

## Editor's Foreword:

I can't believe I'm here already (I'm actually writing this at the end of everything, so for me I'm finished and it's crazy!). Here it is, the last volume of the series, *Always Stand by Me (Part 2)*.

I don't have much to say that I haven't said before, but I would like to make a note about the pictures in this volume. There are a few pictures that were included in a Spanish release that weren't in the Japanese volume, but I've included them here because I really liked them. I think it's all official art, but it's a bit hard to be sure. There are two rough-sketch looking pictures I included which portray really poignant moments, and a bunch of water-color type pictures at the end. I think they add a lot to the volume so I stuck them all in. They're a bit hard to find, so I think the sizes are all off (they were resized already when I found them), so sorry if they look a bit stretched or blurred, but I still love them, so there you are.

Enjoy the conclusion! It's been a pleasure working on this project.

~Moonfaerie24

# Full Metal Panic!

## Always Stand by Me (Part 2)

By Shoji Gatoh



Translator: 顔掌 Translations (Mister V)

Editor: Moonfaerie24

## Chapter 3: Pale Horse (continued)

Kaname was still immersed in her work - she had barely noticed the fact that the ceiling of the control room shook slightly, and the structure's pillar creaked a little. There was probably a battle raging outside - still quite far, but its impact could already be felt. The enemy was on the island.

The structure that housed the TARTAROS was meant to withstand any kind of bombardment, and so she wasn't worried in the slightest. The machinery was also fitted with shock dampers, so measurement errors would be within acceptable parameters. As soon as the tremor from the explosion died, the sound of Kaname typing filled the room once again.

A knock came from outside. Kaname, not looking away from her screen, answered with a short "come in", and Leonard quietly entered the room.

"What's the progress?"

"Just a little longer," Kaname still didn't take her eyes off the screen, and her fingers were flying over the keyboard. "Should I hurry?"

"You already look like you're pushing yourself, I wouldn't look good if I told you to hurry up now, would I?" Leonard's voice was full of self-derision. "The enemy has landed. Our Behemoths are destroyed - it's only one machine, but it's impressively strong."

"Ah... that successor to the Arbalest..."

"Yes, the ARX-8, the one they call 'Laevatein'."

That machine, and the actions of the remnants of Mithril, had caused Amalgam trouble for a long time. For some reason, she did not have any interest in finding out who was the pilot of that machine.

“So, you can’t defend against it?”

“Of course we can,” said Leonard, but it felt as if he wasn’t convinced.

Kaname’s fingers suddenly stopped above the keys, and she turned to look at him. Leonard was in his pilot’s uniform - he was going out in the Belial.

“So if you can, then why should I hurry even more?”

“Well... I’ll speak frankly. I think we have a ninety percent chance of success.”

“Really.”

“But it’s ninety percent...”

“What, have you suddenly lost your confidence?”

Leonard smiled - it was an aggressive smile, with a hint of madness, somehow reminding her of the predator’s smile often appeared on Gauron’s face.

“Of course not. I’ll tear him to pieces.”

“Then what?”

“The enemy machine is equipped with a Lambda Driver nullifier, and the pilot is a master at AS warfare. On top of that, this island is practically home for him. From an objective point of view, I could be defeated, roughly one time in ten.”

“That is surprisingly modest, coming from you.”

“I’m always modest - but anyway, this is the reason why I’d like you to hurry. The chance of my failing is slim, but I’d like to be prepared for it.”

“All right.”

She turned back towards the screen, and started typing again. One line after another, formula after formula, all the different readings - and finally, the last command “Execute”.

“I just finished.”



She took a headset that was lying on the table, and curtly informed the person in charge of the power supply to connect the machine to the power grid.

“Thank you. Do you remember all the rest of our plan?”

“Yep, I memorized Amalgam’s management list that Kalinin-san brought me, and everything else is also in my memory. I only need to get changed and get into the machine.”

She stood up and stretched blissfully.

“Soon, very soon... a peaceful, clean, gentle world will come...”

“Yes...”

“It’s in a way more different, further from this one... That infinite, empty sky, will swipe away the realm of death... you can probably see it too, no?”

“Infinite sky...”

Leonard fell silent, thinking. It looked like he didn’t know whether he should tell her what was on his mind.

“What?”

“I’d like to meet you on the other side, too. No matter who I’ll be.”

The other side... the new world she was about to create...

“Sure, in some peaceful little town somewhere, on a bright, sunny day... we’ll meet, make tea, relax and chat about anything,” she smiled innocently. “Soon, we’ll have all the time in the world. And I’ll go to meet lots of other people, too. I guess I’ll meet Tessa, who would be close to you, and wouldn’t remember any war or anything like that.”

“Yes, I guess it will be like that...”

“And my friends from school, and my mum - everyone will be fine. And this time, I’ll find my own happiness, too.”

“So you won’t go meet with him?”

Kaname didn't understand the meaning of his question.

"Him? Whom do you mean?"

"No, nobody... Well, then, I'll be going."

He nodded to her, and left the room.

Another faraway explosion shook the ceiling. After Leonard left, she stood still for a short while, alone in the control room. Meet with him... whom? She felt as if she was forgetting something very, very important...

"Ah, Sousuke..."

It was a wonder it took her so long to remember it. Wasn't he an important person to her once? She remembered that her chest tightened when she had to kill him in those Siberian ruins, during that encounter in Yamsk 11, and yet she still forgot him. The feelings of guilt that were still alive within her must have caused this... She did not want to remember him, and avoided that painful memory of her farewell in those ruins.

*Get a hold of yourself, Kaname Chidori.*

To her, the fact that she killed him seemed nothing more than a trifle, for some reason. On the other side, he'll probably be doing well, and they'll be able to meet any time. There was, however, a minimal chance that the plan would be stopped - then those two she had killed would remain dead, and she wouldn't be able to save, much less meet, anybody.

"Yes, I have to hurry..."

She had to change her clothes. She opened a bag that was lying in one of the corners of the control room. Inside it was the datasuit that would harmonize her connection to the TAROS. She took off her blouse, camisole and skirt, and was ready to take off her shorts, when she heard a voice in the wireless headset that was lying nearby.

“... Kaname! Chidori Kaname! Do you hear me?” a man’s voice was coming through a lot of noise and static. “...calling on an open channel! If you can’t answer, just listen! I’m here. I’ll be coming for you right away!”

She took the wireless receiver and looked at its LCD display. She confirmed that the channel wasn’t encrypted in any way. There was no point even intercepting it - it was heard on all channels, and since the other side was using an emergency code, her receiver automatically picked it up.

“...Sousuke?” she whispered incredulously.

“I’ve come to take you back! Do you hear me? Take you back!”

There could be no mistake. That was Sousuke.

*Why? He’s dead, isn’t he? I’m certain, that time I shot him in the forehead. Why is Sousuke here?*

She didn’t feel glad that he was alive, or that he finally came for her. Only bewilderment. And that uncomfortable feeling within her grew stronger. Her vision became blurred, she couldn’t read the characters on the nearby screen, and her thoughts became all jumbled.

“...I tried to think of something nice to say, but I’m the same as usual, can’t talk niceties, so listen close. I wanted to tell you, that I thought you had more guts. Do you hear that?”

...what was that man saying? He was talking on an open circuit, so the whole island could hear him. They would locate the source of the transmission, and their forces would intercept and trap him. However, that didn’t stop him from talking. On the contrary, he sounded like he was fed up with everything and grumbling - she didn’t remember him ever talking that way.

“...I’m serious, Kaname. I’m disappointed in you. I always thought you were a better person... no, that’s not true, either. In

fact, there were plenty of things that irritated me. You always hit people over the head, couldn't take an argument calmly; it often felt like you were preying on me, or trying to control me, and I got angry. You lived in your peaceful Japan, not knowing any real trouble, and didn't have the slightest bit of concern about me. Thinking about it now, that's just not fair. You were a cruel, cruel person... but that's not the most important thing. I just remembered it, and thought I'd tell it to you now, while I have the chance... so what I wanted to say is, does it look like you're the person I could throw away everything to save? In truth, I'm still thinking about it. I've been chasing you for a year, and was frustrated many, many times. In Mexico and in Yamsk 11, I was this close, but it all failed because you were slow. Think of yourself as a princess, eh? You really didn't want to do it? You thought that it was all right either way? Don't tell me you're crying now, hearing me say this? Or did the stupid girl expect comforting words from some stupid boy..?"

That speech, delivered in one breath - was it really coming from the always silent Sousuke? She was first astonished, but quickly changed her mind.

That was simply foolish of them. They were trying to get to her through those simple tricks. She felt the discomfort rise to a new level, and become something even more unfamiliar, but she disregarded it, and calmly considered the enemy's plan. It was possibly provocation, or an attempt to move her to tears - how pitiful.

"Well, Kaname Chidori?" the man almost shouted. "What were you saying before 'let's go back together' and all? You liar!<sup>1</sup> And if I'm wrong, come and hit me again! Hit me on the head with your slipper or your harisen, like you always did!"

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<sup>1</sup> He actually calls her "kuso onna"...

She didn't understand why, but that feeling of unease was getting stronger with every minute. Anger was boiling inside her chest, her vision blurred, and she had an almost irresistible impulse to shout at him.

“Answer, Chidori!”

As if trying to erase the overwhelming feeling inside, she furiously scratched her head. She then took the headset from the table, selected the band and switched it on.

“I heard you.”

Sousuke, who had been talking by himself for a while, suddenly fell silent.

“I see you are using a pretty good voice synthesizer to recreate Sousuke's voice. You thought you'd move me that way?”

“I'm the real Sousuke Sagara.”

“Right, if you insist. Your efforts are pointless, anyway. The preparations for the launch of TARTAROS are finished, and I'm going to create a new world. You're too late.”

He still didn't answer. It sounded like he was carefully listening to every word of hers.

“Leonard and his men will surround you soon. You're in a helpless situation. I don't know who you are, but listen to me... throw away your weapons, and wait. Soon, the moment will come for us to say farewell to this cruel, unfair world--...”

“Shut up,” said the voice quietly, but firmly. “You shut up. I'm talking to Kaname Chidori.”

“What are you talking about? I am Kaname Chidori.”

“Wrong,” the voice said with a slight sneer.

Whoever was impersonating Sousuke behaved like a spoiled child.

“You are not her. You are Sofia.”



Sousuke was moving through the jungle on Merida, and continuing the conversation. His last words seemed to have taken the other side completely by surprise.

“Sofia..? What are you talking about?”

He heard her breathing over the radio. She didn’t seem to be agitated by his words - her voice was only suspicious, doubtful of his sincerity. It was just as Tessa had predicted, and they couldn’t meet to talk face to face. From the start, Sousuke wasn’t in the mood to persuade her.

“I am Kaname Chidori. Sofia died a long time ago. So, you tried to move me to tears, and when that didn’t work, you think up some nonsense to confuse me? That is really---”

“I said, shut up!” he spat out.

Anger and disgust towards that woman were building up within him. He continued talking on an open channel.

“You think I’ve come here in a combat-ready AS to start pleading you to stop? Don’t make me laugh. I’ve come to be as much of a pain in the ass as possible. Good, they must all be hearing us now. So, listen closely,” he paused for a moment to take in a deep breath, “I’m going to crush you all.”

That was his declaration of war.

“My specialties are arson and demolition. I’m going to turn that occult machine you’re worshipping into a pile of slag in five seconds. Come on, I want to hear you plead! ‘Please, don’t! These are our hopes!’ I want to see you whimper and hide, crying ‘oh, this cruel world has hurt us so much, we want it to disappear!’ That would be a sight to remember. I’ll record it and transmit it for the world to see. I’ll make you into a public joke. So get ready - I’m coming for you!”

It was probably the first time in his life that he had said so much in the space of one breath. He was surprised himself at the words that came out.

“...you don’t understand anything,” sadly whispered the girl, who had been silent all the while, “what we seek is a gentler, peaceful world, and that’s it. We would heal it, bring harmony, make it cleaner, and a brilliant--...”

“Shut up, you bitch<sup>2</sup>.”

“Th--...”

“What’s all that about healing and cleaning? You’re just going to smear your shit all over the world. This ain’t about you understanding what I say, or not. I decided I would do it. I’ll stop you, no matter what it takes. This thing called war? It’s a simple, very simple process of giving and taking, and I love it. Well, looks like we’ll get started now.”

One of the decoy’s vibration sensors reported enemy movement, and a warning from AI followed immediately:

<Eight o’clock, distance three, two ASes.>

“Come and get some!”

They were probably Lambda Driver-equipped Codarls, and having detected their prey’s location, they advanced on full alert. The decoy’s sensor was barely able to pick them up.

There was no point of speaking with that woman any more. The decoys were in place, and the enemy was dispersed, but sensing the Laevatein’s intent, has probably already started the encirclement.

“Careful about the west slope. There are three places for a good ambush there.”

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<sup>2</sup> I wish there was another option in the dictionary, but there isn't.

<Yes, I remember, > Al also had time to memorize the maneuvering grounds of Merida Island.

Moving fast, he started switching his weapons. First, the two Zeroes from the lower back. Without hoping to hit anything, he sprayed the jungle behind him. Several hundred 20mm bullets ripped through the foliage, shredded branches, and cut down several trees. Not paying any attention to the volley, the Codarls approached. Their pilots had probably decided that ECS was useless at that point, and their shapes were visible through the dense thicket. They fired their carbines first. The Laevatein moved only a few steps to avoid their shots, and answered with its 40mm assault rifle. Five bullets hit one of the machines in the right shoulder, but it managed to escape fatal injury using its Lambda Driver. It swayed, as if drunk, but then managed to regain its balance, and prepared to resume its attack.

He was going to show them which machine was stronger - and discharged a furious volley from both his Gatling guns and the assault rifle. The Codarl couldn't withstand such punishment, and fell on its knees, full of holes.

“The last thing you’ll see is the barrel of my gun!!”

Bullets from the other machine fell on his force field and disintegrated, and he dropped the now-empty 20mm Gatlings. He continued shooting at his enemy, emptying the magazine of his rifle, and charged. The enemy evidently had seen him coming, and started retreating with small jumps to the left and right, shooting back. The 37mm bullets whizzed past the Laevatein that ignored them. Its rifle had already run out of ammunition.

<GEC-B out of ammo.>

“I know!”

He switched the rifle from one auxiliary arm to another, taking it like a baseball bat, and swung at the Codarl. The space



distorted, and the colliding fields made an unearthly sound. The blow was aimed at the enemy machine's head, and sent it spinning on the ground. He was preparing to finish it off with the bent rifle, when suddenly Al's voice made him stop:

<Four o'clock!>

He immediately rolled forward and used the fallen Codarl as a shield. Almost simultaneously, bullets ripped through the space where he had been a moment before, signaling the appearance of new enemy machines. As expected, from the west, numbers unknown, but likely three or more.

Bullets were hitting his improvised shield, and his second GEC-B had also run out of ammo, and he discarded it. Holding the enemy machine with the left hand, he took a Boxer-2 in the right, and returned fire. The enemy machines started spreading out.

<Incoming contacts from the south, at least four machines.>

Now he was being targeted from another side, too. He threw to the ground the enemy machine, which was by now in tatters, and protecting himself with the force field alone, quickly moving to cover. The enemy concentrated his forces more and more, and their coordination was quick.

<It looks like the first two stopped their advance.>

"Sure they did, on the orders of the Lieutenant Commander."

The enemy commander wasn't about to let him destroy them one by one. It also looked like the effect of his decoys and long speech wasn't going to last much longer. So far he had managed to put two enemy machines out of action, but that did not change the overall situation much. There were at least eight enemy ASes left, he didn't know where Leonard's machine was, the

enemy commander was none other than the Lieutenant Commander, and the launch of TAROS was about to happen.

“The Lieutenant Commander...”

He must have been listening to the conversation, together with Leonard. The declaration of war at the end wasn’t addressed to that woman, but to those two.

*I’m not going to hesitate any more. I’m going to crush you all. Weaklings, clinging to your foolish dreams and some piece of junk... have you lost your common sense? I’m disgusted by how rotten you are. I’m going to torment you until you fall. I’ll even wait until you wash your necks...*<sup>3</sup>

That was his message to them. Were they laughing at the moment? No, probably not. They understood perfectly well that they had to use every ounce of strength to stop him. If he was an opponent they could laugh at, everything would have been over very quickly.

A rocket exploded too close for comfort. Earth and small stones rained down on the Laevatein’s armour.

<Three Codarl-type machines moving to 21D.>

It was a clever encirclement, and the enemy machines’ attack was obviously very well coordinated. Their piloting skills were nothing special, but their choice of position and timing of attacks were disgustingly cunning. It was as if he was suddenly fighting a different enemy.

“Is there a signal from the *de Danaan*?”

<No. Status unknown.>

“Let’s lure them out to the northwest.”

<We will be caught in the crossfire en route.>

“It’ll be worse if we stay. Come on, move..!”

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<sup>3</sup> That is, washing the neck before the head gets cut.

And the Laevatein sped from the cover of a large rock straight into the enemy's barrage of fire.



After the flak and other fireworks had ended, the mountain became eerily still. Mao moved under the cover of darkness, with ECS turned on and all sensors on passive. Even her footsteps were barely audible, and she moved with the grace of a stray cat sneaking in from the back alley.

“Doesn't look like anyone's targeting me...”

Time was on the enemy's side, and they didn't have any particular reason to start the combat. Still, fighting an enemy that had already penetrated the underground base would be dangerous for the equipment. She didn't think that they would accept even a one in a thousand chance of their enemy preventing the launch.

“Is there an ambush close then..?”

Could they have already spotted her? It had been two years since the M9 series' onboard ECS was deployed in combat, and in that time it had lost the status of an omnipotent stealth system. It was still, of course, a powerful piece of equipment in its own right, but advanced machines, like the ones Amalgam had, would probably be able to at least detect the general location and direction of movement of a cloaked AS.

Resisting the growing urge to use the active ECCS sensors, she continued moving forward. She would have liked to be much more careful, but the clock was ticking.

The entrance to the base came in sight. She approached the foot of the mountain, on its southern side, and scanned the space around her.

Contact.

Under a rock face on the southern side, as if hiding in the bushes, in a small cave in the rocks, a faint heat source was detected, with an infra-red emission pattern that was definitely not natural.

“Oh, it’s you, Mao,” she heard Clouseau’s voice over short-distance radio. The heat source was his “Falke”. She lowered her gun, and answered on a common encrypted channel:

“What about the assault squad?”

“Yang’s been assembling them five hundred meters to the northwest. One minor injury, looks like a sprained ankle at landing.”

Looks like she had landed farther away than anyone else.

“And Wu?”

She was asking about the soldier who was injured before the drop by anti-aircraft fire. She had only heard that he was unconscious...

“Don’t know. Had to leave him behind, but his condition was pretty bad.”

“I see... is Yang all right?”

Yang and the injured Wu were close, and the question was really about Yang’s mental condition, and readiness to lead the assault squad.

“I only spoke to him a little, but he seems fine. They’re going to follow their own insertion route; we’ll be coming from the northeast. Let’s go!”

“Roger that.”

She glanced at her countdown timer - they had twenty minutes left until the estimated launch. No time to argue. Her M9’s AI exchanged data with Clouseau’s machine. That way, even if they were invisible, she would be able to see his position in real time. A target mark labeled [URUZ1] appeared on her screen. The

sensors of her M9 were searching for the enemy on passive mode, and all electronic warfare systems were turned on. Checking all that, she started climbing the slope after Clouseau.

“Don’t you think it’s a little too quiet?”

“It is...”

Mao’s machine had a more advanced sensor array, and looking through the data that he was getting from her, Clouseau seemed to agree.

“No traps detected... the strength of their forces so far was much lower than expected, too. If this is all, then...”

“Tessa was right?”

“Yes. The enemy must have deployed most of their remaining forces on Merida. And they were serious about defending not this position, but--...”

At that moment, an enormously powerful sound broke their communication and seemed to fill all the space around them. It was not the sound of an explosion, but music. Among the mountains, the high notes of the musical movement echoed and broke, but she immediately recognized the piece. It was Mussorgsky’s “Night on a Bare Mountain”, a symphonic poem that painted a chorus of evil spirits appearing on St. John’s eve and engaging in all kinds of mischief. The source of that sound was also immediately discernible - speakers installed around the base perimeter, that created a wave of sound that was nothing short of a rock festival.

“So, ‘Fantasia’, isn’t it”, muttered Clouseau.

“Eh, what?”

“The world’s first movie with stereo sound... never mind. Anyway, this clowning is definitely Fowler’s handiwork.”

Fowler... yes, it did look like something that poseur could come up with. If irritating the enemy was part of tactics, then he

was a master of it. And that wasn't all - the man was an excellent pilot himself. Then, the next move...

An alarm interrupted her thoughts.

On the north slope at ten o'clock - a small heat source and noise. She pointed her gun at it, and let the targeting systems do the work. No warning was necessary for Clouseau, he had already received her data. The AI would classify it as a measurement error - it was that small - but Mao didn't think so. This was an enemy machine... but it wasn't shooting.

"Didn't see us yet?"

"No - behind you!" shouted Clouseau, and the attack came from a completely different direction.

The enemy was also using ECS, and was almost completely invisible - she just saw something dart out of the shade of a rock and target them with its active radar. It was a classic pincer attack.

"I'll leave you the front one!" shouted Clouseau, and sent his machine into a flying leap forward.

They couldn't coordinate their actions over the datalink anymore - this would become a duel with the enemy.

Mao started moving in the opposite direction, disengaging her ECS - its effect was negligible by then anyway - and switched all sensors to active. Information started flowing onto the screens, and she could soon identify these enemy machines with heat camouflage. They were two Eligor-type ASes - a further development of the Codarl, that machine was both more powerful and agile. During the fight in Mexico, she ran from that machine a lot, until she could crush its head with a surprise attack.

The black Eligor that Clouseau was up against was most likely Fowler's machine, and she remembered the white machine, that she was currently facing, from Mexico.



Thus, on that mountain, tearing apart the evening silence,  
began their last battle.

They had at least managed to avoid being completely surprised this time, but were still at a disadvantage. The numbers were the same, but the other side had Lambda Drivers, and there wasn't even any room for traps or other special tactics. Most importantly, Fowler and his teammate were more than competent pilots, at least equal to themselves.

The white machine in front of her dropped the ECS cloaking and prepared to attack. It started moving very fast, traversing the slope and aiming at Mao.

“Oh, quick to draw, aren't we...”

Encountering strong jamming waves, the targeting systems of the enemy's guns were confused for a while, but it fired a burst anyway. The shots went wide. Mao continued to circle the white machine, sometimes making random maneuvers to throw the enemy off, locked her gun on the target, and squeezed the trigger the moment the lock was confirmed. She knew that the enemy would stop the bullets with its Lambda Driver- that was only a test.

The white machine, however, did not use its Lambda Driver, instead using the same type of lock jamming system. Mao's screen flickered for a moment, but recovered. She thought she saw the enemy machine shake its head a little, as if saying: “I don't need a Lambda Driver to deal with you, my EW systems will be enough,” and move to the next attack position.

