course, it would do him no good against Fowler’s blade. The Fairy Eye, a system for detecting lambda driver activity, remained intact in his machine’s

head and lit up in response to each of the enemy's slashes. In other words, it was Fowler's lambda driver that gave his katana its cutting power. Clouseau's monomolecular cutter, bound by conventional laws of physics, couldn't possibly block it.

Relying on his machine's superiority to the end. That dirty cheating bastard. It would have been reassuring if he could tell himself that, but it wasn't the truth. *Assume, for instance, that the enemy was in a normal machine. Assume that the weapon he's carrying was a monomolecular cutter with otherwise identical weight and balance. Would I still be taking damage like this?* Clouseau had to accept it—he would.

Fowler's attacks were so precise and varied as to leave Clouseau agog. The lambda driver felt almost irrelevant. For the man to overpower Clouseau—one of the best AS martial artists in the world—to this degree...

Who is he? Clouseau wondered. He'd never heard of such a man, not even in rumor. He'd even checked up on him when they were stalking him in San Francisco, but all he'd found was that his name was Lee Fowler, and that he was American, with some East Asian lineage. His history was almost entirely unknown, and Clouseau couldn't even find out where he'd been trained. There was no sign of him in the annals of the major worldwide terror organizations, either.

A martial artist? he wondered. The Eligore's footwork, the way the blade strikes flowed into each other... It wasn't like any military martial art he'd ever seen. Clouseau turned on his external speakers. "If you have skills like that," he asked, "why do you resort to this foolishness?" His reason for asking this wasn't just to give himself time to formulate a countermeasure. He genuinely wanted to know.

"It's a common story, Mr. Clouseau," Fowler responded through his own external speakers. "A man, seeking strength, acquires skill through exhaustive training. He hones that skill into an art, but is quickly taught how powerless he really is."

"Did someone beat you?" Clouseau wondered.

"Yes... you could say that, I suppose. A man not much older than thirty. Drug-

addicted trash,” Fowler clarified. “The kind you’d meet in any city.”

Clouseau listened on and was stunned. “What?”

“But since I don’t think telling you my life story will bring you over to my side...let’s resume.” Fowler’s Eligore took just a few steps, then, as lightly as if hitting a golf ball, sent a rock at its feet flying with its blade. The boulder turned into a bullet flying at the Falke’s head.

Clouseau gritted his teeth at the distraction. He used minimal movements to dodge the rock to allow his machine to keep its balance, but in that same moment, he saw the Eligore approaching, its sword held low.

It’s coming, he told himself. *Lower left*. Rather than choosing to block, he twisted to dodge the blade. Fowler changed his machine’s trajectory instantly into a horizontal slash. Clouseau dropped his machine down, rolling it while stabbing with the monomolecular cutter and performing a leg sweep at the same time. Fowler jumped over this attack and blocked the monomolecular cutter with his right elbow. The Fairy Eye picked it up. A force field generated at the enemy’s elbow—

Clouseau grunted. He didn’t make it in time. The force field hit the blade of his monomolecular cutter and crushed it into powder. He tossed it away, rolled to the side, and leaped to take some distance. As he did this, he threw his anti-tank dagger, which Fowler deflected with his own blade. The ATD then stopped in midair and flew back at Clouseau, hitting him in the right shoulder, where it exploded.

His right shoulder armor went flying. Because his cockpit wasn’t sealed, the residual shockwaves from the explosion washed over him unmitigated.

“Urgh...!” Clouseau choked out. He’d never been through anything like this before. His chest sank in and his ribs broke, driving the air out of his lungs. He also felt the shockwave crack his skull and crush his eye.

But he was still alive... He could still see, too, but the view around him was red; a blood vessel in his eye must have burst. A clearing of his throat sprayed blood onto the screen in front of him. *Damage to my lungs?* he wondered. *What about my machine?* It could still move... But its right arm was severed at the shoulder.

Clouseau finally realized he was lying face down. He immediately righted himself and turned to face Fowler... but the other machine wasn't there. No, he was right behind him—

“You made it back up!” Fowler congratulated him.

Clouseau felt an impact. He rolled himself forward with the momentum, but part of his back armor had been lost, sending shock absorbing fluid leaking out of the exposed spinal frame.

He didn't have time to worry about how long the battle had run on. He zigzagged with all the power he had and took advantage of the terrain to close in. His only remaining weapons were one anti-tank dagger and one grenade. The Fairy Eye—the lambda driver detector that served as his one lifeline—was gone, having been destroyed in the explosion.

He felt pain shoot through his chest with every breath he took. His vision was growing hazy. His fingers were turning numb. Yet still, Clouseau felt a quiet respect for his enemy. *Fowler*, he thought, *you're very impressive*. After having fought him this long, he could tell that he was serious, that he was showing no mercy.

Fowler had dropped all of his pretensions and was just trying to finish Clouseau off with every trick he knew. Clouseau didn't know anything about this man, but it was clear that he was engaging him in an honest duel. And that strength... He could acknowledge it. It would let him go with no regrets.

I'm glad he was my final opponent, Clouseau told himself. But it wasn't over yet. *I still have to stop him. If I can just stop him, my remaining allies can work something out...*

“Release GPL limiters...”

《Warning. Releasing GPL limiters will cause massive trauma to all systems—》

“Just do it!”

《Roger. Final confirmation: Really release GPL limiters?》

“I said yes!”

《Roger. Executing.》

He'd removed the safeties that kept the Falke's palladium reactor in the safe zone. This generated a massive flood of power that the machine wasn't designed to take, skyrocketing the reactor's temperature at the same time. An excess of electricity flowed through the muscle packages, tearing them apart in exchange for achieving massive instantaneous power.

"Let's go!" Belfangan Clouseau cried as he ran across the ground.

That was the biggest explosion yet, she thought with a scowl as she stopped in the middle of the final boot-up sequence. She was in the TARTAROS's central control room, and the explosion had come from just beyond the wall that separated her from the underwater passage. She swiftly checked to see how much it might have warped the TARTAROS's foundation and judged it to still be within tolerable range.

One of the security officers gave her a report from outside: *The enemy submarine has entered the underground waterway. We sent some men up to the surface, so our forces here are light, but we can hold them off for more than long enough. We are still looking forward to the world you will create, and the salvation of all. God's protection to the Whispering!* they said, then began their counterattack.

"'God's protection'..." she snorted. *Such empty words. If God protected anyone, I wouldn't have to be doing all this. There is no God. There is no salvation. This is real life.*

But perhaps human technology can give birth to the three goddesses of fate? If so, then that's what I am: Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos in one.

They need me. An unacceptable world, events that deserve rejection... I will take them all on, denounce them, and transform them. Now and forever, until everyone is satisfied. Again and again, thousands of times, millions of times, billions of times... I'll do it over. This moment is just one step on that never-ending journey. Even the battle on this tiny island will soon be drowned out and vanish...

Like tears in rain.

There were no more distant explosions. She plugged in the final activation

code, pressed enter, and stepped into the TARTAROS.

The corridor was narrow. The floor was cold. She passed through several doors before reaching the core, which was surrounded by amplifiers. Then she lay down on the bed they were hooked up to and began to connect. There would be no need to give commands with buttons or keys anymore. She just had to think.

Let's go, she told herself.

The key was in the lock. All of the devices that had previously been on standby now welcomed her in, and the process of unification began. Substance and thought came together in the universe's most complicated system. Her senses expanded. Her view broadened, as if her narrowed eyes had flown wide open. No, what she could see now was thousands, millions of times broader than that...

She didn't need primitive sensors. She could perceive everything happening around her through the omni-sphere. She could see a vague image of the future, as well: the enemy would soon be thwarted. Those in the underground waterway and those on land would soon be exhausted and defanged, and eventually neutralized.

They won't make it in time, she saw. They can't stop me. The world is already changing.

Right after Tessa and her crew used shaped charges to blast through the sealed service door, they launched into fierce shooting in the underground dock.

"Ah!" A stray bullet raised a spark next to Tessa.

"Captain, get back!" Mardukas shouted while returning fire with his submachine gun. The officer of the deck, Goddard, threw a grenade into the door they'd just blown open. An explosion followed. He threw in another grenade, and as this one detonated, four of her subordinates rushed in.

Just then, Tessa felt it. Dizziness and tinnitus... The area around her became blurry. Linearity lost its hold on the flow of time. The omni-sphere had begun to

affect their past, casting the world before her in countless, truly innumerate forms... Yet she could tell them all apart. *Am I the only one feeling this?* she wondered. She could hear Mardukas and her other subordinates barking orders at each other as they just kept firing, as if they didn't notice anything.

It had begun. The TAROS had activated, and the changes—

“—Captain. They're coming around from the right!” Mardukas said.

“I'll hold off the enemy. You keep moving forward!”

“No! It's dangerous!”

“They'll surround us if we stay! Now, go!”

The enemies, having come around to flank them, were pouring in from the right. Sonar technician Dejirani yanked Tessa by the arm and raced past the wall. Mardukas gave her a light salute before resuming his trade of fire with the enemy. Soon, the smoke had blocked him entirely from her sight.

“Hurry, Captain!”

The sense of wrongness was growing stronger. Her memories of the past began to blur together as a complicated—an overwhelmingly complicated—branching of choices flowed over her.

Some unknown force was expanding out all over the world.

While evading the Belial's pursuit, the Laevatein dove into the shaft for Elevator No. 9, which was located in the third practice grounds. Sousuke went into free fall, streaking towards the base's underground blocks. He landed, kicked open the cage, and flew into the wide Corridor No. 0 that would take him to the underground dock containing the TAROS.

Kaname would be there. He'd almost found her—just a few hundred meters more.

Sousuke felt a strange feeling overtake him. He'd been feeling it for a while. It was as though his depth perception had gone haywire, like he'd suddenly put on glasses with a strong prescription—a feeling of floating, akin to vertigo.

At first, he'd thought it was damage to his optical sensors. Then the *deja vu*

had started, the same feeling he'd felt at Yamsk-11. He'd run down Corridor No. 0 with the Laevatein before, battered and broken, with Leonard hot on his heels...

No, that's not true, he told himself. This is the first time.

Then why am I dropping down the elevator shaft right now? he thought next. *Didn't I fall down it already?*

Temporal relationships—his sense of past and present—were turning hazy; the flow of time was growing more malleable. Sousuke was simultaneously on the surface fighting the Codarls, and taunting the enemy on the radio. He was destroying a Behemoth with the demolition gun, flying through the air on his booster, being shot out of the catapult. He was giving a salute to Sachs's corpse and tending desperately to him as the life drained from his eyes.

And it wasn't just the past. He could also see the future, in which he'd just arrived but was seconds too late. The Belial blocked his way to the TAROS. The damaged Laevatein charged, but the Belial's hand pierced his cockpit. There was no doubt that this was all going to happen; it was a future set in stone.

Sousuke's consciousness was thrown into disorder. No...the disorder was spreading out from the TAROS to envelop him. He didn't know where he was. He didn't know *when* he was. All he had were the words "Keep going" rattling around in his skull.

But keep going? he wondered. *Where to?*

《Sergeant Sagara!》 An alarm rang out. Al's voice seemed louder than he'd ever heard it before.

"Al?" he spoke hesitantly.

《Report status! Where are you? Look at the clock, at the current time! Then state your mission goals!》 Al demanded.

"Status... Ngh!" Sousuke shook his head once, then banged it against his headrest. *Get a grip!* he told himself. *I'm in Corridor No. 0. The time is 0556 hours. My mission objective is to stop the activation of the TAROS.* The Laevatein was racing through the hall towards certain death. "What is... happening?" he finally asked, with some difficulty.

《This machine's TAROS caused your mind to react to a newly occurring phenomenon, 》 Al told him. 《Your psychological state was becoming dangerous, so I severed your connection. The giant TAROS has activated. I'm afraid the effective radius of the omni-sphere already encompasses the entirety of Earth.》

"It's not over yet," Sousuke insisted. There were one hundred meters to go. He just had to keep charging, let loose with his head-mounted machine guns, and fire off the cable in his remaining left arm. He *had to do this*, no matter what. Even if he'd just seen a future telling him it wasn't possible.

He was doing this to bring her back. His will mattered.

In the past, he'd been just like his AS: a killing machine, feeling nothing, doing just as he was told. But that wasn't the case any longer. Now Sousuke worried, wondered, and made decisions of his own. That was what it meant to be human.

I'm doing this because I want to, he reminded himself. He was sure of that. *So, Kaname, please...*

Ahead of him was the shutter that marked the end of Corridor No. 0. He couldn't use the lambda driver now, and instead used sheer momentum to kick through his final obstacle. The Laevatein stumbled as the shutter bent and twisted off, taking a series of cables and pipes with it, but successfully leaped forward into the massive underground cave—the former maintenance dock for the de Danaan.

Beyond a mess of tangled girders and dangling wires sat a massive dome: the TAROS. It looked similar in structure to the one he'd seen at Yamsk-11, but this version was far more technologically advanced.

Regardless, he had to destroy it.

Please, he prayed, *let me be in time...*

Just as he was turning his head-mounted machine guns to their fully automatic setting, there was a collapse of material from the roof above. The Belial was descending, breaking through the cave ceiling with a roar. Its force fields stopped his machine gun fire. *No... a single .50-caliber bullet made it*

through and hit the TAROS, Sousuke realized. Just one. That device was as big as the de Danaan itself, so that certainly wouldn't have been enough to sabotage it.

Placing himself between the Laevatein and the TAROS, Leonard asked, "Did you think you'd escaped me?"

Sousuke didn't respond. He just breathed hard, his shoulders heaving.

"It's too late, anyway," Leonard remarked. "The changes have begun; I can feel it. I see our world overlapping with countless others as we speak. So many possibilities, both here in the present and spreading backwards towards the past... The world is beginning to change. People like you won't be able to perceive it, but don't despair... Everything will be better soon. Do you understand? *She's going to make everything better!*"

"Get out of my way," Sousuke said with a growl. The Laevatein took a step forward.

"Soon, there will be nothing left of this world," Leonard continued. "It will be gone. Perfectly silent. You're in a lambda driver-mounted machine, so I imagine you caught a glimpse of it too—of a world with no past or future. Soon, it will all be over. The change will be completed even as I kill you, and everything will stop."

Sousuke took another step. "Al..."

《Yes, Sarge.》

"I'm sorry."

《Not at all.》

Sousuke had a mere ten rounds left in his head-mounted machine guns.

The enemy's unsightly struggles had allowed one bullet to hit the TARTAROS. It created a little static in her thoughts, but that was all right; Kaname knew that it wouldn't change anything, and that the static would go away soon.

She'd kicked off the changes and now she could see everything. She no longer heard whispering voices. *She* was the one doing the whispering— No, what she

was doing was far stronger and clearer than whispering. She was shouting loud enough for everyone to hear, no matter how far away they were; enunciating clearly enough to be heard by herself, by the version of her about to be born.

Listen to me carefully, she thought. Listen, remember, and do what you must, because what you're going to do is the best thing for everyone.

A voice is a thread. I'm spinning and weaving these threads from the past to the present. Our existence is a machine that went off-track, broke down, and flamed out. I'm restoring it to its proper form. No, not only that... I could even make it even more wonderful: a peaceful world; a world without pain. People may think it's impossible, but it's not. It is possible.

I, with my perception of countless worlds, can see how cause and effect interact in all of them; can reach out and change even how people think and feel.

I'll start my preparations on December 24th, the day of my birth eighteen years ago. I'll start to make significant corrections eight years after that, so that everything will be perfect in the eight years to follow. That's all I have to do. Then the peace and quiet will go on forever.

For instance... How about this?

I'm eighteen years old, and I wake up one winter morning. I'm not a morning person. My mom and little sister come to wake me up. Mom was hospitalized four years ago for a serious illness, but they caught it early, and they were able to save her. Now she's completely healthy again.

My mother and sister yank off the covers, so I pull myself grudgingly out of bed and head to the dining room. My father is reading a newspaper there. He used to be married to his work, but Mom's illness led him to take an office job where he'd have more time to spare. Mom works part-time at a nearby pharmacy.

I make small talk with Dad, then take a seat at the breakfast table.

I thought you were a stronger woman than this.

The TV is on, and the news is playing. The second president of the Federation of Nations is saying something about Egypt; I guess it's a ceremony to celebrate

the first stage of the Sahara Desert greenification project. There are other things, too: the war in Afghanistan has been over for ten years, and their tourism industry is starting to rev up. The suicide rate in Japan is the lowest it's ever been. The world's nuclear arsenal will be completely eliminated within the next five years.

What kind of spoiled princess are you?

I'll eat breakfast at home, get myself ready and go to school. I attend Komaoka Academy High School. The uniforms aren't as nice as those of Jindai High—my second choice—but after wearing them for three years, I've come to like them well enough. I'll start college in the spring. I already have a referral.

You're a liar and a whore!

The world is becoming more and more peaceful. Nobody knows that I'm the one doing it, but that's just fine. After all, this is what I want—

If I'm wrong, come and hit me!

Shut up, Kaname thought irritably. The static wasn't going away. The reverberations from that one single bullet should have been possible to ignore, yet they kept sounding in her head, creating a static in her thoughts that interrupted her eternal melody.

It's that unpleasant man's voice, she realized. *It just keeps rattling around in my head, refusing to go away...*

The feeling of wrongness she'd felt washing over her from time to time seemed to be seeking out the unpleasant man's voice, clinging to it. *This is important,* it seemed to cry.

Disappear, she told that voice. *Disappear. Disappear! No, it doesn't have to disappear. I just need to keep on ignoring it. I need to get my voice through, now. I need to send it farther, farther...*

...Ili.....

There's another voice. It's so very faint, unlike the man's. It belongs to someone else...

...Ili.....ore...

The voice is growing louder, she thought. It's a woman's voice. Is this my voice? No... I'm not saying anything...

...lli...ng...ore...

It's taking shape and forming words, Kaname realized. A girl's voice... What exactly is it saying?

...who are you ca...ore...

It just keeps getting louder. I can't ignore it any longer, she thought. Then, abruptly, panic set in. Stop it, stop it, stop it! Part of me is going away... I'm splitting in two, and another me is forming... Stop it! Then that voice—which had continued to reverberate in her mind—finally took form. And it said...

Who are you calling a whore?! shouted the enraged Chidori Kaname, bursting through the surface of the still lake in her mind.



Like someone on the verge of asphyxiating, she filled her lungs with air. Then, heaving for breath, she screamed out everything she'd been wanting to say for so long:

"You shut up and listen, you selfish asshole! Yeah, yeah! It's all my fault! If only I'd hung in there better, this wouldn't have happened! Yeah, yeah, so sorry! I bet it's my fault the post boxes are red and the telephone poles are tall, too!" she ranted venomously.

"Well FYI, I could go back eighteen years and make the post boxes white if I wanted to, but don't you dare call me a damned whore! Do you even *know* what I've been through?! Most people wouldn't even be able to *whisper* after something like that, let alone shout like I'm doing! Did you manage to forget I'm just a normal high school girl?! Maybe you can show me a little gratitude!" she demanded.

"And besides, how dare you talk to me that way!" she continued. "You're disappointed, huh? I'm a liar, huh? As if *you're* some kind of saint! Where does a war-obsessed perpetual downer like you get off saying that crap to *me*?! I'm the one disappointed here, if anyone is! You had all the time in the world to cook up something nice to say, and that was the best you could do?! Why are you *always* like this?! Couldn't you shout, 'I love you, Kaname!' with just a little snot trailing from your nose?! No, you couldn't, could you? That's just who you are!" she scoffed.