*Damn, he thinks he can play around with me...*

There was no information on the pilot of the machine... but she suddenly got a feeling that it might be that girl. It was pure intuition, but there was a basis for that guess - the machine's movements. The series of light jumps, where the machine only bent its knees a little, made it float gracefully across the rocky slope. It could have been Mao's imagination, however, the AS was a tool designed to reflect its pilot's movements, and to a trained



eye would show its pilot's personality, even without a fully calibrated motion management system. Mao could easily tell who was piloting an allied AS just by looking at its movements. Sousuke's style, for example, was especially notable: a forward-leaning posture, like a predator waiting to take off, its head moving ever so slightly to survey its surroundings. Weber's machine would stand tall, chest forward, its head moving slowly, as if looking around with a certain air of haughtiness. Clouseau's M9 always held its back straight, its limbs moving in the tight, precisely controlled patterns of a martial artist. That was why Mao's intuition was telling her that it could be a girl. Even so, it wasn't like she could take advantage of the information...

"Can't be her... shit..!"

She was being shot at - her left shoulder was hit. No significant damage, but the ECS lenses in that area were damaged. It would be difficult to hide now.

She brushed all those unnecessary thoughts aside, and accelerated her movement, aiming at the enemy, and firing bursts from her assault rifle. From that position, it was too difficult to hit the target. The white machine was jumping around, sometimes using ECS, sometimes not, and shooting in small bursts, as if to ridicule her. There was no time for that. Would she even be able to get close to her enemy..?



The Laevatein threw one of the Codarls on the ground, and pinned it firmly.

<Incoming!>

He held the enemy machine with his left hand alone - his right was holding the shotgun, aimed at a second target. From

behind, a third Codarl was bearing down on him, holding a monomolecular cutter made in the form of a spear.

“Cutter two!”

<Ready.>

The blade of a GRAW-4 monomolecular cutter sprang from the machine’s knee, and started up. He barely managed to avoid the tip of the Codarl’s spear, and from a seemingly impossible posture kicked the other machine. The enemy AS was skewered by the cutter blade protruding from the right knee in a shower of sparks.

One more enemy was shooting at him from another direction. He half-turned, using the enemy as a shield, and kicked it off. The skewered AS flew, like a discarded doll, turned, and fell down, raising fountains of mud. Finally, he put his shotgun to the head of the machine that he had pinned down, and pressed the trigger, blowing it to little pieces.

“That’s right, keep coming!!”

For once, he felt complete. He was using all of his skills, learned from a very young age, in perfect harmony, moving like an organic machine.

And there was another feeling - that of surpassing Andrei Kalinin. The feeling of being able to read his thoughts and tactics. If he moved to a certain position, he could guess what the enemy commander’s orders would be. Their long acquaintance played into his hands - he understood many things about Kalinin. That would surely place the latter at a disadvantage, and he would be able to move unpredictably.

It wasn’t the unwarranted pride of a green recruit, he just knew exactly what he felt. If this was a contest of pure wit, then the Lieutenant Commander would still have the upper hand, but there were too many uncertain factors in this game. Sousuke

himself, together with his machine, was a wild card. He found a rage within himself that he did not expect; something that surpassed the knowledge of that old soldier.

However, no matter how strong he was, he also had limits. The difference in numbers and firepower, strong fatigue, too little time remaining... Even after all that fighting, he couldn't shake them off and run straight towards the objective - TAROS. Even if he did destroy the majority of the enemy's troops, the game would be over by then. And Laevatein would use all of its strength...

*... is that what you're thinking, Lieutenant Commander? No, too slow..!*

<Intercepting signal from the TDD-1. Should we ask for assistance, as planned?>

"Do it!"

<Roger. Executing... Launch confirmed. Displaying data.>

On the very edge of the tactical map appeared ten small marks. The others had probably been waiting for Laevatein's request. The *de Danaan*, managing to get close to the island, went up to periscope depth and fired ten cruise missiles. For them, it was almost a point-blank shot.

<ETA thirty seconds and counting.>

The missiles were coming, and the Laevatein started rapidly moving west. The enemy bullets continued to rain down upon it. It performed unpredictable, seemingly random maneuvers, and hid behind cover as much as it could. Something slammed into the body of the machine - his leg was shot, and though the damage was insignificant, the power output dropped somewhat. Not paying any attention to it, Sousuke pressed forward.

He rushed out of the dense jungle and into an opening - a clear space around three hundred meters in diameter. In the theory

of AS warfare, that geographical feature was to be avoided at all costs, and yet he ran to the very centre of it.

<ETA fifteen seconds and counting. Executing guidance of TRAM one to ten.>

He returned fire, and one of the Codarls' arms was blown off. The enemy didn't stop for a moment, and the machines continued to encircle him, now pressing from three sides at once.

The enemy had eight machines, coming from all directions, and he could not face them all together.

"I'll leave the guidance to you!"

<Roger. ETA five seconds, four... three...>

"Now!"

The Laevatein activated the "fairy's feather". An enormous amount of power was suddenly concentrated on the thin plumes of the unit; bluish particles started dancing on their tips, and even the air around them seemed to vibrate.

The device worked perfectly: the nullification field expanded suddenly, and cancelled the Lambda Drivers on all the enemy machines that were arrayed in a circle around the Laevatein. Almost at the same moment ten cruise missiles that Al was guiding fell upon them, lighting the sky like arrows of flame.

<Impact.>

Four... five hits.

Everything around Sousuke seemed to vanish in one enormous explosion. Some pilots didn't notice the missiles, some did and tried to activate their Lambda Drivers, but the result was the same. More than half of the enemy machines was either blown up into little pieces, or were on fire.

<Five targets confirmed destroyed. The rest are taking evasive action.>

"Good job!"

He stopped the “fairy’s feather”, the plume-blades of the unit gently folding into the machine’s body, and started mopping up the survivors. Only three remained, and while they escaped direct hits, they didn’t come out unscathed. One machine had a leg missing, and was trying to crawl away - he unloaded his shotgun into its back. Only two left. Those seemed to hesitate between escaping and continuing the attack, but finally turned towards him once again.

“Out of my way!!”

Pulverizing one with his trusty shotgun, and slashed the last one in two with his cutter.

The small fish were dealt with. Now was the turn of the Lieutenant Commander himself.

*Did you expect this, too? And if yes, what’s your next move? Probably, luring me in towards the base, waiting for the moment when I’ll be forced to get out of the AS to go save Kaname. You probably prepared a lot of traps, and a nice welcome committee, right? Good, I won’t keep you waiting for long...*

The Laevatein stowed its cutter in its knee, and start quickly moving towards the central base.



Upon receiving the news that the Codarl units were all eliminated, Kalinin didn’t show any sign of surprise - instead, he nodded, as in agreement. It didn’t mean that he was going easy on the enemy, however. He did warn his troops about the dangers of the Laevatein’s Lambda Driver nullifier, and a combined attack with cruise missiles was not impossible to pull off, but that perfect timing was really quite extraordinary. Sousuke and Tessa were

different from a year ago. They had lived through many ordeals, and their skills were now more refined than ever.

He didn't have much left now. If he had managed to make the Belial attack together with the Codarls in a coordinated fashion, the outcome might have been different.

"This is pointless" was the only thing Leonard said to him, his conceit almost palpable. He wished for a duel, nothing less... and so their most powerful unit also became their weakness. He tried calling Leonard on the radio, but there was no response - he had probably closed off the channel.

Thinking about it rationally, the odds were nine to one in Leonard's favor. Even with its Lambda Driver nullified, the Belial was a fearsome machine. Kalinin had no choice but to leave the Leviathan to him, and prepare his men for the battle.

If the *de Danaan* tried to disembark an assault squad, they would have no choice but to enter the base from the north. He would have to prepare an ambush that would wipe out the landing party with one precise blow. Regardless of how well they did, they will spend a lot of time there.

Kalinin gave several additional instructions, and sent his men to prepare for attack.



Running through the jungle at top speed, Sousuke contacted the *de Danaan* on a secure channel.

"This is Uruz 7. All enemy AS units are down, however, unable to confirm presence of Belial. It seems the activation of TAROS has entered its final stages."

"...This is the *de Danaan*, our thanks..."

It was Mardukas' voice - despite the static that interrupted it, Sousuke could hear his heavy breathing, alarms blaring in the background, and someone shouting angrily. He could guess that the damage was quite serious.

"Commander, how's the Captain?"

"We got a bad hit... she was thrown out of her chair during the impact..."

"Is she injured?"

"...it's fine. The ship can still move, she can, too... we'll try breaking from the underground passage to the sea... according to latest info from the satellite, the TAROS is definitely in the dock... Sagara, you get in from above and do whatever you can..."

From the underground passage? That was definitely dangerous, even reckless. He wanted to tell them to try and hide in the sea - but couldn't. There was no room for careful steps. The TAROS was about to launch. He wasn't sure if he would make it alone. He didn't have time to go through carefully, either. There probably wasn't anything left except trying a pincer attack from above and below.

"...Roger that."

"...Give me that!' he heard Tessa's voice, and her fumbling with the headset she took from Mardukas. "Sagara san..! you haven't seen the Belial yet..?"

"Negative."

"Please be careful, Leonard will be trying to buy time... it isn't necessary for him to defeat you, just to stall you until the activation..."

"I understand, but--..."

"Restraint will be harmful. Do everything you can to defeat my brother. It doesn't matter if he dies," Tessa must have guessed

exactly what Sousuke was thinking. “Tell him this from me, it may have an effect. Do you hear? Remember them, this is important.”

Over the noise, he heard that her voice had become... pained, as if she was giving him a cup of poisoned wine to give to her brother. As if fighting back nausea, she had told him the words. It was only a short phrase, that Sousuke did not understand, but there was no time to ask for explanations. He just answered:

“Roger that.”

“Please, do your best. Over and out.”

The channel was closed quickly, and that was the end of his exchange with Tessa. Above ground, some enemies remained, and he couldn't start a moving dialogue with her in the middle of the battle.

The Laevatein was running towards the base. If he continued south from there, he would come to elevator number sixteen, that would take him down into the base, from where he could proceed to elevator shaft zero, which was like the spine of the entire construction. Its width would easily allow an AS to pass through.

Trees were blocking his sight, as he moved through the dense undergrowth. He suddenly remembered the tiger that was left alone by chance on that island. He had saved the Bengal tiger from an illegal animal vendor in Tokyo, and because there was no place to raise him in the city, had moved him to Merida Island. That beautiful white cat could still be in that jungle. Sousuke wondered if he was all right... that time, it was Kaname who told him that it was impossible to keep the tiger in his apartment, and he moved him to those maneuvering grounds, to get rid of the wild pigs, he told her - but she was still worried.

<Sergeant? You seem to be losing concentration,>  
remarked Al.



He was able to evaluate his mental condition, because the cockpit of the machine was in fact a small TAROS.

“No... it’s nothing.”

He shook off these idle thoughts - elevator sixteen was almost in sight. Neither Leonard, nor Kalinin had made their move, and that was just fine by Sousuke. Who knew, maybe they had to deal with some other troubles. Now he only had to stop Sofia...

Ah, but he was deluding himself, nothing could go that easily. On Sousuke’s path, on a small hillock in front of elevator sixteen, stood one AS. An elegant machine, its black and silver armour polished, as if ready for a parade march, its asymmetric head looking as intimidating as a demon from legends. It was the Belial.

It was raining lightly, and the enemy didn’t even bother to use its ECS. It was holding some kind of weapon in its slender hand. It looked like a metallic arc, approximately the size of the machine’s body, that curved like a crescent moon. It was holding this weapon on its shoulder, calmly looking his way. Was that some kind of bow..?

“I thought you’d come this far,” he heard Leonard’s voice through the external speakers. “Though I hoped they would hold out a little longer, with Kalinin in command. Turns out he’s really too old for this.”

“Really. I think with you in command I’d be here in half the time.”

“You don’t say,” the Belial moved its shoulders slightly, as if it was shrugging. “I heard what you were saying just a while ago. Pretty interesting... so you know she’s Sofia?”

“Of course. Heard it from Tessa.”

Yes, Sofia - the girl whose heart and mind were lost during that experiment at Yamsk 11 eighteen years ago. That collection of

residual thoughts was what Kaname was exposed to in the Omni Sphere - Sofia herself had long ceased to exist. It wasn't a case of her personality taking over - no, the girl still thought of herself as Kaname, and while her intent was clear, all the memories of the past belonged to Kaname. This was the reason why it was futile to try and persuade her, or play on her past memories.

He could only hope that her heart was still there somewhere. And if that was the case, what could he tell her? Hang in there? I'm coming? I'm thinking about you? No, that was all wrong. And still, he felt... empty. What powerful words could he say? He had been asking himself the same question over and over, and in the end, he said what he said.

He didn't know any words of love - his were harsh, provoking. After all, you can't support a losing side with gentle encouragement alone.

"I see. Trying to call her real self, thinking that this way would be successful. It's very much like you."

"And what about you?"

"What?"

"It looked like you had feelings for Kaname - but this isn't really her. How could you keep up this pretence, knowing it all?"

"...well I already told you that, didn't I."

"The fact that you refuse to accept this world to the last? Yes, you did."

"I only wish to see it returned to what it should be."

"Now you're just turning in circles."

Sousuke calmly started loading the magazine of his shotgun. He suddenly felt a strange sense of loneliness. It wasn't like he and Leonard hated each other. If they didn't have such powerful motivations and attachments, would they ever think of each other as enemies..? This wasn't even a crossing of fates, just a fight to

destroy the person whose way of thinking was different. He didn't have to give his opponent any consideration... yes, it was time to defeat him and move on. Even if they met in the other world, it would probably be the same, whether they'd be friends or enemies. No interest in each other, no shackles of hatred - an empty relationship.

People just don't change. Fate or not, those that aren't interested in each other just don't associate with each other. It's all a hopeless, humorless story - he felt that very keenly.

*Leonard... if I thought of you as an old enemy, I would perhaps support your cause...*

"I don't have time for this. Let's go."

He shot - the Belial didn't move. Space in front of it distorted, as the armour-piercing round stopped right before its chest, and force fields collided. To them both, the ammunition itself was no more than an intermediary now - a vehicle of their own vision of destruction.

The armour-piercing shell was shredded, as if it was made out of paper. The warped space exploded, and a shockwave made the air tremble.

"Right, this wasn't supposed to be easy," Sousuke shook his head and prepared himself.

This wasn't an opponent who would fall to that simple greeting. His Laevatein was a powerful machine, but the other AS was yet unmatched.

"You showed off that big mouth of yours a little while ago, Sagara," the Belial soared into the sky from the fumes of the explosion. "Something about destroying us, and being a pain in the ass? Well, show me what you've got!"

Sousuke was already prepared to move. That weapon really was a bow - an eight-meter longbow, more precisely. Holding it with the left hand, the machine elegantly pulled the string.

There was no arrow - no, whatever was its projectile, it was invisible, but definitely pointed his way. He suddenly felt that he wouldn't be able to defend against it, and reflexively dodged with his upper body. The Belial shot - something pierced his gun and left shoulder, and a shockwave came moments later, and after it, a sharp plosive sound, that was likely the delayed sound of the discharge of the "bow".

That was something very different from a shell...

"Railgun?"

<Unknown. The hit came in the same instant as the discharge. The projectile could be travelling at hypersonic velocity, rest unknown...>

Sousuke didn't have time to listen to Al's explanations. The force field could not hold against something that travelled faster than a bullet. This first shot didn't only destroy his shotgun, but also the plumes of the "fairy's feather" on the left shoulder. If he hadn't moved reflexively at the last moment, his torso would have been pierced.

"Nice intuition... but what will you do next?"

The Belial was lazily floating in the sky, and preparing to fire a second arrow. At that very moment, Kaname - no, Sofia was probably starting the activation of the TAROS. There was no time... or, rather, time was not the most pressing issue, as death was staring him in the face.

## Chapter 4: The Lover's Dilemma

The *Tuatha de Danaan* was mortally wounded. She had taken two hits on the starboard, and one on the port side. One of them was a direct hit from a torpedo, right near the hangar deck. There was no stopping the flood, and even with the help of the ballast tanks they couldn't keep the ship upright. There was a fire in the crew quarters - it was more than the automatic extinguishers could handle, and there was no one left for fire-fighting duties. It was only because of its size and special construction that the submarine wasn't sinking, but it was already at its limit.

“ADSLMM activating... a hit on Mike eighteen!”

One of the Leviathans got caught in their trap. The enemy that was coming in to deliver the final blow to the *de Danaan*, who couldn't hide in the depths or even maintain full speed, had encountered one of their self-propelled mines. The chief sonar operator confirmed the destruction of the enemy vessel.

However, no one could draw breath yet - instead, they were preparing for another attack. Their target was the first gate of the underwater passage into Merida, that was now blocked by what looked like a fence of some steel alloy.

Holding a blood-soaked piece of gauze near her temple, Tessa continued giving orders:

“Weapons free!”

“Aye, torpedoes away!”

Five torpedoes left their tubes and headed for their mark - one of their launch tubes had been rendered inoperable during the fight. Two of those torpedoes were programmed to explode first, clearing away the enemy mines. The *de Danaan* continued to advance with three other torpedoes in a stream of bubbles. The

enemy's short-range coastal defenses started their work, showering them once again with torpedoes. They tried to outrun them as fast as they could. The torpedoes detonated around them, one after the other. One hit - the ship lurched under them, and Tessa struggled to remain in her seat. One of the bridge's main screens flickered and went black. The damage control officer reported that fires and leaks were springing up around the ship, and they had lost their second starboard rudder. Despite this, they could still move - and they accelerated.

The torpedoes hit the underwater barrier and exploded. As the ship rammed the tattered fence, the impact they felt was not far from a direct hit of a torpedo. Everything shook, ceiling panels fell directly on Mardukas. Somebody screamed, and the lights flickered. Despite that, the forty-four thousand ton vessel was through the gate, and inside the channel.

“Load the next ones!”

“In progress... two... one... completed!”

On one of the remaining screens, the status of the torpedo tubes changed from amber to green, and the label [ARM] appeared near them.

“Fire!”

The last salvo - five torpedoes sped towards the second underwater gate. One of them misfired, and four explosions shook the tunnel. The shockwave propagated through the water and came right at the submarine's bow. The ship was shaken again, and started uncontrollably veering to the starboard, towards the tunnel wall. As the gigantic body of the ship brushed the wall, creating an unearthly screeching sound, the bridge shook fiercely.

“Reactor one and two crossing critical temperature levels! Anymore and--...”

“Maintain full speed! I don't care if we blow up!”

“Aye-aye, Ma’am!”

The second gate was approaching fast. Only three hundred meters... two hundred...

“We’re breaking through, everyone brace of impact!”



But the broadcasting system didn't work. Whether it was flooding or fires, the speakers remained silent.

"It's going to be all right, just grab onto something!" shouted Mardukas, his face bloody as well.

Right after, the submarine broke through the fence. What exactly happened, Tessa couldn't tell - she was thrown off her Captain's chair forward, into the seat of a navigator. She could feel herself turning over several times, and wasn't even sure she was alive.

She opened her eyes to the blinking of alarms, a terrible headache and buzzing in the ears. Mardukas was looking her way and shouting something. She saw the weapons officer lying on the floor, and a navigator tending to him.

"...tain! ...Captain!" Mardukas' voice finally reached her.

"...was I out..?"

"You didn't get up for around thirty seconds."

"...Report our... situation..."

One of the screens on the starboard side was still functioning. She was helped up by Mardukas, and still feeling dizzy, operated the control panel. Luckily, it was still responding to commands.

The ship had breached the second gate into an area drained of water, and slid around two hundred meters. From the broken sluice gate water had flooded the tunnel up to around one-third of its height. The submarine itself could now be declared non-operational, its palladium reactors having stopped automatically. The fire in the engine compartments was still not out, and a new one had appeared near the forward torpedo tubes - there was a risk of ammunition catching fire. The flooding of the hangar deck had naturally stopped, but it was now full of toxic fumes. The rudders



were mostly broken off, and the damage to the outer hull was beyond estimation.

She tried the periscope - it still worked. Setting the optical sensors to night vision mode, she surveyed the tunnel. Around three hundred meters in front of them was the last gate, which had been evidently sealed with a large amount of concrete. It looked like the service tunnel entrances might have been welded shut, too. On the other side of that wall, in the former dry dock, was their goal - TAROS.

She tried the internal broadcasting system - the reserve circuits still worked. Tessa took the microphone, and informed the crew:

“All hands, prepare for close quarters combat.”

There was no time to sit around. Everyone replied affirmatively, left the bridge and went to the neighboring compartment, which had a weapons locker. She watched her subordinates leave one by one, until the last of them, Mardukas, stopped near the exit and called her.

“Captain!”

“Go on. I’ll catch up with you in a moment,” she answered, her voice unnaturally calm.

Mardukas had probably guessed her simple wish, paused for a moment, then nodded, and went out of the door.

She looked around the bridge, flooded with emergency lighting and the sound of alarms, as if trying to engrave the sight in her mind forever.

She turned to the console once again, and typed a single line “Thank you”. The fire had perhaps severed the circuits, and the ship’s AI, Dana, did not answer.

She bent down, then bowed, and kissed the dusty floor. It seemed long, very long, like that of a mother kissing her dying child... even if in reality it lasted only seconds.



She stood up, wiped off the tears that had started to gather in the corners of her eyes, turned, and quickly left the bridge.



The arrows were coming down on the Laevatein one after another, their shockwaves blowing away rocks, hills, and the abandoned buildings of the urban combat training ground. He couldn't do anything against Leonard's attacks - it was impossible to visualize a shield against those invisible energy arrows. He could only dodge them, relying on his intuition, but he would soon reach his limit. Sooner or later he would be driven into a corner

and shot through the cockpit. He didn't have any obligation to continue a contest of strength - it was time to use the equipment that he conserved for that time.

"I'm going to use the 'feather'!"

<Ready.>

That was a device that he couldn't use for a long time, and Leonard knew it very well. He had wanted to wait for better timing to use it, but the enemy wasn't about to let him do as he pleased. It was do or die, and he was going to use everything he had... everything.

*Concentrate... visualize...*

The remaining Lambda Driver nullifier on his right shoulder seemed to function well. The cables from the back of the machine's head were glowing hot, and it activated with a shower of sparks. Now the Belial had lost its Lambda Driver, and the machine started falling out of the sky. However, it adopted a proper posture, and effortlessly landed.

"I thought it was about time you used it. However," the Belial instantly jumped after landing, folded its bow, and started to perform ordinary evasive maneuvers, "do you think you can reach me?"

The Laevatein had lost its shotgun and rifle, and they only weapon it had left was the Demolition Gun, but that could only be used with the Lambda Driver, because of the powerful recoil. He had used all of his anti-armour weaponry fighting the Codarls.

The temperature of the "fairy's feather" was rising - it had less than a minute of operation left. Leonard was charging, shooting his 40mm autocannon, driving the Laevatein into a corner.

"And your machine has another weakness..."

After he said that, the Belial seemed to vanish into thin air. The rain had stopped, and he could freely use his ECS now.

Sousuke couldn't detect him at all. It seemed that the enemy was carefully moving from one rocky spot to another, without disturbing the vegetation or crossing the smoke. It was a calm, calculated approach to this game of hide and seek. He must have noticed that this powerful machine didn't have an anti-ECS sensor array.

"Your EW systems are pitiful - did you think I wouldn't know?" came Leonard's voice from somewhere.

He wasn't able to trace him, electromagnetic waves were seemingly coming from all sides.

"Wouldn't know, eh..."

Carefully studying the visuals from the optical sensors, Sousuke turned on his external speakers.

"There's one thing you don't know yet," he said, closely watching the screens, and remembering Tessa's words - he still didn't understand their meaning, but if he was going to use them, it would be now.

"Oh, really."