"You're sick of me after a year away, is that it? You don't really want me anymore, so you're putting all the blame on me? You're with Tessa now, is that the big punchline here? Yeah, yeah, yeah, whatever, fine. I'm too nice to be bothered. But if you're gonna call me a weak, stupid, lying whore... then screw you! I don't need you anymore! Do a one-eighty and walk, asshole!" she said bitterly. "Nobody gives a shit what you do!"

Ahh... She came out just to vent all that? Such a silly, childish rant... Yet now that she's broken free, I understand: she is Chidori Kaname, and I am Sofia. I've been lying to myself. I've been lying to both of us.

But that's all right. I'm truly going to crush her this time. I'll make her suffer, bow, and serve me. Then the changes will become reality. I will make it happen

without a single lie.

The final battle will begin now, inside this tiny skull.

All she'd managed to get out was the hysterical rantings of a foolish girl. There was no logic behind it, no moral high ground. She was just screaming out her feelings; a child throwing herself to the ground in a tantrum. But she *had* managed to scream. That was important, because she hadn't been able to scream before now.

I did it... thanks to him, Kaname suddenly realized. Out loud, she said, "Sousuke..."

After her consciousness had awakened and she could really think again, she understood why he'd said what he had. *Ah, this is what he wanted,* she thought. *To pull me out of wandering passively through the nothingness, helpless and alone. He just did it in his way, in the way of a soldier.*

Kaname was standing in a daydream, a place without scenery or sound. She was floating in blank space. The floating made her uneasy, so she picked a ceiling and put her feet down on an imaginary floor. Then she clothed herself in the same manner. She didn't care what she wore, so she chose a sleeveless black dress.

"Let's see..." she mused. This was a space for her mind alone, with nobody else's presence. *No, that isn't true,* she realized. *There's someone else here.* "What are you doing?" she said to Sofia, turning around to face her.

Kaname was only passingly familiar with Sofia's face, so the other girl looked just like Kaname here, wearing a matching dress in white. Despite having the same face, though, she was clearly a different person.

"What am I doing?" Sofia smiled. "What's already begun. Why not see it through together with me?"

"I don't think so," said Kaname.

"Why not?"

"You started it. It has nothing to do with me, and I can't help you."

“I knew you’d say that,” Sofia said with a sigh. “I’ve always known. You’ve been rebellious and combative ever since I first started whispering to you.”

The whispers she’d first begun to hear in the mountains of North Korea... they had come from Sofia. In thoughts beyond words, she had always been telling her, “Swap places with me.” Kaname knew that clearly now.

“You’re asking for something pretty crazy, you know that?”

“Surely I don’t have to tell you why, do I? Until just now, you *were* me.”

Sofia was right; Kaname didn’t need an explanation. She’d managed to restore her own consciousness, but she hadn’t lost the memories from the time she had spent blended with Sofia due to resonance. She knew exactly who Sofia was and why she was doing this.

“Sofia. I know you’ve had a really hard life,” said Kaname. “But that doesn’t mean you can just steal someone’s else’s and pretend it’s your own.”

Sofia was dead, if only in the physical sense. Eighteen years ago, in a Yamsk-11 experimental facility, she’d been used as a guinea pig for the TAROS experiment and died in the subsequent chain reaction. The amplified mental waves she’d sent out just before her death had infected the nearby humans and led to their deaths, and then gone on to affect newborn children all over the world. They had even reached into the future, from which the Sofia (or Kaname) present there had relayed back all kinds of information. That information was then circulated through to the Whispered, and some of it became what was known as ‘black technology.’

And thus, their world came to be.

Black technology didn’t come from people fifty years, a hundred years into the future; it had been sent eighteen years into the past *from this very moment*. And after who-knew-how-many repeated tries of that eighteen-year loop, things had escalated to their current form.

At least, so it seemed to be; this was pure speculation on Kaname and Sofia’s part, because neither of them could know the truth for sure. Nobody knew what their world had originally looked like, so any theorizing they could do was akin to speculations about the nature of the end of the universe. There was only

so much they could guess at.

In life, Sofia had been the daughter of Yamsk-11's head scientist, Dr. Valov. She'd been just eighteen years old at the time—the same age as Kaname—when she'd been sacrificed on the altar of her father's experiments. The time leading up to her death had been torturously awful: she'd been administered all kinds of dangerous drugs; her weight had fallen to thirty-five kilograms; her skin had become like sandpaper; her hair had been falling out—

No, don't think about that anymore. It hurts too much.

After an agonizing existence at the hands of her father, Sofia had died, releasing one final burst of hatred and resentment. The echoes of those mental waves had continued to carry out her will, doing their work on the world. And so they popped up again and again, here and there, unfettered by the boundaries of time or space.

One could call her an onryo—a vengeful spirit—but that wasn't what Sofia was. She wasn't trying to hurt people. She just wanted to create a new world, to live her life as someone new. She truly felt it was the right thing to do.

"I died in a wretched, pitiful state," Sofia complained bitterly. "Yet you act like *I'm* the spoiled one?"

"I..."

"Do you know how much I suffered in those last three minutes of life?" Sofia demanded. "Did I *deserve* to die that way? Before they took me off to Yamsk-11, I had a life! I loved a boy! I tended a garden and played the piano! I had dreams for my future... But he took it all away from me, and then everything else..."

"I do think that's awful," Kaname told her. "I really do." True sorrow rose up inside of her, blended with anger towards Sofia's father for what he'd done.

Sofia must have known she wasn't faking it. "That's very kind of you. I can tell you really feel for me."

"Even so...!" Kaname said, after gritting her teeth. "Even so, my mind and life belong to me! I can't just *give* them to you. And I can't let you take a do-over on the world!"

“Oh?” Sofia questioned.

“Because you’re causing nuclear war to do it,” Kaname insisted, “and that’s not okay.”

Sofia wouldn’t need this world once the transformation was finished, but she couldn’t just leave it be, either. If enough Whispered—and the technology they were capable of promoting—remained in this world, then someone here might build another TAROS someday. An omni-sphere with the backing of billions of minds could have a serious influence on any reality.

That was why Sofia, as a precaution, had to destroy this world first. In order to ensure the security and stability of the new world that she was about to build, she’d have to reduce this one’s population to about one percent of its current total.

But Kaname and Sofia were the only ones who were aware of this, along with Leonard and a handful of his subordinates. Everyone else was being conned.

“But that’s necessary,” Sofia insisted. “Everyone will be happy and alive in that new world, see? Killing this world off will be like severing a malignant tumor. What’s wrong with that?”

“‘Malignant tumor’?” scoffed Kaname. “Oh, please!”

“Then what metaphor would make you accept it? Replacing a broken-down machine part? Swapping out a troublesome band member? Or...”

“Stop it,” Kaname said firmly. “I’m not helping you, and that’s that. I’m going to wake up right now and end all of this. There’s nothing left to say.”

Sofia smiled upon hearing this declaration. It wasn’t the serene smile she’d been wearing up until now, but rather the smile of someone bubbling up with amusement.

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, really... You still haven’t noticed? You should be able to see it if you wanted to,” Sofia told her. “Stopping now is what would really put it all to waste, you see. After all...”

“What...?” Kaname began to ask in confusion.

“Look,” Sofia told her.

And then Kaname saw the people fighting outside the walls of her consciousness. Because the conversation between Kaname and Sofia was taking place entirely within a daydream, it had actually only been a few seconds since Sousuke had shot his round into the TARTAROS, but things were still slowly proceeding in the world outside.

Kaname could see the battle in the underground waterway. “Tessa...” she groaned. The crew of the Tuatha de Danaan were fighting, and several familiar members of the crew had collapsed with serious wounds. Tessa was awkwardly firing back with a submachine gun, but she was only slowing down the enemy’s relentless advance, and Kalinin’s forces would soon have her cornered.

I don’t see Mardukas, she realized. Is he already dead?

Tessa also hadn’t noticed the three soldiers sneaking around from the other direction. She’d be surrounded soon, and that tiny body of hers would be shredded by bullets. Just a few seconds from now...

Run, she wanted to tell her, but was unable to do so. Tessa had severed her own connection to the omni-sphere in order to avoid being affected by the spreading changes.

“She made it impressively far,” Sofia remarked, “but her destiny ends here.”

“I...” Kaname said uncertainly.

“Look farther,” Sofia urged her. “Yes... much farther. You can see Fowler, can’t you?”

In the distant mountains of Afghanistan, seven thousand kilometers away, Kaname could see Mao and Clouseau fighting to the death.

“Clouseau-san?” she said. She’d only spoken to him a few times, but Kaname remembered him. His black M9, its head and right arm in tatters, had removed its limiters and was charging through the mountains at top speed towards Fowler’s Eligore.

Clouseau threw a grenade, but Fowler deflected it. The next instant, a sharp strike pierced through the M9’s stomach. It was a fatal wound, yet somehow,

Clouseau's machine continued to move. Or maybe he'd meant to get speared like that in order to grapple with Fowler's machine and stick an anti-tank dagger into its defenseless back.

There was an explosion. Both machines went flying, clinging to each other in mid-air as Clouseau's machine split into two and went tumbling down the slope.

"A murder-suicide," Sofia said admiringly. "He's an impressive operator."

"Nnh..."

"Things are reaching their end three kilometers to the west as well, it seems," she said next, pointing to where Mao's M9 was reaching the end of its rope in the ongoing battle with Sabina's Eligore. Mao's machine was battered, broken, and missing both of its arms, much like a tank that had lost its main gun: there was nothing left for Mao to do except buy herself a little time.

But Sabina's rifle managed to land a hit here and there on the M9, each one slowing Mao's reaction time a little more. She had managed to reach the entrance of the nuclear missile base, but there was nowhere left to go. Mao was caught dead to rights. The Eligore smashed her machine up against the rocks and then stomped on it, the muzzle of her rifle pressed to the M9's chest. There was no escape now. Mao was finished.

"Sabina was a bad match-up for her," Sofia observed. "It's too bad; she was a good person."

"You..." Kaname glared back at Sofia, but the other girl wasn't smiling anymore. Her eyes—cold, cruel, and piercing—now gazed back at Kaname with open scorn.

"'It's all an illusion you created'..." Sofia said mockingly. "That's what you're telling yourself, right?"

Kaname said nothing. She had never known her own face could look like that.

"Too bad, though. I fell for your little trick in Yamsk-11... the one about shooting Sousuke and Tessa?" Sofia reminded her. "But this is different; this is really happening. I haven't influenced this course of events."

In other words, the only way to undo what had happened would be to give

Sofia what she was asking for. Even if Kaname cut herself off from the TARTAROS, ran to the communicator, and shouted for them all to stop, it would be too late. She wouldn't make it in time. The past events had already taken place.

"And then there's him," Sofia reminded her. "Right there, just outside—look."

Kaname gasped. Just in front of the TARTAROS where she lay sleeping, Sousuke's AS, the Laevatein, was charging at the Belial with its head-mounted machine guns on full blast. The bullets tore through cooling pipes, flooding the area with white mist. It was a desperate move, meant to provide just a moment's distraction...

But Leonard wasn't shaken by Sousuke's maneuver; he simply waited for the Laevatein to appear from out of the fog, force fields from the lambda driver focused in his right hand. The battle had already been won.

"He fought hard against Leonard," Sofia said mournfully. "But..."

"Stop it," Kaname hissed.

"...He's gone now."

Even as Sousuke's white AS came breaking through the fog, the Belial drew its hand back to lash out at the Laevatein.

"Stop it!" Kaname cried out, but Leonard wasn't listening.

The Belial's right hand pierced through the Laevatein's chest and came thrusting out the back. The cockpit in the chest had been completely skewered.



Kaname didn't want to see the tragedy that had occurred inside. She didn't want to imagine it, either, and despair gripped her heart. There was no question that it had already happened; she could see that the Belial's arm had pierced the Laevatein right through the cockpit.

It wasn't an illusion. It was fact. Some kind of fluid—Kaname didn't know whether it was oil or blood—dripped down the Belial's arm and onto the shredded white armor.

He'd killed Sousuke. Sousuke was dead.

No... no, no, no, no. Kaname denied frantically.

"You see now, don't you?!" Sofia screamed at her. "'I can't accept it. It's not fair.' You feel the same way I do, but you still want to act like you're in a position to lecture *me*?! As if you're some pinnacle of emotional control... Can you see how arrogant you've been? Can you start to imagine how I feel?"

"Stop it," Kaname begged.

"No! I have a right to keep doing this! Now, say it again, if you still can... Say 'you're wrong, Sofia!'"

"Stop it!!"

"Tell me again why I shouldn't do things over!" Sofia demanded. "Can you explain it to me? You can't, can you?!" Kaname covered her ears and hunched over, but Sofia seized her shoulders and continued to scream. "You remember, don't you? You've felt the same way before... Four years ago, in that hospital in Tokyo..."

Kaname clenched her eyes tighter.

"Your mother," Sofia continued ruthlessly. "The mother you loved so, so much, hooked up to all those tubes, growing thinner and weaker, her hair falling out. The woman who'd once been so beautiful..."

Kaname could picture the hospital room. Her father had just made it out of Haneda Airport, but he wouldn't make it in time. Her little sister was a mess from crying. Kaname herself just stood there in a daze, unable to even parse the attending physician's explanation.

“I’m sorry, but your mother is—”

No, no, no, no! She hadn’t forgotten it. How could she? The memory haunted her constantly. Kaname had told herself she’d gotten over it, but she hadn’t gotten over anything; all she’d done was swallow down her screams and tears. The only thing she’d forgotten was the repression she’d inflicted on herself.

“Ahh...” she moaned at the recollected form of her mother, lying on that bed, hooked up to so many tubes. At the form of the Laevatein, on its knees and speared through the cockpit. “Ah...”

Feelings swirled around Kaname in a maelstrom as the two memories came together and swelled to a monstrous size inside of her. There was no way to hold it all back; there was no way for her to stop now. Kaname wailed and cried and howled like a beast, her mouth wide open and her face twisted. Her breathing grew hoarse as tears streamed from her eyes to pool on the white floor below.

Still unable to stanch her sudden wellspring of emotions, Kaname curled herself up into a ball, crying and screaming. She tore at her hair and clothing, feeling all of her mental energy swept away in waves of grief and despair. Her mind was blank now. She’d had enough of feeling, enough of thinking...

I can’t take it anymore, she told herself. I want to go back to the void. I want to disappear.

“You can’t accept it?” Sofia suggested.

“Yeah...”

“It’s not fair?”

“Yeah...” Kaname said faintly. She thought to herself, *I can’t let this happen to me a second time. It doesn’t make sense. It’s some kind of mistake. It’s not fair.*

Then she thought, *I can’t keep going like this.*

“Poor Kaname.” said Sofia, gently stroking her hair. “But you don’t have to feel any more sadness. We can make it stop.”

Kaname said nothing, but nodded slightly.

“Let’s see it through together,” Sofia went on. “You don’t have to worry. Take

a moment now to picture what you want, and I'll make it reality."

"Really?"

"Yes. You know I'm not lying."

Kaname hung her head silently.

"Now imagine it," Sofia ordered her.

Kaname remained crumpled where she was and, as she'd been told to do, began to imagine. *What do I want?* She asked herself. She didn't want much, just a normal life: peaceful, quiet, and unremarkable.

"That's right," Sofia said encouragingly. "You can see it, right?"

The next thing she knew, Kaname was sitting at her dinner table at home, where it was breakfast time. Before her sat a bowl of steaming miso soup and white rice, accompanied by fillet of horse mackerel and grated daikon radish. There was raw egg, seaweed in vinegar, and rice seasoning available, too, along with the leftovers of yesterday's pork soup. These were all very nostalgic smells.

"What's wrong, Big Sis?" asked Ayame, her little sister.

"Huh?" Kaname replied blankly.

"I asked you to pass the rice seasoning," Ayame reminded her. "Can you, please?"

"Ah... right." Kaname agreed, quickly handing Ayame the requested item. Her father was sitting in front of her, slurping at his miso soup with one hand and holding a newspaper in the other.

"Dad, have some manners!" Ayame said with a pout.

"Mm... ah, sorry," he said absently. "This article about robots is so interesting."

"What robots?"

"From Honda... Oh here, have a look. It's some kind of robot," her father said again. "Really amazing stuff... It can walk on two legs and stay upright if you push it. Impressive tech, huh? Not that I know much about it..."

“Hmm...” said Ayame.

“Yeah, I guess you wouldn’t care about that.”

“Nope.”

“What about you, Kaname? Look, they say they might eventually have some for household chores.” Her father showed her the picture in the newspaper. It was an awkward-looking robot that resembled a space suit. Despite being cutting edge technology, walking was about all it could do. There was nothing to pique Kaname’s interest. The robot’s apparent companion stood beside it, grinning. Kaname thought her lipstick was a rather severe color, and wondered if she was also trying to look futuristic.

“Who cares? We couldn’t afford those things even if they sold them. You’re already sweating to pay off the car,” Kaname said teasingly.

Her father winced. “Don’t remind me.”

“Kaname’s right. Go on, eat up. You’ll be late.”

“Ah...”

The one who’d snatched the newspaper from behind him was Kaname’s mother, who now plopped the lunch she’d just made for her on the corner of the table—Ayame usually ate lunch at school—before taking a seat of her own at the table.

“Kaname,” she said, beginning their typical food quiz. “Did you finish your miso soup? Which do you think it is?” Today’s test was obviously about soup.

“I got it,” said Kaname. “It’s Sendai miso and... some kind of dashi I don’t recognize?”

“Correct,” said her mother. “And I got some Rishiri kombu dashi from Omiya-san yesterday.”

“Hah! You can’t fool my palate,” Kaname boasted, and her mother laughed gaily in response. Her father looked at the time and began to quickly polish off his meal.

“That reminds me, Big Sis,” said Ayame. “How’d yesterday go?”

“Huh?”

“Oh, I want to hear that too,” said her mother. “The big date?”

“Huh? Huh? Um, well...” the question took her so much by surprise that Kaname hadn’t been sure what they were talking about at first, but now she remembered. Yesterday was Sunday, and she’d gone to see a movie with a boy in her grade. You couldn’t quite call it a date... They’d seen a movie in Shinjuku, gotten a bite to eat, done some shopping, and then said goodbye at Chofu Station. Kaname had been home by her eight o’clock curfew.

Well... okay, maybe that *was* technically a date.

“Um... we just hung out some and then I came home,” she hedged. “Totally normal stuff.”

“Oh. That’s boring.” Her mother and Ayame both slumped over dejectedly. Her father, who had stopped eating to listen, looked relieved to hear this and began slurping down his vinegar seaweed with renewed vigor.

“But you like him, right?” her mother suggested. “What’s his name? Ayame, do you know?”

“I do,” her sister declared. “It’s Sagara-san.”

“Hey! How’d you know that, Ayame?!” Kaname asked, her cheeks heating up.

“I heard you talking on the phone with Kyoko-san,” Ayame told her plainly. “You said, ‘I’m going to a movie with Sagara-kun.’”

“Oh, did I say that?”

“Yep.”

“I...I see,” said Kaname. “But you actually listened in and remembered it?! Who even are you?!” She’d thought of her sister as being ‘just a kid’ until recently, but now that Ayame was in middle school and growing up, Kaname would have to watch her own mouth more carefully.

“I see... so Kaname’s boyfriend’s name is Sagara-kun,” her mother whispered intently.

“I told you, he’s not my boyfriend,” Kaname insisted. “He helped me fix my

laptop when it was acting up, so I just... wanted to thank him, is all.” Still, a corner of her mind was grinning at the memories she had of yesterday’s date. It was true that they weren’t really close yet, but she didn’t hate the thought of the label; that’s how much she liked him.

“H-He asked for a d-d-date as a thank-you?!” her startled father asked.