"I heard from Tessa... she told me that she knows what your mother did. Hear me? She knows it."

A long silence followed. He didn't even think that he would get a response, but they turned out to be the magic words, after all.

"Wh..." for the first time, he heard that Leonard's breathing changed. "Nonsense. You're talking nonsense."

The "fairy's feather" limit was coming closer - only fifteen seconds left.

"Hm, you think I'd just invent this?"

*Where are you, dammit...*

“...if she knows, then why’s she interfering? Tessa’s crazy... nuts... that whore, like mother like daughter, eh? Don’t screw with me... stop screwing with me!!”

The enemy finally made a mistake in his movement. A nearby tree shook, the undergrowth bent unnaturally, and leaves fell on something unseen. He could detect nothing on radar, but that was the only place the enemy could be. He pulled out the Demolition Gun without extending the barrel, grasped it tightly, and aimed. The “feather” was still running, and he had no Lambda Driver to help him...

*Fire.*

...his right arm shattered below the elbow as the Laevatein was hit with a force that shook even a normal fifty-ton mobile artillery chassis. The machine was thrown back, turned in the air several times, and hit the ground. The Demolition gun, with a part of the AS’ arm, went flying somewhere.

The 165mm shell hit something and exploded spectacularly. Smoke covered the entire scene, earth and small pebbles were raining down on the Laevatein.

Sousuke’s head was spinning as he tried to get the machine up and do a damage check. He lost his right arm and the cannon, the “fairy’s feather” overheated, and he wouldn’t be able to cancel the opponent’s Lambda Driver anymore.

The smoke cleared, and he saw the Belial, still standing. The enemy had lost its left arm, several armour plates, and the bow weapon - but that was all.

“Shit...”

Despite his best efforts, it didn’t look like he managed to land a direct hit. Sousuke had played his last card, but it wasn’t as effective as he hoped.

The asymmetrical head was turned towards him, all sensors active, as if staring directly at Sousuke, through the cockpit shielding.

“You... to use tricks like this...”

The voice had changed. It was now full of rage - the voice of someone ready to rip him to shreds.

It looked like he could still use his Lambda Driver - the air around the Belial trembled and warped.

“What, now you start thinking about the spirit of chivalry?”

“Enough! I will shut you up!” came Leonard’s reply.

The Belial itself seemed to change into a tornado, and charged straight at him.



The “Night on a Bare Mountain” continued to play, echoing throughout the mountain range. Mao’s M9 and the white Eligor continued their fight, always keeping the same distance, exchanging shots, using jammers, probing each other’s machines with special carrier waves - the battle was even to the point of being futile. Hundreds of encryptions were being created and decoded at almost the same moment, as their electronic warfare systems clashed.

Mao shot, but at that speed she couldn’t hope to hit anything. The white Eligor dodged the shell as if it was a passing butterfly, jumping down on the steep slope, and started activating the lenses on its armour. Was it going to disappear again? No, this time it wasn’t going to become transparent. Instead, the white machine seemed to suddenly split into two - no, three, four white Eligors were dancing around her now, and the fifth one appeared from the shade of a rock.

“Mirage split..?”

Theoretically it was possible to imagine. Instead of hiding oneself with a hologram, the enemy was projecting its own shape around her. Mao had experimented with the idea some time before, but the power output of the M9 wasn't sufficient for it, and after all, the mirage was just a pretty show. One should just aim at the center vehicle - after all, the range of the projection was limited, as the rate of discoloration of the hologram was equal to the square of the distance of projection. Thus, creating a hologram far away was very difficult, and while copying one's own machine, it was logical to place projections around you.

Mao made her AS crouch, and aimed. This time she wouldn't miss. First, she'd make her opponent use the Lambda Driver - the real fight would come right after. She aimed and fired.

The 40mm bullet passed through the center machine - and that was all. The fifth target moved at the same time, switching from the carbine to the anti-armour cutter.

So the central one was a mirage... but how? Was its projection unit powerful enough to let the real AS hang back on the left, and maintain four holograms on its right side? However, in combat it had to be a strain on the reactor...

The enemy seemed to move in slow motion, but it was at the limit of her reaction speed. It looked like a replay of a football penalty kick. Its arms were spread wide, its back bent a little. Ten anti-armor blades were pointing at her. The jammers wouldn't have any effect against thrown weapons - she had to evade, but where? She decided - upwards.

The blades were thrown, and came in, but eight of them almost immediately disappeared. The two from the leftmost machine were coming straight at her... her movements were read, there was no escape.

Mao's M9 crossed its arms on the chest, desperately trying to protect the cockpit, just in time - the blades struck both arms, and their explosive charges detonated simultaneously. Both arms were shattered, and her vision went blank from the impact. The machine was falling... she had to assume a proper landing posture, now - use the arms to stabilize it... but there were no arms. Her machine, shaped like a human body, was missing the most crucial parts.

The AS slammed into the ground, and Mao groaned as she felt the impact. She noticed the timer on the corner of one of the screens... fifteen minutes left. Only fifteen minutes, and she was in a terrible mess. In front of her, the white Eligor cancelled the projections, and calmly took a rifle from its back. The shot would come any second now...

She performed a perfect jack knife maneuver, using all the strength of the M9's dorsal muscles, and started running. She felt shots piercing the machine's armor - back, right leg, right shoulder. She staggered, but pressed on. Alarm - a fire broke out somewhere. No hands to help her...

The comms, as well as the EW systems, were still operational. At least she could tell everyone...

"This is Uruz 2! Sustained critical damage! Unable to destroy the enemy! I think I'm finished..."

*I'm sorry, guys.*

"This is Uruz 1! Don't give up!" quickly answered Clouseau, his breathing ragged.

She glanced at the data from his machine - it had major damage in the chest, in the cockpit segment.

"Ben!"

"Just... hold out, somehow! It's not going too well here, either, but I'll come to you as soon as I finish--..."



A loud metal screech interrupted his transmission, and then there was silence. No signal came from him anymore.

“Ben..?!”

She didn’t even have time to try and reach him. Kicking up snow and dirt, the white Eligor was coming. The Lambda Driver-equipped machine didn’t even have a scratch on it.

What should she do? What could she do..?



Fowler’s machine was drawing near. With the moonlight behind its back, the black Eligor looked very much like an evil spirit that was bearing down on his Falke. Fowler was only using one weapon - a blade. It wasn’t just a monomolecular cutter, though – it was a simple lump of steel alloy, made to look like a real sword. This blade, however, slashed through the chest of Clouseau’s machine like a knife through butter. Clouseau bent back at the last moment and managed to evade a fatal wound, but the sword had even cut through to the cockpit. The inside of the machine was now filled with fumes and the smell of hot iron. Some of the screens had survived, but because of the smoke it was hard to see anything. The next blow cut off some of the head sensors and the blade antenna, stopping his dialogue with Mao in mid-sentence.

“Uruz 2..! Mao, can you hear me..?!”

The reserve antennae didn’t seem to work, or it was perhaps the terrain there that hampered communications. Either way, he had to concentrate on the enemy in front of him first...

Another slash, that time cutting his rifle in half. He threw it out immediately, and the ammunition inside exploded. He jumped into the smoke, getting some distance between himself and the

enemy, and pulled out the monomolecular cutter. He took his “Crimson Edge”, modeled after a gurka knife, in a backhand grip, and his machine assumed the posture of a martial artist. That was, however, futile. There was no escaping Fowler’s slashing attacks. The Lambda field detection system, “fairy’s eye”, installed in the head of his machine, reacted to those attacks - it was obvious that the extreme sharpness of that blade was something visualized by Fowler himself. Clouseau would not be able to stop the blow with the cutter, and had to rely on his machine’s performance.

Filthy bastard... thinking about the enemy that way made it all easier. It was, however, far from the truth. If, for example, the enemy had a normal machine, was using a similar type cutter with the same balance - would Clouseau get hit the same way? Yes, he had to admit it, the result would have been the same. Fowler’s attacks were frighteningly precise and elusive at the same time. It had little to do with the power of the Lambda Driver.

Clouseau prided himself in being one of the best close combat fighters in the world’s Special Forces, and never in his life did he feel that powerless.

“Who is that man..?”

He didn’t remember anything of the sort, not even rumors.

He did assemble as much information as he could on the fellow, before attempting to capture him in San Francisco. Lee Fowler. Nationality: American. Some Asian ancestry. Personal history mostly unknown. Place of training also unknown. He even tried looking through the records of the world’s elite forces and some terrorist organizations, but couldn’t find any traces of someone like him.

“Maybe a martial artist..?”

The way that Eligor walked, the fluid, precisely coordinated movements of its blade. Very different from the martial arts traditionally practiced in militaries around the world.

He switched on the external speaker.

“Your skills are very impressive, and yet... why are you fooling around like this?”

This question wasn’t just an excuse to buy time. He really wanted to know the answer.

“I get this question often, Mister Clouseau,” answered his opponent through his own speakers. “There was once a man, who sought power, and trained day and night to improve his technique... and when he finally perfected it, he understood how powerless he truly was.”

“So you were defeated by someone?”

“...In a way, yes. I was defeated by a thirty-something year old worthless bum, the kind of drunk you see in every city.<sup>4</sup>”

“...what..?”

“It’s not like continuing this conversation about my personal history will suddenly make you my friend, would it... get ready.”

Fowler’s machine took a couple of steps forward, then suddenly hit a small rock with the flat of the blade - casually, as if playing golf. The rock was aimed right at Clouseau’s head, and came as fast as a bullet.

It was of course a decoy, and Clouseau lightly dodged, without changing his posture. At that moment, the Eligor was already close enough to use its sword.

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<sup>4</sup> Unless something went very wrong with my translation (it's a bit or a fuzzy spot there), this is a reference to "Drunken Master". The villain in the movie was played by Hwang Jang Lee, defeated by the drunken master, Jackie Chan.

*It's coming... lower left..!*

He spun, managing to avoid the tip of the sword. The sword suddenly changed direction, slicing horizontally - Clouseau dropped the machine onto the ground and tried to combine a low kick and a slash with his cutter. Fowler jumped over his kick and blocked the cutter easily. The “fairy’s eye” reacted, showing a force field forming around the enemy’s knee...

Too late. The cutter connected with the force field, and its blade shattered into small fragments. He threw it away and rolled and jumped to avoid the following attack. Now he had some range, so he threw an anti-armor blade. Fowler stopped it with the middle of his blade - it hung in the air for a moment, then shot back at Clouseau, hitting his machine in the right shoulder. Its charge detonated and blew off his shoulder armour, and Clouseau, almost exposed in the damaged cockpit, felt the shockwave first-hand. He had never experienced an explosion at that range - it felt as if his chest was crushed, his ribs broken, all air expelled from his lungs, and his eyeballs popped.

No, he was still alive, and both eyes could still see, even if his vision now had a red tint. Some capillaries in his eyeballs must have burst from the pressure. His violent cough sent blood flying onto the main screen.

*Is this my blood..? The machine can still move... but it looks like everything down from the right shoulder is gone...*

He suddenly realized that the machine was lying face down, and made it get up quickly to face Fowler - but he wasn’t there. No, from the back..!

“Oh, you can still stand!”

He rolled forward immediately to avoid the attack, but he felt a tremendous impact as his back armour plate was torn. Shock absorber liquid was leaking from the exposed spinal column of the

machine. He didn't have the luxury of worrying about the time of the fight, and using the terrain rushed away from the opponent. All the weapons he had now were one anti-armour blade, and one grenade. The "fairy's eye" was dead - his last ray of hope against the Lambda Driver extinguished by the last explosion. He felt a sharp pain in his chest with every breath. His vision was becoming hazy, and his fingertips were going numb.

However, Clouseau felt only quiet respect towards his opponent.

"Fowler... what a man..."

Clouseau mostly understood him after that battle. His enemy was a man who would never go easy on anyone, never degrade himself with pompous speeches - he would just use all of his power to kill his opponent. Clouseau had no idea what circumstances that man was raised in, but understood very well that he took their duel seriously. And that strength... He could understand it, too. The man had no regrets.

"I feel lucky that he's my last enemy..."

No - he was still alive, and he had to stop Fowler. If he could do that at least, his comrades could somehow manage the rest.

"Cancel the GPL limiter."

<Roger. Warning: removing the limiter could result in considerable damage to all syste--...>

"Just do it!"

<Roger. Please confirm command: remove GPL limiter.>

"I said do it!!"

<Roger. Executing.>

The safety restriction on the Falke's palladium reactor was removed. Its output started rising above levels for which the machine was designed, and its temperature rose accordingly. The

muscle package tried to compensate for all the excess power that was flowing into it, and tensed up.

“Let’s go..!”

And Belfangan Clouseau kicked off into the air.



The last explosion was closer than ever. The girl, who was inside the main TARTAROS control room, completing the final startup procedures, frowned - it looked like the explosion had come from the other side of the barrier wall that separated the chamber with the device from the underground passage into the sea. She quickly checked how much the foundation of the machine was affected by the shock, and decided that the figures were well within tolerance levels.

The officer of the defense unit, stationed outside of the control room, informed her that the enemy submarine had penetrated into the sea tunnel, and that they did not have any spare troops to send down to assist them, but in his opinion, it would take the enemy too long to break through the barrier in any case. He added that they would lay their lives on the line for the world that she dreamt of. Finally, saying “God watch over you”, he and his comrades left to intercept the enemy.

“God watch over you...”

Empty words. There was no divine protection - she was there, now, alone, and that machine was her handiwork. There was no god, no help would come from anywhere, that was reality. However, if the three Fates would be born from human technology, she would become all of them - Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos at the same time.



"God watch over you..." Empty words. There was no divine protection - she was there, alone, and the machine was her handiwork. There was no God. There was no relief. That was reality.

*They were asking for my protection. I will change this world that they have rejected... I will do it all myself, make this world more gentle and welcoming. I will do it again, until everyone understands. No matter how many thousands, millions, billions of times, I will change it. This moment will become only one in an endless journey. The fight that is happening now, on this little island, will become as insignificant as a drop of water in the ocean.*

She didn't hear any more explosions - not that they mattered. She entered the final code, pressed the "Enter" key, and went inside the TARTAROS. Through a narrow, cold corridor, she went deeper inside the machine, passing several doors. Finally, going past the enormous amplification devices, she entered the central chamber to which everything was connected, lied down on the bed, and started the link. She didn't need any switches now - her thoughts were sufficient.

"Let's go..."

It was as if she turned the ignition key. All the systems that were on standby went live, and started the process of unification and self-organization. What was probably one of the most complex structures in the entire universe came alive as pure information combined with matter.

This feeling of expansion... it was as if she had been squinting, and suddenly opened her eyes, but infinitely wider. She didn't need anything primitive, such as sensors. She could sense everything that happened in the vicinity of the Omni Sphere, and even saw a hazy picture of the future. The enemy would soon be suppressed. Those in the sea tunnel, and those above ground, exhausted any available means, and were powerless.

The enemy ran out of time.

Nobody could stop her.



The birth of the new world began... now.



As soon as they breached the service tunnel door with shaped charges, a hail of fire greeted them. Bullets were ricocheting near Tessa.

“Get down, Captain, please!” shouted Mardukas, returning fire with a submachine gun.

Deck officer Gotthard threw a grenade into the blown-up door. Right after it exploded, they threw another, and then four people rushed into the room.

Then, Tessa felt it - a distinct buzzing in her ears. It felt as if the space around them had suddenly become unclear, and the flow of time uneven. The changing of the past had begun. She thought she could see a multitude - no, an endless number of other worlds, with possibilities she could recognize. Was she the only one that noticed? Mardukas and the rest of the men were shouting something, firing, and didn’t seem to feel it - but it had started. The TAROS was working, and the world...

“Captain! We’re being flanked from the right,” she heard Mardukas’ voice, “I will hold the enemy here. You go on, please.”

“No, it’s too dangerous!”

“This way we’ll be caught in a pincer attack! Go on, quickly!”

The enemy on the right flank had already shown themselves. Sonar operator Dejlani grabbed Tessa’s hand and started running along the barrier wall. Mardukas gave her a salute, and returned the enemy’s fire. She soon lost sight of him behind the smoke.

“Hurry, Captain!”

The uneasy feeling grew stronger by the minute. Memories of the past seemed to suddenly get more real, and a complex - no, an overwhelmingly complicated stream of possibilities, divergences, and parallels flooded her head. The world was speeding down an unseen path...



Pursued by the raging Belial, the Laevatein was forced near elevator nine of the third maneuvering ground, and fell into the shaft. He landed and smashed through the cage, leaping into the main tunnel. Somewhere straight ahead, at the end of that large tunnel, was the dry dock, the TAROS - and Kaname.

That strange feeling that had enveloped Sousuke a little while ago was intensifying. At first, he thought that his optical sensors were malfunctioning. It was like depth perception suddenly failed him - like putting on very strong prescription glasses, or having a sudden bout of vertigo. Then memories flooded his head for some reason. He almost relived the encounter at Yamsk 11. Now he felt as if the Laevatein had already run through this passage... moving in exactly the same way, with Leonard on his heels - an incredible sense of *déjà vu*. No, this was the first time this happened... but then, why was he falling down the elevator shaft? He had just landed moments ago. The flow of time seemed impossible to grasp - or rather, it had become disturbed, and the chronological order of events seemed to be wrong. He was at the same time fighting Codarls, shouting at the enemy on the radio, destroying Behemoths with his cannon, flying in the sky, taking off, giving a salute to Sachs and speaking to him as he was dying... And it wasn't only the past. He saw the future - the Laevatein running towards the TAROS, but being too late - the Belial

standing in his way, its arm piercing his machine through the cockpit... That was the unchanging future, what was going to happen to him very soon. His consciousness seemed to be thrown in the middle of that chaos. He must have been caught up in the effect of the TAROS. He didn't exactly know where and when he was at that moment - only one thought remained in his mind: "Forward". But where..?

<Sergeant Sagara!> he suddenly heard the sound of alarms, and Al's voice. <Look at the situation around you! Look at the clock! And get to your mission objective!>

"The... situation..."

He shook his head, and banged it against the headrest.

*Get a hold of yourself! This is the main tunnel. The time is 0556. The mission objective is to prevent the operation of the TAROS.*

The Laevatein was moving forward at full speed, running towards certain death.

"Wh-... what happened?"

<I was watching your condition through the cockpit TAROS link. It was dangerous, but I had to sever the connection. The target TAROS has already been activated... I'm afraid to say, its influence radius has spread across the globe already---...>

"No, it hasn't."

Only a hundred meters left. He just had to rush in, start shooting at random and pulling out cables with his remaining left arm. He had to do it, even if the future that he saw was different. He would bring her back - that would alone gave meaning to his fight against the future. Before, he was like his AS - pushing forward, little more than a killing machine. Now, after going through doubts and delusions, he was different.

*I am doing this because this is what I want. These are my true feelings. So, Kaname...*

His thoughts were interrupted as he came to a shutter gate. He couldn't use the Lambda Driver anymore, so he just kicked it with all his might. The gate was crushed, some cables were torn off, and some pipes twisted. The Laevatein staggered into the gigantic cavern that once served as the dry dock for the *de Danaan*.

He saw what seemed at first like a mass of cables and pipes, and only after looking more closely was he able to discern a dome-like structure under them. It looked a lot like the structure he remembered from Yamsk 11, but was evidently constructed using more advanced technology.

Either way, he had to render it non-operational. He was going to make it...

The moment he had set the machine guns installed in the head of the machine to full auto, a large block of concrete fell down in front of him, raising a cloud of dust. The Belial had broken through the ceiling of the cavern, and was slowly descending. With its force field, the enemy machine quickly dispatched all of his bullets. No, one 50-calibre bullet hit the machine, but that was all. Not nearly enough to be a nuisance to the device, which was as big as the *de Danaan*.

The Belial stood between him and the TAROS.

"You thought I was going to let you escape?"

Sousuke didn't answer; his shoulders were heaving and his breathing heavy.

"And you're too late, anyway. The change has begun. I can feel it. I can see several different worlds at this moment... every single possibility is there. And it's all going back, to the past. The world has already begun its change. You people can't see

anything... but don't worry. Everything will be fine. She will fix everything, you understand?"

"...Move."

The Laevatein moved a step forward.

"This world will soon be gone. It is the end. There will be perfect silence... if you also had a functioning Lambda Driver, you would see it, too. It's a world without 'before' or 'after'. This will all end very soon. Right after I kill you, it will all be finished, and everything will stop."

He took another step forward.

"Al..."

<Yes, sergeant.>

"I'm sorry."

<Don't mention it.>

His head-mounted machine guns only had ten bullets left.



Because of the enemy's futile persistence, the TARTAROS was hit once, and some noise entered her thoughts. However, it didn't seem to have any lasting effects at all, and almost immediately disappeared. She had started the change, and saw everything. She could not hear the whispers anymore - instead, she was the one whispering to the world. No, those were not whispers, but commands, that could be heard all across the globe. Her voice carried even to herself, before she was born.

*Listen to my words... listen, remember, and do what you have to. This is the most important thing you can do.*

Her voice was the thread, and she weaved it to link the past and the present. She was fixing the very fabric of time and space, that had become so repugnantly twisted...

*And that isn't all. This will be a truly peaceful world, where no one had to be hurt. People would think this isn't possible, but it is. If I can grasp the entire picture of cause and effect, and reach people's hearts...*

The preparations would have to start from the day it all began - the 24th of December, eighteen years ago. After that, ten years before today, the world would turn to a peaceful path, and for the next eight years she wouldn't even have to do anything. Everything would be all right.

*How's this for an example: the eighteen year-old me wakes up one winter morning... oh, I'm bad with mornings. My mother and younger sister come to try and wake me up. Mum had fallen seriously ill about four years ago, but they discovered the cause quickly, and saved her life. Now she's as healthy as always. They shake my futon until I reluctantly crawl out of bed. Still sleepy, I walk into the dining room - dad's reading his newspaper there. Dad's as preoccupied about his work as always, but since mum's illness, he changed jobs, so he can have more time at home. I exchange a few words with him, and go to my seat to have breakfast.*

[...I thought you had more guts...]

*Some news on the TV that seemed always on: the second president of the United Federation of Nations is making a speech in Egypt - looks like it's in commemoration of the end of the first phase in the Sahara desert re-forestation plan. Then other bits of news about Afghanistan, where the hostilities ended ten years ago and an emerging tourist industry seemed to thrive; historically lowest rate of suicides in Japan; five years since the last of nuclear missiles were destroyed.*

[...do you think of yourself as some kind of princess..?]

*I finish my breakfast, change and go my school - the Komaoka Senior High. Its uniform is quite simple, compared to Jindai High, my second choice, but after three years I became really attached to it.*

*Starting from spring, I'll be a college student - I already have a recommendation.*

[...you liar!...!]

*The world is on its way towards peace and harmony. Nobody knows that I am the one correcting it, but that is fine. After all, that I what I wished--*

[...if I'm wrong, hit me..!]

This noise... it didn't seem to stop. Only one shot landed on the machine, but the echo just didn't disappear. That noise in her thoughts that disturbed the harmony she wished to create... a man's unpleasant voice, that seemed to desperately cling to her, and wouldn't go away from her head. The feeling of discomfort seemed to intensify, too. Like the voice was saying something important...

*Go away, go away..!*

No, it was fine like that. She would just continue disregarding it – that was what she was going to tell the voice.

And then, far, very far...

“.....wh....”

It was another voice, very faint “someone else was speaking.

“.....wh....ar...”