“No!” Kaname cried in denial. “I just happened to have tickets, so...”

“I don’t think I can approve of this,” he barreled on. “A boy who does a favor for a woman to get her on a date?!”

“I’m telling you, *I’m* the one who invited *him*!”

“Y-You invited him, Kaname?!”

“It’s not that serious!” she insisted. “Look, whatever, I gotta go! I’m gonna miss my train!”

Her father still seemed disoriented, but her mother and Ayame were both smiling. Kaname snatched up her lunch box and ran for the door as her beloved family watched her go; she shoved the box into her bag next to her notebooks and textbooks. Then she slipped on her shoes and headed for the local train station, which was just five minutes away. Once there, she squeezed onto a packed train and quickly arrived at Sengawa Station. It was there, on her way to the ticket gate, that she ran into him.

“Oh, Sagara-kun,” said Kaname.

“Ah... good morning, Chidori-san.” Sagara Sousuke greeted her.

“Thanks for yesterday. I had a lot of fun,” she said with a grin.

Sousuke turned a little red and nodded. “Ah... right,” he said. “I, um... I had fun, too.”

“Glad to hear it!” she said brightly. “You fixing my laptop was such a huge help.”

“Sure. If you have any more trouble with it... c-call me anytime. I’ll fix it right up.”

“Thanks! You’re a lifesaver.”

“Ah, really, it was easy. So... d-don't sweat it.” Sousuke scratched the back of his head and spoke hesitantly. He'd been like this on their date—on their date-like *activity*—yesterday also.

Unlike the other boys, he was very shy... always nervous around her. He was handsome enough in a plain sort of way, athletic, and completely oblivious to the number of secret admirers he had. He was a nerd about computers and engineering and such, and mostly hung out with other guys who had similar interests.

For no particular reason, they came out of the ticket gate together and walked side by side to Jindai High School.

“Um, so... Chidori-san,” Sousuke began awkwardly.

“What is it?”

“Sorry if this sounds awkward, but... I had fun with you at the movie... yesterday.”

“Right,” she agreed.

“I mean, um, not in a weird way. I just... I don't go out with girls very often,” he explained. “I was nervous, so...”

“Yeah, I could tell.” Kaname said, resisting the urge to laugh.

“Oh... Okay. When I thought about it later, I realized I might have come off as sour,” Sousuke admitted. “Did I?”

“Nah, you were fine,” she told him. “You were just being who you are.”

“I see. I'm glad,” he whispered back, and smiled a little, looking relieved.

“Um, the truth is... Usually I just go to movies and stuff with Kyoko or Shiori,” Kaname admitted. “I was a little nervous, too. So...”

“Huh?”

“So... um, nothing. Sorry,” she said, laughing it off. She couldn't figure out what to say after the ‘so,’ either.

Tokiwa Kyoko, her best friend, called to Kaname from behind, bringing their alone time to an abrupt end. They arrived at school, made it through classes,

and started packing up for the end of the day.

Once Kaname was all ready to go, Sousuke called to her from the classroom entrance. “Chidori-san. Um... d-do you have a minute?”

“Huh? Ah... yeah.”

“I need to talk to you,” he said quickly. “Um, it’s nothing serious.”

“S-Sure,” she agreed. “No problem.” A strange sense of anticipation came over her then, and she stiffened up a little.

Kyoko, who was watching from beside her friend, knew the whole story. She just struck a little fighting pose and encouraged her to go for it.

They headed together to the roof, which was abandoned after classes ended. Sousuke was stiff from nerves, even worse than yesterday. He pressed his forehead to the fence, looking down for a while, and then slapped his own cheeks to encourage himself before turning back to Kaname.

“I...!” They both said simultaneously.

“Ah... g-go ahead,” he offered.

“Sorry, Sagara-kun, you first...” Kaname was nervous as well, and she could hear her heart racing. It wasn’t just fluttering, but pounding like an earthquake. She could feel the tendons in her neck twitching all the way up to the back of her head, giving her a tension headache so bad that she could barely think.

“Ah... right,” he said. “Someone told me... Onodera or Kazama or... s-someone. Um... you’re not dating anyone, huh? Um, I mean, right? Sorry, that was rude. Um, what am I even saying...”

“I-It’s okay,” she said encouragingly. “Keep going...” Kaname’s face felt hot, and she wasn’t quite sure what was going on herself.

“So... um, are you?” he tried again.

“Um, am I what?”

“Not dating... you know, anyone?”

“Huh? Ah, right... I’m not! I’m not dating anyone at all,” she insisted, waving her hands quickly. Then she wondered, *why was I so quick to protest?*

“I-In that case... Um, as an experiment... No, that seems weird, too...”
Sousuke clenched his hands. Mustering up the greatest courage of his life, he looked straight into her eyes to ask, “Would you maybe... date me?”

The question seemed to have taken everything he had. “I’ve liked you for a long time,” he continued in a rush. “But you were so popular, I kept my distance, because I thought I might be a bother... But we talked a lot when I was fixing your laptop, and we walked around yesterday, and I thought you seemed really serious and not flighty at all... And I like that about you.”

Kaname said nothing.

“Am I wrong?” he asked weakly.

“I-I think I get what you mean,” she told him. “I’m not a fan of superficial guys, either...”

“I’m definitely not superficial.”

“I know that.” Suddenly it all felt very amusing.

“I’ll make sure you’re never sad, Chidori-san,” he promised.

“Right,” she said, all while thinking, *I wonder about that... but I’m choosing to trust you.*

“So... can I get your answer?”

I know exactly what the answer is, Kaname thought. *I’ve been waiting for you for eighteen years. I’ve been waiting for you to take me in your arms, to take me awkwardly in your arms...*

I’m so happy, she told herself. *This is what I wanted. What I’ve wanted for so long...* “My answer is... I love you, Sousuke,” she declared, feeling as though tears would soon be spilling from her eyes. She walked up to him slowly with a smile on her face, reaching out gently for his cheek. Her slender fingers traced the left side of his face, and...

Oh, stupid me. I shouldn’t have touched it, she realized.



There was no scar on his left cheek. *That cross-shaped scar. The understated scar, whose origin I never asked about—that irreplaceable scar, burned into him through the fields of battle...*

Into him. Sousuke, Sagara Sousuke, a man who hadn't been shaped by a gentle world like this one. He was raised by combat and chaos; by a world of cruelty that no one would ever voluntarily create. A world of merciless fighting.

Years of strife, destruction, and killing made him who he is, she remembered. A blade forged in the flames of hell, forged through the strike of the hammer, again and again—that's who he is.

It's impossible to forge exactly the same blade twice. That world is the only place where the Sousuke I know can be found. It may mean losing him forever, but no matter how much I lie to myself, how many peaceful, easy days I spend with this version of him... a version without the scars...

Those days I spent with Sousuke—tumultuous and frustrating, but always exciting—I can't make them never have happened. I just can't. If there's one thing I can't accept, one thing I absolutely can't accept...

It's the idea of never having met him.

"I'm sorry," she said regretfully, pulling her hand away from his cheek as she took a step back.

In the end, I just couldn't imagine living in another world. After thinking about all the different ways I might want things to be, all I truly realized was that I don't want anything else.

The "Sousuke" in front of her began to fade away, and the roof and the school building disappeared as well. The sky, the city—everything was gone, and Kaname found herself back in that world of pristine white. Sofia stood in front of her, staring blankly as the dream of a moment continued to play out.

Outside, taking place over one thousandths of a second, the Laevatein was beginning to fall.

"Are you serious?" Sofia asked incredulously.

Kaname nodded.

“Do you realize what you’re choosing? That you’re choosing to let him die? And his allies, and your mother?! You’re going to abandon them all when you could save them? That’s *murder!*”

“But... that’s the only thing I can do,” Kaname told her slowly.

“No, it’s not! You can play a song of rebirth!” Sofia insisted. “You can refuse to give up! All you’re doing is running away! Throwing *everything* away!”

“I’m not throwing *anything* away,” Kaname insisted. “And I’m *not* giving up.” To herself, she thought, *I’m going to keep going. I’m going to keep living. I’m going to keep walking this barren wasteland, in a world where he was, but no longer is. I’ll sustain myself on memories and continue to move on, to keep going through endless darkness. Even if the world is to end one minute from now, I’ll spend that minute moving forward. That’s the only way it means anything.*

The person I am now, who he—who they—had forged together... The will of that person, in this moment, has worth.

I don’t need this machine to let me fight a destiny gone off the rails, Kaname told herself. *I just need to dig deep; to rest when I’m tired, then stand up again. The way my cells tell me. The way the fire in my blood guides me.*

“That’s pure denialism, and self-centered to boot!” Sofia declared scornfully. “What kind of person has the power to bring back the dead and refuses to use it?!”

“But this wouldn’t be bringing them back from the dead,” Kaname argued back. “They’re living their lives with all they have, every instant! Even now! Even if they’re about to be smashed into pieces, they’re facing it!”

“And what about Sousuke?! Look!” Sofia revived the image of the Laevatein, speared through its chest cavity and falling.

“Oh, give it up already! I’m not listening!” Kaname shouted with all her strength. She looked up to the sky, not bothering to wipe at her flowing tears.

“You’re just getting cold feet,” Sofia hissed. “You’ll regret it. Don’t do this!”

“He’d accept this. Because...” said Kaname, working hard to keep her voice

from cracking. “Because... he’d never fall in love with the kind of person who would try to do things over because she was feeling sentimental. He’d never risk his life for a woman like that. So... So I...”

“Please, stop!” begged Sofia.

But Kaname gave the final order, which was: *End this*, and fissures appeared in the white space that surrounded the two of them.

“I’m going to keep going,” Kaname told her. “I’m... I’m going to show him just how strong a woman I am.”

Tremors shook the space around them, and the fissures expanded until the shell of white space broke away. Following Kaname’s will, Kaname’s commands, the changes that had begun to take place across the world now began to recede. The massive mental waves flowing through the omni-sphere vanished, and the innumerate invisible gears of time let out a roar as they once again moved into motion.

“Stop it... stop it... stop it...” said Sofia.

Sousuke, thought Kaname. *Even if you’re gone, I can keep on living. Someday I’ll stop thinking about you all the time. I’ll find myself another, better man. Then I’ll be super happy, and live a good life forever!*

Hah, okay... So, that’s pretty unlikely, she admitted to herself.

“Stop...” Sofia whispered one more time as the white space around them disappeared completely, and the walls of the TARTAROS reappeared once more.

Just as she awakened, Kaname whispered, “Sousuke...”

The changes stopped. The flow of time stabilized.

The drawn-out time returned to normal, and the harsh sounds of battle could be heard resonating through the dome once more.



5: Proof of Humanity

The Belial's right arm went clean through the Laevatein's chest, spearing the cockpit. The metal shredded with a crunching sound, and shortly afterwards there was a burst of fluid.

"You hampered me to the end, Sagara Sousuke," Leonard whispered. *Yet I was never able to call you a worthy opponent. Despite how hard you fought me, despite how much you damaged the Belial...we never could achieve any kind of mutual respect.*

If he could have felt the slightest bit of sorrow at his loss, thought Leonard, perhaps they could have been friends in his new world. And yet he felt nothing; nothing but relief. It was like finally taking out the trash that had been piling up for days.

He withdrew his right arm. The Laevatein slumped to its knees, face pointed upwards, perfectly still. The battle was over. *Now all I have to do is wait for the moment when Kaname—when Sofia—completes the changes,* Leonard told himself, and then paused to frown. *Strange... The sensation of change has vanished. The melody that was once resonating across the world is now gone without a trace. Has something happened?*

"Kaname...?" he asked.

At the same time, he noticed it: the Laevatein was demolished and immobilized, but there was no sign of blood or flesh inside the shredded chest cavity. No mangled corpse of the unfortunate operator. There was no one in the cockpit at all.

The battle continued.

Sousuke had the barrel of a simple mini-rocket launcher pointed at the Belial's undefended hip area. The enemy's palladium reactor lay just behind the armor torn off earlier by the demolition gun's attack.

Be in time, Sousuke prayed, hiding right below the Belial amidst the smoke and scattered shrapnel. He was just within the rocket's firing range, waiting for the right moment, but his current angle was off. He needed the Belial to turn a bit more to the right.

His expenditure of the Laevatein's head-mounted machine guns hadn't been an act of desperation. He'd done it for a purpose, which was to blow out a cooling pipe and create a thick fog. In that fleeting moment of compromised vision, Sousuke had opened the hatch, snatched up the disposable rocket launcher, and leaped out of the machine. The Laevatein's hatch had then closed as it charged forward, purely under AI's control.

He'd apologized to AI because it had been a suicide charge.

Then, while Leonard had finished off the unpiloted Laevatein, Sousuke had run through the fog, made it to the feet of the stopped Belial, and taken aim with his rocket launcher. For a moment, he thought he heard Kaname's voice, but he didn't have time to think about that now. He had only one chance; just one chance to make the shot.

Be in time, he prayed again, knowing that if Leonard noticed him it would all be over. The enemy would leap back and engage its lambda driver, and his tiny little rocket wouldn't make a dent. *He hasn't noticed me yet. Just turn a little more to the right. Just a little to the right. Hurry...*

The machine turned. *He'll know I'm here*, Sousuke realized, and then he fired his rocket. *Be in time...*

The rocket hit and exploded, and the anachronistic shaped charge began its work. The explosive energy entered through the crack in the Belial's armor, where it then blew through the palladium reactor's outer shell to expose the fuel system to thousands of degrees of heat. It wasn't a nuclear fission reactor, so it didn't explode or melt down, but the plasma that fueled it dissipated, and the escaping heat melted the partition like butter. The overload of electricity then coursed through the Belial's body, burning out its muscle packages and wiring.

The demon toppled, spitting fire. The world's greatest fighting machine, the Belial, had been felled by an old-fashioned rocket.

Sousuke stood up silently and tossed the empty launcher aside as he drew his beloved pistol—an Austrian-made Glock 19—from its holster. He moved the slide back and forth to load a 9mm shot into the chamber, then approached the burning Belial.

Another battle continued.

Tessa fired her submachine gun, acting purely on instinct. Its magazine was soon emptied, and the recoil left her hands numb. She changed clips unsteadily, then poked the muzzle back around the corner and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

A malfunction? she wondered.

“Get down!” From beside her, Sergeant Dejrani pulled Tessa to the ground as the enemy returned fire. Sparks rained down from ricochets grazing past her.

As Tessa ducked down, her eyes strayed to the corner just behind her, noticing a figure lurking beyond. *Enemies?* she thought, realizing they had come around behind them. *We’re trapped. But when did they...*

The enemies revealed themselves—three of them—carbines in hand. They were aiming for her. Their leader was a mere two meters away, close enough that she could see his eyes through his goggles. His gaze was cold and hostile.

“Ah...” she said faintly, knowing that there was no place to hide. Then there came a sudden series of shots from close range... *But they aren’t aimed at me*, she realized. They hit the incoming enemies, who collapsed one after another from shots to the back.

The last of the three turned around to return fire but instead shouted in surprise as Mardukas, of all people, appeared from around the corner. He slammed the enemy with his gun stock again and again, putting all of his strength into the beating. Then he kicked his staggering enemy to the ground and emptied his submachine gun into him.

“Mar—” But before Tessa could even cry his name, Mardukas whipped around to reload with a shockingly smooth motion. Then he turned his fire on the enemies in the other direction.

“Get down!” he shouted, just as the enemy threw something at them. It was a grenade, and it fell between Mardukas and Tessa before rolling along the floor.

Tessa thought about scooping it up, but quickly reconsidered as she wouldn’t have time to throw it back. Her only option was to throw herself on top of it to save those around her.

But before she could do so, Mardukas moved into action. He didn’t throw himself on the grenade, though. “Hah!” He just lifted it up to chest-level with his foot like a soccer player juggling a ball, then batted it back at the enemy with a swing of his gunstock.

A roar rang out down the hall as the grenade exploded, leaving their allies completely unscathed. Not only Tessa, but everyone present was stunned by the incredible feat that Mardukas had just performed.

“What are you staring at?” Mardukas shouted. “Charge!” He fired again to snap his subordinates out of their daze, and they plunged forward into the smoke to rush at their disordered enemies.

Somehow, they’d gotten through the worst of it.

“Captain... I’ve cleared up... the enemies behind us!” Mardukas said, struggling for breath. He was battered, bloody, and openly wounded. His uniform was ripped and shredded too, yet his eyes were shining brightly behind his cracked glasses. She’d never seen him like this before.

“Where... did you learn to do that?” Tessa asked, stunned.

“Ah, d-didn’t really... Purely a matter of instinct...” he mumbled. Perhaps the adrenaline high was dying down, because Mardukas stumbled and had to lean against the wall for support.

A milquetoast, left-brained chess fanatic... That was the image she’d had of him, but now that Tessa thought about it, it’s not as if anyone had ever really *said* he was clumsy. To think that he had talents in that realm, as well...

“I... beg your pardon,” Mardukas panted. “Let’s hurry, Captain.”

“Right,” she agreed. “But...” Tessa looked up at the ceiling and narrowed her eyes thoughtfully. She’d severed her connection to the omni-sphere, but out of

curiosity, she reached out to it again. That feeling—the feeling of change—was fading.

“Kaname-san...” she murmured.

Had the changes stopped?

Mao’s battle also continued.

She’d lost both of her arms, and was now pinned to the ground by an undamaged enemy whose 40mm rifle was pressed against her cockpit. Knowing that the next sight she saw would be a spray of her own blood, Mao gritted her teeth in silent anticipation.

But before that could happen, a bar reading ‘IN PROGRESS’ in a corner of her screen switched to ‘COMPLETE.’ It was referring to one of the autonomous anti-air machine guns installed around the missile base, standing about fifty meters away from where she’d fallen. She’d just taken over its control system.

“Execute!” Mao cried out.

《Roger.》

The automatic turret moved by inches, took aim, and fired. Then the 20mm shells from the turret rained down on the enemy machine in front of her eyes.

A hit. A hit. A hit.

The white Eligore stumbled away in a lurching gait, using its rifle as a shield—and after its gun was in tatters, only then did it seem to remember its lambda driver. Having activated that impenetrable shield, the Eligore’s operator threw an anti-tank dagger into the turret, destroying it completely. Then it turned back to Mao’s machine.

“Dammit...” Mao cursed. Insufficient firepower; she’d failed to land a fatal blow.

A pathetic last-ditch attempt, the white Eligore’s pilot seemed to say, its movements radiating frustration and anger. There was no elegance in them now as the enemy machine seized the chest of Mao’s M9 with its bare hands.

“Geh...” she choked, and saw that a lambda driver force field was forming in

her enemy's hands. It was preparing to tear her apart. *Is this the end?* she was wondering, when suddenly something exploded on the Eligore's white back. It had taken a hit from somewhere in the distance.

Mao gasped. *Clouseau?* she wondered. *No, that's not his weapon... It's too high-caliber.* Her infrared sensors were picking something up past the mountains across the valley, three kilometers away. She zoomed in with her night vision mode.

The source of the shot had been a third-generation AS. It was the latest Soviet model, a custom Zy-98 Shadow. Its head was mounted with high-caliber optical sensors, and it carried a large Soviet-made sniper cannon. She'd never seen data for a machine quite like it.

A sniper-type Shadow, Mao pondered. *What's it doing here, alone? What's its affiliation?*

The Shadow fired another shell from its sniper cannon at them, causing the Eligore to toss Mao's powerless machine aside in order to whip around and block the shot with its lambda driver.

The Eligore's back was to her now. The combination of fire from the automatic turret and the support shot from the Shadow had dislodged some armor in its side, exposing the core within.