The voice grew stronger. She could now tell it was female...

*Could it be mine? No, I didn't say a thing.*

“...wh...you...ar...”

The voice became clearer, and she could already distinguish words.

“...whom did you... ar?...!”

The voice was getting too loud... too loud to understand...

*Stop... stop...! stop!! A part of me is leaving... I'm splitting in two...! Stop...*

The voice finally came through.

“...whom did you call a liar?!!” shouted Kaname Chidori.

It was as if her mind was a lake, and she broke through its surface, yelling, choking, gasping for breath - she could finally say everything she was forced to hold back.

“...shut up and listen, instead of doing whatever you want! Yes, yes! It's my fault! I didn't get a grip, and that's why everything ended up like this! Yes-yes, I'm sorry! The post-boxes are too red, and telephone poles too high - that's also my fault! Everything is! And they could've made the postal boxes white eighteen years ago!

“But me, a liar?! I won't forgive that! I had my share of troubles too! Normally I shouldn't even be able to talk like this! That's 'cause I'm an ordinary high school girl! You should be thankful!!

“And instead, what do I get? ‘You disappoint me’ ‘who d'you think you are?!’ Me - a liar? And why do I have to be told that by some military maniac?!

“I'm the one that's disappointed! You had time to prepare for this, and you couldn't think of something nicer to say?! Why d'you have to be like this even at this last moment..?

“I would've been happy with you just sniffing, and saying ‘I love you, Kaname’, or something... you can't do even that, can you?! Or you just don't want to? What, haven't seen me for a year, and don't care about me anymore, huh?! And so, who was it that took my place? You satisfied with being with Tessa, in the end..?





“A-ah, yes-yes, fine, I don’t care. She’s a good girl, not like me, the big liar, with no guts, eh?!”

“Aah, I don’t want to know, I don’t care! Turn around and get out of here, idiot! Just leave me here and do what you want!!”

Yes, she came out just to say those words, to spit out her foolish, childish anger... and thus took a form of her own.

*She is Kaname Chidori. I am... Sofia. I was lying to myself, and to her. But that’s all right, now I will suppress her once and for all. I will make her bend to my will. I will also have to change my appearance to my real form.*

The last and greatest fight began at that moment, inside her head.



What she just said was hysterical rambling. It wasn’t logical, or morally sound, however, it was an expression of her real feelings. She was like a child that would, in anger, throw himself on the floor and start kicking and wailing. However, the important thing was that she was able to speak at all.

And it was all thanks to him.

“Sousuke...”

While she was shouting, and slowly regaining consciousness, she understood his intention, that this result was what he hoped for. He had saved her, who was floating in an ocean of unconsciousness, in constant slumber. It was done in a very soldier-like way, though.

She was now in the middle of a daydream, in a completely white place without visible walls, floor or ceiling, gently floating naked. She thought that it was a bad idea, decided where up and down were for her, and stepped down on the invisible floor. She needed some clothes - anything would do. A black sleeveless dress appeared on her.

“Well then...”

She was alone in that place, inside her head. No, correction - there was somebody else.

“What shall we do?” she called out to Sofia, looking around.

She didn’t even know her face, so when she saw her, Sofia looked exactly like Kaname, but wearing a white dress. Even though her face was the same, one could tell at first glance that she was a different person.



"Well..." She was alone inside her mind. No, that was not the case - there was somebody else. "So what now?" she called to Sofia. Kaname didn't know what Sofia's face looked like. When she saw her, Sofia looked exactly like Kaname.

“What do you mean,” she smiled, “It’s already started, right? Let’s finish it together.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why?”

“That’s something you started, it’s got nothing to do with me. You won’t have my help.”

“I thought you’d say that. Actually, I knew it from long, long ago. When I started whispering to you, you were always so defiant, so... aggressive.”

That voice, that reached everywhere, up to the mountains of North Korea - it was all Sofia’s doing. That whisper in her head, that tried to transmit the thought “switch places with me”. Now she knew it all.

“Do you even understand how absurd your idea is?”

“I don’t think I should explain anything to you, you were one with me up until now.”

Sofia was right, she didn’t even need an explanation.

Kaname was now her old self, but her memories from the time she was merged together with Sofia didn’t vanish. She knew perfectly well what kind of person Sofia was, and why was she doing this.

“Look, I know you’ve been through a lot, and I feel sorry for you. However, because of that, stealing other people’s lives to create a new self is strange to say the least.”

Physically, Sofia was long dead. Eighteen years ago, she was the test subject for the TAROS at Yamsk 11, and when that experiment went wrong, she died. However, just before death, her psychic waves were amplified many times, and not only killed the people in the immediate vicinity, but also reached newborns across the world. These waves also reached into the future, where there was another Sofia (or Kaname) - she told her of the newborn “Whispered”, and the future one then transmitted them the information, which became known as “Black Technology”.

Thus, the world came to be. The “Black Technology” wasn’t something from the end of the next century, but from

eighteen years into the future. She could guess that these eighteen years have been repeating over and over, and this technology was their product. It was just a guess, neither Kaname nor Sofia could really know the truth. There was nobody who knew what the original shape of the world was - one could just think of it as the edge of the universe, supposedly there, but too far to be certain.

Sofia was the daughter of Doctor Valov, the chief scientist of the Yamsk 11 facility, and was sacrificed for the experiment. She was eighteen at the time, just like Kaname now. It seemed that she had been subjected to inhuman treatment prior to the experiment, along with constant injections of drugs. Her body weight had dropped to thirty-five kilograms, her skin was rough, and her hair was falling out... even seeing it through memories was heartbreaking. And so she died, after all that hellish torture and humiliation that was inflicted upon her by her own father. The psychic waves resonated with her thoughts at the time, spreading through time and space. In old legend, she would be called a vengeful ghost.

In truth, however, she wasn't. Her thoughts were not a malediction to all living things - instead, she wanted to create a new world where she could live as somebody different, and she believed that this solution was the only right one.

“You know how I died. You think I should content myself with that?”

“Well...”

“Those last three minutes... you must feel the pain of those last minutes, too. And you're saying that I should just let it go? You know, there was a boy I loved before being taken to Yamsk 11. I grew flowers, loved to play the piano, and had dreams of my own. They took everything from me, and instead--...”

“I know, and believe me, I think it’s terrible. Really, really terrible...”

A wave of sadness swept over her, then anger towards her father, who did those things to his own child. Sofia seemed to feel that Kaname was speaking truthfully.

“Thank you... you’re a kind person, you know. I can feel that your compassion is genuine.”

“Even so!” Kaname bit her lip, and held back the grief. “Even so, my heart and my life - they are mine alone. I cannot give them up to you. And I can’t let you change the world however you want.”

“Really.”

“Because you can’t just start a nuclear war in this world!”

After the new world was created, this one wouldn’t be of any use - but it couldn’t just be left alone. There were many Whisped left on the planet, and with their knowledge, someone could start using a TAROS once again, and it was too dangerous to leave something like that to billions of people. This world had to be destroyed - not even one percent of the population could be allowed to live. They all had to disappear to make place for the new, peaceful world. Only Kaname and Sofia knew of that, together with Leonard, and several subordinates.

It all seemed like a bad joke.

“But it’s necessary. Everyone will live in the new world; we’ll just cut away the tumor. What’s bad about that?”

“Just cut away? Those are just pretty words.”

“Then what would you compare it to? Replacing broken parts, or members of an orchestra? Or--...”

“Enough,” snapped Kaname. “Anyway, do not expect my cooperation. I’ll wake up and stop this nonsense. I don’t see other options.”

Sofia suddenly burst into laughter. She hadn't even been smiling until then, it was like an uncontrollable burst of emotions.

"What's so funny?"

"...what, you haven't noticed yet? It's pretty obvious. If we stop now, the world will come to nothing..."

"Huh?"

"Look."

And she saw - the figures of those who were fighting around her, while she was having this daydream. The situation around changed very slowly. Only several seconds had passed since Sousuke's shot at the TARTAROS. Then she saw the sea tunnel.

"Tessa..."

The crew of the *Tuatha de Danaan* was engaged in a firefight. Several crew members had collapsed with serious wounds. Tessa was clumsily holding a submachine gun, and returning enemy fire - they could barely hold out. She couldn't see Mardukas - he had probably been killed. Kalinin's soldiers were extremely loyal to her, after all. On top of that, Tessa didn't notice that three of them were creeping up from behind. She was soon going to be caught in a pincer attack. A score of bullets were going to pierce that frail body, and...

*Run!*

She tried to reach her, but it was useless. Tessa was suppressing any signals from the Omni Sphere within herself, to avoid its side-effects.

"It's wonderful that she made it this far, but her fate is sealed."

"Wha---..."

"Look further... yes, further. You should be able to see Fowler and the others."

Seven thousand kilometers away, she saw Mao and Clouseau engaged in a struggle to the death.

“Clouseau-san..?”

She had only spoken to him a few times before, but remembered him well. His machine’s head was partly smashed, and it was missing its right arm - but having disengaged the reactor limiter, it was running at great speed towards Fowler. He threw a grenade towards Fowler, but the latter avoided the explosion, and in the next instant, its sword pierced the M9’s abdomen. It was a fatal wound, but Clouseau’s machine still moved. No, it looked like skewering himself on the sword was his intention. With his next move, he plunged an anti-tank blade right in the back of Fowler’s machine.

The explosion sent both machines flying, Clouseau’s was snapped in half and started rolling down the slope...

“It’s a pity. Looks like he was a great pilot.”

“Damn...”

“Three kilometers to the west - looks like it’s also coming to an end.”

Mao’s M9 was driven into a corner by Sabina. The M9 had lost both hands, and its body was riddled with wounds. It was like a tank without its turret. There wasn’t anything she could do, except escaping and trying to buy time. She was being shot at, her vehicle staggered, and its movements were becoming sluggish. She could have made it to the entrance of the base, but now she couldn’t get away anymore... and there, the Eligor caught up with her, brought her machine down, and pointed its rifle at her chest.

“Sabina had her opponent at a disadvantage, though... she was a good person.”

“You...”



She glared at Sofia, but the girl wasn't laughing. She didn't even try to hide her disdain, and only gazed at Kaname with cold, emotionless eyes, that could see through everything. It was her own face, but she never knew it could make such an expression.

"You think it's an illusion I'm showing you?"

Kaname didn't answer.

"Unfortunately, not. I was fooled by your little trick at Yamsk 11, when you made me think I shot Tessa and Sousuke - but this isn't a trick. This is happening, right now. I didn't even have to do anything."

This had all gone too far, and couldn't be stopped, even if she cut the connection from the TARTAROS right now, and grabbed the nearest communications equipment. It was futile trying to make them stop... she couldn't make it.

"And look at him. Right here. Right outside. Look."

In front of the TARTAROS, Sousuke's machine - the Laevatein - was charging the Belial, firing wildly from its head-mounted machineguns. Cooling pipes burst, and the area was shrouded in a white mist. It was an improvised smoke screen. Leonard, however, was expecting his opponent to appear from the mist, and his Lambda Driver was concentrating an intense force field on his right arm. The endgame was near.

"Leonard's opponent is doing great, all things considered. But--..."

"Stop it..."

"...he can't be saved."

The white AS appeared from the fog, and the Belial immediately attacked.

"STOP!!"

Leonard didn't. The Belial's hand went for the opponent's chest, pierced it and reappeared from the back. The cockpit capsule

inside was crushed - she didn't want to see what happened inside,  
not even guess.



Impossible despair gripped Kaname's heart. It had just happened. The Belial had destroyed the Laevatein's cockpit. Blood or oil, or maybe a mix of both, was flowing from the pierced chest. This was not an illusion.

Sousuke was dead. He died a moment ago.

*No... no, no-no, this can't be...*

"You understand now, don't you?!" shouted Sofia. "You can't accept this! Can't forgive this! You know these feelings, right? And then, why did you say those things to me?! You should have seen your face, as if you won a victory against yourself... Now you understand your own pride? Do you understand?!"

"Stop..."

"No! I won't! I have the right to continue! Go on, say it again, 'you're wrong Sofia!' Say it!"

"Stop..!"

"Come on, explain to me again why is it that we can't use the one way of starting over. I want to hear it..! Oh, you can't? Of course not."

Kaname fell on her knees and tried to cover her ears, but Sofia grabbed her by the shoulder and continued to yell.

"Right, you remember this feeling, don't you? Oh, yes you do. Four years ago, that hospital in Tokyo..."

Kaname froze.

"Your mother's face. Your beloved mother, all covered in tubes, looking weak and frail, her hair falling out... and she was once so beautiful..."

She saw that hospital room again. Her father had just flown into Narita airport, but he wouldn't make it there in time. Her sister was sobbing, and she was standing still, in shock. She didn't hear anything the physician was telling her.

*"I am sorry, but your mother has passed away..."*

No... no, no. She hadn't forgotten that memory - it came back to haunt her at every opportunity. She always held in her grief, and somehow overcame it...

No, that was a lie. She could never overcome it. From that time on, she had tried her best not to cry, bear the pain, and eventually forget.

"Ah..."

The figure of her mother, lying on that bed, covered with tubes. The Laevatein, pierced through the cockpit... those two images overlapped within her, causing an extraordinary upheaval of emotion. She could not bear the weight anymore, she could not resist this pressure.

Kaname screamed.

It was an almost bestial howl. Disheveled, her mouth wide open, she continued to scream until there was no air left in her lungs.

A torrent of tears came next, and they made a puddle on the floor. The wave of emotions that overwhelmed her did not stop, and she was cowering in the same place, clutching her chest, defeated by the sorrow and despair, and let out everything that had been weighing on her heart.

She didn't want to think, or feel. She just wanted to return to nothingness, to disappear.

"You can't forgive this, can you?"

"No..."

"And you can't accept it either?"

"No..."

It was unthinkable that something like that would happen to her again. This was... nonsense, yes, there was some mistake.

*I can't accept this. I can't go on like this.*

“Poor, poor Kaname,” Sofia gently stroked her head. “but let’s not grieve any longer. There’s something we both can do.”

She gave a little nod.

“Let’s finish it together. You don’t have to worry anymore. Just imagine what you want to do. I’ll make it all come true.”

“Really..?”

“Yes. You should know I’m not lying.”

Kaname was silent.

“Go on, remember, imagine it...”

Still on the floor where she had collapsed, Kaname tried to think.

“What do I want...”

Not much, really - just spend time like a normal person, in peace and quiet. A very ordinary life.

“Yes... you can see it, can’t you?”



Before she noticed the change, she was sitting at the dining table. It was breakfast time, and she saw the vapor rising from the bowls of miso and white rice. She smelled fish, and grated daikon, raw egg and mozuku vinegar, nori and egg furikake, and the leftover pork stew from yesterday... a very nostalgic smell.

“What’s wrong, sis?” said her sister, Ayame.

“Huh?”

“You were going to give me the furikake, come on, quick!”

“Ah... yes, here” she handed the plate to Ayame.

She saw her father, sitting in front of her, holding a newspaper with one hand, and the miso bowl with the other.

“Da-ad, that’s bad manners,” said her sister, shaking her head like an adult would do.

“Mm... ah, sorry. This article about robots is pretty interesting.”

“Robots? Eh?”

“It’s Honda... see, here. No idea what it’s called, but it’s impressive. See, it can walk on its two legs, and even if you push it, it doesn’t fall over. Now that’s modern technology for you... I don’t really understand anything in it, though.”

“Hmm...”

“You don’t seem too interested though.”

“Nah.”

“Kaname? What about you? See, they might start selling those, to help with housework and all.”

Her father held the newspaper in front of her. The cover photo was a robot that somewhat resembled a spacesuit, awkwardly taking a step forward. This was the forefront of technology - it could finally walk.

Kaname wasn’t interested at all. She only thought that the woman that was presenting the robot and smiling, wore a brighter shade of lipstick that needed, and that maybe they wanted to make it look futuristic.

“Yeah, but... even if these are sold, we won’t buy one anyway, right? You’re complaining about the car loan anyway.”

Hearing Kaname’s tease, her father gave a bitter smile.

“Bah, don’t talk about these things during breakfast.”

“Kaname’s right. Now, eat quickly, or you’ll be late.”

“Oh...”

Her mother had come up from behind and took the newspaper from him, put Kaname’s bento-box on the table (Ayame’s school had a canteen of its own), and sat down at her own place.

“Kaname, did you already try the miso?”

“Aha.”

“What do you think?”

“Sendai miso paste and... a dashi that I don’t recognize.”

The food quiz had become a sort of tradition, and today seemed to be the day of the miso soup.

“Correct. I got the kelp from Oomiya-san.”

“Hehe, you can’t fool me!”

Her mother laughed lightly.

Her dad looked at the clock, and started gulping down the rest of the meal in haste.

“Ah, sis, so how did it go, yesterday?”

“Eh?”

“O-oh, your mother would like to know that, too. It was a date, wasn’t it?”

“Ah, er... that, well...”

She sounded surprised, but immediately remembered everything. Yesterday was Sunday, and she went to see a movie with a boy from her school. Well, it wasn’t really a date... they went to Shinjuku to see a movie, then drank tea, went shopping a little, and parted ways at Choufu station - and that was all... but, wait, wasn’t that a date after all..?

“Well... wasn’t anything special, we just walked around. Nothing weird.”

“Aw, no fun...”

Both Ayame’s and her mother’s shoulders dropped in unison. Her father didn’t seem to understand what they were going on about, and was instead quietly sipping the mozuku vinegar.

“But you did like it, didn’t you? I mean, you went with a boy? Ayame, did you hear anything about that?”

“Aha, name’s Sagara-san...”

“W-wait..! How do you know, Ayame?!” Kaname felt her cheeks flush.

“I could hear you speaking with Kyouko-san, and you said you were ‘going to the movies with Sagara-kun tomorrow’, or something like that.”

“Eh, I said that?”

“Yup, you did.”

“Well, er... wait, are you always listening and remembering everything I say on the phone?!”

Evidently, she had to stop thinking of her as “just a kid” anymore, and couldn’t let anything slip... yes, she was different now. Kaname had to watch what she said from now on.

“Ah... so Sagara-kun’s your boyfriend” murmured her mother, looking serious.

“I said, he’s not my boyfriend or anything. He fixed my laptop, and I was just thanking him...”

She was denying it, but somewhere within her heart something wanted to make her smile. Their relationship wasn’t anything like that, but it wasn’t bad hearing it from other people... and he wasn’t a bad guy.

“Right, right-right-right, so, you owe him, and you went to a date in thanks?” her father suddenly intervened.

“I said, it’s not a date, we happened to have tickets...”

“Your father thinks it’s not too good - what, doing a favor for a girl, and then asking her on a date in thanks? No-no.”

“No! I asked him myself!”

“Y-you asked him out..?!”

“It wasn’t anything serious..! Ah, forget it, I’m going to miss my train! Right, I’m off!”



Leaving her astonished father, and giggling mother and sister in the room, she jumped out into the hallway, took her bag, and cheerfully went off to Jindai High.

The station was less than five minutes away. She got onto the crowded train, and soon arrived at Senkawa station. There, on the other side of the ticket barrier, she met him.

“Ah... Sagara-kun...”

“Oh... good morning, Chidori-san,” Sagara Sousuke nodded in greeting.

“Thanks for yesterday, I had fun!” she smiled.

Sousuke’s cheeks flushed a little, and he said after a little pause:

“Ah... y-yes, I... had fun, too.”

“Good! Thanks for fixing the laptop again!”

“Mm... if you ever have any trouble with it... I, I’ll help.”

“Thanks! You really saved me there!”

“No, it was simple, really... s-so, don’t worry,” said Sousuke, scratching the back of his head, obviously flustered.

It was the same as yesterday. Unlike other boys, he was quite shy, and seemed somewhat tense. He was quite handsome, good at sports, and had a lot of secret admirers among the girls, but didn’t realize it himself. He had a thing for computers and all kinds of machines, and his friends were mostly the same. Thus, without any particular reason, they were walking together to school.

“Er, Chidori-san...”

“Mm, yes?”

“I don’t really know how to say it... well, yesterday, watching that movie together was really fun.”

“Mm?”

“Er, no, well, I don’t mean anything weird. It’s just that I... didn’t really go out with a girl before. I was really... worried.”

“Mm, I understood that.”

It looked like he was going vent some of that tension.

“Ah, well... I thought about it later, and I must’ve been really... unsociable. Was it all right..?”

“Yep, it was fine. You were your usual self, Sagara-kun.”

“Right, good,” he muttered, and smiled broadly.

“You know, I usually go out to see movies and stuff with Kyouko or Shiori, and that’s it. I was a bit nervous too. So...”

“Yes?”

“So... well, nothing, sorry.”

She faked a laugh. She didn’t know what to say after the “so”, herself. Besides, they met her friend, Kyouko Tokiwa on the way, and their conversation ended there.

Afterwards was an ordinary school day. The classes ended, and as she was getting her things together, ready to go home, Sousuke called her from the classroom doorway.

“Chidori-san... do... do you have time now?”

“Huh..? Yes, yes.”

“I just wanted to talk, but... it won’t take long.”

“Mmm, all right.”

She had some kind of unknown premonition. She stiffened a little. Tokiwa and all of her friends understood immediately, and started edging her forward, whispering words of encouragement.

They were alone on the roof of the school. Sousuke was even more nervous than yesterday - he pressed his forehead against the fence for a while, then clapped himself on the cheeks, as if trying to rouse his own spirit, and finally turned to face Kaname.

*“L-listen..!”*

They both started speaking at the same time.

“Eh... please, go on...”

“Ah, no... sorry, Sagara-kun...”

Kaname's thoughts were confused, and her heart was fluttering, beating faster and faster - now her heartbeat was as powerful as an earthquake, and she was trembling, thinking that she was going to pass out.

"Ah, yes... well, I, I heard from Kasama, Onodera and the others... that, well, Chidori-san isn't... with anyone... Er, I mean, going out with anyone, sorry... so, what was I saying..."

"I-it's all right, please continue..."

She felt that her face was burning, and she couldn't think straight.

"So..?"

"Ah... what?"

"Well, do you have someone or..."

"Eh? Oh. No. No-no-no, not at all."

She waved her hands in front of her, denying all that - a little too vigorously, the question wasn't that serious after all.

"Then, would you try... no, saying this is just weird..."

Sousuke clenched his fists, mobilizing every ounce of his courage, and looked her straight in the eyes.

"Would you... go out with me?" he almost shouted these words of confession. "I liked you for a long time already, but you're a popular person, and I thought I wouldn't bother you and kept my distance... But after I fixed your PC, and we talked, and walked around together yesterday, I kind of got the feeling that you're a really good person, not showy or anything... and I liked that, too..."

Kaname was silent.

"Was I wrong..?"

"You kind of understood it? That I don't like people who show off, and all..."

"I'm not like that..."

“I know.”

He suddenly became much more serious.

“I won’t ever make you sad, Chidori-san.”

“Mm.”

She thought that was questionable, but believed him for now.

“So, well... I’d like to hear your answer.”

She had to say yes or no clearly, right now.

*After all, I’ve been waiting for you for eighteen years...*

*Waiting to be held, to be embraced by you. I’m happy... This was my wish.*

“Of course, yes, because I love you... Sousuke.”

She stepped up to him, smiling despite the tears, and gently reached for his cheek. She touched his left cheek with her fingertip.

*Ah, I’m such an idiot...*

The scar was not there. That cross-shaped scar, the origin of which she didn’t know. All those battles, survival in the harshest of environments - it was a wonder that he only had that one scar.