Hurry! Mao howled with effort as she sat her machine up, arched its back, and drove its head into her enemy's side with all her might. She felt the hard jolt of an impact as the action crushed the electronic equipment in her forehead, but she bulled forward regardless. The enemy machine was completely caught off guard.

Select sub-weapon: Head-mounted machine guns. Point-blank range. "Nnngraaah!" cried Mao, pulling the trigger. The two chainguns activated, releasing a full spread of automatic .50-caliber shots.

The tungsten alloy warheads she'd fired into the enemy machine ricocheted around inside its armor, causing pandemonium. Cables were severed, the frame was pulverized, the control unit crushed to powder, and the power unit shredded.

The ricochets also blew the head off of Mao's machine and destroyed one of her machine guns. The other followed it a moment later.

Mao's M9 and the Eligore it was latched onto both fell over, wreathed in black smoke. The destruction of her head-mounted sensors had left her monitors uniformly blacked out.

"Try sub-sensors!" Mao yelled. "Okay, they're out too..." Grabbing the emergency escape handle attached to her chest's shock absorber pads with her mouth, she pulled as hard as she could. This activated the explosive bolts and sent the ceiling of her cockpit flying away.

Mao pulled her .45-caliber pistol from its holster and exited her machine. The smoke was thick around her. She tried hard to steady her uneven breath as she looked around.

The enemy machine had fallen on its face next to the devastated M9. With her pistol tight in her hand, she moved carefully forward. *The cockpit hatch behind the Eligore's head is hanging open, she realized. The pilot must have bailed out. Which means—* With a gasp, she hid behind her M9's leg just as bullets began to rain down. The escaped enemy pilot was shooting at her.

Mao leaned forward to return fire and saw a grenade come bouncing along the ground towards her. She took cover just as it exploded, then moved to the other side of her fallen machine to search for her enemy.

She could see them now, running away, dressed in a tight operator's uniform that revealed the lines of their body. *Ah, a woman, Mao thought. I knew it.*

Mao was currently right next to the large gate leading into the base, which was bored into the mountain's sixth station. That's where the enemy was headed.

Into the nuclear missile base... towards the launch control room, she realized, and knew that she had to pursue. She didn't have time to revel in her own miraculous survival, but just loaded a new clip into the submachine gun stored in the blown-away hatch.

Speaking of which... Mao paused to look around for the Shadow that had saved her life. It was still standing on the ridge, so far away it was the size of a

pea. Mao looked at it through the mini-binoculars she kept in her tactical vest.

The Shadow gave her a salute, brushing its fingers against its temple. Then it slung its sniper cannon over its shoulder and made a movement like a joking little shrug.

No way... she thought.

The Shadow touched its head-mounted antenna and twirled its index finger around, a signal for her to turn on her FM radio. She hadn't had an open channel during the fight due to the clash of electronic weaponry, but now she put on her radio headset, opened a channel, and waited.

"Well? How's my timing?" asked a thoroughly smug male voice. It was a voice she thought she'd never hear again.

Oh, God in heaven...

"Guess I just made it in time. Ready to fall in love with me all over again, Big Sis?" Kurz Weber said with all his usual brazenness.

The GRU special forces unit that had come running just as they'd withdrawn from Yamsk-11 had found Kurz there on the verge of death. They'd brought him back from the brink and given him treatment and rehab, a process that still wasn't quite complete. He'd reunited with Wraith soon afterwards, and just yesterday he'd heard about the plan. After begging Colonel Kiryenko of the GRU and pushing back against his doctor's objections, he'd been allowed to borrow a sniper-type Shadow and run to the rescue.

In truth, Kurz was in no condition to be in an AS at all. Pain was already racing from the wounds all over his back and his body. Combat maneuvers were out of the question, so sniping from a high vantage point was about all he could do.

Nevertheless, here he was, like the knight in shining armor from right out of a storybook. He hoped his first line would sound dramatic and cool, and that Mao would cry over his miraculous return. Then he'd say, "If you're ever in danger, I'll always come running. Even from the next world."

Now, come on, he thought encouragingly. *Cry for me, Melissa.*

“You suck,” Mao groaned at him over the radio.

“Huh?”

“I thought you’d taken yourself out nobly, like a real man,” she told him scornfully. “Why are you showing your damned face again? Is this what Wraith was trying to tell us? Yeah, I get it now. Boy, no kidding. What a waste...”

“W-Waste? Don’t be like that, I—”

“Yeah, yeah. You survived. Wow, what a shocker. Satisfied now?”

“What the heck is wrong with you?!” Kurz demanded. Such a cold-hearted reaction... It seemed he was the one who’d ended up with tears in his eyes.



“This place is still swarming with hostile machines. You’re on suppression and support duty. Communication over.” And with that, Mao disappeared into the base.

“Meanie,” Kurz muttered, returning his scope’s magnification to its previous setting and resuming his sniping posture. He could see several standard enemy ASes moving around in various places on the mountain. Kurz sighed and, fighting an indescribable sense of depression, began picking off the remaining hostiles.

The Falke was in pieces, stripped of all its limbs. Clouseau struggled his way out of the cockpit and coughed violently. His broken ribs burned in his chest. He hauled himself to his feet and grimaced, heaving for breath.

I can’t believe it, he thought. I’m still alive.

Did the explosion blow out my ear drum? I can’t hear at all out of my right ear. My vision is red and pulsing too. I can’t move my left arm. I can feel my fingertips, but I think the hand’s broken.

It hurts. It hurts. It really freaking hurts.

I need to get those ears fixed, or I won’t be able to enjoy 5.1 channel surround sound...

I’m out. I’m quitting this stupid business. The minute I’ve recovered, I’m moving to Akihabara and resuming my study of Japanese. Then I’ll become a translator. Amazing days ahead. I’ll make it happen.

“I’m...” he coughed, “quitting!”

Who cares about strength? Who cares about the warrior’s path? Feed it all to the dogs. It’s meaningless.

The more he felt that way, the worse his wounds ached, but this job wasn’t done yet. Clouseau pulled his automatic pistol from his holster and, dragging his injured leg, limped his way to the devastated Eligore.

Fowler lay next to the smoking cockpit, soaked in blood. Clouseau approached him cautiously, kicked away the gun near the man’s hand, and put a finger to

his neck: no pulse. Fowler was dead. The anti-tank dagger's explosion must have sent shrapnel through the cockpit and into his chest. Clouseau had meant to sacrifice himself, yet he had lived, and Fowler had died.

Strength is irrelevant. It all came down to luck. As that thought drifted through his mind, Clouseau felt an indescribable sense of regret sweeping over him. "Sorry, Fowler..."

He looked surprisingly peaceful in death. Almost as if he were sleeping. *What did he mean when he said he'd 'lost' to some drug-addicted trash?* Clouseau wondered, and couldn't even begin to imagine. *What tragedy had he experienced? What motivated him? How had he survived this long?* The man's death meant his story would never be told.

Standing was too painful, so Clouseau collapsed in place and turned on his headgear's radio. "Uruz-1... here. Fowler's machine is down and out. My M9's gone, too. I'm in real trouble... or so I'd like to say, but I think I'll pull through. Is anyone... else alive out there?"

"Ben. Thank goodness," Mao's voice responded. "I managed to clean things up here too. And..." She sniffled and choked. Was she crying? No, surely it was his imagination... "Sorry, I got a little surprise on my end, too... Kurz is alive."

"What did you say?" Clouseau's eyes went wide. *That idiot survived? How absurdly stubborn...*

"The GRU saved him, apparently," Mao went on. "He's in a Shadow, holding down the perimeter, so I'm going into the base. I managed to get in touch with Yang, but the enemy resistance on the lower floor is holding them up. I'm heading for the launch room on my own."

"Alone? It's not safe."

"That's all we have time for," she insisted. "There's a woman heading for the launch room. I think she's going to push the red button."

"All right," he said after a pause. "Be careful."

"Right." She hung up.

"Dammit!" Clouseau fumed. Just minutes ago, he'd been thinking of quitting

this awful business. Yet here he was, cursing his inability to join the fight.

Sousuke's battle continued.

His breathing was stable and his senses were heightened as he readied his 9mm pistol and approached the flaming Belial.

He could see a human form in the smoke; dressed in his operator's uniform, Leonard was sitting atop a meter-wide pipe. He was bleeding profusely from a wound in his stomach. Noticing Sousuke's approach, he turned the revolver in his hand towards him—

A gunshot rang out. Leonard took a hit to the shoulder and dropped his own weapon. It hit the concrete floor with a clang. "Ngh..." he moaned, and his arm fell limply to his side as he stared emptily at Sousuke. He didn't seem to be carrying any other weapons.

"I saw it," Leonard whispered ruefully. "I speared your cockpit. That should have been it. Then she would complete the changes, and everything would have ended..." He let out a deep sigh. "Why did things turn out this way? Why must it go on? This just... isn't right."

"This was my intended goal," Sousuke said, his pistol still locked on Leonard. "I just wasn't sure if I could pull it off."

"Very impressive," he said in a muffled, self-recriminating voice.

"Leonard," Sousuke said, "It was a real gamble that you'd actually fall for this. I honestly don't know how it worked out so well."

"I wonder... I suppose Teletha's message affected me more than I thought. Heh..." As if no longer able to restrain his emotion, Leonard turned his face down to cover it with his hand and laugh.

Or is he crying? Sousuke couldn't tell.

"She knew about our mother, but she still did all of this," Leonard continued. "That frail little sister of mine... I thought she was a great fool, but perhaps she was tougher than I ever was," he whispered as if to himself. "I don't understand. I just... got sick of everything. For so long, everything seemed so

pointless... I thought everyone else was stupid. I knew I was odd. I wanted to be normal. I thought this was the only way to be normal."

Sousuke said nothing.

"Do you understand? I wanted to be normal."

"I do," Sousuke said hesitantly, lowering his gun. "I want to be normal, too. I've wanted it for a long time now." It felt like the first proper conversation they'd ever had. Two men, polar opposites, who at the end of the day wanted the same thing. *Call us yin and yang, light and shadow, whatever you want. But on a fundamental level, maybe we're kind of alike.*

A glimmer of life resurfaced in Leonard's empty gaze. "You can't ever be normal."

"Maybe not," Sousuke agreed.

"I think we've finally achieved a hint of mutual understanding," Leonard mused. "The beginnings of a friendship, just as we're about to die... Do you think that's how it will end?"

"No."

"Thought not." He grinned.

Sousuke finally realized that Leonard was holding a small remote in his left hand. It was a detonator of some kind... Either for the facility, or for the entire base. *He's going to press it, Sousuke realized. I have to kill him.* He forced himself to forget that this was Tessa's brother, took quick aim at his head, and —



Before he could pull the trigger, a rifle round struck Leonard in the chest. There was a spray of blood, and the detonator fell from his hand.

Sousuke gasped, thinking, *My left. Eight o'clock.* Halfway up the TAROS dome, around what looked to be the entrance, stood a man carrying a rifle. Sousuke turned and ducked behind cover.

"The major," Sousuke said aloud. It was Andrey Kalinin, dressed in fatigues and a tactical vest, accompanied by two subordinates. One of the two was carrying a limp girl with long black hair on his shoulder.

"Chidori!" Sousuke yelled as the men began to carry Kaname swiftly towards the underground dock's exit passage. Sousuke wanted to leap out from cover, but Kalinin's merciless aim wouldn't let him.

Why kill Leonard? he wondered. Leonard must have been holding a detonator for bombs attached to the TAROS. Kalinin had shot him to keep him from blowing it up while Kaname was nearby. But if that was the case, Kalinin's next move must be...

"It's all over, Major! Let her go!" cried Sousuke, knowing that Kalinin was going to take her with him and make his escape. Perhaps he thought that, as long as he had Kaname, he could always build another TAROS somewhere. Perhaps he had anticipated this from the start.

After coming this far... I won't lose her again! Sousuke told himself. But "Major! You...!" was all he could say.

You know how I feel about her. You know what kind of person I was back in Afghanistan. Why are you taking her away from me? Why do you always just leave without a word? Why won't you give me an answer?!

Traitor... He'd never meant that word as strongly as he did in this moment. With gritted teeth, Sousuke set his aim to kill. He fired, but he missed. The man was out of pistol range.

With a few bursts of sporadic counterfire, Kalinin and his men left the underground dock behind. The corridor they'd taken would lead right to the runway aboveground.

Sousuke moved to pursue, but he spared a glance for Leonard, who had fallen nearby. He'd already stopped breathing. Sousuke knew he shouldn't pity him; Leonard would probably just have found that humiliating.

If you really were trying to blow up the TAROS, I can understand that. I've thought before that I'd rather blow her up than let you have her, as well. But wasn't there more you could have done, like leaving some last words for Tessa? You had so much power, and yet... Leonard, you were a fool. After someone was dead, you always thought of all the things you wanted to say to them. Sousuke hated that feeling.

Get a grip, he told himself. Right now, he had to get Kaname back. Sousuke checked his remaining ammo, then took off after Kalinin and his men.

With her submachine gun pointed straight ahead, Mao moved deeper into the nuclear missile base. In the distance of the dimly lit concrete passage, she could hear the gunshots from the battle being waged by Yang and the others. Her own heavy breathing seemed unusually loud in her ears.

She'd beaten the route to the nuclear weapon control room into her head time and again: compartment eight on floor F. She'd take a few turns along the leisurely sloping pathway and then go down several floors, which would lead her deep underground.

Calm down, she told herself. *Don't be afraid. The enemy force is concentrated below, holding off Yang and the others. That means they'll be understaffed here. Damn, when did I become so timid? I feel like a scared little girl. How can I be afraid for my life now, after everything I've been through?*

It's that idiot's fault, obviously. What was all that "fall in love with me all over again" nonsense? As if I would ever—

Mao gasped and came to a stop. *Enemies around the corner. Two of them. They know I'm here.* Diving behind a nearby container, she fired at the one she could see. Her opponent threw a grenade as they collapsed, but they hadn't pulled out the safety pin. The remaining enemies cringed back as she charged forward, firing on full automatic.

Enemies dispatched.

Nice one, Melissa. Your instincts are still on point. Mao paused long enough to scoop up the grenade rolling towards her before moving on. The deadline that Wraith and the others had predicted for them regarding the launch code deciphering had already passed; the enemy could launch the nukes at any moment now.

Mao passed a sign reading “E-8.” Aware that her destination was nearby, she took the stairs down from there. *I hate entering stairwells like this, she thought. I feel so exposed...*

Almost there. No traps. Keep moving on down the passage.

She passed by the sturdy iron door that led to the launch control room before attaching a shaped charge to a nearby wall. She knew the door was too sturdy for her to blow it away, and had determined from the updated map Wraith had provided that this was the best place to create a shortcut.

Mao planted the fuse and backed off before she detonated it. The shockwave from the explosion was still like a punch to her gut, but she sucked it up and dove into the smoke, through the hole she’d opened in the wall.

No time left, she reminded herself. Hurry, hurry, hurry...

There were three enemies stationed in the launch control room. One man, standing nearby, was highly panicked from the explosion. She shot him dead.

There was another man in the back of the room. He looked at her, about to shoot, but she quickly took aim and fired first, barely beating him to the punch. The enemy took a 5.7mm round to the chest and collapsed.

The last one was the Eligore’s pilot, still dressed in the tight white AS operator’s uniform that accentuated her hip line. As the woman turned to face her, Mao saw that she was young—maybe in her teens. She had sensible short hair and was wearing glasses. She was also holding a pistol in her right hand, and the thumb of her left was on a large red button on the console panel—the launch button.

Mao opened her mouth, but didn’t tell her to stop. She shot without hesitation. The woman took a hail of bullets and collapsed. But...

Alarms began to blare as the control room’s main screen lit up in red, the

word “launch” blinking there in Cyrillic writing. She could hear muffled rumbling sounds from the upper parts of the base.

It's the nuclear missile's rocket motor, Mao realized. The launch had begun. “What have you done?!” She cried out. Then she ran up and, kicking the woman's weapon away, began to work the console. Struggling with her shaky knowledge of Russian, Mao checked the information about the launched missiles.

They'd only deciphered the launch code for one, and that one had just been fired. The second launch code had completed just now. The third one followed. These other two missiles were free to launch, but there was nobody left to push the button.

They'd only gotten off one shot. It was a 5.5 megaton nuclear warhead mounted on an MIRV missile. It had enough power to burn a city the size of Tokyo to cinders.

Where's the missile headed? What's its destination? Her answer came immediately and she muttered, “What the...”

The nuclear missile was heading for the Pacific Ocean. Latitude: North 20° 50'. Longitude: East 140° 31'. *That's Merida Island,* she realized. In just twenty-four minutes, the nuclear missile would reach Merida Island. She didn't know how things were going there, but Tessa and Sousuke should have reached it by now. Kaname would be held there, as well.

Is there any way to detonate the missile in flight from here? she wondered next. No... It wasn't designed for that. Once the missile had been fired, it would annihilate its target in nuclear fire. It couldn't be jammed or blocked. She couldn't stop it.

She had to warn Tessa and the others. Mao manipulated the console, searching for a usable satellite channel. The “searching” bar progressed so slowly that she wanted to scream.

“Hurry!” she yelled. That woman could have fired it literally anywhere; why, of all places, would she have chosen Merida Island? “What's the point of this?” she shouted at the woman, who was lying nearby in a pool of blood. Mao had fired into her mercilessly, so she probably didn't have long to live.

“Of firing... at Merida Island?” the woman asked.

“Yes,” Mao fumed. “You seem satisfied with yourself, at least!”

The woman laughed haltingly. “The changes... stopped. I felt it inside my machine. He... failed. It’s all her fault...”

“‘Changes?’ ‘Her?’”

“He deserves to disappear... and so does she,” the woman said. “I’m the only one who goes out like this... it’s not fair. What was I lacking? He’s too cruel... I can’t stand it any longer. I’m giving it all to the fire, along with that woman...”

“What in the—” Mao tried to interject.

“Let them burn...” the woman whispered hoarsely. Those were her last words.

They hadn’t taken them all out, but they’d managed to push through the enemies’ resistance to arrive at the underground dock. Perhaps the defeat of the Belial had quashed their morale.

Tessa and her comrades now stood before the giant dome-shaped TAROS. On guard for an ambush, the team split up to surround the dome. There was no sign of Kaname inside; had she left on her own, or had someone taken her? They couldn’t know either way just yet.

They found the remains of the Laevatein and the Belial on the other side of the deck from the TAROS. Sousuke must have come and gone. They called him on the radio but received no response.

And then... Tessa found Leonard. She could only stand there silently in front of her brother, who sat slumped and motionless on top of the large pipe. *I always knew he’d end up this way, she thought. But maybe he felt the same way about me. That it would be one of us, or the other.* But either way, she’d long been prepared for this outcome.

There was so much she’d wanted to say to him if they ever met again. She’d wanted to beat him black and blue, then puff up her chest and give him a lecture. But there was no chance of that now.

Tessa wanted to cry, and she didn't understand why she couldn't. Maybe if she was lucky enough to make it back home and find some semblance of a normal life, she'd have time to process it and grieve.

It would be a painful process. She'd brought about his death herself, after all. Whatever he'd been planning, he was still the only family she had left.

"Captain, message from Mao."

"From Melissa?" Tessa questioned.

Shinohara had been using a handheld device to check communications in the area when she'd picked up a satellite transmission from Mao. It was a shortwave signal, so there was no vocal component. Just a simple telegram-style warning.

Shinohara showed the message to Tessa. They were on the verge of securing the Afghani missile base, but Tessa didn't have time to be relieved to learn that Mao was safe. The news she was sending them warned of the worst possible outcome: a nuclear missile would hit Merida Island in twenty-two minutes.

He had to admit it; he had failed. Kalinin had known full well that this outcome was possible, yet he'd still set their odds of victory at ninety percent. The surrounding sea defenses, the island defenses, and the Belial... each had been arranged flawlessly. He'd made no errors, yet everything that could have gone wrong had done so; every plan had ended in failure, and he'd ended up with his back against the wall.

He knew that the nature of battle was that things didn't always go the way you wanted. And yet he hadn't been able to stop it; Teletha Testarossa and Sagara Sousuke had grown stronger than he'd ever imagined they might. He hadn't expected the Tuatha de Danaan to break through his every line of defense and plow almost all the way to the underground dock. That event had forced him to split his ground troops, which had meant his defenses rallied too late. Then not only had that AS, the Laevatein, destroyed every AS it had come across, it had also defeated Leonard, which was a truly shocking result.

Those young people had bested him in a head-to-head fight, with incredible split-second judgment and skill. And Leonard, in a last act of resentment at his

own failure, had nearly blown up the facility, along with Chidori Kaname.

But Kalinin couldn't let that happen. He needed Chidori Kaname. As long as he had her, he could always try again. He couldn't let her die just to satisfy Leonard's ego. He'd shot Leonard to death to prevent it, though he still wasn't sure if the boy had genuinely meant to press the detonator switch or not.

While Kalinin ran up the stairs, one of his subordinates asked him, "Where's the escape helicopter?"

"Standing by on the runway," Kalinin answered tersely.

"Right."

Escape and try again, he urged himself. But was that really the right thing to do? Was that really what he wanted? *Of course it is*, he insisted. *I want this. I can still try again.*

It didn't have to be the ideal world that Leonard had been trying for. Kalinin just wanted to set things right, to give the world the form it was meant to have. He was now the only person who could do so. *And if Sousuke tries to stop me, I'll show him no mercy.*

"It's this way," said his subordinate. "Hurry."

They came out onto the camouflaged runway on the surface. A mid-sized transport helicopter was waiting on the runway's outskirts, its rotors already turning. With the unconscious Chidori Kaname in tow, Kalinin and his entourage hurried to the helicopter's boarding ramp.

When Sousuke came out on the runway, the first thing he heard was the roar of the turboshaft engine. Kalinin and his men were on that helicopter, and they had Kaname.

Chidori! he thought, and took off running. He was thirty meters away.

A single soldier armed with a rifle stood in the door, shooting at him. Sousuke returned fire, emptying his clip while maintaining his speed. A shot hit one of Sousuke's shoulder pads, causing him to stagger, but he swapped out his clip and kept firing. He landed a hit on the man in the door, who tumbled out of the

helicopter.

The helicopter had begun to taxi. *It's going to take off soon*, Sousuke realized. He fired at the tail rotor, but his 9mm gun didn't stand a chance against a military helicopter. It raised a few sparks, but had no further impact.

Sousuke's gaze fell on a storage shed at the corner of the runway. There was a ground-mounted cable about three meters long, used for securing parked aircraft. *Make it in time*, he urged himself, changing the direction of his full-speed charge and running past the shed to grab the cable. The helicopter's tail began to rise as the machine picked up speed.

Now! With a grunt of effort, Sousuke threw the alloy steel cable into the air. It spun in an arc towards the helicopter, where it made contact with the tail rotor and wrapped around it with a clang. The rising helicopter suddenly pitched and dipped, but didn't fall; despite its newfound struggle, the sturdy tail rotor kept turning. The helicopter hovered about a meter off the runway, swaying back and forth mid-air.

Sousuke charged for the open starboard entry port, fighting against the powerful downdraft to leap inside. The enemy soldiers within were holding tight to their seats in the unstable craft. Sousuke fired three quick shots into them at close range and pushed through the cabin to find Kaname, who was lying in a seat. She looked dazed, but was trying to get up.

Kalinin was nowhere to be seen. *Is he in the cockpit?* Sousuke wondered, but dismissed it for now. "Chidori!" he called.

"Sousuke...?"

He ran up to Kaname and sat her up. It was his first time touching her in a year, and thoughts were racing through his mind. *At last!* "Can you walk?" he asked. "I'm going to get you out of here. Just hang on."

Running to the back of the cabin, Sousuke manipulated a panel in the wall to open the rear cargo hatch, which slowly began to open. The scenery outside went whirling by as the helicopter continued to dip and spin above the runway.

"What's going on?" Kaname asked. "Am I still dreaming? I..."

"You're not dreaming," he told her. "You're coming back with me."

Just at this moment, Kalinin came out from the cockpit with his rifle at the ready.

Sousuke pulled Kaname behind a crate right as Kalinin opened fire. He felt a sudden ache in his back; a ricochet had dug itself halfway into his bulletproof operator's uniform. The yaw on the ricochet allowed his uniform to stop it, but the hit still resulted in a sharp stab of pain.

"Release the girl and drop your weapon!" Kalinin demanded.

"Not a chance!" Sousuke responded, then poked his pistol out from behind cover to return fire. Kalinin must have known there was no way he would hit from this angle, because he didn't even bother trying to dodge. The man fired again, blasting off a metal cargo restraint and sending a stack of weapons cases tumbling down at Sousuke.

"Ngh!" These were large cases full of anti-tank and anti-air missiles, about a hundred kilograms in total, and they took on the centripetal force from the spinning helicopter to crush Sousuke against the wall.

Kaname was lying on the floor, looking around her as if still in a daze. "Sousuke? Is it really... you, Sousuke?" she asked.

"Chidori!" Sousuke choked out, but was pinned in place as Kalinin drew nearer to them.

The helicopter shook violently, and its spinning grew faster, sending the weapons cases tumbling out of the open cargo hatch. Kaname suffered the same fate, sliding helplessly down the loading ramp and out of the helicopter.

"Dammit!" Sousuke tried to pursue, but couldn't; part of the metal restraint was tangled around his leg. While he struggled to shake it off, the helicopter suddenly lurched upward, freely gaining altitude.

He could see Kaname's body rolling down the runway, which was now moving farther and farther away. "Chidori!" he yelled, kicking and pulling at the metal until he finally got it off. But by then, the helicopter was already meters up and still rising.

After I came all this way, he thought despairingly, fully aware that a jump from this height would kill him. "Ngh!" he groaned as the aircraft began to

shake violently.

Sousuke turned to look at Kalinin, who was gripping a seat nearby and glaring at him. The Russian whispered something, but whatever his words had been, they were smothered by the combined roar of the engine and the wind whipping in from the cargo hatch.

The helicopter's ascent stopped, and it tilted hard to the side. The vibrations around them grew violent as the machine continued to spin. They were in no condition to fight now; the helicopter had lost its balance and was now plummeting to earth, moving farther and farther away from the runway as it plunged towards the base's north side. The ground was approaching, and the angle was too steep for the helicopter to land on its skids. The rotors tore through trees and broke against rocks as the machine struck the ground.

Just as Tessa arrived on the runway aboveground, she heard a crash from the north, as if from some kind of aircraft. There was a trail of smoke in the air above; this, too, was traveling in a northerly direction.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Mardukas, spurring her on. "But for now, we must escape!" There were only twenty minutes left until the nuclear strike would hit. There was no way of knowing if they'd be able to find an aircraft, take off, and get away from the island in time.

Sergeant Dejirani, who was communicating with the crew as he headed for the underground hangar, now reported in. "We found a turboprop aircraft, a King Air we left before! We're fueling it up now. No time to load it up to full, but it'll get us to liftoff, at least."

"That's fine," said Tessa. "Bring it up top!"

"Yes, ma'am. But someone beat us there..."

"Another guest?"

"Yes," Sergeant Dejirani confirmed. "The plane came preloaded with a white tiger in a cage."

“A tiger?” Tessa didn’t understand. *A tiger on a plane?* she wondered. *Who would have put it there?* “Is it dangerous?”

“Doesn’t look like it.”

“Then we’ll take it with us,” she decided.

“Aye aye.”

A rumble echoed around them as the massive elevator, designed to move aircraft from the underground hangar to the surface runway, activated. This had once been their home, after all. They knew exactly what to do at times like these.

“We need to clear the runway,” said Tessa. “There’s something scattered across it.” About fifty meters down the runway lay a scattering of something that could impede their takeoff. Was it heavy weapons cases? *No, wait...*

“Kaname-san...?” she said uncertainly. It wasn’t just the weapons cases—Chidori Kaname was lying there, too. Tessa recognized her immediately.

“Captain?” Mardukas said warily.

They hadn’t secured the runway yet. There was a chance that enemies could still be lurking about, but Tessa didn’t care about that right now. Ignoring Mardukas’s warning, Tessa ran up to her friend. “Kaname-san?!” she said urgently, shaking her.

“Ngh...”

She’s breathing, Tessa realized. Thank goodness. Her injuries were limited to scrapes and bruises, too.

“Out of the way, Captain. I’ll carry her.” One of Tessa’s subordinates came running up from behind, picking Kaname up and heading for the elevator. Tessa ran alongside him, calling to Kaname, “Kaname-san, can you hear me? It’s me!”

“Tes... Tessa?”

“What happened?” Tessa asked urgently. “Do you know where Sagara-san is?!”

“Sousuke... saved me...went with the helicopter...” She pointed a trembling

finger northward, in the direction Tessa had heard the crash. Black smoke was still rising from that point.

About five hundred meters north, I would reckon, Tessa figured. That was enough to give her the gist of what had happened. Someone—most likely Kalinin—had tried to take Kaname away by helicopter. Sousuke had tried to save her, and had taken the machine down in the process...most likely while still inside it.

“We have to go after hi...” Kaname struggled to get off Tessa’s subordinate’s back, but fell into a coughing fit. Her face was pale.

Tessa put a hand to Kaname’s forehead and found she had a high fever. *Aftereffects of using the TAROS?* she speculated. *It might get worse if we don’t get her somewhere she can rest soon...*

“Sagara-san is...” Tessa trailed off, looking in the direction the helicopter had gone. Was Sousuke all right? It was possible he’d been thrown clear on the way. But the worst might have also happened, had he been there when it crashed.

Tessa looked at the time: eighteen minutes left. Did she have time to send someone to find him? To find him, save him, and bring him back here? No, there was no way to make that math add up... Even if they did get lucky enough to find Sousuke and bring him back, it wouldn’t be before the nuclear bomb hit. They’d have no time to take off and get far enough away. They simply wouldn’t.

Tessa called to him on the radio. Now that they were on the surface, communications should be possible. “Ansaz here. Uruz-7, respond! There’s a nuclear strike on the way. We have eighteen minutes left!”

There was no response.

The twin turboprop engine plane taxied out of the large elevator. It was an old-fashioned propeller craft they used to use to carry off-duty soldiers to civilization, be it Guam or Tokyo, from this base isolated in the Pacific.

“Ansaz to Uruz-7, respond!” Tessa radioed urgently. “A nuclear warhead is seventeen minutes away! Uruz-7!”

No response.

The crew were rushing to prepare for liftoff. They removed the pipes from the fueling vehicle and carried the wounded on board as the few who had been delegated to remove the weapons cases from the runway ran back. Mardukas dragged Tessa on board, as well.

“Do you read me, Uruz-7?!” Tessa tried again. “Answer me, Sagara-san!”

“Uruz-7... here,” came Sousuke’s voice through the static.

“Sagara-san!”

“Tessa... I’m glad you’re safe,” he said. “My current location is... near the third radar, I think. Where... are you?”

“We’re on the runway,” she told him. “Kaname-san is safe, and the crew is about to make its escape. A nuclear warhead is heading this way. We have sixteen minutes. Please come quickly!” At his current location, he might just make it. If they waited until the very last minute, and if he started running at full tilt right now, they’d be able to take him on board, and just maybe...

“Negative, Ansaz.”

“What?”

“I’m currently... engaging the enemy,” he said. “I don’t think I can make the rendezvous.”

Sousuke’s battle wasn’t over.

The remains of the burning helicopter lay on its side, shattered pieces strewn everywhere. The crushed drop tank, bent rotors, and detached engine pods were scattered along the ground, putting out smoke.

The dawning sky was beautiful.

Sousuke gave his report to Tessa standing near a sponson, which had been broken neatly in half and was now coated in flames. The static from the radio was severe. He didn’t know why; perhaps it was malfunctioning from the beating it had taken.

“Engaging the enemy?” Tessa replied. “How many are there?! ”

“One.” Sousuke stared down at said enemy, holding his final remaining weapon—a combat knife—in a reverse grip.

Andrey Kalinin, holding a knife in a similar fashion, was standing five meters away from him. Blood was dripping down his temple, and his fatigues were charred and bloodstained.

They were both in bad shape. Sousuke wanted to offer a truce and propose running back to Tessa together, but he knew too well what the other man would say.

“Kaname... is she safe?” Sousuke asked Tessa.

“Yes. She’s sleeping now.”

“Make sure you get her back home.”

“Sou—” Tessa started to say something, but stopped. She was a smart woman; tragically smart. She knew that when Sousuke said it was impossible, she wouldn’t be able to convince him otherwise. “Yes... I promise.”

“Thank you. Uruz-7, signing off.” Sousuke turned off the radio and threw his headgear aside; he wouldn’t be needing it anymore.

Tessa had sounded like she was holding back tears. *Shouldn’t I have offered her one last kind word?* he wondered. No, that wouldn’t do. Knowing Tessa, kind words would just have made things more painful for her.

“Are you finished?” Kalinin asked.

“Yes,” Sousuke told him. “Do you know about the nuke?”

“I heard about it in the helicopter earlier. One of my subordinates was listening in.” Kalinin let out a short sigh. “Sabina did it, I imagine. It was a mistake to place her there.”

“Were you really planning to start a nuclear war?”

“Yes. We were going to start the world over anyway, so we thought it would stave off future trouble if we wiped it all clean first.”

There was something almost boastful in Kalinin’s tone, and Sousuke felt a violent anger rising inside him. Not about the approval of mass slaughter, but

because he felt that Kalinin was lying not just to Sousuke, but also to himself.

“Feel free to try to justify yourself to me, if you want,” he invited.

“I imagine that would only enrage you,” replied Kalinin.

“True.”

Some distance away from them, the futilely rumbling engine of the helicopter blew to pieces with a roar, sending its turbine blades flying through the air. Nuts, bolts, and aluminum plating rained down around them.

That was the signal. Through the dust cloud stirred up by the shrapnel, Kalinin began to charge, moving with a speed that seemed unimaginable given his usual slow-yet-purposeful daily deportment.

There was no feint, no attempt to knock him off-balance, no attempt to grab his wrist or shoulder. Kalinin just stabbed at him. The motion was fast, sharp, and straightforward.

Sousuke grunted and moved his head aside just in time to feel the blade whip past his throat. Kalinin followed up with a flurry of widely varied strikes, and Sousuke struggled to even tell what was coming next.

A gesture that, at first, seemed like a lurch and a grab turned out to be Kalinin rushing past him to stab at his back. Sousuke leaped forward into a roll to get some distance and turned to see Kalinin about to kick dust into his eyes. He closed just one eye and slashed at the other man’s leg, but Kalinin changed the course of his kick to whip his foot at Sousuke’s temple instead. Sousuke just barely blocked with his left arm, and the impact felt sharper than that of any kick he’d ever taken.

“Ngh...” he groaned. The kick sent Sousuke’s balance shifting to the side, but instead of fighting it, he went into a roll, followed by another slash. Kalinin dodged it effortlessly, then channeled the momentum of the dodge into a spin and planted the heel of his jungle boot into Sousuke’s side.

“Ngh!” Sousuke’s breath caught in his throat as the world around him dimmed, but he endured the pain and took his battle stance again.

“What’s wrong?” Kalinin taunted. “You can’t do anything without an AS?”

Sousuke said nothing.

“I’ve taught you so many things, but it occurred to me a long time back...”

“What?”

“You have no talent for this.” Instantly, Kalinin’s right hand flashed through the air, thrusting forward like a bullet. Sousuke just managed to dodge, but another strike whipped towards him with the same speed. Sousuke just barely dodged it as well, then tried a counter blow. The dizzying back-and-forth caused sparks to fly.

‘No talent’? I’ve always known that. It hurts to hear it said aloud, but I’ve always known, he thought. I’m not a natural at any of this. Not at brawling, not at sniping, not at piloting an AS. I’m good enough but not the best. There are more gifted people all around; Mao, Clouseau, Kurz... They’re all better than I am. I know that much.

Kalinin probably has superior instincts for this kind of hand-to-hand fighting, too.

“But then...” he said out loud. But then why... Why did you try to make me into a soldier? The only thing I have going for me is my stubbornness in the clutch.

Amidst the dodging, blocking, and enduring, the sun began to rise behind Sousuke. He’d positioned himself with the sun at his back without even realizing it, and now Kalinin was squinting, his vision impeded by the light.

If Sousuke was going to strike, it had to be now. He charged, barely dodging Kalinin’s stab before grabbing the man’s knee and twisting it. He could have run away, but he grabbed Kalinin’s knee anyway, and pulled with all his might.

It wasn’t enough. He’d be stabbed in the back at this rate, but Sousuke didn’t care; he dug his nails in, applying his weight. The pull was similar to the move ‘sode tsurikomi goshi’ in judo.

It was a battle of wills as the two men pushed at each other.

Kalinin lost his balance, but dug deep to try and recover. With a grunt, Sousuke kicked off the ground with all his might. Kalinin lost the fight and fell to

the ground. It wasn't a skilled fall, but more like the kind you'd see in a squabble between children.

Nevertheless, Sousuke wasn't about to complain as he locked down his opponent's right arm. Kalinin continued to try and stab at him, but Sousuke mustered all of his strength to hold his knife arm in place as he twisted, again and again. At last, Kalinin's knife fell from his hand.

The enemy had lost his weapon. Victory was near.

Sousuke strained, then bucked his head backwards to hit his opponent again and again. He just had to make Kalinin vulnerable for a second. He heard the dull sound of the cartilage in the man's nose breaking.

Anger. Hatred. No mercy for the enemy.

Sousuke moved to sit astride his opponent, using all of his weight to hold down Kalinin's arms. He adjusted the grip on his own knife and pressed down on the defenseless chest.

The ribs are in the way, he reminded himself. Keep the blade parallel. Do you know where the heart is? You need to use every ounce of power you have and push it in at a diagonal. Eventually you'll tear through blood and flesh and get a feeling like tearing through steel...

And yet, Sousuke just sat there. The tip of the knife remained still against Kalinin's chest as he failed to press it in. He tried to do the deed again and again, but the knife wouldn't move. The blade never reached his heart.

"Ngh... dammit." Sousuke couldn't do it. He knew that all too well, and the power that had been coursing through his body just moments ago disappeared suddenly without a trace.

Sousuke released Kalinin, stood up, and backed away. He tried to convince himself to charge in again, but realized he couldn't do it, took three more steps back, and squatted down.

I can't kill my own father.

"Do whatever you want," Sousuke whispered, collapsing back against the shell of the helicopter. He stuck his knife into the ground in front of him and

trembled in front of Kalinin.

I'm so tired. So sick of fighting.

As Sousuke sat there, Kalinin slowly stood up. "As I said, you have no talent."

"Oh, shut up."

"You're like a lamb raised among wolves," Kalinin observed. "You've never truly hungered for blood, and you don't need to eat flesh to survive. You simply imitated what the wolves around you did, because it was the only way for you to survive. Can there be any animal in the world more pathetic, more pitiable?"

"I don't care," Sousuke told him.

"This isn't how you were meant to be. You weren't meant to become what you are... someone who could best me in a fight. You weren't meant to be called 'Kashim' or 'Uruz-7.'"

Sousuke had nothing to say.