Sousuke... the world that created him wasn’t this peaceful and gentle. He was a child of that unforgiving, chaotic world, torn apart by a never-ending, merciless struggle. That harsh era, an age of destruction and slaughter, was the one that shaped him into the man she knew. He was a blade, forged in the fires of hell.

He couldn’t be replicated, and the person standing in front of her was not him. She had lost him forever - she knew it, no matter how much she tried to deceive herself, no matter how many sweet days she would spend with this boy who had no scars. The time she had spent with Sousuke - yes, those days were noisy,

messy, full of nonsense, but her heart longed for them. Now, however, they would not return. She could do nothing.



One thing she could never accept, and never forgive - that she didn't get to meet him.

"I'm sorry..."

She lowered her hand and stepped back a little.

In the end, she couldn't imagine herself in this world. She wanted to do this and that, but she finally came to think that she did not have any wishes left.

The "Sousuke" before her disappeared, along with the roof, the school, the city - everything. She was in that white space again. In front of her was Sofia, staring at her in shock. Their momentary daydream continued. Several thousandths of a second passed, and outside, the Laevatein was falling to the ground, very slowly.

"Are you serious..?"

Kaname gave a silent nod.

"Do you understand what you're choosing? You're just going to leave him to die? His friends, too, and your own mother? You're just going to abandon everyone? That'd be a sin towards the entire world!"

"So what... there's nothing I can do..."

"Yes there is! Continue the process of rebirth! You cannot give up, not now! You would be running away, abandoning everything!"

"There is nothing to abandon, and nothing to give up on..."

To continue living by herself, in this barren world where he did not exist... living off memories, wandering aimlessly in the darkness, and even if this world is doomed to perish after a moment, continuing to walk on... There was meaning in that. She, who created that ideal world for herself, thought it had meaning. There wasn't any need for this machine to fight against fate - she just needed to bear it. She would rest, and then continue, following her nature.

“You are deceiving yourself! Don’t you see how egoistical this is? You have the power to resurrect the dead, and you won’t use it?!”

“There is no one to resurrect! They are all alive, this very moment! They might be killed the next instant, but for now they are alive!”

“What about Sousuke?! Look at that!!” Sofia once again conjured up the image of the Laevatein, pierced through the chest.

“Shut up! There’s nothing that can be done about that!!” she yelled at the top of her lungs, looking up at the invisible sky, tears still flowing down her cheeks.

“This is madness! You’re going to regret it! Stop, now!”

“He would agree with me! Because,” she continued, with more confidence than ever before, “if I was the crying weak girl that I’m now, he wouldn’t come to love me..! He wouldn’t risk his life for me... So... I’ll...”

“Stop this! Please..!”

But Kaname’s decision was final.

When she said that, the white space surrounding them seemed to warp and twist - a giant vortex appeared, and started sucking it in...

“...so I’ll live on! *I’ll show him that I have guts.*”

A shockwave made the entire white space tremble - the vortex became larger, and this daydream started falling apart. Her will to live, and to begin anew, was destroying this illusion. An enormous psychic power spread through the machine, made its countless gears stop, and start turning in the opposite direction.

“Stop!..! Stop..! *stop...*”

*Sousuke... I live, while you are dead. I don’t even mind it that much. I’ll find myself an even better man, and will become happy..! bah, who am I lying to.*

“Sto---...”

The white space disappeared completely, and she saw the inside of the TARTAROS. The first word that came off the awakened girl’s lips was a name “Sousuke...”





The transformation of the world had stopped. Time had resumed its normal flow, and the sounds of the fierce battle outside reached her inside the dome.

## Chapter 5: The Proof of a Man<sup>5</sup>

The Belial's hand went right through the chest of the Laevatein, crushing the cockpit with the jarring sound of metal, ripped and torn by enormous forces. It seemed like something burst inside.

"...annoying to the very end, weren't you, Sagara Sousuke," muttered Leonard.

There was an unspoken relationship between them, as opponents. His enemy had almost managed to drive him into a corner, to damage the Belial to this extent.

*We couldn't even feel mutual respect... if I could feel sorrow for his death right now, maybe in the next world we'd become comrades... but I feel nothing, as if I just took out the garbage.*

He pulled his right hand back. The Laevatein, powerless, fell on its knees, and leaned back, as if looking to the heavens. The fight was over. All he had to do now was to wait there. Kaname - no, Sofia - was about to change this world.

...Something was wrong. He had been feeling the change up until now, but not anymore. That specific tone that seemed to resonate through the entire world was gone without a trace. What could have happened..?

And at the same time he looked at the fallen Laevatein's chest, and noticed - there seemed to be no blood or bits of flesh in

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<sup>5</sup> Considering the fact that the author likes references, this could be a reference to a movie of the same name, "Ningen no shoumei", a 1977 Japanese detective movie with a lot of foreign elements, that is apparently well-known.

the crushed cockpit. No remains of the pilot, who should have died a gruesome death. There had been no one in there from the start...



The fight still wasn't over. The small rocket launcher was aiming at the defenseless waist of the Belial, at the part most damaged by the Demolition Gun - the enemy's palladium reactor should be there. The angle, though, was somewhat wrong... just a little to the left...

*"I have to make it, I have to..."* was the sentence drifting around Sousuke's mind, as he hid right in the mist near the feet of the Belial. He was waiting for the last possible moment, at the closest range of his rocket's percussion fuse. The Laevatein didn't just burst all those pipes with its remaining bullets out of desperation. They burst, created a fog that was even thicker than he expected, and when it provided enough cover, Sousuke opened the hatch, took the rocket launcher and jumped out of the machine, which then passed under AI's control. The attack was risky for his AI companion, hence the "Sorry" that he said earlier.

Leonard finished off the unmanned Laevatein, and Sousuke dashed to the feet of the now motionless Belial in the fog. Once he even thought he heard Kaname's voice, but it was now gone.

He had one shot, and he was going to use that chance.

*"Have to make it..."*

If he were noticed, he was as good as dead. The enemy would use the Lambda Driver immediately, and the small rocket launcher wouldn't be able to scratch its armor. However, he still escaped detection.

*A little more to the right... turn just a little more... he'll be able to see me now, I have to make it...*

He fired at point-blank range. The old-fashioned, but reliable, plastic explosive worked its destructive magic. The armor, weakened by Sousuke's previous shot, broke into a thousand pieces that pierced the outer core and the fuel systems of the palladium reactor. It was not a fission reactor, so it would not cause an uncontrolled chain reaction - as the nuclear core was destroyed, the plasma inside overflowed and melted everything like butter. For a moment, a great, uncontrolled surge of current overloaded all of the Belial's systems, burning out most of the muscle packages. The devil was devoured by its own flames, and fell. The world's most powerful machine was destroyed by an old infantry rocket launcher.

Sousuke discarded the empty launcher tube, stood up and pulled out his favorite Glock-19. He cocked the slide, and the 9x19mm Parabellum round went into the chamber.

He carefully started coming close to the burning Belial. The fight was not over yet...



Tessa was wildly firing her submachine gun, as if lost in the battle. Suddenly, she realized that the magazine was already empty, and her wrist went numb from the recoil. She clumsily replaced the magazine, peered around the corner, and pressed the trigger.

Nothing happened. Did it jam..?

"Head down!!" shouted sergeant Dejlani, and pulled her behind the corner.

Ricochets sparked on the walls, and whizzed past her. She instinctively looked at a corner behind them.

"...enemy? There?"

She saw a shadow in that corner - there was no mistake, the enemy had flanked them and come up from behind. When did they have the time to..? She saw them - three people, armed with carbines, aiming her way. The first one was just two meters away, and she could see his eyes through the goggles. In them was only a cold intent to kill. There was nowhere to hide.

A shot at point-blank range - but not the person who was aiming at her. Two people, shot from behind, collapsed in front of her, the third was turning back - and was knocked out by Mardukas, who came around the corner. Her executive officer kicked the enemy again and again, enraged, and emptied the remaining bullets of his SMG magazine into him.

“Ma...”

Hearing her, Mardukas changed the magazine with a surprisingly smooth and trained motion, changed his position, and shot another enemy.

“Get down!”

That last one threw something - it was a grenade. It fell right between them, and rolled on the floor.

Tessa thought about throwing it back - but there was no time. She could only throw herself on top of it to protect her allies in the immediate vicinity.

But Mardukas moved faster. He did not throw himself onto it, instead expertly kicking it back towards the enemy with his gunstock.

The roar of the explosion shook the passageway. No one was hurt, but they were all dazed by Mardukas’ miraculous drive, and stood still for a moment.

“What are you standing around for?! Break through!” shouted Mardukas, continuing to shoot.

The crew members came back to their senses, and rushed inside the fumes from the explosion, to finish off the remaining enemy.

“Captain... the last enemy... is down!” reported Mardukas, his breathing ragged, his shoulders going up and down. He was covered in blood and cuts in many places, his uniform torn, but his eyes were blazing with excitement behind the half-broken glasses. It was the first time she had seen him like that.

“...where did you learn this?” Tessa asked him, still in awe.

“Er... nowhere... I was maybe too caught up in the battle...”

His body was giving way from all the pressure, and he was holding to the wall for support.

She had thought he was only obsessed with chess, but now she realized she never heard anything about him being particularly slow, and disliking athletic activities. So this was another of his talents...

“I... excuse me. Let’s hurry...”

“Yes, but...”

Tessa lifted her eyes towards the ceiling, squinting. She had cut off any connection to the Omni Sphere on purpose, and now opened it up a little, very carefully. Any feeling of change was gone.

“Kaname-san..?”

Did the process finally stop..?



Mao’s battle continued. Her M9 had been pushed down by the enemy, and the 37mm gun was pressed against her cockpit. At the next moment, the shell would pierce her body....

However, just before that, a progress bar in one of the corners of the screen changed to “COMPLETE”. It was one of the anti-aircraft autocannons of the base that was around fifty meters from where she had fallen - she had managed to hack its control systems.

“Execute!!”

<Roger.>

The autocannon started moving by itself, aimed - and fired.

A hail of 20mm bullets hit the enemy machine. The white Eligor staggered, trying to use the rifle as an improvised shield, that soon became useless... and finally, after this moment of panic, remembered to use its Lambda Driver. Deflecting the bullets, it threw one of the anti-armor blades at the autocannon, which exploded. Then, it turned back towards Mao’s machine.

“Shit...”

That firepower was not enough after all, not nearly enough to inflict a fatal wound. The enemy was probably thinking that this was impudent of her. In her enemy’s movements, she saw anger at being humiliated - they did not resemble a graceful dance anymore.

The Eligor grabbed her machine by the collar. She saw the Lambda field gathering around the enemy’s hands - it was trying to tear her apart.

*This is it, then...*

As soon as that thought crossed her mind, she saw a spark fly from the back of the white machine. It was... a direct hit from a shell?

Did Clouseau come back for her? No, that didn’t look like a shot from one of the weapons he was carrying. It came from somewhere far away - from the other side of a precipice, in fact. There was a heat source there, three clicks away. She switched her sensor to night vision, and saw that the shooter was the newest

machine of the Soviet Army, a customized Zy-98 Shadow, with an extra optical sensor array on its head, and a large-caliber sniper rifle. A sniper-type Shadow wasn't in any of the intelligence reports she had read up until now.

Why was it alone? Where was its squad?

The Shadow shot again. The Eligor threw away the powerless M9, turned towards the new enemy, and prepared to meet it with its Lambda Driver. Mao saw that in one place, the armor had been particularly badly damaged by the volley of the anti-air autocannon and the Shadow's first shot, and a part of the core unit was exposed. She had to hurry...

Mao made her M9 get up, and with all her strength rammed her head in the back of the enemy machine. Her cranium sensors were smashed to bits, but she didn't care - that was all she had.

The enemy couldn't recover from the surprise attack, and collapsed. She chose her last auxiliary weapon - the head-mounted guns, and shot at point-blank range.

"Taaaake thiiiiis!!" she was shouting and gripping the triggers.

The double chain guns started revving up, and the feeder mechanism came alive, disgorging 50-caliber bullets on full auto. Their tungsten cores pierced and shredded the insides of the enemy machine, severing cables, destroying controls circuits and dynamos.

They also bounced back at the M9's head, turning it into Swiss cheese. One of the chain guns broke, the other jammed and exploded. Covered in black smoke, both machines collapsed on top of each other.

Her monitors went black - all of the head sensors were destroyed, the sub-sensors did not seem to respond as well. With all her strength, she pulled the handle of the emergency escape system that was installed in the cockpit pod. The explosive bolts



fired, blowing off the ceiling of the cockpit. She grasped her trusty .45 handgun and climbed out of the machine. Everything around her was covered in thick black smoke. She steadied her breathing, grasped her sidearm tightly, and very carefully advanced towards the enemy machine, lying near her broken M9. She saw that the cockpit hatch of the Eligor had been left open - the pilot had already left. Then where did..? Ah! The pilot was hiding near the leg of the M9, and she shot at her.

In answer, a grenade came rolling on the ground towards her feet, and she moved away at the last moment. She moved to the other side of the machine, and started pursuing the enemy. She finally saw the pilot, who was trying to run away - it was a woman, clad in a tight bodysuit. She seemed to be headed for the gate to the interior of the base, that was, it turned out, just near Mao. She thought that the enemy was heading for the launch control room - it was imperative to pursue her.

Mao didn't have time to wallow in the happy feeling that came after escaping certain death. She took a submachine gun and several magazines from the locker in the cockpit hatch... and remembered the Shadow that saved her life. It was still standing on that mountain ridge, little more than a speck from this distance. She took out field binoculars from her tactical vest, and looked at it. The machine turned towards her, and gave a nonchalant salute, then shouldered its sniper rifle, and seemed to shrug.

*No way...*

The Shadow pointed to its own head antenna, and made circular motions with its finger. He had to be using an FM antenna. Her M9's communications systems were destroyed during the battle. She put on her headset and switched to an open frequency.

"...how d'you like that timing?" a triumphant voice. A voice she thought she would never hear again. Oh God.

“I made it just in time, just at the right moment, eh? You’ll fall in love with me again, won’t you, nee-san?” said Kurz Weber, shameless as ever.



He had been picked up, dying, by Special Forces of the GRU, that had been late to the scene at Yamsk 11. He was given prompt medical treatment and a rehabilitation program, but wasn’t fully recovered yet. He learned of this operation only the previous day, from Wraith, and managed to persuade both Lieutenant Colonel Kirienko and his army surgeon to let him borrow the sniper Shadow prototype.

Properly speaking, in his condition he shouldn’t have boarded the AS. Some of his scars were burning already, and while he obviously wouldn’t be able to fight in his usual form, he could at least shoot from a safe distance.

Nevertheless, he seemed healthy enough to crack jokes as usual. He did look like a knight in shining armour right now, so he had to keep it as dramatic and cool as possible. Mao would probably be amazed by his miraculous return, and shed tears of joy, and then he would say: *“if you’re in trouble, I’d come back from the dead to rescue you”*.

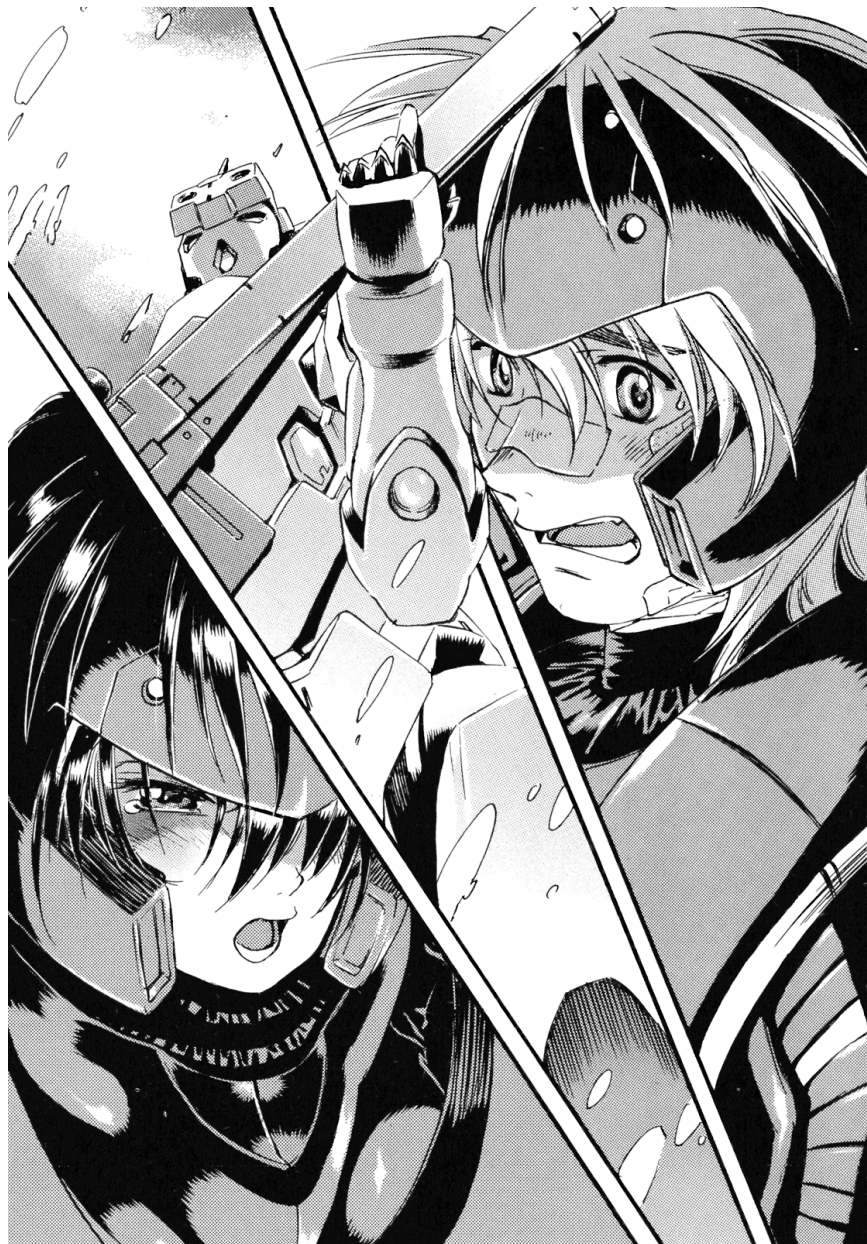
*Come on, say it... cry a little, Melissa.*

“...you’re the worst,” finally came her sullen voice over the radio.

“Eh..?”

“You died a heroic death, didn’t you? Why’d you come waltzing in here all of a sudden? So that was what Wraith wanted to say... I see. What a mess...”

“Wha-.. mess?! What’re you talking about, I-...”



“Ooh, right. You’re alive. Ooo, I am surprised. You satisfied?”

“What..?”

He didn't expect that chilly welcome, and thought that he was more likely to be the one crying.

"Please provide fire support for suppression of the remaining enemies. Over and out."

Saying that, Mao disappeared inside the base entrance.

"Sheesh, this is awful..."

He corrected the scope amplification and got back into a firing position. He spotted several ordinary type enemy ASes moving around the mountain. Silently and sadly, he marked his targets and began the cleanup.



His Falke had lost its limbs and became little more than a wreck. Clouseau climbed out of its cockpit, and started coughing violently, every cough causing sharp, stabbing pain from his ribs. Clouseau grimaced.

*Still, it's amazing that I'm actually alive. Looks like my eardrums might've been blown... Right ear can't hear anything. I see red... the left arm won't move. There's feeling in the fingertips, so it must be a fractured bone. It hurts... hurts, oh God, how it hurts. And if my ear doesn't get better, that will be awful. I won't be able to enjoy 5.1 channel sound. No, that's it. I'll stop doing this. When all of this heals, I'll migrate to Akihabara and start my Japanese studies again, and then I'll become a translator. Yes, every day will be fun. I'll definitely do that.*

"I'll," he coughed again, "stop this..!"

*Pff, strength... warrior's way... how ridiculous.*

The pain from his injuries was strong enough to make him feel that way. However, his work there wasn't done. He took out his pistol from the holster, and dragging his left leg, started

approaching the downed Eligor. He saw Fowler lying in a pool of blood near the cockpit. Black smoke was all around them.

He came closer, cautiously, keeping his gun trained on the enemy pilot, then pressed a finger to his neck. There was no pulse. Fowler was already dead. It looked like a fragment of the armor had pierced the cockpit, and his chest. In the end, he risked his life with that attack, and survived, while his enemy was dead. It wasn't a matter of who was stronger or weaker - pure chance. Because of that, an inexpressible feeling of regret arose in Clouseau's chest.

"I'm sorry, Fowler..."

The dead pilot's face was unexpectedly calm, as if he was sleeping. Clouseau wondered what he meant when he had told him about being defeated by a worthless drunk. What kind of tragedy happened to him? What did he think during the battle? How did he live up until now? All of that disappeared together with him.

It was hard even to stand up now. Clouseau sat onto the ground, and switched on his headset.

"This is... Uruz 1. I destroyed Fowler's machine. My M9 has been seriously damaged. I am seriously injured - well, I'd like to say that, but it doesn't look like I'm about to die yet. Is someone... alive?"

"Ben! Oh, I'm so glad to hear you," came Mao's voice. "I also managed to clean up somehow... and..."

He thought he heard her sniffing and coughing a little. Was she crying..? No, he had probably imagined that.

"...sorry, I was just a little surprised. Actually, Kurz is alive."

"...what?"

Clouseau opened his eyes wide in astonishment. That idiot was alive..? His stubbornness was simply amazing.

“Looks like the GRU helped him. His Shadow’s taking care of the exterior, and I’m going inside the base. I contacted Yang and the others, but they’re still pinned down by the enemy on the lower levels. The control room should be close from my position.”

“You’re going in alone? That’s unreasonably dangerous.”

“Not like we have any choice. The enemy’s pilot also ran in, I’m sure she’s prepared to launch.”

“...right. Take care.”

“Aha.”

The line was closed.

“Shit...”

Even if he thought before that he was going to quit this job, right now, unable to fight, he was more disappointed with his injured body than ever before.



Sousuke was keeping his breathing even, his senses sharp. Keeping his pistol on the burning Belial, he continued to carefully step closer. He saw a human figure behind the black smoke. Leonard was sitting on a large, meter-wide pipe, covering a large wound in his abdomen. He noticed Sousuke, and lifted the revolver he was carrying...

But Sousuke was faster. His bullet hit Leonard in the shoulder - his enemy swayed a little, and dropped the gun, which fell to the concrete floor with a dry metal sound.

It didn’t look like he had other weapons. His hands were now hanging limply, and he stared at Sousuke with vacant eyes.

“But I saw it clearly...” muttered Leonard. “I pierce you through the cockpit. I know I was supposed to. And that would be

the end of it. And she would complete her change of this world, so everything would end.”

He let out a deep sigh.

“How did it come to be this way? Why is this continuing... isn’t it strange..?”

“I don’t know, but this is what I planned to do,” said Sousuke, without taking his sights off him. “Didn’t know if it would work, though.”

“Impressive,” Leonard’s voice was filled with something close to self-derision.

“Leonard, it was a gamble on my part, I couldn’t know if you would fall for the trick. It’s a wonder it went this well.”

“Yes, isn’t it... Looks like Teresa’s message worked too well...”

It looked like Leonard finally couldn’t take it all anymore. He bent forward a little, and burst into laughter... or perhaps tears, Sousuke couldn’t tell.