"There's somewhere else out there you belonged," Kalinin went on. "But you can't go back there now. You destroyed that place yourself."

What are you trying to say? Why are you saying it? You can't possibly want to spend this time giving me some hoary old lecture about how I'm not a real soldier, Sousuke thought incredulously. *You pity me, huh? You're saying I should have been a normal man? But I could never be, and now it's too late.*

"And so... I'm going to finish things." Kalinin picked up the knife and approached him, step by step; he'd started the fight, and he meant to finish it. He could do what Sousuke couldn't. He had to prove that there was a difference between wolves and sheep.

Kalinin came in close, crouched down, and took a stabbing posture. Slumped against the ruined helicopter, Sousuke just watched in exhaustion. He was ready... but the strike never came.

Kalinin coughed, and a streak of red spilled from a corner of his mouth as the knife dropped from his hand. He fell to his knees and collapsed forward, his back soaked with blood.

Sousuke only now realized there were fragments of metal stuck into Kalinin's

flesh, deep enough to reach his internal organs. It must have happened when they crashed. *Was he fighting all this time with those wounds?* he wondered.

“Why in the world...”

“Your final... training,” Kalinin said weakly. “I wanted to show you... who you really are.” His large, bloodstained hand grabbed Sousuke by the shoulder. “You couldn’t kill me. Of course you couldn’t. You’re a kind boy.”

“Stop it,” Sousuke replied. The words affected him worse than a slap. *I don’t want to hear that. I don’t deserve it. Why can’t you be cruel with me? I won’t be able to stand up again after hearing something like that.*

“I wanted... to send you home.” Kalinin sighed deeply, as though the life was draining out of him. “I wanted to go home, too. To Irina... To my child...” He was talking about his late wife. Over ten years ago, she and her unborn child had died of a medical error while he was on maneuvers in Afghanistan.

“Is that why you worked with Leonard?” Sousuke asked. “I can’t believe a man like you fell for that kind of weak-willed fantasy!”

“Did... Did you think I was invincible?”

“Isn’t that what fathers are?!”

Kalinin smiled slightly. Perhaps he enjoyed being called a father. “This is... what all fathers are like under the surface. And realizing that is a sign of growing up...”

“Major.”

“Iki-nasai.” Kalinin said his final words in Japanese. Then the hand gripping Sousuke’s shoulder loosened, and he collapsed.

How many minutes had he sat there, squatting in front of Kalinin’s empty shell? Sousuke heard the distant sound of a propeller craft’s engine and looked up at the sky. The King Air had taken off from the base’s runway with Tessa and the others on board.

Sousuke looked at his watch: ten minutes until the nuclear missile arrived. Flying at full speed, they’d only just make it to safety. They really must have

waited for him until the last second.

“Chidori...” he sighed. There was so much he wanted to say to her, but it all came down to those mere ten seconds in the helicopter. He’d burned himself out for a whole year, all for that fleeting moment of contact. He wasn’t even sure if she’d been back in her right mind or not in those moments. The only evidence he had that she was, was the fact that the ‘change’ hadn’t taken place.

Will she be able to be happy now? He hoped that she would. But he’d lost his chance to be sure, to see it happen. *It’s fine*, he told himself. *I did all I could.*

He’d left his last will and testament unwritten, and he still didn’t know what he’d have put in it if given another opportunity. There was nothing left that he could do for her.

“Good luck...” Sousuke whispered, gazing at the plane as it disappeared into the rising sun. Then he stood up and, leaving the silent Kalinin behind, ran towards the base. He didn’t expect it to do any good, though. Even moving now was pointless.

And yet he ran.

Iki-nasai. Through the haze of his uncertain memories of the past, long ago, Sousuke felt he’d heard those same words once before. Not *ike*, “go,” or *ikiro*, “live,” but a liminal word existing between the two. He wondered why Kalinin had picked that word. But he ran through the light of the early morning, choosing to treat those words as if they had been an order.

He found a passage leading down in a corner of the practice grounds, kicking in the wire mesh door and going through. He reached the bottom of the stairs in thirty seconds, passed through several doors, and ended up near Corridor No. 0.

The Merida Island underground facility wouldn’t be able to withstand the pressure and heat generated by a nuclear warhead on a modern ICBM. Escaping to the sewers or the thermonuclear power facilities on the base’s lowest level would be no better; even if he managed to survive, he’d be trapped under the rubble of the collapsed facility, or drown in the seawater that rushed in after the explosion.

Going underground wouldn't save him. He was out of options. Sousuke checked the time: seven minutes left.

"Nothing I can do, then?" he said, knowing that he was helpless. He was about to sink to his knees in despair when he saw something at the end of the corridor. There was a large hole in the wall, beyond which was the underground dock where he'd settled things with the Belial.

Oh, right. I forgot about him. Picking through the rubble, Sousuke entered the underground dock. The demolished Laevatein lay there beyond the cables and pipes. It still had its head, so the audio sensors should still be working. He ran up and tried addressing it.

"Al."

《I thought you were just going to leave me here,》 came the typically casual tone over the external speakers. The cockpit was destroyed, but Al's core unit was in the stomach. He must have just made it through.

"Do you know about the nuclear attack?" Sousuke asked him.

《I do. I intercepted the transmission from Afghanistan.》

"I see..."

《The MIRV warhead they fired has a payload of 5500 kilotons. It's all going to hit Merida Island. Even if you took shelter, you couldn't possibly survive.》

"It seems that way," Sousuke agreed.

《But I'm satisfied, since I got to get that scrap back for what it did to me at that school.》 Al apparently held a grudge over his loss to the Belial during his days as the Arbalest.

That school... It had only been a year ago, but it felt so far away, Sousuke reflected. Losing to Leonard's Belial in the courtyard there, watching Kaname be taken away, swearing to her classmates that he'd bring her back... After a long, long journey, it would all end here.

"How many minutes left?" he asked.

《Five.》

“Longer than I expected...” Now that he’d resigned himself, it felt like too long to wait.

Sousuke suddenly remembered the memory chip in his pocket. It had come with the letter from Kudan Mira, and he’d planned to look it over after the operation was done. Unfortunately, he had nothing to play it in. There was a compatible slot for it in the cockpit, but the cockpit had been speared by the Belial’s hand.

“Can you read a memory chip?” he asked AI.

《Searching now. I believe I can. The slot in the cockpit is still functioning.》

Sousuke climbed into the cockpit through a space in the hatch, where the smell of burnt metal and vinyl stung his nose. The master suit he’d typically sat in had been blown away, leaving a barren, empty space surrounded by crushed electronics and cables. He pushed aside the warped frame to reach the box-shaped unit that had just avoided total destruction, pulling out the memory chip to insert it.

“Can you display it?” he asked.

《The sixth panel screen is still working. Displaying now.》

Most of the screens had been destroyed with the rest of the machinery, but a screen about the size of a magazine dangling on his right side was still working. It flickered and lit up, showing the contents of the memory chip. *A movie file, eh?* Mira’s letter said she’d found this file ‘on the internet.’ The file notes contained the date and time it was uploaded, the site it had come from, its size and format. The file name was ‘tokanasosuke_01.’

The resolution was low. There was a lot of static. The sound was mono. Nevertheless, Sousuke ordered it to play.

The first thing he saw was a classroom. It was familiar, but not quite the one that he knew. The view outside the window was also similar, but not quite right. He could vaguely hear the brass band club practicing outside. The calls of the baseball club. The silly laughter of girls in the hall.

It was Jindai High School. The classroom wasn’t 2-4, but the one just above it, 3-4. The view began to move jerkily, swinging to show first the ceiling, then the

floor.

“Wait, are you recording already?” said a voice.

“It’s working. See?” replied another.

Then the movement stopped; perhaps the camera had been placed on a tripod. Beyond the static, he could see Kazama Shinji, facing the lens, clearing his throat. “Um, ahem... I don’t know where you guys are or what you’re doing, but I wanted to give you an update. If you see this, give us a call.”

“Hey, how is anyone gonna know who we’re talking to?” someone interrupted from outside the frame. Everyone laughed.

“B-But are you sure it’s okay to say their names?” someone asked. “We’re gonna send this all over the world, right?”

“It’s fine. Anyway, here we go. One, two...” The screen moved again. The students were lined up in front of the blackboard. There were over thirty of them, and Sousuke recognized them all. How could he not?

They all shouted at once, a little bit off time, “Chidori! Sagara! Come home soon!” Then they broke into sporadic laughter, with individual comments like “Let’s try it again” and “No, it’s fine,” standing out here and there.

Kazama came back into frame and winced as he continued. “Anyway, that’s basically the plan. We were hoping you might see this, wherever you are. Okay, who’s first?”

“Teacher! Teacher first!” a crowd of them shouted, followed by whistles and applause.

Kazama left the frame and a woman entered in his place. It was their homeroom teacher, Kagurazaka Eri. She was wearing her usual suit, but her shirt and pants were looser around the stomach than usual.

“Ah... Sagara-kun, Chidori-san. It’s your homeroom teacher, Kagurazaka,” she said. “Are you doing all right? I know it’s been an eventful time, but everyone’s still here and working hard. We’ve got all your things safely stored away, so don’t worry about that.”

“Teacher! Anything else to report?!”

“Ah... well, the truth is, last year, I married Mr. Mizuhoshi. You really helped me seal the deal. Thank you so much.” This was followed by more teasing around her.

“Teacher, there’s more!”

“What? Um... Everyone will have graduated by then, but I’ll be taking maternity leave in April. The baby’s due in June. If you can, please come and see me.” There was a thunderous round of applause. Eri gave the camera a wincing smile before she exited the frame.

“Next! Who’s next?”

“Kyoko, you go.”

“M-Me? Um, um...”

“Kyoko! Kyoko!” they chanted.

Tokiwa Kyoko entered the screen. She’d stopped wearing her hair in braids, it seemed. She looked a little more grown-up, but seemed hale and hearty enough.

“Um... Kana-chan, Sagara-kun,” she began. “As you can see, I’m just fine. I know you’re probably really worried about me, but don’t be, okay? By the way, I’m taking care of Hamski, so he’s fine, too. Graduation is on March third. I hope you can get in touch before then...”

“Yes, thank you!”

“Okay, who’s next?”

“Ono-D, go for it!”

The frame shook. “Huh? Uh, I wasn’t gonna...”

“Oh, that’s right! Ono-D, Ono-D!”

“But...”

“You gotta. You’ve got a lot to say, right? Go say it.”

Sluggishly, Onodera Kotaro entered the frame.

“Just get it out. Say it!”

“Um... I don’t really... darn it.” He dragged his feet, lowered his head, ran his hands through his hair, and finally turned to face the camera again. “Ah, fine. Sagara... I’m sorry,” he said, glancing up at the camera regretfully. “I lost my temper last time we saw each other. Since then, I’ve heard a lot more about what happened and thought it over... and it was wrong for me to blame it all on you.”

There was no teasing this time. Everyone just fell silent and listened to him speak.

“I just felt like... you were hiding things from me. I mean, I know you had your reasons and all. But I felt really left out, you know? That’s why I lost my temper... okay? Sorry. Anyway, that’s the deal. Give me a call if you get back. I’ll be waiting.” Before those around him could react, Kotaro fled the camera’s gaze.

Other students began to come up after that, and each one shared their own short messages for Kaname and Sousuke. It was a long video. There were close to fifteen minutes left, according to the timestamp.

Sousuke looked at the time: one minute until impact.

“I don’t want to die,” he said, his voice breaking as he squeezed the words from his throat. He meant it from the bottom of his heart. “I don’t want... to die.”

I don’t know what’s happening, he thought. His face felt hot. The world turned blurry around him. He didn’t know what was happening. The words came against his will. “I really... I really don’t want... to die...”

Then Sousuke finally realized... *I’m crying*. Tears flowed from his eyes as he pulled at his hair and began to weep and wail, there in that cramped, burnt-out cockpit with barely any space to move.

I just want fifteen more minutes, he thought in despair. *Just fifteen more minutes. Let me watch it to the end. Why can’t you give me that much?*

I don’t want to die. I want to go home. I want to go back to that school with Kaname.

I want to go home.

Please, please, please...

"I don't want... to die."

《Sarge. Thirty seconds,》 Al said.

"Please..."

《The TAROS was destroyed. I cannot channel your thought patterns to activate the lambda driver.》

"I... I know," he choked.

Twenty seconds left.

《Before I attempt something, I wish to ask a question. Am I human, or am I a machine?》

"You're..." It would be easy to say that Al was a machine, but Sousuke couldn't say that any more. Whatever he was, it was more complicated than that. "You decide that for yourself," he finally said. "That's... what all humans do."

《Thank you.》

There were five seconds left.

"What are you..."

《I'm going to try and do it myself.》

Around the fallen Laevatein, the air warped sharply. It was the power that lay beyond the physical. The power that required a human mediator to activate...

Zero seconds left.

The 5.5 megaton warhead exploded in the air over Merida Island.

Epilogue

Outside Portsmouth, Virginia

A new headstone stood beside the other two:

Here lies Leonard Testarossa.

He wished for a better world.

Of course, it was only a headstone. His body would have been atomized over the Pacific by the nuclear explosion on Merida Island.

He probably wouldn't want to be next to our mother, Tessa thought, but he should be. I'd like them to try and talk things out. But putting him right next to her might still be too painful, so I placed our father in the middle. That should be acceptable.

I don't know how many decades it will be, but I hope my own final rest is here, someday. Then the four of us can have a proper family meeting. True reconciliation may be difficult, but I want to believe in our eventual salvation.

"Do you understand?" Tessa whispered to Leonard's grave. The stone responded with silence. All she could hear was the sound of the wind and birdsong. Then she stood up and left the graves behind.

Two men were waiting for her nearby. One was Mardukas, dressed in a gray suit. The scar across his forehead had removed some of the cold impression he used to give off and replaced it with a curiously intimidating air.

The other was Admiral Jerome Borda, the former head of Mithril's operations division. Borda had been MIA since the attack by Amalgam had blown up their headquarters. He really had been badly injured, he said, but after over six months of treatment and recovery, he'd begun secretly making preparations to rebuild the organization.

"All finished?" Borda asked. There was a patch over his left eye, and he walked with a cane in his right hand.

“Yes, Uncle. And I’m sorry for the trouble,” said Tessa.

After the nuclear explosion on Merida Island, the plane carrying her and the others had been forced to make a water landing. They’d been picked up afterwards by the surfaced US Navy submarine, the Pasadena. Captain Sailor had been as shocked to see the erstwhile maid and ‘the Duke’ boarding his vessel as he was to see the tiger in the cargo hold, but he’d eventually given them permission to board. A zoo in Hawaii had taken the tiger in.

Sailor treated them politely enough, but after a transfer in custody to the Naval Information Department at the Hawaii submarine fleet HQ, they’d spent a week in what had more or less been house arrest. But just as the real interrogations were about to start, Admiral Borda had come to fetch them.

Tessa didn’t know how he’d done it, but she and her crew ended up being set free. She’d heard that Courtney and Sears, who had been arrested for stealing a military AS and helicopter, had also been acquitted of their crimes.

“I received a report,” said Borda. “The army has gone down to DEFCON 4. I think it’s safe to say the threat of an East—West clash is behind us.”

“I see...”

“Those three hours after the explosion over Merida were the worst,” he went on. “I mean, a ballistic missile launch? Those five minutes before we realized it was heading to an empty island in the West Pacific were like a nightmare.” The West had been seconds away from a retaliatory strike, but Hunter, Lemon, and the others had succeeded in informing all departments that Mao and her people had successfully retaken the base.

And so, World War III had been averted. The current state of global affairs was far from being peaceful, but the world was returning to baseline—back to the world they knew, in which many things could happen, both good and bad.

“It wasn’t empty,” Mardukas corrected.

Borda paused. “Ah, that’s right. I’m sorry.”

“That’s all right.”

“How is Chidori Kaname faring?”

“The hospital discharged her,” Mardukas told him. “She said she was going back to Tokyo.”

Chidori Kaname had been in a coma for over two weeks after their escape. They didn’t know exactly why; she’d seemed to be physically well after the fever receded, yet she simply wouldn’t wake up. Tessa tried calling to her with resonance once, to no avail. She thought at first that Kaname had closed herself off to it, but that didn’t seem to be the case. Tessa actually hadn’t heard the whispers since the battle at Merida Island, and the occasional feelings of déjà vu she’d felt in the past had stopped, as well.

Tessa couldn’t say for certain, and it would take a while to be sure, but she thought she might never hear the whispers again. She wasn’t sure yet if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

In the end, for whatever reason, Kaname suddenly woke up one morning. She’d been confused at first, but then had gradually seemed to take in the situation and explained that she was definitely in her right mind again. She also gave a detailed account of everything she’d seen and done while inside the TAROS. Tessa had been shocked when she’d heard it.

Then came the painful part. As Kaname clenched her hands into fists and listened calmly, Tessa explained what had happened, just giving her the facts: that a nuclear MIRV warhead fired from Afghanistan had hit Merida Island. That they’d barely had time to escape. That Sousuke had been left behind.

Kaname listened silently up to the end, then simply told Tessa, “I’m sorry.” They didn’t say much else to each other after that, but Tessa had promised to visit her again once things were settled. Then she’d taken care of a few remaining points of business before flying here to Virginia.

“It must have been hard on you,” observed Borda.

“It was,” Tessa admitted. If she was being honest, it still didn’t feel real. She hadn’t cried once. Most likely, in a week or two, some little thing would hit her in a way that would spark a deep, all-consuming sadness. She’d been through this before, after all. Many times.

The three of them walked down the forest road on the way back to their car. It was still cool out, but spring was right around the corner.

“What happens next for you two?” Borda wanted to know.

“I’m going to return to England,” Mardukas answered. “I have some money saved up, so I can lose myself in military history or chess for a while.”

“That makes sense... There’s no submarine left for you to serve on. Will you see your wife?”

“My former wife,” Mardukas corrected. “I wouldn’t count on a proper reunion, but we’ll share a meal, at least. I don’t know how it will turn out, myself,” he admitted with a shrug.

“What about you, Teletha?”

“Well...” Tessa smiled weakly. She was thinking of traveling to see the families of the deceased members of her crew. She wondered if Nora, who had started a relationship with Sachs just before he passed, might resent her. She didn’t know if the other woman would agree to meet with her or not, but she should at least try.

It will be a hard journey to make, she thought. Maybe I’ll ask Melissa to join me. Ah... but she has Weber-san now. Maybe I shouldn’t get in their way.

The news that Kurz, whom they’d all presumed dead, had popped back up during the operation in Afghanistan had given Tessa an extremely awkward feeling. He’d been one reason for her despondence just before the operation had started, after all.

Her anger about the revelation more or less outweighed her joy. She wasn’t about to say “read the room, idiot,” to him personally, but she’d heard their other comrades had given him a merciless hazing to that effect. Kurz had been extremely disappointed by his lack of a hero’s welcome.

“What about you, Uncle?” Tessa asked. “Are you going to rebuild Mithril?”

“I don’t know. Amalgam has been hobbled, but they’re not gone. I received word that Amit may have joined them, as well. I don’t know whether to fight them or try to coexist,” Borda admitted. “I’m completely at a loss.”

“I see...”

“There’s no money, either. Things can’t be like they were now that the

Mallorys are gone. But if I do find a funding source..." Borda glanced sidelong at Tessa. "How would you feel about a TDD-2?"

"I have no interest in it whatsoever," she told him flatly.

"I'm glad to hear that." Of course, he'd likely meant it as a joke, but Borda smiled in seeming relief that Tessa had lost all interest in weapons.