“To think that she knew about our mother... and that she could do all this... I thought she was a stupid little sister... turns out, she’s much tougher than me...”

He continued muttering, as if delirious.

“I... don’t really understand... I’ve started hating everything a long time ago... I thought everything was worthless... and everyone was an idiot. I know it’s not normal, but... that’s why I wanted to become normal. And I thought there was no other way...”

Sousuke was silent.

“You understand? I wanted to become normal...”

“I... do,” Sousuke lowered the gun. “I’ve wanted the same thing. For a while now.”

It looked like they were finally having a normal conversation. Two very different people, who wanted the same

thing. Were they the positive and negative, the light and shadow, - that didn't matter. Then, essentially, were they not like comrades?

He saw a small spark appear in Leonard's eyes, that previously seemed so lifeless.

"You won't ever be able to, you know."

"Maybe."

"Now we understand each other... dying together, as comrades, eh... so... you think this is it?"

"No."

"I thought so" he was grinning broadly.

Sousuke had already noticed. Leonard's left hand was holding a small remote control that looked like some sort of detonator, possibly activating the self-destruction of the facility. He was ready to press it. Sousuke had no choice but to kill him, even if the fact that his enemy was Tessa's brother gripped his heart. He aimed for the head, and his finger started squeezing the trigger...

A rifle bullet hit Leonard in the chest - a fountain of blood sprayed from it, and the detonator fell.

The shot came from the left side, eight o'clock. Sousuke dropped and rolled into cover. Then, he saw a man with a rifle, standing in one of the upper passage doorways.

It was, of course, Andrei Kalinin, in his field tactical vest, leading two subordinates. One of them was carrying the limp body of a black-haired girl on his shoulder.

"Chidori!..!"

The two subordinate, one of them carrying Kaname, disappeared into the doorway. When Sousuke tried to move out, Kalinin shot in his direction. Why did he order them to kill Leonard, then? The remote control he had been holding must have really been a detonator for charges planted around the TAROS. He



must have killed Leonard to prevent any harm to Kaname, but to think that Kalinin would go that far...



“Your plan failed! Let her go!”

They seemed to be planning to escape with her. If they had Kaname, they could build the TAROS somewhere else again. Perhaps the Lieutenant Commander even anticipated that turn of events. He would go that far... even to kidnap her...

“Lieutenant Commander..! You..!”

He was speechless.

*You must know how I feel about her. You know me, what kind of person I am, from a long time ago, in Afghanistan. Why then, are you taking her from me? Why can't you just walk away silently? Why aren't you answering?!*

*Traitor.*

He had never felt such a strong hatred towards the man.

He aimed to hit, and shot - but his attempt failed, as the range was too much for a handgun. They exchanged fire several times, then Kalinin and his subordinates left the former dry dock. The tunnel they were in led straight to the runway.

Sousuke was about to pursue them, and turned back for a last glance at Leonard. He was dead, no doubt about that. Sousuke didn't feel any pity for him, either. This must have been another humiliation, and it was understandable that he was willing to blow up the TAROS and everything else.

*Yes, if I had left her to you, I wouldn't have minded blowing myself up. Still, there were more things you could have done. Couldn't you at least have told me something for Tessa? With all that power of yours, you were one big idiot, Leonard.*

Sousuke didn't like that mood. Things he wanted to say came one after another, but his enemy was dead.

“Get a grip..!”

Now he had to go take back Kaname.

Sousuke counted the bullets he had left, and started his pursuit.



Mao, holding her SMG at the ready, was carefully walking through the dark, concrete passageway inside the base. She only heard the faint sounds of the battle that Yang and the others were engaged in below, and her own breathing, that seemed so loud. She had memorized the route to the control room a dozen times over. Level F, compartment eight - it should be just ahead, down a gently sloping corridor, then down a couple of staircases.

It was deep underground - very deep. *Calm down. No need to feel nervous. The enemy is all tied up on the lower levels, there wouldn't be enough people to stop me here. Damn, since when did I become such a scaredy cat? Like a teen girl...* but now, life became precious to her.

Of course... it was all that idiot's fault. What was all that about making her "fall in love again"..?

There were two enemies around the corner - they had noticed her. She dived behind a nearby container, peered around its corner and shot one of them - then threw a grenade, without removing the safety pin. The first one collapsed, and the second faltered, just enough to allow her the time to charge in. She shot at full auto, and the man collapsed.

*Right, Melissa. Your intuition is as sharp as ever.*

She picked up the grenade, which was slowly rolling on the concrete floor, and moved on. The time until the enemy gets the launch codes had already elapsed, and she could expect a launch at any minute.

She came across a sign: [E-8] - her destination was almost in front of her, just one flight of stairs down. She hated entry through the staircase - too many points from which the enemy could be aiming at her. Just a little longer... there seemed to be no traps. She entered the hallway, passed by a large iron door that led to the control room, and started setting shaped charges on the wall near the door, which looked too sturdy to be blown off. Besides, the plans that Wraith had brought them proved that blowing a hole in the wall would be a better shortcut. She set in the fuse, went to a safe distance, and detonated the charges.

As the shockwave passed and smoke filled the corridor, she rushed in - there was no time, no time, she had to hurry..!

Three people in the control room. One was deafened by the explosion, and was still dazed when she shot him. The second one started lifting his gun, but she was a split second quicker. He fell, his body pierced by 5.7mm slugs. The last one remaining was that girl - white AS pilot suit, an impressive figure, though she was still in her teens, short hair and glasses. A pistol was in her right hand, and her left... The thumb of her left hand rested on a large red button. *Red*. It must be the launch button...

She didn't have time to try and persuade her, or shout at her to stop, and squeezed the trigger. The bullets pierced the AS suit, and the girl fell.

In the next instant, however, the control room was flooded with the shrill noise of alarms. The main screen went red, and [LAUNCH] was displayed in Cyrillic characters. A tremor shook the base as the rocket engines of the first missile engaged.

Mao jumped towards the girl, and kicked out the weapon from her hands. She then turned towards the command console, and cursing her bad Russian, tried to read the information on the launched missile. It turned out that there wasn't only one launch

code - that was only the first launch. The second was already on standby, and the third was near completion. All the remaining silos were getting activated - however, there was no one to give the launch command anymore.

Only one missile had been launched - but it was quite enough. The detonation of its 55 megaton warhead would turn a megalopolis the size of Tokyo into ashes. And its target?

She immediately recognized those coordinates... twenty degrees, fifty minutes north, by one-forty degrees, thirty-one minutes East.

The target was Merida Island.

Around twenty-four minutes later, the missile would hit the island, and she did not know what was going on there at the moment, except the fact that Tessa and Sousuke were fighting, and Kaname was imprisoned on that little piece of land.

She thought she could order it to self-destruct in mid-flight, but it didn't seem to have that capability. It simply went on towards its target, ignoring all obstacles. She couldn't do anything from this side... she had to warn Tessa and the others.

She operated the console, and started searching for available satellite connections. The [SEARCH IN PROGRESS] bar seemed to move incredibly slowly.

“Come on..!”

For the world at large, that was perhaps not the worst outcome. However, why Merida?

“What are you planning?!” she shouted at the girl, who was lying near her in a puddle of blood. She had been wounded in many places, and probably didn't have long left.

“Missile... at Merida..?” she asked feebly.

“Yes. Is that what you've been planning?”

“Hahah...” the girl spasmed and twitched, but her bloody mouth was laughing “...the change... has stopped. I felt it... inside the machine... he... made a mistake... all her fault...”

“Change..? Who’s that girl..?”

“They can all disappear... he... and the girl... this way, I’d be alone... unfair... what’s wrong with me..? Cruel man... that girl, too, in the flames of hell...”

“What are you on about..?”

“Let them burn...”

She continued muttering in delirium, and soon fell silent.



It wasn’t exactly a mopping-up operation, but Tessa and the remaining crew members somehow got through the enemy soldiers and into the former dry dock. Perhaps the enemy morale was shaken by the Belial’s fall, she thought, as the TAROS came in sight. Her crew was dispersing, ready for an ambush, but none came. Kaname was not inside the TAROS - she might have left on her own, or been taken by someone else. The wrecks of both the Laevatein and the Belial were near the dome of the TAROS, but Sousuke was nowhere in sight, and did not answer on any radio channel.

She did, however, discover the body of Leonard. Her brother’s motionless corpse was leaning on a large pipe, and she stood stock still before it.

She had thought that it may come to that. He would probably despise himself, or her, in that situation. In any case she was prepared to resolve some things that were between them in the past, and wanted to say many things to him at their next meeting... wanted to preach to him the wrongness of his ways, her chest

puffed with pride... and now, it was impossible. She couldn't even cry, and she didn't understand the feelings within herself. If she got out of there alive, then perhaps her feelings would break through, and she would suffer - after all, his death was her doing... Either way, he was the last relative she had, and now even he was gone.

“Captain. Transmission from Mao.”

“Melissa..?”

Shinohara, who brought along satellite communications equipment, had caught her transmission. It was impossible to have a conversation at this short wavelength, and they only received information from her in brief. The operator, Shinohara, showed her the transcript of the transmission: the Afghan missile base was under their control. However, they had no time to be happy about their comrades' safety.

In twenty-two minutes, a nuclear missile would hit Merida Island.



*Admit it. You're defeated.*

Even Kalinin could not predict that everything would turn out like this, however, victory had been on their side with a ninety percent chance... all the defensive preparations in the coastal waters, the island's defensive unit, and finally the Belial. Everything had seemed to be flawless. There were no miscalculations, but perhaps because of the overwhelming amount of damage, they were now driven into a corner. He understood that this fight wasn't going as he planned, and yet he could not stop.

The power of Sagara Sousuke and Teletha Testarossa was terrifying indeed. He could not have imagined the *Tuatha de*

*Danaan* breaking through all of their defenses and coming right up to the dry dock. Because of that, he had had to split his forces into two parts, and they arrived late. The Laevatein had amazed him as well, having not only destroyed the entire AS troop, but also the Belial. Those youngsters had defeated him in this decisive battle. A splendid display of resolution, and extraordinary skill.

Leonard had planned to take Chidori to the grave together with him in that explosion, when the plan had failed. However, that would be most unpleasant. If he at least had Kaname Chidori, he could start off again. He wouldn't let her die just to satisfy that boy's foolish pride, and so he shot him, not knowing if he was seriously going to use the detonator or not.

Kalinin quickly ran up the staircase and asked one of his men:

“What about the escape helicopter?”

“On standby, on the runway, sir.”

“Right.”

He would escape, and start over... but was it something he really wanted?

“Of course...”

It was his wish, and he would do everything for it. Not an ideal world like Leonard and the others wanted to create - no, just restore it to what it should have been. And now, he was the only person able to oversee the process. If Sousuke was going to try and stop him - he would not show mercy.

“Here. Hurry, sir.”

They went out on the camouflaged runway, in the corner of which a transport helicopter was waiting for them, its rotors already spinning. Taking the unconscious Kaname with him, Kalinin hurried to the helicopter's boarding ramp.





As soon as Sousuke got out onto the runway, he heard the noise of the powerful turbo shaft engines. Kalinin and his men were boarding a transport helicopter, taking Kaname with them.

“Chidori..!”

He broke off into a run - thirty meters to the helicopter. One of the soldiers on the boarding ramp was aiming his rifle at him, and shot - Sousuke shot back, emptying the magazine of the handgun on the run, and hit the enemy in the shoulderpad. He ran, changing the magazine, and saw the soldier fall out of the aircraft. The helicopter's wheels were already lifting off the ground, it was going to take off at any moment now. Sousuke aimed at the tail rotor and shot, knowing that it was useless - 9mm bullets couldn't harm a military helicopter.

He suddenly spotted something left in the corner of a runway - a bundle of cable that was used to fix aircraft, around three meters long.

“Have to make it..!”

He ran towards that bundle of cable and picked it up. The helicopter was already hovering above ground, starting to accelerate - and took off.

He threw the cable - its end flew in an arc, and reached the tail rotor of the machine. A horrible screeching sound came as the steel alloy cable whipped around the rotor, and the machine swayed, but did not fall. It hovered around a meter from the ground, struggling to maintain control, and Sousuke rushed to its right-side door. A soldier was in the way, attached by the safety belts inside the machine - Sousuke shot him and shoved the corpse aside. Near him, stretched out on the bank, was Kaname, who seemed to try to

get up dizzily. Kalinin was nowhere in sight, possibly in the pilot's cabin.

“Chidori!”

“...Sousuke..?”

He rushed towards her, and helped her get up. It was the first time he felt her so close in more than a year. He had finally caught up with her... he suppressed the flood of emotions that were flooding his mind.

“Can you stand? We have to go, now. Get a grip!”

He quickly operated a control panel inside the aircraft, and the main cargo hatch started opening - very, very slowly. The outside scenery that came into view was also slowly spinning, as the helicopter was still struggling above the runway.

“...what... is this a dream again? I...”

“No, it's not. We're going back together. Going back, you hear?”

At that moment, Kalinin appeared from the pilot's cabin, armed with a rifle. Sousuke pulled Kaname with him into the middle of the freight containers. Kalinin shot - and he felt a dull pain in his back. The AS pilot suit, being bulletproof, stopped the slug itself, but the pain was still intense.

“Let that girl go, and drop your weapon!”

“Don't screw with me!”

He pushed his gun out from the crates and fired. There was no way he would hit from his position. Kalinin didn't even stop, and fired back. The metal fittings that held the cargo in place flew apart, and one of the boxes fell on Sousuke.

It was a big case, likely used for anti-tank or anti-aircraft missiles, well over a hundred kilograms. The centrifugal force from the uncontrolled rotation of the aircraft added to the crushing force on Sousuke's chest...

Kaname, still in a daze, was trying to get up from the floor and understand the situation around her.

“Sousuke..?. Is it really you... Sousuke..?”

“Chido..ri..!”

He couldn't move, and Kalinin was coming closer.

At that moment, the aircraft started vibrating, and the rotation worsened. The crates started sliding down to the cargo hatch and were flung outside, on the runway, taking Kaname with them.

He swore, powerless - his foot was caught in the cargo fixtures, and they wouldn't move an inch. The helicopter suddenly lurched and started rapidly gaining altitude. He saw her small figure tumble down and roll onto the runway, and then quickly go further and further away.

“CHIDORI!..!”

He kicked away, pulled and finally untied the metal fixtures, but as he got up, the helicopter was already more than ten meters from the ground and climbing. He would just die if he jumped. He came that close, and yet couldn't do anything...

The machine shook again. He grabbed onto something, then turned back to look over his shoulder. Kalinin was clinging on to a seat, gazing at him, and seemed to mutter something - but he couldn't hear anything because of the noise of engines and the wind that came in from the open cargo hatch.

The helicopter stopped climbing, inclined steeply, and another impact shook the machine. It was now revolving faster than ever - this was no time to think about fighting each other. The machine started losing height fast - completely out of control, it was falling from the sky. The runway was left somewhere far behind, and it looked like the machine was slipping north.

The ground was coming up fast, at such an angle that this couldn't even be called an emergency landing. The rotors struck the trees first, and then the body of the machine slammed into the rocky ground.



When Tessa finally reached the runway, a horrendous noise came from somewhere to the north, like an aircraft crashing. There was a plume of smoke that went in the same direction.

“What was that?”

“I don't know, Ma'am, but we have to get out of here,” Mardukas was hurrying alongside her.

Twenty minutes until the missile hits the island. Even if they found an aircraft that very moment and took off, they didn't know if they could escape.

Sergeant Dejlani, who remained in contact with the crew members in the underground hangar, reported:

“We've got a plane! It's the turboprop 'King Air', turns out it was left here. They're refueling it. Not enough time to get a full load, but we'll manage to take off.”

“Good! Get it up!”

“Yes, but... there's already someone there before us.”

“Someone..?”

“Er, well... they report a white tiger in a cage inside the plane.”

“A... tiger?”

She didn't understand. Tiger on a plane? Whose pet was that?

“Does it look dangerous?”

“Er, not really...”

“Well, let’s take it with us then.”

“Aye-aye...”

The main elevator started lifting the airplane out of the underground hangar and onto the runway. The place was filled with that familiar noise of engines once again - it was their old home... but they had no time to reflect on it.

“We need to get the runway cleared off, there’s something there.”

Around fifty meters from them were scattered what seemed like boxes of ammo, and foreign objects on the runway were a hazard. But...

“Ka... Kaname-san?”

There weren’t only ammunition boxes. Kaname Chidori was lying there.

“Captain..?”

Not paying attention to Mardukas, she ran towards the girl. The runway wasn’t safe yet - there was a risk of enemy ambush, but she didn’t care.

“Kaname-san?!”

Tessa’s breathing was ragged, her shoulders heaving up and down, as she shook Kaname.

“Ow...”

It looked like she was thankfully uninjured, except a few bruises and scratches.

“Please, Captain - I’ll take her,” one of her subordinates had come up from behind, lifted her on his shoulder and started running back towards the plane. Tessa tried to keep up, and kept calling her.

“Kaname-san!! It’s me! Do you hear me?”

“Te...ssa..?”

“What happened? Where’s Sagara-san?”

“Sousuke... saved me... in the helicopter...”

She weekly lifted a finger and pointed to the north, where the sound of a crash had come from moments before, and now a column of black smoke was rising. It was about five hundred meters north of the runway, and Tessa guessed the rest of the story. Someone - probably Kalinin - had kidnapped Kaname, and Sousuke chased after him... he was in that helicopter.

“Have to go... after him...”

Kaname couldn't speak anymore, as her body shook in a violent coughing fit. Her face was ghostly pale. Tessa touched her forehead - the girl had a very serious fever. Was it an after-effect of using the TAROS..? In any case, if she didn't get rest, she would become worse.

“Sagara-san...”

She looked in the direction of the supposed crash. She wondered if he was all right, and if he could have been thrown off. If he was inside when it crashed, the worst could have happened.

She looked at her watch - another eighteen minutes until impact. Was there time to send her men to look for him - rush there, and take him back..?

No.

No matter how she calculated, it was simply impossible. The missile would come around the time they found him. There was barely enough time to get to a safe distance as it was.

She tried calling him on the radio - since they were on the surface, the signal should be fine.

“This is Ansuz. Uruz 7, come in! This island is about to be hit by a nuclear missile, ETA eighteen minutes!”

No response.

The elevator had finally lifted the twin-engine turboprop airplane up onto the runway. It was an old, trusty plane, that had usually carried off-duty members of Mithril to Tokyo or Guam.

“Ansuz to Uruz 7, come in! I repeat, this island will be subject to a nuclear strike in seventeen minutes! Uruz 7!!”

No response.

The crew members were finishing the takeoff preparations as fast as humanly possible. A couple were removing the fuel supply pipe, others were carrying their injured comrades to the aircraft, others yet finished moving the ammo boxes scattered on the tarmac, and were running back. Mardukas pulled Tessa into the aircraft almost by force.

“Do you hear me, Uruz 7! Answer, Sagara-san!!”

“This is... Uruz 7,” Sousuke’s voice was barely intelligible because of static and noise.

“Sagara-san!!”

“Tessa... I’m glad you’re ok. My present location... near radar number three. Yours..?”

“On the runway! Kaname-san is fine, we are getting out of here. The nuclear strike will wipe out the base in sixteen minutes. Come here, quick!”

This way, there was a possibility of them making it out alive, if they waited until the last possible moment until he got on board, and then took off at full speed...

“Negative, Ansuz.”

“What--...”

“Uruz 7... engaged in combat. Linking up is impossible.”



Yes, his battle was not over yet.

Under a beautiful morning sky, he stood in the middle of the burning wreckage of the helicopter. Drop tanks, fragments of the fuselage, rotors and engine pods were scattered around him, and everything was covered in black smoke. He sat near a broken stabilizer, and reported to Tessa. The noise was awful, and he didn't know its source, but most likely his headset was damaged in the impact.

“The enemy? How many?”

“One.”

Sousuke was holding his combat knife in a backhand grip, standing face to face with the last remaining enemy. Five meters in front of him, holding a similar knife, stood Andrei Kalinin, his uniform torn, his face bloody.

They were both a sorry sight. Even if he had proposed to him to stop the fight, and run back to Tessa together, the reply was obvious.

“Kaname... is she all right?”

“...yes, she's lying down for now.

“Please get her back safely.”

“But...”

She sounded like she wanted to say something, but stopped herself. She was too aware of the situation, painfully aware, and understood that if Sousuke said that it was impossible, it really was like that.

“Well... I promise.”

“I am grateful. Uruz 7, over and out.”

He took off his head gear - he wouldn't need it anymore, and it sounded like Tessa was holding back tears. Should he have told her something affectionate at the end? No, he shouldn't, this double-dealing was what hurt her the most.

“Are you finished?” said Kalinin.



“Yes... do you know about the nuke?”

“I heard. One of my men was tracking it,” he sighed,  
 “Sabina’s handiwork, I’d say. It was a mistake sending her there.”

“...were you really planning to start a nuclear war?”

“Of course. Everything had to be fixed anyway. There  
 wouldn’t have been any trouble in the future, we would have  
 rebuilt everything anew.”

Sousuke suddenly remembered that strong feeling of anger  
 and hatred towards this man for his lies. It was not for his  
 admission of mass genocide - Kalinin was lying not only to  
 Sousuke, but to himself.

“If you have an excuse, I’d like to hear it.”

“No matter what I’ll say, you’ll be angry.”

“Of course.”

Somewhere behind them, one of the helicopter’s engines  
 exploded, and the area was showered with fragments of turbine  
 blades, screws and torn pieces of aluminum alloy casing.

The explosion was like a sign. A cloud of smoke covered  
 the area temporarily, and Kalinin used that to rush towards him.  
 His movements had been almost sluggish until then, but at that  
 moment his speed was incredible. There were no feints, no clever  
 techniques, no flexible use of wrists and shoulders - just the point  
 of his knife, coming straight at him.

He barely had time to move his head, and he felt the blade  
 swish past his throat. The stab turned into a slashing attack faster  
 than he could imagine. He thought that his opponent would try to  
 grapple him, but instead he was aiming at his back. Sousuke  
 dodged and jumped away, to get a little distance, and the enemy  
 looked like he was going to kick up the dust at him. Sousuke  
 closed one eye and tried to aim for his opponent’s leg, but instead  
 of kicking up dust Kalinin’s leg came at his temple. He blocked it

with difficulty - but not completely. The impact on his left hand, that was blocking the kick, was probably the most powerful he had ever received in hand to hand combat. He staggered, barely managed to right himself, and tried to slash his opponent. Kalinin dodged the attack without difficulty, and with the same movement the heel of his jungle boot struck Sousuke's side.

Sousuke had trouble breathing after the kick, and his vision became dark for an instant, but he returned to a guard position.

“What, you can't fight without your AS?”

Sousuke was silent, and tried to steady his breathing.

“I taught you many things, but there was something I always thought.”

“What?”

“You don't have any talent for this.”

At the same moment, Kalinin's right hand moved so fast it seemed to leave afterimages on his retina, almost as a bullet - but he somehow dodged it. Stabs kept coming with the same speed - he avoided them with great difficulty, and counterattacked. Sparks flew - he scrambled to right his posture, his vision swimming.

Talent... he knew he didn't have any. He didn't even bother to answer.

*I know that I'm not a genius, at hand-to-hand, and shooting, and piloting. I'm on a pretty average level, nowhere near the top. There are a lot of people more skilled than me - Mao, Clouseau, Kurz - all of them more talented. I know that. And in my grasp of hand-to-hand combat, I'm probably inferior to Kalinin.*

*So - why, then? Why did you use me as a soldier? My only strength is stubbornly fighting to the very last.*

Sousuke kept dodging, parrying, withstanding all the attacks that were thrown at him, and the brilliant morning sun was rising behind his back. Unexpectedly, this position turned to his

advantage, as Kalinin had to squint, and his field of vision became narrow - if he was going to attack, this was the time.



“What wrong? You can't fight without your AS?” “…………” “I taught you many things, but I always thought something.” “What?” “You don't have any talent.”

He charged his enemy, barely avoiding Kalinin's stab, caught his knee and pulled. He could have avoided the attack, but instead he grabbed the knee and pulled with all his might - and it was not enough. This way his back was open, but he didn't care anymore. He shifted his posture and put his entire weight behind the grapple, almost performing a sode-tsuru-komi-goshi<sup>6</sup>. His opponent staggered, but was regaining his balance - and at that moment he kicked him to the ground with all his might.

It was a victory of perseverance. Kalinin fell on the ground, and it was not a pretty fall, like in a match - no, it looked like a shameful scuffle of some children in the sandbox. But that was fine.

He tried to grip his opponent's right arm - Kalinin was still trying to slash him with the knife, but with all his strength he tried to complete the back arm lock. The knife finally fell out of Kalinin's hand, the enemy losing his only weapon. Victory was very close.

He clumsily head-butted him, over and over again, just trying to create an opportunity for himself.

A thick sound - his nose cartilage was snapped.

*Anger.*

*Hatred.*

*No mercy.*

Still on his enemy's back, locking his hands, Sousuke reached for the knife that he still had, and stabbed at the man's defenseless chest. He struck a rib, and remembered that he had to hold the blade horizontally. Sousuke remembered where the heart was - he only had to push the blade in, and almost felt the sensation of serrated steel piercing flesh and ripping apart arteries...

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<sup>6</sup> Judo maneuver - sleeve lifting and pulling throw.

He didn't stab. The point of the blade reached Kalinin's chest and stopped. He tried again, and again, but it didn't go further.

This blade couldn't reach the enemy's heart, because he couldn't drive it in. He became painfully aware of that fact. He was young and strong, but all that did not matter anymore, and his strength disappeared somewhere.

He jumped back from Kalinin, telling himself to get up, and charge the man once more, but realized it was useless, so he took three steps back.

He couldn't kill his father.

"Do whatever you want..." he muttered.

He still kept his back to the wreckage. He took the knife, lying in front of him, and threw it in Kalinin's direction. It stuck the ground right in front of the man, and remained there, quivering slightly.

Sousuke felt a terrible fatigue. In front of him, Kalinin was getting up slowly.

"...that is why I said that you have no talent for this."

"Shut up..."

"You're a lamb, brought up by a pack of wolves. You don't need blood, you've no taste for flesh, but you still pretend to be a wolf, because if you didn't, you would die. Is there a more twisted and sorrowful existence..?"

"Like I know..."

"You shouldn't have to do this. You shouldn't have become the man that could drive me into a corner. Not Kasshim, or even Uruz 7, no..."

Sousuke was silent.

"There had to have been a more appropriate place for you, but... you can't turn back anymore. You destroyed yourself."

What was the man trying to say? What was this all of a sudden - a stale speech about how he “wasn’t born to be a soldier”.

*I’m a sorrowful existence, you say. I should have become a normal boy, you say. But I didn’t. And now it’s too late.*

“But I’ll help you make that distinction.”

Kalinin picked up the knife, and approached carefully, getting closer with every step. Once a fight was started, it had to be settled. He could do what Sousuke couldn’t - that was the difference between a lamb and a wolf, and this distinction had to be enforced.

He closed in, his posture low, preparing for a thrusting attack. Sousuke was leaning against a piece of wreckage, simply looking at him feebly...

But the stab he was expecting didn’t come. Kalinin coughed violently, and spit blood. The knife fell from his hands - then both of his arms went limp, and he collapsed.

The back of his field uniform was soaked in blood. He probably received that injury during the crash - Sousuke just noticed that many metal fragments had pierced his back, and evidently reached his internal organs. And he fought in that condition...

“W-why did--...”

“It was... your last... training,” his voice was weak, “I wanted you to think... about what you are.”

He grabbed Sousuke’s shoulder with his big hand, now covered in blood.

“You wouldn’t stab. I knew it. You’re a gentle child...”

“Stop it.”

These words were worse than being stabbed. He didn’t want to hear this. He wasn’t like that. Why didn’t this man scold

him properly... if he continued to speak like that, Sousuke wouldn't be able to stand up anymore.

“Wanted to... get you back...”

He sighed deeply, like his life was leaving his body.

“I also... wanted to go back... to Irina... and the child...”

He was talking about his wife, who had died, while expecting a child, because of a medical error, while he was in Afghanistan.

“And that is why you went with Leonard's plan? A man like you, following some kind of crazy pipe dream?!”

“You thought... I was flawless..?”

“That's what a father's got to be like, no?!”

Kalinin smiled faintly, perhaps glad to be called a father.

“If you look... at any father closely, it's like that... before you know it, he's only half a man...”

“Lieutenant Commander...”

*“Ikinasai.”*

His last words were in Japanese<sup>7</sup>.

Strength left the hand that was grabbing Sousuke's shoulder, and it fell to the ground.



He didn't know how much time he spent on his knees near Kalinin's body, who looked like he was simply daydreaming. The noise of turboprop engines woke him up, and he looked up at the sky. The “King Air” had just taken off from the runway. Inside were Tessa and the rest of the crew. He glanced at his watch - ten

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<sup>7</sup> Can mean "go on!" or "live!". Same last words as Sousuke's mother said (see “Voice from the North”)

minutes left until impact. If they went to full speed now, they would probably reach the limit of the safety zone.

“Chidori...”

There was so much he wanted to tell her, and yet it had come to this. They only had a dozen seconds inside the helicopter. He had been waiting for that for more than a year, and yet those moments were all he got. He didn’t even know if she had returned to her true self, he only knew that the so-called “change” had stopped. She would probably be happy from now on, wouldn’t she..? At least, that was what he wanted, but now he lost any way to make sure of that.

Well, he did what he could. In the end, he didn’t even rewrite his last will and testament, and couldn’t think of anything, even now. He couldn’t do anything for her right now.

“Good luck...” he muttered, looking at the tiny speck that was the plane, disappearing in the morning sun.

He stood up, and leaving Kalinin’s body, began running towards the base. It was not like he was going to find anything useful. He didn’t even want to move anymore, but still he ran.

*Ikinasai...* he seemed to remember those words, as if in a mist, from somewhere long, long ago. Why did he say that, instead of properly saying “live” or “go”? However, those words had the power of a supreme order, and he kept running into the morning sun.

He found one of the entrances to the base in a corner of the maneuvering grounds. Kicking down the wire mesh gate, he jumped down the staircase - it didn’t even take him thirty seconds.



Turning several corners and passing several doors, he suddenly found himself standing in corridor zero<sup>8</sup>.

With the warhead on that ICBM, the underground structures of Merida would not withstand the heat, or the shockwave of the detonation, even if he ran to the drainage facilities at the very bottom of the underground base. Even if he somehow managed to survive the initial impact, the structures would collapse, and ocean water would flow in, drowning him. Either way led to the same result. It was futile trying to hide underground, and there didn't seem to be any methods of escape.

He looked at the watch. Seven minutes.

“Nothing I can do, eh...”

It seemed to be futile. He sat on the floor of corridor zero, thinking, and then noticed a large hole in the wall. On the other side was the dry dock, where he settled his score with the Belial.

That's right, Sousuke had completely forgotten about that fellow. He climbed over a pile of rubble, and saw the damaged Laevatein still lying in the same position he had left it in. Its head was still relatively undamaged, so its hearing sensors should be operational. He rushed over, and called him.

“Al...”

<I thought you were going to leave me like this,> came his voice from the external speakers, his tone flat as usual.

The cockpit had been destroyed, but Al's core unit was in the abdomen. The maneuver had been dangerous for him, but he had survived.

“You know about the nuke?”

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<sup>8</sup> Just a side note: in Japan, they usually start a numbered list (eg. in official documents) with zero (so it's point 0 to point 9, instead of 1 to 10).

<Yes, I do. I had been monitoring the transmission from Afghanistan.>

“Right...”

<It is a MIRV design, with each warhead carrying a nominal charge of 550 kilotons in TNT equivalent, all of them targeting Merida. It is impossible to take refuge on the island.>

“Yeah, isn’t it...”

<At least we could get our revenge on that piece of scrap over there.>

Al bore a grudge against the Belial from his days in the Arbalest. The fight at that school... Yes, the school. It was only a year ago, but he felt like it was forever, and missed it. In the square courtyard of that school he was defeated by the Belial, who then kidnapped Kaname. He had then told all of his classmates that he would “definitely bring her back” - it was so long ago... and now he was at this dead end.

“How much time left?”

<Five minutes and counting.>

“Seems so long...”

He knew it was useless to struggle, and just waited, feeling every second pass slower than ever.

He suddenly remembered the memory chip that was in one of his pockets - the one that he had got from Sarah Miller. He was planning to look at the contents after the operation had ended, but now he had no playback device. There was, of course, one in the cockpit, but that had been destroyed by the Belial.

“Think you can read a memory card?”

<Confirming... it is feasible. There is a functioning slot in the cockpit.>

He climbed in through the hole in the cockpit hatch, pinching his nose because of the overpowering smell of burned

metal and vinyl. The master seat was gone, the space was full of twisted cables, system parts were hanging by their wires, but he found a box-like device that had escaped destruction. He pulled it towards himself, and inserted the memory card.

“Well, can you even display this somewhere?”

<Only display panel six is operational. Displaying.>

The magazine-sized screen on the right side, which also somehow hadn’t been damaged, flickered to life, and he started looking through the contents.

“So it’s a video...”

Sarah had written that it was something she found on the net. He took a moment to look at the file properties. It was called [tokanasousuke\_01]. Finally, he pushed the Play button.

The resolution was pretty low, lots of grain, mono sound. First, a classroom came into view - a little different from what he remembered. The scene outside the window was also slightly different. Sounds of the brass band club practicing. Shouts from the baseball team, training outside. Girls’ laughter from the corridor. This was, unmistakably, Jindai High.

The classroom was probably not the familiar 2-4, but the one above it, 3-4. The picture wobbled, and suddenly the floor and ceiling changed places.

“Hey, is this thing on already?”

“It’s upside down. Look.”

The camera was finally fixed on a tripod, and the picture became steady. The first thing that came into view, was the face of Shinji Kazama. No mistake, it was really him.

“Err, ahem. We don’t really know where you guys are, and what you’re doing, so we thought we would give you some news this way. If you see this, please contact us, somehow.”

“Hey, hey, you’re not really making any sense this way!”  
came a voice from outside the picture, and some people laughed.

“B-but, we don’t really remember if it’s ok to say names and all... we’ll be laying this out for the world to see, you know.”

“Who cares. Come on, one-two-”

The picture moved again, and now showed the students gathered in front of the blackboard, three dozen of them. He knew them all well - he wouldn’t forget any of their faces. They all shouted at once:

“Chidori! Sagara! Come back quickly!”

They were definitely far from being in perfect unison, and then broke out into laughter, with some saying “let’s remake this”, and others telling them to leave it this way.

Kazama turned the camera back towards him. A somewhat strained file was on his face.

“...so-o, that’s sort of what we wanted to do. Thought that you two might see it somewhere. So, whom shall we start with?”

“Sensei! Sensei will go first!” shouted many voiced behind the camera, some people whistled and clapped. Kazama left the picture, and was replaced by a woman - their female teacher, Eri Kagurazaka. She had always worn a suit before, but now she was in a loose shirt and casual pants.

“Eeh... Sagara-kun, Chidori-san. I’m your homeroom teacher, Kagurazaka. How are you? A lot of things happened, but everyone is doing their best. I’m keeping your personal effects, so don’t worry about them.”

“Sensei, is there really nothing else you could say?!”

“Ah... well, as a matter of fact, last year I’ve married Mizuhoshi-sensei. Thanks to you, I finally did it. Thank you, really!”

Cheers from the class.

“Sensei, there’s something else, isn’t there?”

“Oh... right, well. After you all graduate, in April, I will go on maternity leave. We are expecting a baby in June. If you can, please come back to meet us.”

Overwhelming sound of applause. Eri awkwardly left the picture.

“Next! Who’s next?”

“Kyouko! Let Kyouko do it!”

“... eh, me? I... err...”

“Kyouko! Kyouko!!”

Kyouko Tokiwa entered the picture. It looked like she had done away with her usual childish pigtails. She looked a bit grown up, but looked in good health.

“Um... Kana-chan, Sagara-kun. I’m fine, as you see. You must’ve been really worried, but please, don’t. Oh and by the way, Hammy’s now staying with me, so don’t worry. The graduation’s on the third of March. I’d be very happy if you could let us know how you’re doing until then...”

“Right, thank you!”

“Next? Come on people!”

“Ono-D, go on!”

The camera shook again.

“Eh? I, well, don’t--...”

“Oh, right! Ono-D! Your turn, Ono-D!”

“But ehh...”

“No, you have to. You want to say a lot of things, don’t you? Well go ahead.”

Koutarou Onodera slowly, reluctantly walked into the picture.

“Come on, dude, say at least something!”

“..ehh... what, sheesh,” Onodera was scratching his head, glancing at the camera hesitantly, but finally turned towards it.

“Well... Sagara... I’m sorry,” he said awkwardly, not looking at the camera, “I kinda lost it that time, and after that... well, I’ve been hearing things, and thinking... if it was all your fault or not.”

His voice became cooler, and the class was completely silent, waiting for his next words.

“Well, eh... were you keeping too many things from us, or not... but I realized that you guys also had your reasons. So, as I said, I kinda lost it then, in the heat of the moment... gah, sorry, man, it’s just an excuse. Anyway, when you get back, let us know. We’re waiting.”

Koutarou then quickly escaped behind the camera. After that, his classmates one by one transmitted their messages to Kaname and Sousuke. It was a pretty long movie, he thought it lasted at least fifteen minutes...

He checked his watch. One minute left.

“I don’t want to die...”

This thought overwhelmed him.

His voice shrill and tense, as if squeezing out the words, he muttered:

“I don’t... want... to die..!”

He didn’t understand. His voice changed by itself, and became unnatural. His face became hot, his vision blurred and swam.

It was all hopeless.

“No... I don’t... want to... die...”

He finally realized.

*I’m crying.*

Tears were flowing out; he was sobbing and groaning from the thought, in that cramped, sooty, black cockpit. There was only a minute left.

*Please let me see them, if only for a minute. That's all I ask. But this doesn't matter right now, does it..?*

*I don't want to die. I want to go back... go back to that school with Kaname... I want to go back! No, no, no...*



“I don’t want... to die...”

<...sergeant. Thirty seconds left,> said Al.

“No... don’t want to...”

<The TAROS is destroyed. It is also impossible to use the Lambda Driver.>

“...I... know...”

Twenty seconds.

<I want to try something, but first I want to ask. Am I human, or machine?>

“You...”

It would be simple to say that he was a machine... but that was simply no longer the case. He was a much more advanced being than that.

“...decide it for yourself. People... do that.”

<I am grateful.>

Five seconds.

“What are--...”

<I'll try it by myself.>

The air around the Laevatein, lying in the middle of the room, started vibrating. It was the power of turning energy into matter - the raw power for which the human pilot was only the intermediary...

*Zero.*

The equivalent of fifty-five megatons of TNT detonated in the sky above Merida Island.



## Epilogue

Virginia, the outskirts of the City of Portsmouth

Near two old graves, a third fresh one had appeared recently.

The inscription on the tombstone read:

*Here lies Leonard Testarossa  
Who wished for a just, righteous world*

There was nothing in the grave, of course. His body was turned to dust by that nuclear explosion in the West Pacific.

He probably wouldn't have wanted to be interred next to his mother, but she had to do it. She wanted them to talk, if they ever met in the other world. It was a bit lonely for him to be near her alone, and so she put the tombstone between their parent's graves. That should be fine.

She didn't know what would happen several decades later - she would probably be resting there, too, and the time would finally come for the entire family to be together. The reconciliation would probably be difficult, but... she could only believe that it would come.

"Isn't this a good end?" murmured Tessa.

The tombstone was silent. Only the sound of wind and the chirping of birds disturbed the serene silence of that place.

She stood up, and returned to her companions. The three people left this place. One of them was Mardukas, his forehead now sporting a scar, that somehow seemed to make him less cold, but even more grim. The other was Admiral Jerome Borda, former

chief of operations of Mithril. It was unknown if he was alive or dead after the attack on the headquarters. He had been recovering from his injuries for over half a year. It looked like during all that time, the preparations for the reconstruction of the organization continued.

“Is it fine now?” said Borda.

His left eye was now covered by an eye patch, and he used a cane to walk.

“Yes, uncle. Sorry to make you come all the way here.”

Tessa and her crew had made an emergency landing on the ocean after running away from the nuclear explosion over Merida Island. There, they were picked up by the USS *Pasadena*. Needless to say, Captain Sailor was amazed to see both the cute maid and the “Duke” among the survivors, and even allowed (perhaps because of the utter shock) the tiger on board his submarine. The tiger was now in the Hawaii zoo.

They were treated very well aboard Captain Sailor’s vessel, but after docking in Hawaii, they had been taken into custody by the Navy intelligence. She had thought that severe questioning was about to begin, but admiral Borda came to pick her up just in time. She didn’t know what connections he had used, but the entire crew was freed. To her surprise, she heard that Seals and Courtney, previously charged with appropriation of military vehicles and AS, were also acquitted.

“A report just came in. The military decided to lower their level to DEFCON four. For the time being at least, I’m pretty sure the crisis is averted.”

“Really...”

“But I’ll remember those three hours after the explosion forever. It was a ballistic missile launch after all... and those five

minutes after we realized it was heading towards some unpopulated island were a goddamn nightmare.

The West was about to retaliate, and both Hunter and Lemon outdid themselves - they tried to spread the information that the nuclear base was under control as fast as possible between the intelligence agencies across the world. In the end, they had averted World War III. This world couldn't be called peaceful, but it returned to its normal functioning. Both good and bad things would happen in any living society, after all.

"It was not unpopulated," Mardukas corrected him.

"Yes... I'm sorry."

"No, it's all right."

"So, what happened to that girl, Kaname Chidori?"

"...she left the hospital. She wanted to go back to Tokyo once again."

After her escape from the island, Kaname Chidori slept for two weeks. No one knew the reason. Her fever had subsided, and her condition seemed close to normal, but it seemed like she didn't want to wake up.

Tessa had tried to wake her up by using "resonance" once, but nothing happened. She thought that the girl was rejecting her attempts, but that didn't seem right. In fact, she didn't feel that "whispering" voice even once from the time of that battle on Merida. Sometimes, she thought she had echoes or déjà vu sensations, and would be quite cautious about it for a long time; but it seemed that they all would never hear that voice again. She hadn't yet decided whether it was a good or bad thing.

After some time, for some unknown reason, Kaname had opened her eyes. At first, she was in a terrible state of confusion, but gradually understood the situation - and it was clear that she had returned to her normal self. Tessa was quite amazed to hear

what had happened inside the TAROS... but then came the most difficult part. Tessa, clenching her fists and trying to retain her composure, had informed her of what happened on Merida - that Merida Island was hit by a nuclear missile, and that there was no time to take refuge... and that Sousuke was left behind. Kaname listened silently until the very end, and only said "I'm sorry". They hadn't talked much after that. Tessa, calming down, only made a promise with her to meet again soon, and left that place.

"It must be hard..."

"Yes..."

Those were their last words to each other, and she didn't know her real feelings yet. Tessa didn't cry once. The next week, probably, or the one after, her sorrow would break through because of some trivial matter, and she would start blaming herself. This had repeated itself many times already.

The three people were returning to the car, walking on a path through the forest. It was still cold, but spring was just around the corner.

"What are you planning to do from now on?"

"Personally, I wanted to return to England for once. I have some money saved, it should last me for a while. I'll play chess and read some old military books, as usual."

"Well... it's not like you have a ship to return to. Are you going to meet your wife?"

"My former wife, sir. I don't plan to start over, but eating out together would be nice... I don't know myself, to tell you the truth," Mardukas shrugged.

"What about you, Teletha?"

"Who knows," she smiled faintly.

She thought she might visit the bereaved families of the subordinates she had lost, or just go travelling. Nora was probably

feeling bitter about Sachs' death, and she didn't know if she would really meet her, but at least paying her respects should be enough. If it was about travelling, she would ask Melissa to join her... ah, but there's Weber-san. She'd probably be interfering.

Like everybody else, she thought he had died a heroic death, but when she heard he had suddenly appeared on the battlefield in Afghanistan, she felt uncomfortable. Before the operation, she had been thinking about a lot of things... and afterwards, her first reaction to him was anger, only afterwards she felt relieved. Tessa wouldn't tell him what an idiot he was, but she heard that he got enough from his other comrades. It seemed that he was expecting a hero's welcome, and was now sulking.

"What about you, uncle? Planning to go on with rebuilding Mithril?"

"Don't know. We were severely weakened by Amalgam, of course, but not completely destroyed. Also, there's some intelligence that Amit had a hand in all of this. Don't know if I should be hostile with him, or continue working together."

"Really..."

"There's the problem of financing, eh. Now that the Mallorys are gone, we can't live like before. If we find financial backers..." Borda glanced at Tessa "what do you say? Would you consider building a TDD-2?"

"No, thank you, I've had quite enough."

"Hmm, it's good to hear that."

Of course, it was a joke. Seeing Tessa like this, without any interest in any kind of weaponry, Borda gave a relieved smile.

They went out of the forest and to a red Cherokee that was parked on the shoulder of the road. Noticing them, Michael Lemon climbed back into the driver's seat. He had been fired from the French intelligence, and was now working under Borda.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Lemon-san!”

“Not at all! You’re always welcome! If you asked, I’d find tea, or lunch, or dinner... er, well, food...”

Seeing the furious glances of Mardukas and Borda, he stopped, and cleared his throat:

“...ah, but, that aside - there’s news from Wraith! Please, have a look. You’ll be quite surprised.”

He held out a tablet PC. On it was displayed a top secret file from the American Navy. Even Borda with his connections couldn’t get access to such high-class recent intelligence reports so fast.

“Where’s this from?”

“She says she got it from the GRU.”

“Hmm, hmmm...”

“It’s thanks for Afghanistan... though I’m sure they’re being sarcastic in their own way...”

Seeing Borda’s troubled face, Tessa took the tablet and started looking through the file. There were thirty infra-red pictures of Merida Island taken by a satellite with intervals of 90 minutes between them. The earth was scorched, the landscape was practically razed by the monstrous explosion. As the heat subdued, and the mushroom cloud cleared, she saw that the island had become nothing more than a lump of half-molten rock. She saw a straight piece of coastline, probably the remains of the underground base.

In the second file, she noticed that the radiation emission was not as high as expected - the MIRV warheads were designed to be relatively “clean”. After the first hour the radiation subdued considerably, and after fifteen hours was only one percent of the initial amount.