They came out of the forest next to a red Cherokee parked on the roadside, where Michel Lemon got out from the driver's seat upon noticing their return. He'd been officially fired from French Intelligence, and was now working for Borda.

"Sorry for the wait, Lemon-san," said Tessa.

"Not at all! I'd accompany you anywhere, Testarossa-san. You can call me for tea, for lunch, for dinner... Ah, ahem." Lemon cleared his throat as he noticed the death glares being fired at him by both Mardukas and Borda. "A-Anyway! I just received some information from Wraith: watch this, you'll be stunned."

Breathlessly, he held out his tablet, which displayed several top secret US Navy files that Wraith had sent them. Borda himself had strong connections in the Navy, but this was extremely recent knowledge that outstripped what even he could access.

"Where did she get this?" he asked skeptically.

"The GRU, apparently."

"What? Grr..." Borda clutched his head in frustration.

"She says it's their way of thanking us for Afghanistan," Lemon clarified. "And a bit of an 'in-your-face' as well, I'm sure."

With a sidelong glance at Borda, Tessa took the tablet from Lemon and checked the files it contained.

The first file was a series of optical and infrared satellite images; there were thirty images of Merida Island after the nuclear attack, each taken ninety minutes apart. It was painful to see the landscape burning and pulverized from the shockwave, but eventually the heat receded, the smoke gradually dispersed, and a rocky, barren landscape full of craters came into view. The

coastline was all straight lines now, likely as a vestige of the underground structures revealing themselves.

The second file was a series of radioactivity readings. It seemed the MIRV's warhead was configured to minimize radiation relative to the scale of the explosion. The radiation had greatly declined in the first hour after impact, and after fifteen hours, it had fallen to less than one part per hundred.

The third file was a video of a Navy helicopter heading for (the rocky remains of) Merida Island, twenty-four hours after the blast. The footage seemed to have been taken with a camcorder, and featured the occasional glimpse of the helicopter crew in radiation suits. The Geiger counter captured by the camera suggested readings within acceptable levels, allowing for a safe landing and investigation.

Upon reaching Merida Island, the helicopter began recording from above the epicenter crater. A significant pile of rubble lay a little ways off, half-soaked with seawater and lapped at by the waves: this was the remains of the underground base. Judging by their current location, it was somewhere near to where Corridor No. 0 met the underground dock.

The next thing she saw caused a whisper to emanate from Tessa's throat. "What in the world..."

There was a white and red machine, humanoid, lying at the water's edge. It was an AS: the Laevatein. Despite all the damage it had taken, she recognized it. On the screen, the investigators that had found the white AS had a tense conversation: *This is an AS? Ridiculous. It can't be. There must be some mistake!*

The helicopter approached and zoomed in on the Laevatein. For some reason, the camera was having trouble focusing. The air around the machine was warped. Ah, no... The warping suddenly stopped, and the camera zoomed in on the crushed machine's chest. The feed was so grainy it was hard to make out any details, but what she could tell was that someone wearing a black operator's uniform had crawled out of the machine to look up weakly at the investigators' helicopter.

The video ended and the screen went black.

Tessa didn't know what could have happened. She had seen how the

Laevatein's cockpit was pulverized, so there should have been no way to amplify the operator's influence waves and activate the lambda driver.

But... what if the core unit had remained undamaged, and AI had activated a force field himself? What if he'd protected Sousuke and the machine from the initial nuclear blast, then kept the lambda driver running for hours afterward, in order to minimize their radiation exposure?

"It seems the machine and operator were recovered and moved to the base in Okinawa," said Lemon.

He survived? The sudden reality of it all caused Tessa to nearly drop the 650-dollar tablet, and Lemon scrambled to snatch it away from her before she could. He went on to say, "From there, jurisdiction was transferred from Navy Intelligence to the CIA. Apparently there was quite a power struggle, but Senator Spear of the Senate Intelligence Committee took the reins and—"

Borda clicked his tongue. "That'll be Amit, I'll bet. He's got loads of blackmail material on Spear."

"He's in custody, then?" It took all of Tessa's strength to ask. She had thought she wouldn't cry this week, but she was wrong. Life was a series of unexpected blows.

"It appears that way. They expect to take him from Kadena Air Base to California eventually. I'm not sure if he's in speaking condition yet, but I would imagine the plan is to wait until he recovers to move and question him."

"But we need to save him..." Tessa protested.

"Mao and the others are already on-site."

Chatan, Nakagami District, Okinawa

"Sheesh, I thought I was through with violence for a while... But it is what it is. I'm partly to blame for this, anyway," Mao grumbled from the passenger seat. She slid a clip into her submachine gun, pulled the bolt, and checked the scope.

"This wouldn't have happened if you'd made it to the launch room one second earlier. But you had to have your touching reunion with a certain idiot,"

Wraith whispered back from the driver's seat.

"What, this is my fault now? You're blaming this on me? You know how hard I fought to get out of the hospital and save you guys? Come *on!*" Kurz argued from the back seat. They were crammed into a small vehicle, so the muzzle of his rifle banged annoyingly against the ceiling and the windows.

"Get out of the hospital, huh? Think about how I feel, then. My ribs, my spleen... they're still shredded. My hearing's still on the fritz too. So don't shout; it causes ringing." The bandage-wrapped Clouseau groaned, sitting next to Kurz with his carbine at hand.

Mao, Wraith, Kurz, and Clouseau were Team Alpha. Their Humvee was parked on the shoulder of Route 50, heading to the nearby US Air Force Base while they waited for Team Bravo to get in position.

Clouseau continued grumbling. "Raiding a US base... it's madness. We're like terrorists. We might really die this time. I should've stayed in bed next to Wu."

"Don't worry," Mao told him reassuringly. "I've been to this base a bunch of times. I know the lay of the land."

"You think *that's* the problem?" Clouseau asked incredulously.

"Ah, if only we had an AS..." Mao sighed.

"Don't say that," Clouseau muttered. "I'll start crying."

Just then, they got a call from Yang on Team Bravo. "Bravo Leader here. We're all in place. We'll start making trouble at the appointed time, so you take the rest."

"Alpha Leader, roger," Mao responded before shutting off her radio. The raid would start in five minutes.

A long silence followed until Kurz, who was bored, spoke up abruptly. "But what if it turns out he's a vegetable? Or he's dead from radiation poisoning?"

"Don't talk like that," said Mao.

"I just think we should be mentally prepared," he insisted. "I mean, it *was* a nuclear blast."

“You saw the numbers in the report. There’s reason to be hopeful,” Wraith said. “Besides, you weren’t exactly in the best shape when they pulled you out of Yamsk-11 either, Weber.”

“Yeah, I really thought I was dead meat...”

“Seriously, what a waste,” Mao grumbled. “There’s being gutsy and there’s just being stubborn. God, I thought I was rid of you at last. And then—”

“Come on, Big Sis,” Kurz said teasingly. “You can admit it.”

“Admit what?”

“On the plane ride back from Afghanistan, after everyone went to bed, you snuggled up to me and sniffled and said in that really cute—hrrgh!”

“Die! Seriously, die!” Mao shrieked. “You’re such a creep! Who tells people that stuff? Seriously!”

“C’mon, is it such a big deal?”

“Of course it is! And you... Ah, we’re done. I’m fed up. Once we’re done here —” Mao was interrupted by a sudden explosion from the base beyond the fence, and she looked over in shock.

The sound had come from far away, the base’s northwest side. It was followed by another explosion, which was in turn followed by sirens and alarms. Team Bravo’s diversion wasn’t supposed to start for another five minutes, and the explosions weren’t coming from the area where they were stationed. *Something’s happening at the base*, she realized. Who in the world could be behind it?

“What do we do?” Wraith asked.

“Let’s wait for now. I don’t hear any gunshots, so it might be something small.”

“And Team Bravo?”

“Standing by until they get other orders.”

As Team Alpha discussed their next course of action, they could see a truck speeding down the base’s runway, heading east, away from the earlier

explosions. The truck kept going over the runway's east side until it burst through the fence and flew out onto the road where Mao and the others were waiting.

"Hey, now..." Mao protested.

The truck drove straight for their vehicle. As it passed them by, the light from the streetlamps gave them a momentary glimpse of Sagara Sousuke in the driver's seat.

"Sousuke?!" Mao yelled.

The truck kept on going for fifty more meters before it squealed to a stop. A metallic clunk suggested that there had been a gear change, and it then backed up at full speed to stop right dead beside them.

Mao recognized that sullen expression and tight frown. "What are you doing here?" Sousuke asked as he disembarked, leaving his engine still running. For some reason, he was wearing the uniform of an Air Force second lieutenant. Mao couldn't even begin to speculate what he'd been through to come this far, but it had clearly been quite an ordeal.



The four of them piled out of their own car to meet him. “Well... we came to save you...” said Mao, trailing off awkwardly.

“I see. Hmm...” Sousuke furrowed his brow when he looked over at Kurz, who was getting out of the back seat. “Oh, you’re alive?”

“Is that all you have to say?!” Kurz demanded.

“Seems like a waste,” said Sousuke.

“That’s so mean...”

Meanwhile, explosions continued to cause chaos in the nearby base. The soldiers hadn’t noticed Mao’s party yet, but it was only a matter of time.

“I don’t have time to waste,” Sousuke declared. “I have business to attend to, so I need to use your vehicle.” Then he strode towards the driver’s seat of the Humvee.

“Wh-What?” asked Mao, sounding taken aback.

《Hello. Please let the sergeant go,》 said a synthetic voice from the bed of the truck.

“AI?” Mao peered into the truck bed and saw the AI’s core unit and power source, as well as several external mechanisms carelessly strewn about.

“It would have been much easier to escape on my own,” Sousuke grumbled. “I put in the extra effort to get him out.”

《It’s much appreciated.》

“Glad to see you’re doing so well... Though this *is* a little anticlimactic,” Mao observed.

“They ran a number of tests on me, and I’m sorry to say I’m the picture of health,” Sousuke told her.

His endurance was almost disgusting, and Mao felt like a fool for having spent weeks worrying about his chances of survival.

“Where is Kaname?” Sousuke asked next.

“In Tokyo,” Mao told him. “She said she didn’t have any immediate plans, but

she really wanted to go back there first.”

“I see.”

“She also refused any offers of protection. She said she doesn’t hear the whispers anymore,” Wraith said grimly.

“Aha. Please take care of Al,” Sousuke told them. Then he got right into the driver’s seat of the Humvee and revved up the engine. He was apparently going to force them to escape in his confiscated truck, a vehicle which hadn’t exactly been designed for a fast getaway.

“Sousuke,” Mao said urgently.

“Yes?”

“You remember what I said, right? What will you do now?”

Sousuke turned his eyes down and thought silently for a while. The sirens of cars from the base grew closer. They must have finally realized that the explosions were a diversion. “I’d really like to throw away my weapons, but as you can see, it will be difficult,” he said with a shrug, indicating the approaching sirens with a tilt of his head.

“Yeah, fair enough.”

“Anyway, graduation first,” he decided. “Goodbye.” The Humvee squealed as it accelerated, peeling up dust from the roadside as Sousuke left them behind.

“And there he goes,” sighed Mao. “Sheesh...”

“I should have stayed in the hospital,” Clouseau grumbled.

“But... *what* graduation?” Kurz wanted to know.

The group just watched him drive off for a while, slack-jawed, until Mao suddenly clapped her hands together. “Look alive, people! We gotta make a getaway, too!”

The security cars approached as the four of them piled into the truck and then began tearing off in the opposite direction at the nearby T-intersection.

Mao and Wraith climbed into the truck bed, and Al asked them, «By the way, do I have a new body waiting for me?»

“Of course not!” Mao told him. “We’re all out of money, and the organization’s been dismantled!”

《Then after we’ve reached safety, please install me in a car. I would prefer a Trans Am.》

Chofu, Tokyo

Kaname closed the door behind her, and the taxi drove off.

There were sparrows singing in the morning sun. Housewives were putting out their garbage. Office drones were commuting to work. Old men were walking their dogs.

Her apartment was in front of her. The building and the city around it had barely changed in her year away.

I’m finally home, Kaname thought. She’d thought a sense of awe might have overtaken her, but she didn’t feel much of anything. She wished she could be happy, or crying, or feeling some sense of nostalgia...

Using the key she’d gotten from Wraith before her discharge, Kaname went inside. It took her a minute to even remember her apartment number, but she eventually took the elevator to the fourth floor. She didn’t run into anyone on the way and found that the nameplate still read “Chidori” when she arrived. She unlocked the door and went inside.

The entryway and hall were pitch black. She pressed the switch on the wall, but the lights remained off. *Right, the breaker...* Kaname got on her tiptoes to open the panel over the shoe cupboard, then raised the lever for the breaker in the back. The doorbell let out an experimental ring, and the ventilation fans and refrigerator hummed to life. Lights went on in the rooms around her.

“I’m back,” she decided to say, even though nobody was there to answer. Her father and sister would still be in New York, but maybe they’d sent a relative to come by and clean the place up every now and then.

Kaname took off her shoes and headed for the living room, where she found that the interior hadn’t changed much during her year away, either. The only difference was in how utterly clean it was, with no signs of life at all: no mail

scattered about, no laundry tossed on the floor, no notebooks and textbooks carelessly strewn across the table. Maybe the police had been by to investigate, or her family had cleaned it up.

The fridge in the kitchen was, unsurprisingly, empty. Her bedroom was just as she'd left it, aside from having been tidied up. Even her James Brown poster was right where she'd left it.

Kaname came back to the living room and tried the phone. Surprisingly, the line was still working. She tried calling her house in New York and got the answering machine. It was 7 p.m. over there, so maybe they weren't home yet.

"Hello," she said. "Um...it's Kaname. I'm home in Tokyo, and I'm basically okay. I'll call back later."

She thought back to that daydream from the TARTAROS of that leisurely morning. Her mother was gone; that was the reality she'd chosen. And yet Kaname felt like she could still make something similar happen. She could drop her resentment of her father, her jealousy of her little sister, and really engage with them. She wouldn't be perfect, but she could try a little harder.

"I'm sorry if I worried you. And I... I don't resent you anymore, Dad." She set the phone down. Feeling utterly exhausted for some reason, she collapsed onto the sofa. *What do I do now?* she wondered. *Sousuke is gone...*

That's what Tessa had told her. Kaname had been prepared for that possibility, of course, and had listened calmly to her friend's explanation. The news had opened a small hole in her heart, and yet it still didn't feel real. The idea that he'd made it through the battle with Leonard, only to still end up dead, just didn't add up.

She'd had a similar feeling after her mother had died, but this wasn't quite the same. There was just... this vague feeling of "Yeah, I don't think so." You could call it a simple refusal to face reality, but the feeling was a very level-headed and quiet one. It felt to Kaname like a voice of reason.

She thought back on Leonard, too.

That poor man. I couldn't return his feelings, but at least he was trying to deal with me in good faith. But by the time I realized that, it was too late to mend our

relationship. Fowler and Sabina, too... and Kalinin. They all had such hopes, such expectations, and I rejected them all. I think it's going to be hard, she reflected, living on with that on my conscience.

And then there's Sofia... Tessa told me she was gone, but she's not, Kaname admitted to herself. Sofia still exists. She's tucked away in a corner of my mind and makes herself known from time to time, watching me. But I don't sense any jealousy or resentment or lasting anger from her.

When she thought of Sofia, the primary feeling Kaname sensed from her was amusement. She seemed to be thinking, *Oh, you think you can do this? Prove it. How far can you make it in this world that you've chosen? See if you can make me really accept it, start to finish. And if you're going to fall in love, share it with me. I want to feel it, too. I have a right to that, don't I? You can't tell me I'm wrong.* That was what Sofia wanted, and there was no hostility or coldness there.

Well, I won't deny her that, Kaname decided. And I do think I owe her that much. I'll just have to share my life with her.

Thoughts swirled around in her mind, one after another.

Enough. Let's watch some TV, wait for a reply on the phone, then laze around a little and buy some ingredients for dinner at the supermarket. It was a sensible plan, but it didn't feel right. *That's right...* Kaname reconsidered as she got up from the sofa. *Today's Friday. A weekday. It's 9:14...*

"The school..." she said out loud. Of course, she'd probably been expelled. Maybe she'd just poke her head in and give everyone an update and an apology.

I still have my uniform, right? Kaname wondered, rummaging around in her closet. Her Jindai High School uniform was there, wrapped neatly in plastic from a cleaning company.

"I don't know about this..." Kaname groaned, standing in her white and blue uniform before the wide-open school gate. A big sign hung from it, reading: 1999 Tokyo Municipal Jindai High School Graduation

She knew it was the time of year for the event in question, but she couldn't believe it was today, of all days. Should she feel glad that she'd made it in time?

What to do? she asked herself. She could even hear the strains of *Aogeba Totoshi* playing from the gym. Was that the theme for the graduating students leaving the venue? It struck a solemn sense of goodbye, like turning a new page on the time of one's youth.

I've been attacked by terrorists, survived a robot deathmatch, escaped the threat of global thermonuclear war, and stopped the alteration of reality itself. After miraculously coming back from all of those massive-scale events... is there any chance I can still fit in here?

"Urgh..." While she continued to waffle over her next course of action, the graduating students came streaming down the school breezeway from the gym. There were girls crying with their arms around each other's shoulders, and boys releasing some pent-up energy after the long, boring ceremony. Kaname caught glimpses of a few faces she recognized.

"Hey... Chidori-san?!" someone shouted.

Ah, she realized. *I've been spotted...*

"It's Chidori-san! Look, over there!"

"No way!"

"Chidori? Are you kidding me?!"

"What? Who are we talking about?"

"Chidori-san! Over there!"

"Hey, hey, hey!"

The commotion was growing. Kaname didn't know what to do, so she just stood where she was. She'd been prepared for a firing squad, but this reaction was the opposite.

"It's Kana-chan!"

The breezeway was starting to become very chaotic, but Tokiwa Kyoko fought her way desperately through the crowd and came into view.

“Kyoko...?” Kaname asked cautiously.

“Kana-chan!” Her friend ran up to her, smiling, without the slightest hesitation.

I don't understand, thought Kaname. *It's been a whole year. After all I put her through, how can she be running up to me, crying her eyes out? Stop it, Kyoko. I don't know what to do with this...* She didn't know what else to say. All the feelings of uncertainty that she'd been burying deep down inside came flooding out now.

As Kyoko flung herself into Kaname's arms, Kaname began to sob. She hadn't meant to; she just couldn't help herself. She squatted down in place and kept on crying even as the rest of class 3-4 came running up to her a moment later.

The teachers came running too, and while quite shocked and dismayed themselves, they eventually led the students to the nearby courtyard to try and stem the chaos. Of course, that didn't do anything to quell their excitement.

Her homeroom teacher, Kagurazaka Eri, her female friends like Shiori-chan, her male friends like Kazama Shinji and Onodera Kotaro, her student council comrades and people from all the other classes surrounded her, smiling and crying. She'd been away so long, yet they were all just the same.

I'm glad I kept going, Kaname told herself. *This was the right decision. Wasn't it, Sofia?*

She couldn't remember exactly what they talked about. She wasn't sure how long they spent like that. But at last, someone said, “Where's Sagara-kun?” and everyone went quiet.

“Sousuke's....” She wasn't sure how to explain.

To bring me back, he...

On a distant island, he...

After a year of fighting, he...

All alone...

For my sake...

“Huh? Isn’t that Sagara there?” someone asked, and one by one, the students all turned to face the gate.

A Super Cub motorcycle lay on its side nearby. A man had thrown it aside and was running, breathlessly, towards the courtyard where they sat.

It was Sousuke.