The third file was a video from a Navy helicopter sent to recon the place of impact twenty-four hours after the blast. It was filmed almost like a home video, sometimes showing the crew inside the helicopter in their NBC suits. The Geiger counter showed radiation levels well within tolerance limits, and landing did not seem unreasonable. The helicopter flew over the island, surveying impact craters, and they noticed what appeared to be a large pile of rubble, half-submerged in sea water. This was definitely the ruins of the base itself - somewhere close to the dry dock and corridor zero.

She gasped, seeing the following frames. There was a man-made object, a human-like figure painted in black and red, lying stretched out on the beach.

It was the Laevatein.

The machine had been badly damaged, but there was no mistaking its unique form. Upon discovering the machine, the crew of the helicopter started arguing fervently, somebody saying that it must be a visual mistake, and that it's impossible. The camera was out of focus, as the surroundings of the machine seemed to be blurred for some reason - but that blur suddenly disappeared. It zoomed on the machine's chest. The resolution wasn't the best, and she couldn't be sure, but she could see someone in a black AS pilot suit slowly climbing out of the cockpit and looking at the recon helicopter. The video file ended, and the screen went black.

Tessa didn't know the details, but as the cockpit was destroyed, there was no way to activate the Lambda Driver. It shouldn't have been possible. Could they have attempted to link Al's core unit directly into the system? This would not only have protected them from the initial explosion, but running the Lambda Driver intermittently later would have protected them from the radiation.

“It looks like they recovered both the pilot and the machine, and took them to the Okinawa base.”

He was alive.

The tablet almost fell from Tessa’s hands, and Lemon quickly took it away.

“He was then transferred from the Navy intelligence to the CIA. This was, of course, quite troublesome, but then Congressman Spear of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence stepped in and snatched him away--...”

“Amit’s work, then... he knows that Spear too well,” remarked Borda.

“Is he... in confinement?” it took all of Tessa’s willpower to murmur these words.

She thought she wouldn’t cry this week, but she was mistaken. Life continued to surprise her.

“That seems to be the case. They seem to be planning to transfer him from Kadena base to California. I’m not sure if he’s now in any state to talk, but knowing them, they will begin cross-examination as soon as he recovers.”

“Have to save him...”

“And it looks like Mao and the others are on the spot.”



Okinawa, Nakagami district, Chatan

“...damn, and I thought I was finished with guns and shooting... but I guess it can’t be helped. It’s partly my fault, isn’t it,” Mao was muttering.

She was sitting on the passenger’s seat, checking the magazines and scope for her SMG, then finally pulled on the bolt.



“If you had been a second faster, there wouldn’t be any problem now... all that because the reunion with a certain idiot moved you too much,” muttered Wraith, in the driver’s seat.

“Eh?! Now it’s my fault? You just said it was my fault, didn’t you?! I was barely recovered, but rushed to save you all, and this is what I get?” protested Kurz from the back seat. The inside of the car was quite cramped, and the muzzle of his rifle kept hitting the window and the ceiling.

“Recovery, eh... well, think about me then. I’ve still got stitches all over my belly, my spleen... everything’s still holding on god knows how. My ear’s not healed, so stop shouting!” groaned Clouseau who sat next to him.

He was covered in bandages, and was holding a carbine.

They, the A-team, had stopped their Humvee on the shoulder of national highway 58 that led to the US base in Okinawa, waiting for the deployment of B-team. Clouseau continued grumbling.

“Raiding an American base... we’re goddamn crazy. Same as terrorists. We could die here. I should’ve been lying on the hospital bed next to Wu.”

“It’ll be fine. I’ve been to this base before. I know the layout.”

“That’s not the problem here...”

“E-eh... I wish we had at least one AS...”

“Stop - it only makes this worse.”

A transmission was incoming from Yang.

“This is Bravo leader. We’re in position. We’ll start the distraction on time. Rest is up to you.”

“Alpha leader, roger that,” acknowledged Mao and cut the line.

In five minutes they would begin their assault.

They sat in what seemed like an endless silence. Kurz was getting bored and restless, and finally said:

“Right, but what do we do if he’s a cripple, or dying from radiation poisoning?”

“Oh shut up.”

“No, we should be prepared for that, right? I mean, it was a nuclear explosion!”

“Well if I had information like that, I would have showed it to you, wouldn’t I. The readings were quite positive,” intervened Wraith. “And when they found you under Yamsk 11, you were pretty bad yourself, Weber.”

“Gah... I really thought I was dead myself.”

“Spoiled brat,” muttered Mao humourlessly, “You weren’t really dying, so stop pretending. I’d feel relieved if the idiot was finally gone.”

“Ah, come on, nee-san. Should I tell them..?”

“What?”

“Well, when everyone was asleep on the plane back from Afghanistan, she came to me, crying, and her voice was soooo sweet--...”

“Die!! Just die!! Drop dead!! You’re the worst! You think it’s normal to tell them that?! Huh?!!”

“Eh... but what’s wrong...”

“Everything..! just... aah, forget it! I’m through with being civil, when this ends--...”

Suddenly, they heard an explosion on the territory of the base - far away, on the northwest side. Sirens immediately followed. There was still five minutes until the planned time, and besides, B-Team was on the other side. Something was happening inside the base.

“So... what now?” asked Wraith.

“Let’s wait a little. There don’t seem to be any gunshots, and it was pretty small-scale.”

“What about B-Team?”

“On standby until further orders.”

Then they saw a lone truck driving away from the scene of the explosion, to the east, then passing the base perimeter, and heading right towards them at full speed.

“Hey, wait a...”

The truck passed them at full speed, and as the light fell for an instant on the vehicle, they saw that in the driver’s seat was none other than Sousuke Sagara.

“Sousuke..?!”

Fifty meters on the truck screeched to a halt, then changed gear, reversed and stopped near them.

“What are you doing here?”

That familiar, sullen face, the same mouth with its edges always turned down.

Sousuke kept the engine running. For some reason, he wore the uniform of a Second Lieutenant of the USAF. It seemed like a lot happened before he finally escaped.

The four people, staring at him as if he was an apparition, hurriedly got out of the car.

“Well... we were here to get you out...”

“I see. Hm.”

Seeing Kurz, who was trying to get out of the back seat, Sousuke frowned.

“Oh. So you’re alive.”

“What, is that all you can say?!”

“You’re as spoiled as usual.”

“...and you’re awful...”



Chaos reigned in the base behind them, but it was only a matter of time before they were discovered.

“There’s no time. I’ve got some things to do, so I’ll be taking the car,” said Sousuke curtly, and started getting into the driver’s seat of the Humvee.

“W-...what?”

<Thank you. Please let the sergeant go,> said a synthetic voice from the truck’s dashboard.

“...AI?”

They saw that the AI’s core unit was in the rear of the truck, along with a power supply and some other machinery.

“It would’ve been easy for me to escape alone, but to take this guy along I had to go through a lot of trouble.”

<I am grateful.>

“...you seem to be completely healthy. I’m even disappointed a little.”

“I had been questioned, but unfortunately, I’m safe and sound.”

Amazing, outrageous perseverance. It made them, who for several weeks thought they would never see him again, look like a bunch of dolts.

“Where’s Kaname?”

“In Tokyo. She didn’t know what she was going to do from now on, but she said she wanted to return at least once...”

“I see.”

“She refused an escort. Said she didn’t hear any whispers anymore,” grimaced Wraith.

“Right... I’ll leave AI to you.”

He got into the driver’s seat of the Humvee and turned on the engine. Looked like he was leaving them the hard part - escaping with the truck.

“Sousuke.”

“What?”

“Do you remember what we talked about? What are you planning to do from now on?”

Sousuke paused, and was lost in thought for a moment.

The sirens of the base vehicles seemed to be approaching already. They must have realized that the blast was just a diversion. Sousuke nodded toward the lights of the patrol cars, then shrugged.

“As you see, I want to throw away my weapons, but that’s kind of hard at the moment.”

“Yeah... right...”

“Anyway, the graduation ceremony comes first. Well then, I’ll see you later.”

The Humvee’s engine roared, and it accelerated along the highway. Sousuke was gone in a cloud of dust that his car lifted on the shoulder of the road.

“And... he just left. Sheesh...”

“I should’ve remained in the hospital...”

“Er... graduation ceremony?”

They were all standing there, absent-mindedly looking in the direction where the Humvee disappeared to. Then Mao came to her senses and slapped her forehead:

“...oh damn! We’re the ones that have to escape now!”

The military police cars were drawing nearer. The four of them scrambled to get into the truck, and tried to get away, taking the opposite direction at the next T-junction. Al inquired to Mao and Wraith, who had to sit in the back of the truck:

<So, what are the plans for my new body?>

“There are none! There’s no budget, there’s no organization!”

<Then when we run away, would you please install me in a car? I would prefer a Trans-Am.>



## Tokyo, Choufu City

The door of the cab closed behind Kaname, and it drove away. The chirping of sparrows greeted the morning sun. A housewife was taking out trash. A salaryman passed her, hurrying to work. An elderly man was taking his dog for a morning walk.

The apartment building before her, and the neighborhood itself, hadn't changed in a year. She was finally back.

She thought she would feel a surge of emotions, but there was nothing, though she would have preferred to feel happiness, or at least cry.

She took out the duplicate key that Wraith got her, entered the building, and went up to the fourth floor. For a moment, she couldn't remember the number of her apartment. She didn't meet anyone on her way, and finally came to the familiar door with the nameplate "Chidori" still on it. She opened the door, and a completely dark corridor greeted her. She pressed the switch on the wall, but nothing happened - ah, there was the breaker. She stood on her toes and pushed up the lever on the panel above the shoe shelf.

The doorbell rang by itself once, and the refrigerator and fan started up. The lamps flickered and turned on.

"I'm home..."

She said it by reflex, knowing that there was no one else. Her father and little sister had to be in New York now. It looked like someone had come to clean her room occasionally.

She took off her shoes and went into the living room. It hadn't changed either - just too tidy, and didn't have the feeling that someone lived in it. There were no letters on the floor, no

skirts and shirts lying around, no reference book on top of the TV. Perhaps the police had come up to investigate, and cleaned it up later.

The fridge was, naturally, empty. The bedroom was also the same, except tidied up, even her poster of James Brown remained untouched. She returned to the living room and tried the phone, which surprisingly wasn't cut. She tried calling New York, but heard the greeting of an answering machine. It should have been around seven PM there, but no one seemed to be home.

"Hello... err... this is Kaname. I'm home in Tokyo right now, I'm just calling to say I'm fine. I'll call you later."

She remembered that illusion of the TARTAROS - that peaceful morning with the family. Her mother was gone. She chose that herself. But something could be done about this. She would throw away her rejection of her father, and jealousy towards her sister, and be a better child. She wouldn't be able to recreate that peaceful ideal, but she could do at least something.

"I'm sorry I made you worry. And I... well, I don't blame you any more, Dad."

She put down the receiver. For some reason, this took all of her remaining energy. She fell down on the sofa, and started thinking. What should she do from now on? Sousuke was gone, Tessa had told her that. She was so resolute when speaking with her, and Kaname, too, listened to her explanation without letting her emotions show. It was as if she had a gaping hole in her heart, but the emotions wouldn't come out. Even now, thinking about the fact that Sousuke had survived everything, including the fight with the Belial, but had to die in such a way, didn't strike home.

She was the same after losing her mother, but this time it was different, and she didn't understand how. She only constantly felt as if it was a lie. Was this what rejecting reality felt like?



However, that feeling was flat, emotionless, and very quiet, as if she was thinking about something very ordinary.

She remembered Leonard.

*Poor man. I couldn't even answer him, in the end. At least, he followed me until the end, and when I could finally appreciate it, my relationship with him was beyond repair. Fowler and Sabina were the same. And Kalinin... They all had their hopes - and I am the one who rejected them. Living on bearing this burden will be hard.*

*And Sofia... Tessa had said that the girl disappeared. That was a lie. She's still here, in a corner of my mind. Sometimes she appears and looks at me. But I don't feel any jealousy or envy from her, no - it feels like she's smiling at something humorous. Telling me to show her how I'll stick by my words, and this world that I chose. She's telling me to make her agree. To fall in love, and let her take over for a while. She thinks she has the right to that. I'm not going to tell her that she's wrong - it's her wish, after all, and I'm not that cold. And, well, I can't really refuse it, since I owe her a little. Well, I'll just have to stick with her for the rest of my life.*

*Hmm, now what. My head starts turning when I think too much about this... let's end this here. I'll lie on the sofa, watch TV, wait for an answer on the phone, then maybe go to the store to buy some food.*

That seemed to be as good a plan as any, but something wasn't exactly right. Ah, but of course... Kaname rose from her half-daydream. It was Friday - an ordinary weekday. The time was 9:14AM.

“School...”

Though, properly speaking, she had dropped out of school, but she would at least show her face there, talk to people and apologies to them - that would be better. What about her uniform?

She opened the closet and found her Jindai High uniform hanging on the rack, still packed in the plastic from the dry-cleaner's.



“Oh...

Kaname, in her green and white uniform, stood in front of the empty gate of the school, and looked at a large sign above it. The sign read: “Heisei 10, Tokyo Metropolitan Jindai High School Graduation Ceremony.” She knew, of course, that it was about the time for those events, but she couldn't have imagined that it was today. She thought that she should be happy that she made it in time, but what should she do now? The familiar tune of “Aogeba Totoshi” was coming from the gym. So they chose this for the graduation? It certainly set a grave, solemn mood of turning over a page of the students' youth. And at this moment she would show up - someone who had been kidnapped from there after a fight of military robots, involved in the conspiracy of a terrorist organization, started and stopped the changing of the world... it somehow seemed exceptionally inappropriate.

The students started flowing out of the gym and heading towards the school building. Some girls were happily hugging each other, and most boys, tired from the ceremony, were stretching and yawning. There were a lot of familiar faces in that happy crowd.

“Hey... isn't that Chidori?” someone shouted.

Oh, she was noticed.

“Chidori-san?! There, there she is!”

“What, are you serious?”

“Chidori?! Really?!”

“Wait, who..?”

“Chidori-san!! There!”

“Woaah, waaah!”

The uproar grew and grew, and Kaname didn’t know what to do, she was rooted to the spot. The feeling was as though the crowd might be about to throw stones at her, but didn’t.

“Kana-chaaaaan!”

The students were in chaos, and inside that crowd, she saw Kyouko Tokiwa, frantically trying to get through to her.

“Kyouko..?”

“Kana-chan!!”

Tokiwa was running towards her as fast as she could.

She was smiling.

Without a trace of doubt, or hesitation, she was smiling, and running to embrace Kaname.

She didn’t understand - a year had passed, and all of those things happened.

*Why are you running towards this weak, crying me? Stop, Kyouko, or I--*

After that, emotions flooded her, like a torrent exploding from within her heart, and as she hugged Kyouko, she began crying. She fell to her knees there and continued weeping, even when all of her classmates from 3-4 came and surrounded them.

The teachers also came running and, while they were as shocked as her fellow students, they still managed to quell the turmoil and lead the crowd into the neighboring courtyard. All of them - her teacher, Kagurazaka, Shiori, Shinji Kazama, Kotarou Onodera, and all of her friends and classmates gathered, some of them smiling, others trying to hold back tears. She was glad no one really changed.

She was also glad she had chosen to continue in this world. Right, Sofia?

Kaname didn't remember much of what she did and said to her friends in the next few minutes, until someone finally said:

“Where's Sagara-kun?”

The crowd went quiet.

“Sousuke...”

She didn't know how to explain it. He was the one who had promised to bring her back, and that he did - fighting, by himself.

*How can I...*

“Hey, but - isn't that Sagara?” someone said.

The students started turning one by one towards the gate. A Honda Super Cub was lying there, and the man who just got off the bike was walking towards them.

It really was Sousuke.

The crowd was in upheaval once again, some people genuinely happy, others simply astonished. Kaname, however, felt as if she was almost expecting this.

*Ah, so it was a lie. The guy I love has one redeeming trait, and that's his stubbornness.*

“Well, how's that?! I held my promise! I brought her back!” he shouted.

He was breathing heavily, covered with sweat - she didn't know what he did to get there on time. But he, too, had taken the trouble to change into the uniform of a Jindai High student. It was just like him, sticking to principles.

“Sagara..?”

“Sagara-kun!!”

“Hey, it's Sagara!”

His classmates surrounded him as he came closer.

“Sorry I'm late. I was held at the Okinawa base until this morning.”

“You're not listening...”

“No, I did check that the graduation ceremony was today.”

“I said, you’re not listening!”

Exchanging words with Shinji, Koutarou and the others, Sousuke pushed through the crowd and finally appeared in front of Kaname.

“I thought you would be here, Chidori.”

“Sousuke...”

His manner was casual, almost cocky. After staring death in the eye, after all that happened, he came here, and was smiling in that way... why?

“Lots of things happened. There’s a lot I want to tell you... not now. I heard from Wraith that you didn’t accept an escort.”

“But...”

She didn’t hear the “whispers” anymore. Many organizations might exist in the world, but now she was worthless to them.

“That is naïve. You need someone to guard you,” he held out his right hand.

She took it hesitantly, and allowed herself to be led. He stepped forward, then said:

“I will be your guard. Always.”

“Wh... you...”

She felt her cheeks flush, and her heart start beating faster than ever.

*How should I answer him..?*

“Do you remember our promise, from Mexico?”

“Huh..?”

The promise they made over the radio... that they would kiss, when they met again, no matter what place they were in. Those were Kaname’s words.

“As you can see, this is our reunion.”

“Eh... b-but, but...”

“You don’t like me?”

“I didn’t mean that, but look around..!”

A crowd of three dozen people was surrounding them in the school courtyard, and from the windows of both buildings even more students looked at them. All of them were watching... so many people...

“A-ah... it’s not like I’m against it, but... here? I mean... everyone is watching... this is a bit...right..?”

And then Sousuke answered, as usual:

“No problem.”

He gently embraced her, and their lips met. Resistance was futile.

She didn’t know how long it lasted - her head spun, and she was only vaguely aware of what was around her. The remainders of her common sense kept telling her that several hundred people were staring - then they too threw up the white flag, before the overwhelming realization that this was what she wished for.

She just closed her eyes and surrendered to him. She realized she loved him now more than ever.

“Don’t care anymore..!”

Before the astonished audience, she put her arms around his head, and following her heart, clumsily, but passionately, continued kissing him. The two were completely absorbed in each other among the jeers of a crowd of students.

It was embarrassing. Extremely embarrassing. Her face burned with shame - but she didn’t care.

*Look if you want to. I’ve wished for this for a long, long time. He, too. That’s all, got any complaints?*



Their lips finally separated, but they still embraced each other, her face close to his.

“...don’t let me go, please...”

“I won’t.”

“Always... always stand by me...”

“Of course,” Sousuke, his face sullen as usual, nodded seriously. “I won’t need weapons while you are beside me.”

The End

## Afterword

For those who like to look at the afterword first, beware - there are spoilers.

I had kept you waiting for far, far too long. Please forgive me.

Why did it become such a long road... I won't even start explaining, because it would become a torrent of complaints. Anyhow, this three-year journey had somehow come to a close. I bought two bottles of wine ("Chateau Latour" - the price was... considerable<sup>9</sup>) of the year FMP! started, 1998. Left one for myself, and gave Shiki-san the other, with the message: "Please open when you finish the illustration work". It's kind of out-of-character for me, but sometimes, why not indulge yourself.

After all, it's been twelve years, and we were working together on the series all this time. Only we two have the right to enjoy this exquisite taste (hehe). There are a lot of people who helped me over the years, but there are only two bottles!

So, my book has just returned from the final proofreading, and I'm writing this afterword while enjoying this excellent wine, and a gloriously delicious cheese that Shiki-san sent me in return. So, yep, I'm a drunken writer.

...just a moment, some guy from express post delivery came. Looks like it's the sample copy of the first book.

Oh... it's bound by a sash that reads "The grand finale of the explosive school military action is finally here!"

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<sup>9</sup> Well he does like his wine, doesn't he \*jealous\*. Chateau Latour is a Bordeaux Premier Cru Classé, and a bottle of that of 1998 can be found nowadays at upwards of 150 Euros a bottle, probably more considering it's Japan.



Grand finale..? I don't know about that, but it's good to have these things a little exaggerated sometimes. Thank you, whoever's in charge.

By the way, if you get the two volumes together, it'd make a very impressive final book, but apart they look like... collections of short stories. This is pretty hard...

Anyway, I had decided from the very beginning that this story's theme would be, well, "Boy meets girl". Then I always hope that this main theme wouldn't slide out of focus because of all those secrets of the world, battles between organizations, and the like. This is a story about him and her, and I always tried hard to make that clear. Did I succeed or... well, I thought I'd leave it to the readers' judgment, and so right now I am trembling in fear that it won't be so.

Anyhow, this long series is now at an end. But that's a bit too sad, isn't it? So I thought that maybe in the near future I should publish some short stories that have been piling up. I thought maybe it would be a sort of sequel to this book... but I don't really know if I should do it or not. "Some things are best left unsaid" - or so the saying goes, but it's not like I wanted there to remain a feeling that some things shouldn't be said... mmm, I don't really know. I'll think about it more when I calm down.

I'm preparing a new series now, too. I would like it to reach the readers as soon as possible; but for now, there's another action series I'm working on "Cop Craft" (in the GaGaGa collection published by Shogakukan). The illustrations are made by Range Murata, and the spine is blue. If that sells, well, I'll also think "Right! I'll do my best!" So! Please! Read it..!

...that was for a bit of self-advertising.

*[note: the rest of the afterword is basically a list of names and thanks, including the full cast of the anime, mangakas, mecha designers, editors, etc.]*

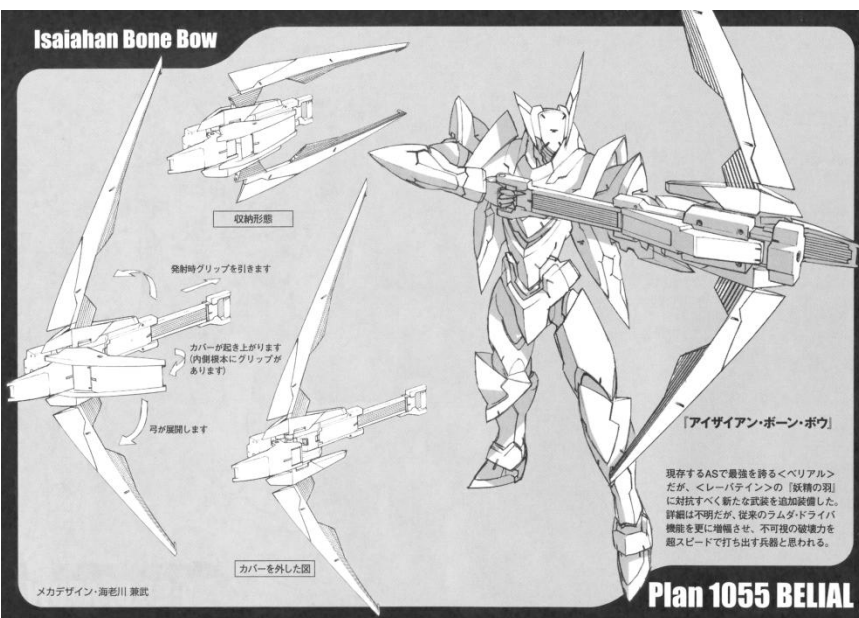
And finally you, dear reader.

It has been twelve books. Counting short story collections, twenty-two. I feel privileged that you have stuck with me on this long journey.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Yours,  
Shoji Gato  
July 2010

## Isaiah Bone Bow



## 特殊仕様

メカデザイン・海老川 廉武