There was shock, and joy, and chaos. But somewhere in her heart, Kaname felt a feeling of... “Yes, I knew it.” *Stubbornness is the main thing that man of mine has going for him, after all.*

“Well, you see? I brought her back, just like I promised, see?!” he was shouting. He must have come here in a hurry, because he was covered in sweat... Yet he was still in his Jindai High uniform. Had he really had time to spend changing his outfit? Maybe he wanted, in his own way, to do this ‘right.’

“Sagara?!”

“Sagara-kun?!”

“Hey, hey! Did someone say Sagara?!”

Sousuke entered the courtyard amidst the chatter. “I’m sorry,” he told them. “Until today, I was being held in a base in Okinawa.”

“No one asked,” Kotaro pointed out.

“But I checked to make sure that today was graduation,” said Sousuke, ignoring him.

“Really, no one asked,” Shinji chimed in.

Among similar exchanges with their other classmates, he pushed through the crowd and finally made it to Kaname. “I thought I’d find you here, Chidori,” he said.

“Sousuke...” she trailed off. He was brimming with confidence, as if this was all just as he’d planned it. She knew he’d almost died time and again, that he’d faced so many hardships just to make it here. After all that, how could he smile at her like this, like the king of the world?

“It’s been an eventful time,” he said quickly. “There’s so much I want to tell

you... but never mind that. Wraith told me. You said you don't need protection?"

"Well..." *I'm not hearing the whispers anymore*, she thought, but didn't say. *I don't know what the organizations of the world might be thinking, but I can't possibly be of any more use to them.*

"That's foolish," he said flatly. "You *do* need protection."

Kaname said nothing, but Sousuke held out his right hand. Kaname took it timidly and took a step forward as he guided her.

"I will protect you," he promised. "Forever."

"Wait... ah... ah..." Kaname's face turned crimson, and her heart began to race. *I'm flustered enough as it is right now. Exactly what kind of answer is he expecting?*

"Do you remember our promise back in Mexico?" Sousuke asked abruptly.

"Huh?" Then she remembered the promise they'd made over the radio. *We'd better kiss the next time we see each other. Long and hard, no matter where we are.* Kaname had said those words herself.

"We've seen each other again," he pointed out.

"Huh?! But... but..."

"You don't want to?"

"Of course I want to!" she protested. "But, um... look around!"

There were people all around them, in all 360 degrees. They were currently standing in the courtyard, and when Kaname looked up, she could see the non-graduating students crowding into the north and south buildings to look down at them from the windows. So many eyes. So many people. People, people, people, all around her...

"Well... I know I said that, and I wouldn't really mind," she told him. "But... maybe not here? I mean... look! Everyone's watching! So we can't... We can't really..."

But Sousuke's next words sealed the deal. "Not an issue," he told her, and

then he took Kaname gently in his arms and confidently put his lips to hers.

It was pointless to resist. “Mm! Mm...” Suddenly, she didn’t know up from down, left from right. With hundreds of people watching, Kaname felt herself drown in the sweet sensation of that kiss, abandoning the last remnants of her reason to her desire to remain like this forever. She closed her eyes and surrendered to his embrace.



She'd never felt so excited. Her love for him grew and grew. *Oh, whatever...* she decided, and before the stunned gazes of her friends and classmates, Kaname wrapped her arms around his neck, accepting his lips and seeking them out with inexperienced kisses of her own.

Cheers and whistles broke out from the onlookers, the sound engulfing them.

I'm embarrassed. So embarrassed. My cheeks are on fire... But who cares? Let them watch, she decided. I've wanted to do this for so long. He's wanted it, too. That's all that matters.

And if anyone's got a problem with that, screw 'em!

Their lips parted, and they pressed their foreheads together. "Never let me go, okay?" she whispered.

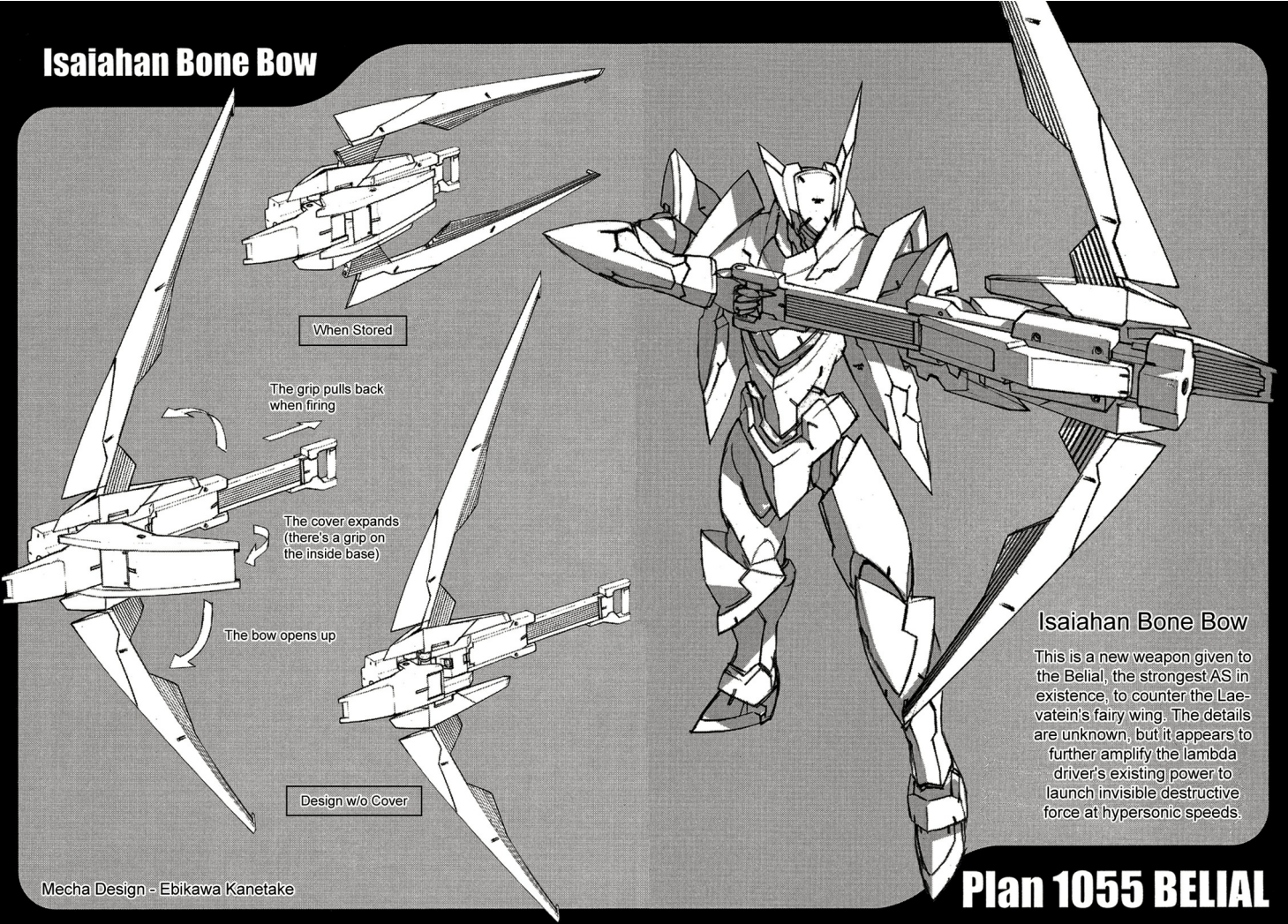
"I won't," he whispered back.

"Stay... Stay with me forever."

"I will." With his usual sullen expression, Sousuke gave her a confident nod. "As long as I have you, I don't need weapons."

[The End]

Isaiahan Bone Bow



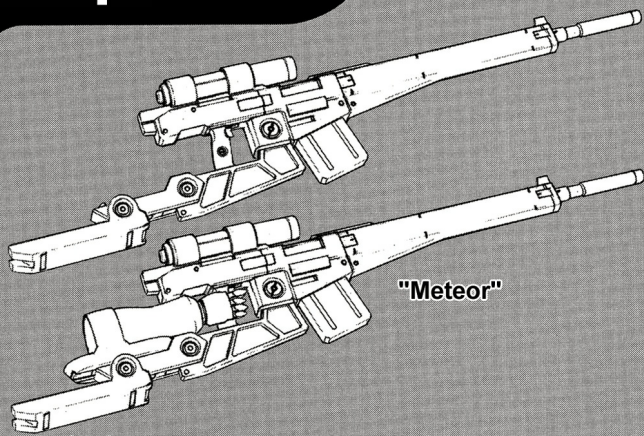
Isaiahan Bone Bow

This is a new weapon given to the Belial, the strongest AS in existence, to counter the Laevatein's fairy wing. The details are unknown, but it appears to further amplify the lambda driver's existing power to launch invisible destructive force at hypersonic speeds.

Mecha Design - Ebikawa Kanetake

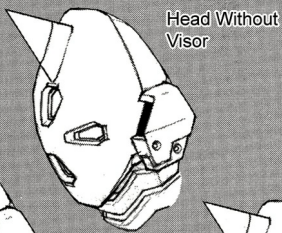
Plan 1055 BELIAL

Special

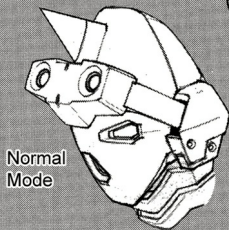


"Meteor"

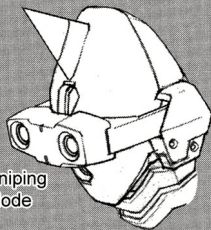
Attaches to
arm hardpoint



Head Without
Visor



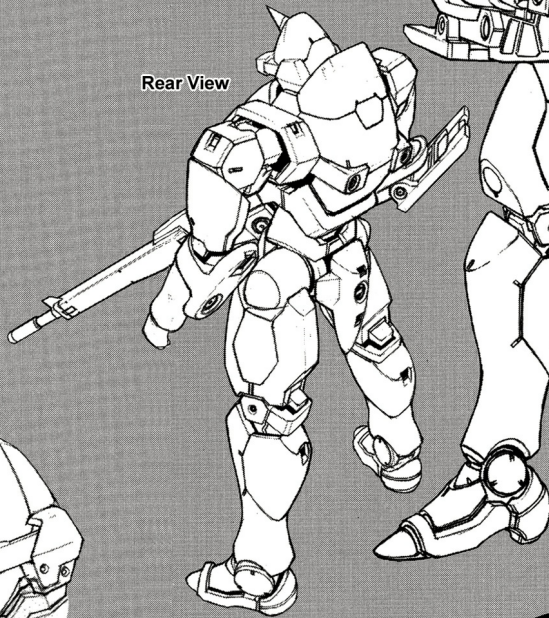
Normal
Mode



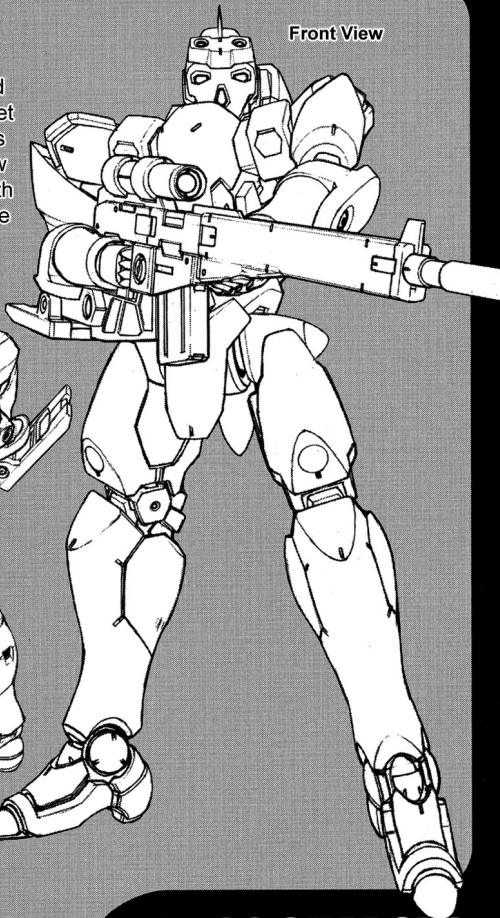
Sniping
Mode

Mecha Design - Ebikawa Kanetake

A Shadow customized
for sniping by the Soviet
Union's GRU. It differs
from a normal Shadow
in that it's equipped with
a special visor for more
precise aiming.



Rear View



Front View

Zy-98 SHADOW

Afterword

Spoilers within. Those of you who like to peek at the afterword first, beware.

I'm so, so sorry for the long wait. Terribly sorry. Why was it so late, you ask? Well, I think if I start talking about it I'm going to start crying, so I won't.

At last, this twelve-year journey is finally over. When *FMP!* first started in 1998, I bought two bottles of wine (Chateau Latour; the price was... considerable). I kept one for myself and sent the other to Shiki-san with the message, "Open once your illustration work is done." Out of character for me, I know, but I think it's okay once in a while.

This series has been like running a three-legged race for twelve years, so this flavor is reserved for Shiki-san and me (laughs). There are a lot of people who played a part in this accomplishment, but these two bottles are ours alone!

We just finished the proofreading, so now I'm writing this afterword while enjoying my freshly opened wine and tasting the sinfully delicious cheese that Shiki-san sent me in exchange. Yes, that's right. I'm drinking and writing.

And even as I write that, a package arrives. It's samples of part one! Ohh... On the obi, it says, "The pinnacle of school military action is finally complete!" The pinnacle, eh? I'm not sure about that myself, but I guess it's okay to exaggerate a little bit. Credit to my editor.

Incidentally, if you combine parts one and two, they form my longest volume yet. But if you break them up, they're each about the length of a short story collection. Interesting.

I decided at the very start that this would be a 'boy meets girl' story, and I told myself I would stick to that rather than straying into prioritizing the mystery of the world, the nature of destiny, the political intrigue, or the fights. At the end of the day, this was supposed to be the story of these two people, and I worked hard to keep the focus on that. Whether or not I succeeded in this endeavor... I guess I have to leave that to the judgment of the readers, and I

tremble in fear at your verdict.

At any rate, this is the end of the novels. But it feels a little sad to just leave it at this, so I'd like to write enough short stories to put out a collection of the few that are so far unpublished. Some sequel material also might be nice... but I'm not sure whether to go with it or not. There's a saying that some things are better left unsaid, but I also don't feel particularly like what happens after *needs* to go unsaid. So I'm not really sure. I'll think about it more once things have settled.

I'm working on a new series now. I hope to get it to you as soon as possible, but I also have the police drama *Cop Craft* (with Shogakukan Gagaga Bunko) coming out. Renji Murata's doing the illustrations, and the blue spines really pop on the shelf. If they sell well, it will imbue me with a feeling of "Okay, I can handle other projects!" So please make sure you read it!

Here at the end, let me offer thanks to everyone who's helped me along the way. The following people have supported me in every way imaginable during the process of expanding the story.

First, thanks to all the members of the editorial staff who supported me. My first editor, Sugenuma. We finally made it through, huh? (cries). Sato, my second and longest-running editor. I ended it just the way we discussed before. Morishita, my third editor. You really helped me make it to the finish line. My fourth, Komatsu. You really hung in there. And you're still hanging in there! Thank you!

To the staff at Fushimi Shobo and all those who helped me in the editorial department, I'm sorry for all the trouble I always caused you. At least we made it to the end. Thank you so much.

Next, the people on the mecha side. To Masayuki Takano, the mangaka who wasn't on this officially, but did the initial mecha designs at the 'friend rate:' good luck on *Blood Alone*. Toshiaki Ihara, who did some mecha designs when we got our anime adaptation, especially the second generation AS designs: You really saved me, so let's grab a drink together some time. And to Kanetake Ebikawa, who handled not only the Laevatein and other third generation designs, but provided support when I was pulling my hair out here on this last

volume: you were like Kurz, taking out that enemy machine in the clutch and flashing a thumbs up. It was too darn cool! And to all the people involved in drafting, tweaking, design, printing, bookbinding, marketing, and sales: You all really hung in there through the trouble I caused. Thank you so much.

Now for the three people behind the comics adaptations. Retsu Tateo: I haven't seen you in a really long time. You really worked hard in the early stages when we didn't have a lot in the way of setting documents. The Kaname you draw is super cute. Thank you so much. Tomohiro Nagai who worked on the *Ikinari!* series: It's been so long since we last talked. Your incredible powers of generating laughs almost made it hard for me to write the short stories (laughs). I've rarely seen a comic adaptation that made me laugh that much. Thank you so much. And Hiroshi Ueda, who draws the currently-running *Sigma*: I'm sorry I keep sending you everything so late (sweats). If there's a character you want to marry, I'll happily give them to you. To the respective editorial staff of the comic adaptations: I frequently was so frustrated with my own writing that I neglected to respond to your questions. I'm really sorry, and also, thanks so much.

There are so many people involved with the anime that I'm indebted to as well. It would be impossible to name them all here, but I'm so grateful for everything that all of you did. I'm also extremely grateful to the people involved with each related company. To Atsushi Ito, the producer: you were like my second editor, and were so lenient with me, I really have to thank you. Maybe it was just because of work, but I have a lot of memories of the fun trips we took together. I hope we can head out somewhere for fun again. And thanks to everyone involved at Gonzo Digimation before it had that name. Your studio was so full of surprises for a newcomer to the anime business like me. And thanks to the people at Kyoto Animation, who took the adaptations on starting with *Fumoffu!*, for not only making me feel welcome, but for creating work of such amazing quality. I'm always happy when I think of the success you've had since then.

To Koichi Chigira, the director of the first anime: I meant to play on your baseball team, but I haven't seen you since you finished *Druaga*. Invite me by sometime! I found myself doing a Google image search on you, and that first

picture...you look like a criminal defendant brought in on some false charge. To Osamu Horiuchi, character designer and animation director: You gave me so much feedback on the original designs, and brought such effortless quality to it. I really owe you so much. Thank you. I'm keeping those *Shin Cutie Honey* DVDs as a family heirloom. Fumihiko Shimo, series composition and scriptwriter: you really gave me so much careful advice and support when I was just starting out as a creator. You were basically my screenwriting teacher. Thank you so much. And to Yota Tsuruoka, sound director: it's been too long since we last saw each other. I don't know how to thank you for humoring the annoying creator who always came to your recording sessions. I tried to follow the diet you recommended, by the way, but my appetite won out and I caved.

The cast has been incredibly helpful, to a degree I can't fully express. While I was writing, I had the anime cast speaking in my head. Tomokazu Seki as Sousuke. Satsuki Yukino as Kaname. Yukana as Tessa. Masahiko Tanaka as Gauron. Shinichiro Miki as Kurz. Michiko Neya as Mao. Akio Ohtsuka as Kalinin. Tomomichi Nishimura as Mardukas. Rikiya Koyama as Clouseau. Daisuke Namikawa as Leonard. Ikue Kimura as Kyoko. Rio Natsuki as Ms. Kagurazaka. Mamiko Noto as Shinji. Takayuki Okada as Ono-D. Toshiyuki Morikawa as Hayashimizu. Takehiro Murozono as Al. And Tomoko Kaneda as Bonta-kun. I'd like to offer more thanks, but I'm running out of pages (sweats).

To everyone who made merchandise based on my story: I don't have much space to introduce you, but thank you, as always. I am truly grateful.

And though it might go without saying, to Shikidouji for sticking with me through these truly hellish twelve years: thank you so much!

And here at the end, the greatest of thanks to you, the reader, for coming with us this far: twelve volumes of just the novels; twenty-two volumes if you include the short stories. It's been a very long journey. Thanks so much for taking it with me.

Goodbye.



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Full Metal Panic! Volume 12 Forever Stand By Me Part 2

by Shouji Gatou

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis Edited by Dana Allen

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